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THE ALCHEMICAL “IMAGE OF THE WORLD” IN THE ALLEGORICAL PROGRAMME OF THE GARDENS AND PARK AT PETERHOF¹

In connection with my research interests, which include the semantics of the cultural codes of the alchemical tradition, I made a study of the hieroglyphics of the gardens and park at Peterhof, which were created during the baroque era, a time saturated with the spirit of hermetic philosophy and the ideas of the Rosicrucian movement, which were reflected in architectural and landscape design. In my opinion, a serious approach to the interpretation of the design of the gardens and park at Peterhof, based on the hermetic background to baroque culture, provides a significantly broader view of the cultural horizons of the beginning of the New Era in Russia than is generally accepted. Thanks to this approach, the ensemble as a whole acquires a robust system of coordinates (vertical and horizontal) and a polyphonic sound.

In expanding the information on Peter the Great's interest in the alchemical tradition set out in British scholar Robert Collis's article “Alchemical Interest at the Petrine Court”² and independently establishing parallels between Peter's actions and aspirations and the spirit of Rosicrucian documents, I came to the conclusion that the future Emperor was not simply aiming to glorify Russian weapons and introduce a new allegorical language with the design and layout of the main official residence when he initiated building work there in 1714–1715. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, it had become a tradition in western Europe that an enlightened leader who sympathised with or was driven by hermetic ideas aimed to position their monuments, churches, cities and gardens “in such a way that ‘higher forces’ could find manifestation in them”, and “the constructions themselves must be ‘an imitation of reality’, ‘an image of the heavens’, or ‘a copy of eternity’”.³ As a result of this approach to its design and construction, Peterhof as a combination of site, nature and architectural objects subtly transforms a walk

¹ The text is translated by Ruth Addison.

² Robert Collis, “Alchemical Interest at the Petrine Court”, *Esoterica*, VII, 2005, www.esoteric.msi.edu

³ Graham Hancock and Robert Bauval, *Vlast' Talismana* [Talisman: Sacred Cities, Secret Faith] (Moscow: Eksmo, 2006), 260.

in an ancient park into a holy journey inside oneself, immerses the visitor in another reality and indicates the possibility of "another world". It may be that, sharing Cicero's thoughts, Peter the Great aimed to "have at his disposal a large number of good places, well lit, placed in strict order at a certain distance from one another, and also images which were effective, bright and moving, that could meet the soul and penetrate it".¹ He and his descendants created an ensemble which produces in visitors the feeling that their perception of the world has become more intense, vivid, light and, simultaneously, precise.

If one pays attention and tunes in to perceiving what is happening inside the gardens and park at Peterhof, one can sense when stepping over the threshold of this unusual place something like another dimension, an impersonal space which offers freedom from worldly problems and invites one to look inside oneself. Being here, a person begins to recall their ability to understand their surroundings as a whole (something they do not utilise in everyday life), without lacunae, intervals, ambiguity and ignorance. A person learns to see with their being, their whole body. The transformation takes place very gently and imperceptibly, without noise or fuss, as one moves into gardens, when it seems after a few steps that all extraneous sounds, even those from the busy road nearby, exist in another dimension. Gradually, step by step, a balanced perception appears, which matures with time and becomes independent power. It seems to order the visitor to "read the book of Nature", studying hermetic wisdom, discerning the extent of its otherworldly vision, like heavenly harmonies filling the universe, piercing the sphere of the heavens and diving into the objects of the world that surrounds us, completing an Action that only those who have "correct sight" will notice. This is the message of the Peterhof gardens, presenting the visitor with a vision of Knowledge concealed behind allegorical hints, which are packed in a frame reworked in the baroque version of nature. Knowledge of the purified nature of Heaven returned to humanity, assimilated in the baroque period in the more sophisticated images of the regular garden, with its "grand visual rhetoric and dramatic broad perspectives", as garden scholar Christopher McIntosh put it.² Unlike in many other gardens worldwide, the comprehension of this Knowledge in the gardens of Peterhof is accompanied by a distinctly outlined initiatory journey leading to an absolute meaning which is hidden behind a hermetic veil. This is why a specific unique Petrine style³ can be felt here, imbued with the spirit of the age which pervaded in Russia at the beginning of the eighteenth century.

¹ Cicero, "Ob oratore [On the Orator], 2, 87" in *Tri traktat ob oratorskom iskusstva* [Three Treatises on the Orator's Art] (Moscow: Nauka, 1972).

² Christopher McIntosh, *Gardens of the Gods: Myth, Magic and Meaning* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2005), 76.

³ Dmitry Likhachev, *Poeziya sadov: K semantike sadovo-parkovykh stilei* [The Poetry of Gardens: Towards a Semantics of Style of Parks and Gardens] (St. Petersburg: Logos, 2008), 131.

Following the baroque fashion of his time, Peter created his garden like a complex visual text, devised to transmit messages on various levels. The baroque style mixed such varied tendencies as: 1) theocentrism (humans are puppets in God's hands); 2) stoicism (combining religious perception with an understanding of humans' independence and responsibility, for example Justus Lipsius;¹ 3) a satirical or picaresque position,² which is characteristic of the creators of alchemical treatises.

Russian scholars such as A.V. Ananieva and A.Y. Veselova note that “on the level of *semantics*, garden and text can be mutual sources and the reason for the appearance of a whole object – a garden or park or a work of literature – or a separate fragment, detail or motif of a garden in a text or a text in the space of a garden. The material presence of text in a garden is possible as quotes, for example, a garden inscription or scenes from a literary work reproduced in the space of the garden”.³ At Peterhof, the possibility of the assimilation of an alchemical treatise in the garden is indicated not only by the interest of Peter the Great and his allies in the ideas of the Great Work but also by the establishment of the “hermetic field” in the culture of the New Era as an “intersection of two axes. There is a horizontal axis that opposes the subject as an eccentric, disembodied observer and the world as an assembly of purely material objects, including the human body. The vertical axis then stands for the act of world-interpretation through which the subject penetrates the surface of the world in order to extract knowledge and truth as its underlying meanings”.⁴ The baroque garden is simply created for the embodiment of such ideas, because in it “the complexity of semantic presentation is at the forefront”,⁵ flowing from the hermetic conception of interpretation of the point of intersection of these two axes as a theurgic act.⁶

In essence, the idea of “multi-layered depths” of symbolism at Peterhof is in the air. The Soviet scholars N.I. Arkhipov and A.G. Raskin noted, without going into detail, that in Peterhof's Grand Cascade “every statue, every bas-relief had a definite allegorical meaning and together they comprised an elaborate coded narrative”.⁷ In the twenty-first century, V.S. Turchin, who

¹ Justus Lipsius (1547–1608) was a Flemish philosopher, publisher, scholar of Seneca and one of the founders of neo-Stoicism.

² Svetlana Farkhutdinova, *Dialogicheskaya priroda kul'tury barokko* [The Dialogical Nature of Baroque Culture] (Tomsk: TML-Press, 2009), 34–35.

³ A.V. Ananieva and A.Y. Veselova, “Sady i teksty (Obzor novykh issledovaniy o sadovo-parkovom iskusstve v Rossii)” [Gardens and Texts (A Review of New Research on Garden and Park Design in Russia)], *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, 75/5, 2005, 351.

⁴ Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Proizvodstvo prisutstviya: Chego ne mozhnet peredat' znachenie* [Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey] (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2006), 40.

⁵ Dmitry Likhachev, *Russkoe iskusstvo ot drevnosti do avangarda* [Russian Art from Antiquity to the Avant-Garde] (St. Petersburg: Iskusstvi-SPb, 2009), 318.

⁶ See also: Olga Kleshchevich, *Alkhimiya: vykhod iz spagiricheskogo labirinta* [Alchemy: Out of the Spagyric Labyrinth] (St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo RKhGA, 2014).

⁷ Nikolai Arkhipov and Abram Raskin, *Petrodvorets* (Leningrad/Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1961), 54.

passed away recently, wrote: "In the residence (at Peterhof – O.K.) there were several semantic layers of symbolic 'texts', superimposed on one another: one was 'true', clear only to the owners, and the other was a 'cover' aimed at guests and the general public. Shortly before his death, Peter the Great, who had conceived his Peterhof on the deserted bank of the Gulf of Finland, wrote a programme of what needed to be done there in future and how, 'without him, but as if together with him'. It included, as the project had during his lifetime, the concept of 'dual' reading of every structure in the parks and palaces: for initiates and the uninitiated".¹ No one has yet discovered documentary evidence of such a programme, but it was not without reason that theologian Feofan Prokopovich, who shared the tsar's "alchemical interests", wrote that there were two types of fiction, the second of which exists "to indicate a certain secret, a divine power, an aid, wrath, a punishment, a revelation of the future".² With his interest in hermetic philosophy, it is entirely possible that Peter the Great could have incorporated in the landscape and other natural resources at Peterhof the idea of reflecting the alchemical process on the place, "aiming to cover it with as many 'meaningful' objects as possible, giving the gardens an instructional character".³

The heirs to Peter's ideas "produced what he had planned, over time strengthening the 'covering' external and elegant symbolism and thus decorating the internal".⁴ In addition, at the beginning of the New Age the presence of allusions and allegories in texts, including "garden texts", would become an indicator of an appeal to a select group: readers who shared the author's views or understood the references.

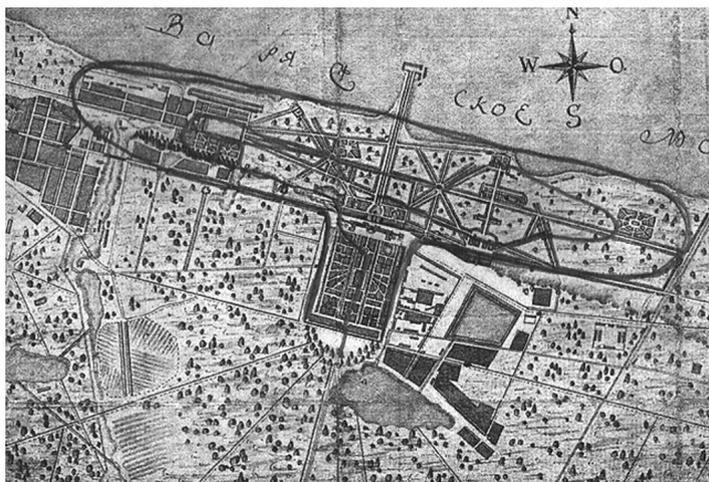
One indicator (at first glance the main one) of possible alchemical allusions within the gardens and park at Peterhof is the fact that the plan is in the shape of an alchemical retort. This demonstrates that the idea of the Alchemical Vessel (first, during the Petrine era, in the "cup" of the Lower Gardens, which in 1738, under Anna Ioannovna, were joined to the Upper Gardens and began to be transformed into a "retort") had been incorporated in the ensemble as its emblem and foundation at the design stage, influencing all future construction and landscaping. At the same time, it indicates that one of the semantic layers of Peterhof could be alchemical, based on the genre principles of the alchemical treatise. The general plan of the park, in the form of an alchemical emblem, becomes the title page of the garden-treatise and, simultaneously, contains an allusion to the alchemical laboratory of power, in which Peter the Great performed the transmutation of matter, the object of the Great Work: from the "vulgar Mercury" of backward, Traditional Rus to the "gold" of a progressive European country. Alchemists are known to have called their

¹ Valery Turchin, "Peterhof: simvol, emblematy, estetika vody [Peterhof: Symbols, Emblems, the Aesthetics of Water]", *Nashe nasledie*, 66, 2003, 216–217.

² Feofan Prokopovich, "O poeticheskom iskusstve [Poetics]" in *Feofan Prokopovich. Collected Works* (Moscow/Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk, 1961), 403.

³ Dmitry Likhachev, *Poeziya sadov*, op. cit., 121.

⁴ Valery Turchin, op. cit., 217.



Plan of the Lower Park and Upper Gardens, working drawings, 1760s
The thick line marks the emblematic presence of the alchemical retort within the park's plan

alchemical vessels “mother”,¹ because the within it, as in the womb, the Great Work takes place and the Philosopher’s Stone is formed.

So, before us is the plan of the Peterhof park and gardens in the form of an emblem of the Great Work – a retort – a vessel “with a long neck”.² Here the long neck is the Upper Gardens and the broad body is the Lower Gardens.

At Peterhof it is obvious that the founders aimed to set out material didactically, based on the methods of the “hermetic kabbalah” (the alchemical “language of the birds”), suggesting that the visitor move along an initiatory route laid to help those seeking knowledge of the spiritual life. Here it operates through observation of the route’s external expressions (in this case the symbolism of the fountains and their location in the gardens), through work on revealing their allegories and allusions, to experiencing the internal spiritual meaning of one’s own life. Fulcanelli wrote that “all alchemists are obliged to make a pilgrimage. Albeit in the figurative sense, because this is a *symbolic journey* and he who wishes to benefit from it does not leave the laboratory even for a second. He constantly observes the vessel, matter and flame”.³ This is the same way in which a journey through the Peterhof park and gardens implies a symbolic journey inside the retort, inside the laboratory of the human soul, “the original condition of one’s matter as *an image of the world*”⁴ embodied in the space of the alchemical garden.

The fact that the Plan of the gardens includes an image of an alchemical Retort indicates that the Peterhof park and gardens should be seen not simply

¹ Francis van Helmont, “157 Alkhimicheskikh Kanonov [157 Alchemical Canons]” in Olga Kleshchevich, *Alkhimiya*, op. cit., 243.

² Fulcanelli, *Taina soborov i ezotericheskoe tolkovanie germeticheskikh smyslov Velikogo Delaniya* [The Mystery of the Cathedrals] (Moscow: Enigma, 2008), 214.

³ Fulcanelli, *Filosofskoe obiteli i svyaz' germeticheskoi simvoliki s sakral'nym iskusstvom i ezoterikoi Velikogo Delaniya* [The Dwellings of the Philosophers] (Moscow: Enigma, 2003), 282–283.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 164.



Image of a retort
from the alchemical
treatise *Mutus Liber*
(1677)

as an Alchemical retort in which the Great Work takes place but, simultaneously, as an Alchemical treatise – the description of an alchemical process – since “old parks should be ‘read’ like books, turning one page-period after another, imagining the long process of construction, finding in it the traces of events, the ‘signature’ of the founders, the struggle between various artistic trends, the poetic echoes of time, the original evidence of a bygone age. [...] However, one must remember that gardens and parks were never simply works of art, but a unique expression of philosophical views of the epoch and the relationship of humankind to nature”.¹

Interest in the garden-treatise or garden-book appeared in many European countries in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

¹ Arkady Vergunov and Vladislav Gorokhov, *Russkie sady i parki* [Russian Gardens and Parks] (Moscow: Nauka, 1987), 6–8.

The quintessential such garden was the park that Frederick V¹ and his wife, Elizabeth Stuart (daughter of the English king James I) began to build in 1620 at their residence in Heidelberg, the capital of the Palatinate in south-west Germany. The garden, which was situated on the steep banks of the river Neckar, was divided into several terraces, each of which had its own geometric plan. Hortus Palatinus (the Garden of the Palatinate) had all of the elements of a Renaissance garden: fountains, grottos and a labyrinth. However, the main element of the garden was its programme. It incorporated an image of the world, a cosmological structure of the universe through which the visitor could travel symbolically.² This garden gave a definite “vector of initiatedness” to baroque gardens, as at this time none one saw “anything reprehensible in copying good artists, or even imitating them completely”.³ The Peterhof park and gardens ensemble-meditation sets out the journey of an adept, which is actually a description of the Great Work, the great Journey which a person who has decided to change as a result of the transmutational elements of the alchemical process.

In the process of research, I defined four sections of the compositional plan which aid in the interpretation of the alchemical treatise:⁴

I. Understanding the object of the Great Work: On Mercury

II. Understanding the Agent of the Great Work: learning “How the Great Work takes place” and progressing through the “Stages of the Great Work”

III. Understanding the Aim of the Great Work, the Philosopher’s Stone

IV. Receiving instruction on Methods of the Great Work and Advice of the Master.

I applied these sections to the plan of the park and then virtually (and many times in real life) followed the route inside the garden-retort, finding explanations for the alchemical fountain compositions-pointers in works by alchemical authors.

As a result, my theory of Alchemical Peterhof found a visible embodiment. The “neck of the retort” – the Higher Gardens – became the Preface or the Preamble of the garden-treatise.

The first three sections of the compositional scheme (“On Mercury”, “On the Agent of the Great Work” and “On the Philosopher’s Stone”) fit the following areas of the gardens and park at Peterhof: the west side of the park, including the Marly palace; its centre – the Adam and Eve

¹ The first ruler to attempt to bring alchemical Rosicrucian dreams to life. See Frances Yates, *Rozenkreiterskoe Prosveshchenie* [The Rosicrucian Enlightenment] (Moscow: Aleteia/Enigma, 1999).

² Boris Sokolov, *Severnyi man'erizm. Barokko, Klassitsizm* [Northern Mannerism, Baroque, Classicism], www.gardenhistory.ru

³ Natalya Pakhsaryan, “XVII vek: klassitsizm i barokko [17th century: Classicism and Baroque]” in *Evropeiskaya poetika ot antichnosti do Prosveshcheniya. Entsiklopedicheskiy putevoditel'* [European Poetics from Antiquity to the Enlightenment. An Encyclopaedic Guide] (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Kulaginoi – Intrada, 2010), 184.

⁴ See Olga Kleshchevich, *Alkhimiya*, op. cit., 75–88.

fountains – as a reflection of the Chemical Marriage; Monplaisir palace and its garden, the traveller’s rest, and the Sun fountain.

The fourth section (Methods of the Great Work and Advice of the Master) relates to the rest of the eastern side of the Lower Gardens: the fountains Garden of Fortune (Labyrinth) and Pyramid, the cascade Chessboard Hill, the Orangery fountain and then the nucleus of the garden-treatise, the Grand Cascade. We will examine each part of Peterhof’s “alchemical complex” in order.

THE NECK OF THE RETORT. PREAMBLE

The upper gardens at Peterhof are a “symbolic introduction” to the garden-treatise, created in the classical style of a baroque garden parterre.¹ Here the visitor is given a brief summary of the initiatory journey and, it is assumed, takes on the role of neophyte, the “vulgar mercury” of alchemists – identified with arcana 0 of the tarot, “The Fool”—by the first fountain, Mezheumny (Midway), which in old Russian meant “blockhead”, “fool” or “idiot”.² The next fountains on the route from the gates to the palace, especially the Neptune fountain provides sufficient food for thought in order to penetrate the alchemical symbolism and make a firm decision as to which part of the park to move after the “neck of the retort”. Since at the end of the Higher Gardens the sacred yet playful moment of the baroque garden comes into play, the Labyrinth, which, according to René Guénon, “opens or prevents, depending on the situation, access to a particular place where one should not enter without analysis, as only the “qualified” can progress to the end, with others meeting difficulties or getting lost along the way”.³ Moreover, he noted that the meaning of the labyrinth “could belong in the same way to the entrance any place of initiation or any sanctuary that is intended for ‘secrets’ and not for public rituals”,⁴ which is unarguably the role of the “neck of the retort” as a passage to the main place of action of the Magistry, the Lower Gardens. It is here that the traveller is faced with the choice of taking the correct direction, which confirms (or not) the level of their “hermetic training”. Without going into detail regarding the argumentation of this choice for lack of space, we note that one should move westwards, as indicated by the female statue of the Square Ponds fountain, as if to confirm her understanding of the passive, feminine receiving principle of the Great Work as a step on the way from the condition of “vulgar Mercury” to that of the “imperfect” and then “perfect” Mercury of the alchemists.

¹ Mikhail Sokolov, *Printsip Raya: glavy ob ikonologii sada, parka i prekrasnogo vida* [The Principle of Heaven: Chapters on the Iconology of the garden, the park and the beautiful view] (Moscow: Progress-Traditsiya, 2010), 436.

² Zinaida Aleksandrova, *Slovar’ sinonimov russkogo yazyka: prakticheskii spravochnik* [Dictionary of Russian Synonyms: A Practical Guide] (Moscow: Russki yazyk, 1989), 177.

³ René Guénon, *Simvoly svyashchennoi nauki* [Symbols of Sacred Science] (Moscow: Belovod’e, 2004), 222.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 225.

The body of the retort

I. Sandy Pond. The Whale fountain used to stand at the centre of the pond, a large, carved and painted wooden “whale-fish” which, for alchemists, symbolised “foundation matter” and alluded to Jonah’s adventure in the belly of the Whale. This was a preparatory process for transmutation, which involved the familiarisation of the neophyte with his own imperfection. For this reason one can relate it to the first section of the compositional scheme of alchemical treatises, “Understanding the object of the Great Work: On Mercury.

II. Lion Cascade. The cascade is a “Temple of water”. At its centre is a sculpture of the nymph Aganippe, the protector of Mount Helicon and its “source of abundant streams”, the allegorical embodiment of the inspiration and strength of the alchemist, Light, Flame and Spirit, the so-called “Philosophical Heaven” which has two forms, fiery and watery. The cascade embodies the understanding of the watery form of the agent of the Great Work and relates to the second section of the compositional scheme of alchemical treatises, “Understanding the Agent of the Great Work”.

III. Next comes the third section of the compositional scheme of alchemical treatises, Stages of the Great Work.

1. The first alchemical stage is *nigredo*, represented at Peterhof by the Marly gardens and park, the design and decoration of which contains allusions to Deucalion’s flood. This is the four Triton Bell fountains, heralding with four strikes “the coming end of the fourth epoch, which completes the earthly cycle”,¹ and the paired Menager fountains, which previously featured golden balls on the top of the spouts, allegorically embodying “the Globe, which is under the power of water and fire. This ball is supported by the waves of the stormy sea”,² like the Golden Hill cascade, where at the top of the golden staircase – among other gods of the Greek pantheon which are favourite symbols of alchemical writers – is Triton, blowing into a seashell and signalling Deucalion’s flood to recede. If below, Triton – in the form of four young Tritons with bells, signalled the End of the World four times – here he creates a sound from his shell-horn which gives hope that the burdens and ordeals of the Great Work will soon be over.

Central part of the park

West side

2. The second alchemical stage: *albedo*.

- The Eve fountain embodies the alchemical woman, the passive principle and, at the same time, indicates the beginning of the *albedo* stage, symbolised by the Moon and silver.

- The Adam fountain embodies the alchemical man, the active principle of Work.

¹ Eugène Canseliet, “Predislovie k tret’emu izdaniyu [Foreword to the Third Edition]” in Fulcanelli, op. cit., 39.

² Fulcanelli, op. cit., 516.

The combination of the Adam and Eve fountains contains an illusion to the Chemical Marriage, a joining of the passive and active principles in the process of the Great Work, which was seen by alchemists as a theurgic procedure of conjoining the "divine flame": its rays and light and the human soul. This energy was used by alchemists for a specific task, the purification of the object of the Work of that which they called "dross" to leave what they considered "pure". The Chemical Marriage produced an androgyne which, with time and continued application of Mastery, was transformed into alchemical Medicine and the Philosopher's Stone.

At the same time, the architectural complex which includes the paired sculptures of the Adam and Eve fountains underlines the baroque rhetorical antithesis of the western and eastern sides of the park. Here, the west is a description of *nigredo* and the passive principle of the Work, and the east is hope for the future related to attaining and operating with the active principle of the Work.

- Monplaisir is a place of rest for the Traveller. The palace and gardens are full of alchemical symbols. The Sheaf fountain embodies the idea of alchemy not only as "heavenly agriculture", but as the kernel – the alchemical Ceres – of the seed of transmutation. The paintings on the ceiling of the central hall at Monplaisir also contain alchemical allusions, repeating according to the four corners of the world the semantics of distribution of mythological figures throughout the Peterhof garden-treatise. The same can be said of the frescoes which adorn the side pavilions of the galleries of the main complex. They depict scallops, alchemical shells which were worn by those making the pilgrimage to the church of St. James, the patron saint of alchemists, at Santiago de Compostela.

- The Sun fountain embodies the understanding of alchemical Sun-Gold as the fiery incarnation of the active agent of the Work on the eastern side of the park. It is the antithesis of the watery incarnation of the Lion Cascade, the Temple of Water on the western side.

East side

After the Sun fountain, the garden-treatise reaches the last stage of the initiatory journey and the fourth stage of the compositional scheme of alchemical treatises: IV. Receiving instruction on Methods of the Great Work and Advice of the Master. It includes:

1. The Garden of Fortune (the so-called Labyrinth). Our concept of the park-retort, with its integral initiatory route, supports the conclusions of archaeologist Viktor Korentsvit that the planting is nothing like a labyrinth. The wheel with spokes which can be seen in its plan is a type of Ouroboros, directing the Traveller on a new stage of the journey, to the kernel of the Work. It is also an allusion to the endless reproduction of the main operation of the Great Work, theurgic praxis.

2. The Pyramid fountain is a triumphal monument: Long Live the Great Work! The fountain's form is reminiscent of the "hieroglyph of flame" and

the pyramid is “nothing other than an *athanor* or *philosophical oven* where the Great Work is done”.¹ As a whole, the fountain incorporates the idea of a monument, the Memorial, in honour of the tireless creative strength of the hermetic Flame-Logos and the “Temple of Invisible and the Higher Divinity”.²

3. The cascade Chessboard Hill. The chessboard which is laid out on the drainage of the cascade, is an embodiment of the alchemical gryphon, a hermaphrodite, an androgyne, a creature with human (black squares) and divine (white squares) elements after firing in the “philosophical fiery oven”. Above, by the grotto, there are three winged dragons, the three stages of Mercury: vulgar, imperfect and perfect. They visually demonstrate the process in which “the Dragon, devouring his own tail and sloughing his old skin according to legend, achieves youth with a new skin”,³ according to the alchemical maxim “One must be able to die in order to live and become immortal”.⁴ The cascade includes an accompanying narrative, which is hidden in the arrangement of the statues on either side of the chess board, thus adding to its semantics the polyphony of alchemical symbols. It is a wonderful example of a “false didactic story” typical of the baroque style of presenting alchemical treatises, which explains the presence at the top of the cascade of three rather than the traditional two alchemical dragons.

4. The Triton fountain in the Orangery complex is a description of the preliminary results of the neophyte’s journey as he is transformed step by step into an adept who is ever closer to achieving the aim of the Great Work, the Philosopher’s Stone. Having paid tribute to the alchemical Flame and the Work itself in the form of the watery Pyramid, and having experienced much of the essential nature of the alchemical Dragon – in the form of the monsters of the Chessboard Hill cascade and as the protectors of the treasure of the Heavenly garden which is embodied by the Orangery complex – the traveller through the Peterhof retort appears here in the image of the god Triton, the son of Neptune. It was he, as we recall, who sounded the horn which signalled that Deucalion’s flood would recede and here he personifies the end of the alchemical experiment. Having slain the dragon, Mercury transformed from “vulgar” to “imperfect”, he confirms his art of perfecting the object of the Work into a “valuable metal”, completing the alchemical stage *albedo*, which began with the conjoining in Chemical Marriage of the “passive” and “active” alchemical principles.

¹ Ibid., 394.

² Manly P. Hall, *Entsiklopedicheskoe izlozhenie masonskoi, germeticheskoi, kabbalisticheskoi i rozenkreitserskoi simvolicheskoi filosofii* [An Encyclopaedic Outline of Masonic, Hermetic, Qabbalistic and Rosicrucian Symbolical Philosophy] (Moscow/St. Petersburg: Eksmo/mirgard, 2007), 145.

³ Michael Maier, *Ubegayushchaya Atalanta, ili Novye Khimicheskie Emblemy, otkryvayushchie tayny estestva* [Atalanta Fugiens, that is, New Emblems of the Secrets of Nature] (Moscow: Enigma, 2004), 113.

⁴ Papus, *Genезis i razvitie Masonskikh simvolov: Istoriya ritualov. Proiskhozhdenie stepenei. Posvyashcheniya. Legenda i Khirame (To, chto dolzhen znat’ Master)* [Genesis and the Development of Masonic Symbols] (Moscow: Enigma, 2006), 84.

Finally, the semantic core of the Peterhof park and gardens, the Grand Cascade, is a "treatise within a treatise". It is a major concluding coda to the alchemical oratory of fountains, the apotheosis of the story of the Peterhof park and gardens, where numerous elements of decoration are employed in a polyphony typical of baroque style. At the end of the eighteenth century, the cascade was likened to a church with three communion tables, in the Rosicrucian spirit, where the sculptures of the cascade depicted the earthly life of the hero of the narrative; the Lower Grotto and the space in front of it symbolise his transformation as a result of alchemical practices; and at the semantic centre of the cascade we see the triumphant Completion of the Great Work. In the struggle with the hermetic lion, which embodies matter processed by the philosophers using alchemical arts, Samson-Heracles rips from his jaws "the moisture of the Sun and the saliva of the Moon",¹ the symbol of the Universal Medicine which can "act on the three kingdoms of nature in order to overcome imperfection, illnesses and 'flaws'".² Thus, at the alchemical stage *rubedo*, ends the initiatory epic of the main character of the Peterhof alchemical garden-treatise, which began at the gates of the Upper Gardens, at the top of the virtual alchemical retort.

The analysis of the alchemical layer in the interpretation of the park as a whole, and particularly the Grand Cascade, demonstrated that there it does not contain a single "mute or superfluous element". The statues, vases, bas-reliefs, grottoes and fountains are placed in a logical order of unfolding of the alchemical narrative in which "vulgar Mercury" becomes the Philosopher's Stone, the acquisition of which is embodied in the central sculptural group Samson Tearing Open the Lion's Jaws. This concept counters the traditional point of view in which Peterhof "unlike its western and northern prototypes (Versailles in France and Drottningholm in Sweden – *O.K.*), primarily glorifies not the person of King but the victory of the Russian Emperor over the Swedish kingdom. Paraphrasing the expression attributed to the Sun King – 'I am the state' – one can say that at Peterhof it is not the person of the Emperor which is identified with the State, but the State with the person of Peter the Great".³ However, in the course of my research I have become increasingly convinced that this is only the upper, politicised and relatively recent layer of the polyphonic fabric of the ensemble's semantics. The Peterhof park and gardens is a substantial and detailed tale of the neophyte who, having completed the complex path of perfection, became a master and can now elevate "vulgar Mercury" to his level. The story is in the form of an alchemical treatise using the specifics of the conduct and assertion

¹ Dom Pernety, *Mify Drevnego Egipta I Drevnei Gretsii* [Myths of Ancient Egypt and Ancient Greece] (Kiev: Por-Royal', 2006), 423.

² Julius Evola, *Germeticheskaya traditsiya* [The Hermetic Tradition] (Voronezh: Terra Foliata, 2010), 272.

³ Vyacheslav Lyotin, "Tsarstvo severnogo Apollona: Allegoricheskie programmy Drottningholma (Shvetsiya) i Petergofa (Rossiya) [Kingdom of the Northern Apollo: The Allegorical Programmes at Drottningholm (Sweden) and Peterhof (Russia)]", *Vestnik KGU im. N.A. Nekrasova*, 6, 2006, 138.

of Transformation in Russian history of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, perceived as the alchemical transmutation of a whole state due to the strong will of an initiated monarch equipped with Divine Grace (Alchemical “Vertu”), “strength”, “goodness”, and “the Ability to transmute imperfect Metals into Gold and Silver”.¹ The main theme of the tsar’s concept was a commitment to new ideas, their power and irreversibility – plus the great effort and challenges involved in bringing new ideas to life – not the glorification of Russian arms or the person of the ruler. This is supported indirectly by the fact that there is not a single figure of Mars, the god of war, in the ensemble, something which would have been logical in a military memorial complex and in the style of that period.

As a result, the fragmented and disjointed material on the landscaping and architecture of the Peterhof park and gardens, if interpreted using the symbolism and cultural codes of the alchemical tradition that are widely used in the design of gardens and parks during the Renaissance and the early years of the New Age, enables us to bring it together in an easily-read, logical sequence. This, in turn, leads to a deeper and more considered perception of other semantic layers, which are traditionally expressed when describing this wonderful monument to Russian baroque. In endowing the park at Peterhof with alchemical symbolism, Peter the Great left us a message about the necessity of spiritual work through reflection and of contact with spiritual powers both virtually and in reality, bringing together in an indivisible Whole two externally separate “images of the world”: “his own material” and “the cosmological structure of the universe”, the microcosm and macrocosm of alchemists. To help those who wished to read the messages and their followers – continuers of the alchemical idea of the garden such as Carlo Bartolomeo Rastrelli and Mikhail Zemtsov, the latter’s pupils Ivan Blank and I. Davydov, Nicholas Benois, Andrei Stackenschneider, and the members of the commission of the Academy of Arts which decided to change the design of the Grand Cascade at the end of the eighteenth century there were clues which, in the distinct and legible genre of the alchemical treatise, described the steps necessary for the neophyte to approach hermetic Truth. In the Peterhof park, the richness and benefit of such reflections and searches is defined not only by the visitor’s level of preparedness of the visitor, but also by the intuitively or consciously chosen route through the emblematic retort of the garden-treatise, which matches the logic of the stages of alchemical transformation and the aim of transmutation that, without doubt, takes place thanks to the spirit and charm of this magical place with Peter the Great left to us.

¹ Bernard of Treviso, “Pokinutoe slovo [Abandoned Word]” in Claude d’Ygé, *Novoe Sobranie khimicheskikh Filozofov [A New Collection of Chemical Philosophers]* (Moscow: Enigma, 2010), 241.