

Michael Emmans Dean

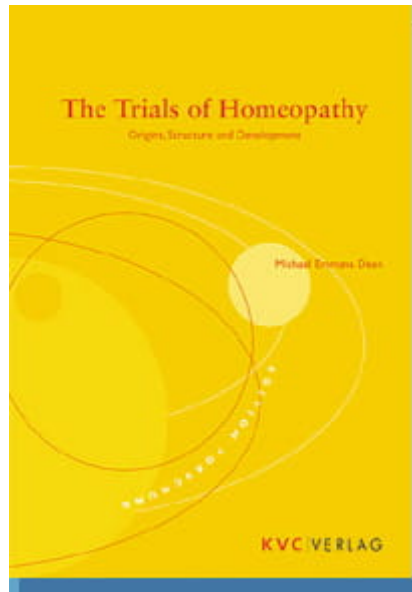
The Trials of Homeopathy

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3.3.4. Drug preparation

Hahnemann's pharmacopeia was mainly herbal in the first two decades of homeopathy, and prepared solely from liquid tinctures. Juices were expressed from fresh plants, dried plants were steeped in alcohol for several hours, and in one or two cases metallic salts of various degrees of solubility, such as *Causticum*, were used to make a 'tincture' which could then be further diluted as needed (Hahnemann 1805b). He modified the process of simple dilution with succussion as a more efficient means of mixing the material with the diluent, but there is no suggestion at this time that he had discovered processes which not only made the medicines safer — the original motivation for dilutions — but also released a hidden medicinal power. Dilutions were standardized in 1816, on a metric (centesimal) scale quite dissimilar to the traditional apothecaries' measures used in homeopathy until then. Two years later Hahnemann claimed that even substances declared to be biologically inert because of their insolubility were capable of pathogenetic and therapeutic action, after lengthy trituration with lactose, and he now began to call the process 'dynamization' and the attenuations 'potencies'.

Plausible influences from alchemy are much easier to find here than with the similia principle, provings or poisonous plants. The call for common alchemical processes such as serial dilution to be used in the preparation of medicines was frequently heard in Europe from the time of Ramon Lull (c. 1232-1315, but the works fathered on him belong to more than one author, like the Hippocratic, Jabirian and Paracelsan writings) and the experimentalist philosopher Roger Bacon (c. 1214—92) onwards. Instructions for alchemical projection - the final process of transmuting base metal with the philosophers' stone to produce gold - demand accurately measured serial dilutions, typically of one part in 100 (Lully 1330). And, of course, the more times the process was repeated the more powerful it became, as the cynical but well-informed Ben Jonson observed in 1610¹¹:

For look, how oft I iterate the work,
So many times, I add unto his virtue.
As, if at first one ounce convert a hundred,

After his second loose, he'll turn a thousand;
His third solution, ten; his fourth, a hundred.
After his fifth, a thousand thousand ounces
Of any imperfect metal, into pure Silver or
gold, in all examinations As good as any of
the natural mine.

Trituration of insoluble substances was another of alchemy's many processes, and in his article of 1818 on *Aurum foliatum* Hahnemann records how he came to adopt the practice only after reading its history in early medico-alchemical texts:

I was delighted to find a number of Arabian physicians unanimously testifying to the medicinal powers of gold in a finely pulverized form, particularly in some serious morbid conditions, in some of which the solution of gold [trichloride] had already been of great use to me. (Hahnemann 1818; 1880)

The alchemists' legendary *aurum potable* (drinkable gold) had of course disappeared from European medicine by the late eighteenth century, dismissed by nearly all Hahnemann's contemporaries as a primitive superstition. He recounts the history of gold therapy in Islamic and European medical alchemy, quoting Geber's celebrated phrase *materia laetificans et in juventute corpus preservans* (a substance that gladdens and preserves the youthfulness of the body) that he had found in *De alchemia*, in the edition of 1598 brought out by Lazarus Zetzner, a leading publisher of alchemical works (Geber 1598). The book was attributed to Jabir ibn-Hayyan (c.721-c.815), the 'father' of Islamic alchemy, until the twentieth century, when it was shown that it belongs to the thirteenth century and was probably written in Europe (Newman 1991). Nevertheless, the author of the *Summa perfectionis*, as it is usually called, had an intimate knowledge of Arabic alchemy, and the book has always been accepted as the fountainhead of the European alchemical tradition. Interestingly, this emergence of the 'gold as elixir of life' theme in Europe in the thirteenth century ties the practice ultimately to Taoist alchemy, rather than Hellenistic Egypt as previously thought: the Chinese took the immortality theme literally, unlike the Greek alchemists, and it was transmitted to Europe via the Middle East (Needham 1974).

Hahnemann then cites Serapion the younger (c.900) and Ibn Sina for their use of gold in various conditions including cardiac disease and depression, showing his knowledge of Arabic in the process. One of the conditions Ibn Sina treated with gold could be 'talking to oneself or 'dyspnea', depending on the diacritical mark: Hahnemann claims that his proving demonstrated it was the latter, and respiratory distress is certainly accepted now as an aspect of gold

toxicology. The early methods of making pure gold biologically available are then detailed: Abu'l-Qasim al-Zahrawi (Abulcasis, 936-1013) first showed how to prepare gold powder by rubbing it on a rough linen cloth in a basin filled with water, and Zacutus, the Portuguese, later rubbed gold on a grindstone. Hahnemann cites over 20 more recent alchemical and medical texts that recommend gold powder - including Francis Bacon's *Historia vitae et mortis* (1623) - and decided the idea was worth testing empirically:

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Accordingly, trituration with lactose was introduced for the first time into homeopathic pharmacy, though it was a common technique elsewhere. Here for example are Storck's (1762) instructions for preparing aconite:

Take extract of Blue Monkshood, two grains; white sugar, two drachms; mix and grind them together for a long time in a marble mortar, to the finest powder.

Hahnemann's innovation combined an existing technique for preparing dried plant materials — previously unused by him, because he preferred to steep them in alcohol - with an alchemical technique that had been eclipsed:

I triturated the finest gold leaf (its fineness is 23 carats, 6 grains) with 100 parts of milk-sugar for a full hour, for internal medicinal use. (Hahnemann 1880)

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100 grains of this powder (containing one grain of gold), and on others, 200 grains (containing two grains of gold), dissolved in water, sufficed to excite very great alterations in the health and morbid symptoms.

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Prior to 1818, metals had been available to homeopathy only as solutions of their salts such as copper sulphate, mercury sulphides and iron acetate (introduced respectively in 1805, 1811 and 1816). This seems to have been true of post-Paracelsan iatrochemistry generally: in spite of the example of gold powder, only the nitrate of silver had been used in Europe, notably by Robert Boyle (1627—91) whose renowned diuretic pills Hahnemann criticized for their large

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Hahnemann did not record whether he adopted centesimal dilutions from alchemical sources — and he need not have as the metric scale was being used increasingly by scientists - but the date justifies the conjecture and his bibliographic references show he cannot have been unaware of the precedents.

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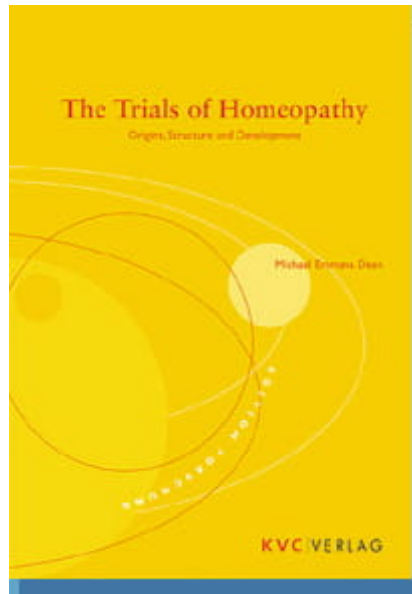
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