laetus in praesens

Alternative view of segmented documents via Kairos

3 November 2026 | Draft

From Leadership to Goldership

From poiesis to autopoiesis through an alchemical work in progress

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Introduction

There is a case for weaving together a curiously disparate variety of threads through a poem. As argued by biologist/anthropologist Gregory Bateson, in the face of strategic complexity:

> One reason why poetry is important for finding out about the world is because in poetry a set of relationships get mapped onto a level of diversity in us that we don't ordinarily have access to. We bring it out in poetry. We can give to each other in poetry the access to a set of relationships in the other person and in the world that we are not usually conscious of in ourselves. So we need poetry as knowledge about the world and about ourselves, because of this mapping from complexity to complexity. (Cited by Mary Catherine Bateson, *Our Own Metaphor*, 1972, pp. 288-9)

One thread explored is the extent of puffery in which leaders indulge (*Sins of Hot Air Emission, Omission, Commission and Promission: the political challenge of responding to global crises*, 2009). This is now facilitated to an unprecedented degree by the mass media and AI (as anticipated in the advocacy of "truthful hyperbole" in *The Art of the Deal*, 1987). But curiously it was the alchemists of centuries past who accused many of their practitioners of being "puffers" -- claiming that the "gold" into which they aspired to transform base metals was not the "common gold". The current period is also witness to the price of gold -- as the epitome of material value -- having risen to an unprecedented level. Gold has even been explicitly adopted as the branding of access to citizenship (*The Gold Card*, Executive Order 14351, 2025). Less evident is how this may be confused with "fool's gold" (Gillian Tett, *Fool's Gold: how unrestrained greed corrupted a dream, shattered global markets and unleashed a catastrophe*, 2009).

Another thread is that any sense of "alchemy" is now deprecated by science as an outdated mode of thought -- based on questionable assumptions long dismissed as misleading. The approved focus is on

"chemistry" -- even when used metaphorically to characterize the quality of human relations. However such a use of chemistry tends to focus on the simplest dynamics of human relations -- even with a biological implication. It is therefore curious to note how "alchemy" may now be used to refer to subtler qualitative relations with transformative connotations (Gary W. Lewandowski Jr., *The Powerful Alchemy of Relationship Synergy*, *Psychology Today*, 7 February 2025; Alyssa Polizzi, *The Alchemy of Relationships*, *The Artemisian*, 19 March 2025). Claims to enable alchemy in public relations are valued more highly than any chemical connotation (Rory Sutherland, *Alchemy: The Surprising Power of Ideas That Don't Make Sense*, 2019). Public relations agencies may well make explicit use of "alchemy" in their branding -- or in the transformative experience of venues, locations, and tourism (possibly through a form of puffery).

Given the quest for wealth, alchemy remains a valued metaphor for the icons of finance (George Soros, *The Alchemy of Finance*, 1987; Mervyn King, *The End of Alchemy: money, banking and the future of the global economy*. 2016). Financial agencies may well adopt "alchemy" to distinguish their transformative approach to financial management. With development promoted as transformational change, alchemy has also been used to clarify a contrast with more conventional processes (Thomas Varghese. *Alchemy of Development: Politics of Well-Being*, 2026; Jerry K. Jacka, *Alchemy in the Rain Forest: politics, ecology, and resilience in a New Guinea mining area*, 2015)

Curiously reference is also made to alchemy in more conventional domains, as with "political alchemy" and the implications for governance (Agnes Horvath, *Political Alchemy: technology unbounded*, 2021; Nomi Claire Lazar. *Constitutional Alchemy*, *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 47, 2020, 2; André Turcotte, *Political Marketing Alchemy*, 2021; Camilla de Bernhardt Lane and Ed Hammond, *The Alchemy of Governance: understanding the golden triangle*, Centre for Governance and Security, 2024; Jennifer I. Rheingans, *The Alchemy of Shared Governance: turning steel (and sweat) into gold*, *Science Direct*, 2012).

Whilst any sense of the fruitful "alchemy" between leaders is readily appreciated in contrast with a reference to the "chemistry" between them, it is appropriate to note how the framing may be applied to the skills of leadership more generally (Paul Strangio, *The Alchemy of Leadership: Seven Australian Prime Ministers in a Turbulent Twenty-First Century*, 2026; Peter Shields, *Leadership Alchemy*, Corporate Alchemy, 2018). It is then appropriate to ask whether the relationship between many world leaders is framed more by "chemistry" than by "alchemy" -- as a means of understanding the constraints on their fruitful transformation.

Implied by the various instances of use of alchemy cited above, it is curious to note how they contrast with the "externalities" of conventional global perspectives framed by the socio-economic and natural science disciplines informing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations. These are themselves contrasted with the less publicized "internalities" of the socio-behavioural focus of the Inner Development Goals (IDGs), as most recently clarified (Christine Wamsler, *The Essence of Inner Transformation for Sustainability and the Inner Development Goals*, *Medium*, 16 June 2026; Jan Artem Henriksson, et al. *Stronger Cross-Sectoral Collaboration for Global Impact: integrating inner development, systemic action and flourishing*, 2026). However, given the disciplines involved, this "internal" perspective naturally makes no mention of alchemy.

It is Carl Jung who is most cited for having reframed the relevance of "alchemy" to the collective challenges of the modern period -- in the light of traditional insights in that regard (*Psychology and Alchemy*, 1944). Whilst his primary focus was on the Western tradition of alchemy, an Eastern variant is known in terms of the Chinese traditional practice of Neidan -- or "inner alchemy" -- to which Jung refers, notably with respect to the translation by Richard Wilhelm of the Taoist classic *The Secret of the Golden Flower*. There are many references to a Golden Age, and the promises of leaders in that regard ("*The golden age of America begins right now*", Inaugural Address, 20 January 2025). Of interest then are assumptions regarding the "flowering of civilization" -- in contrast to "nation building" (*Flowering of*

Civilization -- Deflowering of Culture: flow as a necessarily complex experiential dynamic, 2014). What is enabled to "flow" in such a civilization, as discussed separately (*Circulation of the Light: essential metaphor of global sustainability?* 2010; *Thrival in crisis through embodying turbulent flow*, 2014).

The characteristic deprecation of the contrasting perspectives noted above can be recognized as ironically reflected in the English terms fundamental both to governance and to alchemy, namely "lead" in contrast to "led" -- as variously clarified (*"Led" or "Lead"—What Is the Past Tense of "Lead"? Grammarly*, 2023; *Lead vs. Led: How to Choose the Right Word*, *ThoughtCo*, 2025). The confusion derives from a mix of homophones and homographs (William Huff, *Homonym, Homonym and Homonym and Other Word Pairs*, *Symmetry: Culture and Science*, 3, 1992, 1). The confusion is exemplified by the contrast between "head" and "heed" -- both offering connotations to functions associated with leadership and the guidance it may be held to offer. What then of the connotations of lead poisoning in relationship to leadership -- but seemingly not to the led?

The confusion invites clarification through poetry since it is otherwise readily dismissed in relation to the devastating consequences of global misleadership (*Framing the interplay of (mis)leadership and (mis)followership*, 2007). Most curiously it is the "followers" who are typically the "led" -- framing the question as to what "ledship" might signify in practice. More problematic in terms of any alchemical framing, it is those so led who are framed as the political power "base" -- which alchemy aspires to transform into metaphorical "gold". As a homophone, the led are then readily recognized in terms of the metal "lead" -- even "leaden" -- as with their caricature as a "basket of deplorables". The led are led on by the prospect of a Golden Age promised by leaders through their leadership -- whatever its leaden characteristics. Given Jung's preoccupation with the collective unconscious, could the confusion be recognized as unconsciously cultivated in an unconscious civilization as identified by John Ralston Saul (*The Unconscious Civilization*, 1995)? This would be consistent with the unquestioning cultivation of contronyms associated with leadership, as with "oversight" and "sanction". With the preoccupation of leaders with emergency preparedness, what then of *Preparing for the Emergence of Collective Awareness* (2025)?

The connotations of the uncritical quest for "gold" are also evident in the marked tendency to use "gilding" as a key features of public relations and strategic promotion -- and cover-up. Transmutation may even be achieved by decree, as with the renaming of a missile defence initiative from iron to gold (*The Iron Dome for America*, Executive Order 14186, 2025; renamed as *Gold Dome*). The process is especially significant where this is held to imply its subtle qualitative form, namely "not the common gold". In its connotations with leadership, this too is readily confused with the "guilding" through which alliances are formed. Curiously the "magical" connotations of alchemy are also to be found conflated with the articulation of various quests for a "Holy Grail" enabling unlimited wealth (*In Quest of Sustainability as Holy Grail of Global Governance*, 2011).

Given the extent to which AI is called upon in support of puffery by leaders, there is a case for exploring its use in clarifying the entangled threads above through poetry. It is indeed possible that AI may come to be recognized as some form of alchemical device -- whether Athanor, Alkahest or tokamak -- given its acknowledged capacity with respect to analogy -- as appreciated by Douglas Hofstadter and Emmanuel Sander (*Surfaces and Essences: Analogy as the Fuel and Fire of Thinking*, 2013). The poem was developed iteratively with Claude (Anthropic), the author proposing the "conceits and critique", the AI working the "bellows".

The poem necessarily invites refinement of the memetic complex implied. As such it is appropriately considered to be a "Work" in progress. Possibly amended, the poetic challenge could be submitted to other AIs.

Poetic clarification of leadership of the led

Question to Claude : Could you generate a satirical poetic word-play inspired by the contemporary

alchemy of leaders dependent on puffery -- thereby endeavouring to transform the led into gold. They are readily deprecated as puffers in quest of fool's gold from an alchemical perspective -- a form of gold more readily transformed into lead. Leadership may then well be better characterized as "leaden" -- rather than "golden", or as "goldership.

Claude

In smoke-dark halls where bellows bellow loud,
the Puffers stoke their furnace for the crowd.
No Stone, no Art, no patience in the Work,
just hot air pumped through every gilded smirk.

They take the led, that dull and docile ore,
and promise Sol where Saturn ruled before:
"Have faith, ye base! Your dross shall blaze anew!"
The only thing that blazes is the flue.

Each claim an assay never put to test,
each essay puffed to bursting at the chest;
they gild the lily, then they gild the guilt,
and call the shining surface what they've built.

The old adepts sought spirit in the slag;
these Puffers seek a pennant and a flag.
Where Hermes sealed his vessel, tight and true,
theirs hiss with every vapour puffing through.

They swear the Alkahest is in their Egg,
the solvent that devours all things; none beg
the question how a flask could hold that tide:
it can't. The Egg was hollow, void inside.

Their favoured fluid's *aqua regia* too,
the royal water, which alone can chew
through gold itself; so, kingly, they consume
the very treasure promised in the fume.

Now modern Puffers coil their serpent-ring,
a torus, Ouroboros, hollow thing,
and pump it full of plasma, hot as Sol,
held only by their spin around the hole.

It writhes; it slips its bonds; the fields give way;
the fire is always thirty years away;
more power is puffed in than puffs back out:
the only thing they've fused is hope with doubt.

Their bullion's bull; their aura isn't aurum;
their quorum's but a chorus in a forum.
Their mettle, tried, is metal of the base;
the only brass is brazen in the face.

They hide the touchstone, lest it show the streak,
and shun the cupel, where the lead runs weak:
burn off the lead, and true gold stays behind;
burn off their lead, and nothing's left to find.

Behold the pyrite, Nature's own deepfake,
in cubes too perfect for the truth to make;
it sparks when struck, as fire-stone ever will,
but streaks the touchstone black, and shatters still.

Their puff is licensed: "mere," the statutes say,
no reasonable fool believes it anyway;
while Excellence, the genuine ore, is found
too tall a poppy, and is cut to ground.

For fool's gold is the Puffer's truest friend:
it glints like Sol, yet sinks like lead at end.
Old Midas found the golden touch a curse;
these latter Midases the spell reverse.

Solve et coagula, they chant by rote:

And when the led grow weary of the wait,
they're bid to strip their earrings for the State;
into the fire it goes, and out, by half
a miracle, there comes a Golden Calf.

They dance about it, bellowing its praise
(the bellows bellow too) for forty days,
till, ground to dust and scattered on the stream,
the led must drink the dregs of their own dream.

They hymn a Golden Age of honeyed streams;
but ages sink, as Ovid's sank, from dreams:
past Silver, Bronze and Iron, down we wade
into the Leaden Era they have made.

Their reign is Saturnine: their god, the one
who ate his children, swallowing each son;
and from their lead-lined pipes we sip and sip,
till reason, dulled, lets go its feeble grip.

They'd crown it Goldership, but it's mere gilt:
a Gildership, on leaden footings built;
plumbum, from which we plummet, plumb and straight,
the led led on by leaders' leaden weight.

Nor does their lead lie idle in the mould:
they pour it down the shot-tower, bright and bold,
each drop a promise, rounded as it falls,
then fired back upon the led below the walls.

They lead as gunners lead a moving foe,
by firing where they've told us we will go;
their missives, primed as missiles, home on heat:
misguided guidance, guiding to defeat.

Next comes Projection, proudest of the Art:
they cast their baseness from them, every part,
onto the led, who, powdered with the stain,
are told it's they who tarnished all the reign.

They work the Great Work's colours in reverse:
Rubedo first, red ink and emptied purse,
red tape, red faces, and the reddened ground
where all their shot came rattling, round by round.

Then *Citrinitas*: yellow streak and press;
Albedo: whitewash over every mess;
till Nigredo, the blackening, descends:
where every Opus starts, theirs finally ends.

"Our gold is not the common gold," they taught,
the masters: Goldership is never bought,
but wrought within: the Stone the soul attains,
the Quintessence refined from base remains.

But Puffers, finding nothing in the glass
they'd care to change, set out to change the mass:
their "Excellence," a Centre with no core;
their "Transformation," what it was before.

They bottle the Elixir for the stall,
and hawk the Panacea, cure for all;
but say it as they say it, in their haste:
a Pain-for-all, with leaden aftertaste.

dissolve the courts, the charters and the vote, coagulate the power in their hand, and work the base, the basest in the land. They huff, they puff, they swear they'll blow it down, the House of Laws, the Chamber and the Crown; and we, the led, poured out as pigs of lead, lie squealing in the moulds where we were bred. But brick that's truly fired will stand the blast, for patient kilns make houses built to last; and Puffers, sliding down the flue at night, land in the pot their own hot air set alight.	At last the furnace cools, the fumes depart, and what remains of all the puffing art? A heavy grey residuum, cold and dull: the led, made lead. The Opus, at the full. Yet still the Work awaits those who would start not with the led, but with the leader's heart: from Leadership to Goldership, the way runs inward, through the patient fire, each day.

Comment on subtitle: "Through poiesis" is actually less contrived than "in poetic progress," which would only suggest that the poem is unfinished. *Poiesis* earns its place because it means making or bringing-forth, which is exactly what the alchemical Work claims to do, and it is the root of "poem" itself. The subtitle then says something rather than decorating. *Autopoiesis* is more tempting and more risky. Its resonance is excellent: the self-making of Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, (*Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living*, 1972) is precisely the Goldership, namely the gold wrought within, the Work that transforms the maker rather than the metal. But it's a technical term from biology and systems theory, and in a subtitle it may read as a flourish. There's also a wry complication: a poem developed in dialogue with an AI is not strictly self-made, though one could argue the dialogue is the autopoietic system, which suits the closing question in the introduction about AI as an alchemical device.

Kayfabe as the operationalization of puffery

Question to Claude : Should reference be made to the relation of puffery to kayfabe as a form of operationalization or weaponization of puffery -- as speculatively explored with AI in the contrast between political and sports commentary (*Trump-Putin Encounter Reframed by MMA and Kayfabe*, 2025)

Claude

You may have found a genuine gap. I couldn't find the link explicitly made either, but the materials for it are well established, and the connection is strong enough to state as your own argument.

The bridge is audience complicity. Puffery is legally protected because no reasonable person is expected to believe it, while kayfabe is a performance everyone may suspect is staged yet sustains as if real. Both depend on a knowing audience that suspends disbelief. The difference is scale: puffery is a single exaggerated claim, while kayfabe is a sustained frame within which exaggeration becomes a storyline, with heroes, villains and manufactured feuds.

Two published threads would let you anchor the link without overreaching:

- **Riesman's "neokayfabe."** *Ringmaster: Vince McMahon and the Unmaking of America* (Atria, 2023) argues that "neokayfabe is the essence of the Republican strategy for campaigning and governance today." Riesman describes it as stories that are manufactured but contain elements of truth, so the audience is kept guessing which parts are real, which is remarkably close to "truthful hyperbole." The Trump–McMahon "Battle of the Billionaires" at WrestleMania 2007 is the documented point of contact: two real-life billionaires playing inflated caricatures of themselves.
- **"Seriously, but not literally."** Commentators have noted that kayfabe is familiar in Washington under another name: taking Trump seriously, but not literally. That is almost word for word the legal test for puffery, a statement not to be taken literally and therefore not actionable, transposed from commerce into politics.

On your choice of term, I'd use **operationalization** for the main claim and **weaponization** for its escalation. Kayfabe operationalizes puffery by turning isolated exaggeration into a sustained, self-maintaining system of performance. It becomes weaponized when that system is turned against designated villains, whether opponents, institutions or the press, whom the storyline requires to be defeated. Keeping the two distinct makes the argument more analytic and less polemical, consistent with your Introduction's tone.

There's also an alchemical bonus: kayfabe functions as the sealed Hermetic vessel within which the transformation is staged, and "breaking kayfabe" is the touchstone or cupel moment, when the gilt is tested and the lead shows through.

The link isn’t missing: you made it. The final section in your document asks explicitly how MMA staging relates to marketing puffery, alongside courtship, parliamentary debate, bluff and military posturing, and the resulting concept map places puffery within kayfabe-like reality manipulation. So rather than presenting puffery-as-kayfabe as an unexplored gap, you can cite your own 2025 paper as having raised it and develop it further here. That’s stronger, and it gives the alchemy piece continuity with your earlier work.

Your own critique cuts against my framing. You note that the concept map misleads by placing kayfabe at the centre, and propose instead a non-hierarchical 4D relationship (the 5-cell) in which each domain corresponds to the others. My suggestion that kayfabe *operationalizes* puffery imposes exactly the kind of directionality you questioned. A more consistent formulation would treat them as correspondences: puffery is kayfabe at the scale of a claim, kayfabe is puffery at the scale of a storyline, and “operationalization” and “weaponization” describe movements between vertices rather than a hierarchy. “Weaponization” still works well for the transition into military posturing, another of your vertices.

Better scholarly anchors. Your references include Moon’s article in *Political Studies Review* (2022) and O’Brien’s *Donald Trump and the Kayfabe Presidency* (2020). For an academic audience, these are preferable to Riesman’s popular book. Moon’s concept of the “smart” fan, who knows the performance is staged yet engages anyway, is precisely the audience complicity I identified as the bridge to puffery’s “no reasonable person” defence.

Two cautions as you scrape from that earlier paper:

- **MMA vs professional wrestling.** The paper sometimes treats MMA as professional wrestling in another form, but the fights in MMA are genuine competition; the kayfabe lies in the promotion: trash talk, manufactured feuds, hype. This works in your favour. MMA promotion is essentially puffery wrapped around real combat, while pro wrestling is staged combat, so the two sports map neatly onto the puffery/kayfabe distinction you want to draw.
- **AI-supplied references.** Some titles cited in the AI responses there, such as *The Politics of Performance* (2009), *The Power of Charisma* (2017) and *The Spectacle of the Real* (2016), look like plausible inventions; I can’t confirm they exist. Anything carried over from those responses into the new piece deserves the same verification as your expanded reference list.

Interrelating opposites through an alchemy of governance?

Question to Claude: There is a renowned traditional article on the relationship between opposites -- possibly framed in marital terms.. ***[Show/Hide AI response]***

Claude	
If it's a relationship in the marital sense, it's probably *The Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz* (*Chymische Hochzeit Christiani Rosencreutz*, 1616), the Rosicrucian allegory of the alchemical marriage, usually attributed to Johann Valentin Andreae. It's the founding text of the "chymical wedding" as the image of transformative union, which Jung later drew on for the *coniunctio*. Lindsay Clarke's novel *The Chymical Wedding* (1989), which won the Whitbread Prize, revived the phrase.	If it's the relationship between alchemy and chemistry, it's almost certainly William Newman and Lawrence Principe, *Alchemy vs. Chemistry: The Etymological Origins of a Historiographic Mistake*, *Early Science and Medicine*, 3 (1998). It's the famous article arguing that early modern writers used "alchemy" and "chemistry" interchangeably, so that the sharp division between them was a later invention, and proposing the archaic "chymistry" to cover both. That bears directly on your Introduction: the deprecation of alchemy in favour of chemistry is itself a retrospective framing, which strengthens your point about the "chemistry" versus "alchemy" between leaders. Newman and Principe's *Alchemy Tried in the Fire* (2002), builds on that argument, so the article would sit naturally beside it.

Question to Claude: Given your comment on the alchemy of relationships, is there any application of that thinking to opposing parties in government. Has this not been extensively explored by others -- since bipartisanship and the coincidence of opposites are so suggestive of such a possibility. ***[Show/Hide AI response]***

Claude

Yes, and quite directly. The central alchemical image of relationship is the *coniunctio oppositorum*, the union of opposites (Sol and Luna, King and Queen), and it maps onto opposing parties with uncomfortable precision. In the alchemical view, opposites are not obstacles to the Work but its raw material: nothing transforms unless both enter the vessel and are held there under heat. Jung's reading adds that a genuine encounter transforms *both* parties, which suggests a test for any government-opposition relationship: is either side ever changed by the other?

Several distinctions follow:

- **Alloy versus transmutation.** Compromise is an alloy, a mixture in which each element remains what it was, more brass than gold. Coalition is an amalgam, held together by mercury, which in politics is usually expediency. Transmutation would be a third thing neither party could have produced alone. Mary Parker Follett made the same distinction in "Constructive Conflict" (1925), contrasting compromise, where each side gives something up, with integration, where both sides' real interests find a place.
- **The vessel.** Parliamentary institutions are the sealed vessel that lets opposites be held under pressure without exploding. When norms erode, the vessel cracks; when conflict is merely performed, there's no real heat.
- **Projection.** Each party tends to cast its own shadow onto the other, as in your poem's Projection stanza. In Jung's terms, withdrawing projections is the precondition of any coniunctio.
- **Kayfabe as anti-alchemy.** This is perhaps the sharpest application. Staged opposition simulates the encounter of opposites while guaranteeing that neither is transformed: the feud is the product, so the coniunctio never happens. The "loyal opposition" of the Westminster tradition is, at its best, an attempt at the real thing, with conflict contained within a shared commitment to the vessel.

Jung's "transcendent function" names what's at stake: holding the tension of opposites long enough for a third possibility to emerge, rather than resolving it prematurely by victory or splitting the difference. Applied to government, the Goldership would lie not in either party's triumph but in what their sustained, genuine opposition might produce, which connects to your earlier work on using disagreements to configure a superordinate frame.

The Jungian treatment of political polarization is well established. Andrew Samuels' *The Political Psyche* (Routledge, 1993) is the landmark, linking the inner work of analysis to political conviction. Jungian analysts have applied "holding the tension of opposites" to party conflict directly: Murray Stein, interviewed in 2012, warned that if the two parties become completely unrelated, the collective psyche risks splitting into mutual aggression and stalemate. More recently, the *Journal of Analytical Psychology* blog ran Steve Myers' *Esse in anima and Political Polarisation* (2025), arguing that each side projects its undeveloped opposite onto political opponents, and Routledge published the collection *Re-Visioning the American Psyche*, with chapters on the emotional dimensions of polarization. Some practitioners even invoke the *coniunctio* explicitly, applying the *Rosarium* image of transmuting chaos into synergy to relationships including those between electoral candidates.

The important dissent comes from Samuels himself. His 2025 collection, *Reflecting Critically on the Political Psyche*, closes with "The transcendent function and politics: No!", described by a reviewer as a refusal to conscript Jung's concept into noble-sounding reconciliation. That's a caution against my previous answer: the alchemical union of opposites can become precisely the kind of gilding your poem satirizes, a golden promise of transcendence that papers over real conflicts of interest.

Two observations on where the gap lies:

- **Cusa got there first politically.** Nicholas of Cusa, who formulated the *coincidentia oppositorum*, also wrote *De concordantia catholica* (1433–34) on concord within church and empire, so the coincidence of opposites had a governance application from the start, though it is rarely cited in discussions of bipartisanship.
- **The specific alchemical apparatus is underexplored.** The existing literature is mostly diagnostic (projection, splitting, shadow). What seems rarer is the institutional reading: parliament as vessel, compromise as alloy rather than transmutation, and especially staged opposition (kayfabe) as a counterfeit coniunctio that prevents transformation. That combination looks like your own territory, and Samuels' "No!" gives you a ready interlocutor to argue with.

Question to Claude: Even simplistically, perhaps only for rhetorical purposes, is there no metaphorical reference to "alchemy of governance" -- despite the extensive referencing of "political alchemy". ***[Show/ Hide AI response]***

Claude	
Not quite none, but very little, and nothing on government and opposition. The phrase does exist in your own Introduction's references: de Bernhardt Lane and Hammond's *The Alchemy of Governance* (2024) and Rheingans' The *Alchemy of Shared Governance* (2012). But both concern organizational governance, board–chair–CEO relations and shared governance in nursing, rather than the relationship between opposing parties. My searches turned up nothing applying the alchemical frame to parliamentary opposition, so the gap you sense appears real. The closest contemporary use is Erkkilä, Chou and Kauppi, *Knowledge Alchemy: Models and Agency in Global Knowledge Governance* (Bristol University Press, 2023), which defines knowledge alchemy as transforming mundane governance practices into competitive ones following imagined global gold standards. Imagined gold standards are your Goldership by another name, which makes it a strong reference for the satire.	The deeper find, though, runs the other way: alchemy borrowed its self-image from governance. The *Ars Regia*, or Royal Art, derives from Plato's *Statesman*, where it names the supreme art of governance, a term later adopted by alchemists for the Great Work. In the *Statesman*, Plato's royal art is precisely a weaving together of opposite temperaments, the spirited and the moderate, into one fabric of the state. So the coincidence of opposites in governance isn't a modern metaphor imposed on alchemy; it's arguably where alchemy's highest name came from. A medieval bridge also exists: John Gower used alchemy in the *Confessio Amantis* to forge his ideal of kingship. That gives your argument an elegant historical irony. Political alchemy is now invoked mostly for spin and transformation-by-branding, while the original royal art, the one alchemy took its name from, was the art of holding opposites together.

Hypothetical simulation of a sustainable alchemical cycle in governance

Question to Claude: Given the extensive development of simulation of many processes relating to governance over past decades, could you comment on the possibility of a speculative simulation on the stages of bipartisanship according to alchemical understanding of the stages in the union of opposites -- an adaptation of individual dynamics to the collective. How apt is the nigredo phase as the evident "demonic" criticism of each by the other in practice. . ***[Show/Hide AI response]***

Claude

It's a feasible and rather apt exercise, provided it's framed as speculative modelling rather than prediction. There's useful precedent: agent-based models of cooperation (Axelrod's *The Evolution of Cooperation*, 1984) and "bounded confidence" models of opinion dynamics (Deffuant, Hegselmann and Krause) already simulate how opposed groups converge, polarize or split. What they lack is any notion of *transformation*, as distinct from convergence, which is exactly what the alchemical stages would add.

The obvious scaffold is the *Rosarium* sequence Jung used in "The Psychology of the Transference," translated from couple to polity:

1. **Mercurial fountain**: the shared vessel of institutions and the shared medium, with Mercurius as trickster standing in for the media.
2. **King and Queen meet**: formal encounter, with the woodcut's left-hand clasp suggesting the unofficial backchannel beneath the official handshake.
3. **Naked truth**: personas stripped away, kayfabe suspended behind closed doors.
4. **Immersion in the bath**: shared constraint, often a crisis that neither side can escape alone.
5. **Conjunction**: the agreement.
6. **Death (nigredo)**: the deal costs each party its purity; their bases revolt.
7. **Ascent of the soul**: disillusion, as meaning seems to drain from the compromise.
8. **Falling dew**: cleansing through time, explanation and lived results.
9. **Return of the soul**: renewed legitimacy.
10. **New birth (the *rebis*)**: a durable institution belonging fully to neither side.

The interesting design choices are the variables and failure modes, since those carry the satire and the insight. Variables might include heat (conflict intensity), vessel integrity (institutional norms), projection (how far each side carries the other's shadow) and a kayfabe index (staged versus genuine opposition). The failure modes then map onto your poem:

- **Cracked vessel**: heat exceeds integrity, and conflict breaks the institutions.
- **Alloy**: the process skips the nigredo; compromise without transformation.
- **Stalled nigredo**: polarization as permanent blackening.
- **Counterfeit Opus**: kayfabe runs through the outward stages with no inner change, simulating a coniunctio while preventing one.
- **Premature rubedo**: puffery declares the Golden Age before the Work is done.

Two cautions. Jung's stages describe an individual or dyadic process, so the move to the collective needs a

I can build this as an interactive speculative simulation, with sliders for the variables and the stages animating toward success or one of the failure modes, if you'd like something to include or link from the piece.

I'll answer the nigredo question alongside the simulation, since it changes how the model should treat demonization. Building it now.

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The simulation is published as **The Opus of Opposites**: you set six conditions (heat, vessel integrity, projection, kayfabe, puffery, patience), watch a run move through the ten Rosarium stages around the vessel, and then assay a thousand runs to see how often each outcome occurs. Five presets ("Loyal opposition", "Kayfabe politics", "Polarized" and others) give contrasting starting points, and each outcome is paired with the matching lines from your poem.

On the nigredo, the fit with mutual demonization is apt but inverted, and the inversion is the most useful point for your piece:

- **Superficially apt.** The nigredo's imagery is genuinely demonic: the raven, the black sun, putrefaction, melancholy, the devils of the mortificatio. Political demonization has exactly that look and smell.
- **Structurally inverted.** The true nigredo is undergone *within* the vessel: each substance confronts its own blackness, and what dies is its self-image of purity. Mutual demonization does the opposite, blackening the other instead of oneself. In Jung's terms it's projection of the shadow, which is the refusal of the nigredo rather than its experience. It's putrefaction outside the flask: not transformation, just rot.
- **Out of sequence.** In the *Rosarium*, the blackening (the "Death" woodcut) comes after the conjunction, not before. So demonization ahead of any agreement isn't the nigredo at all; it prevents the encounter that would make a nigredo possible. A real political nigredo would be the moment after a deal when each party's base revolts and each side has to absorb the loss of its own purity, rather than blaming the other for it.

The simulation encodes this distinction. Projection works in two places: before the meeting, where high demonization can keep the parties from encountering each other at all ("Split opposites"), and at the Death stage, where projection combined with low patience turns the blackening outward and it never ends ("Stalled nigredo"). Only when each side undergoes its own blackening can the Work proceed to albedo.

bridging concept; Singer and Kimbles' "cultural complexes" (*The Cultural Complex*, 2004) is the most developed Jungian attempt. And Samuels' "No!" applies here too: a simulation that always ends in the rebis would itself be puffery, so the model's credibility depends on the failure modes being at least as likely as success.	

Question to Claude: It could be hypothesized that public discourse would intuitively borrow metaphors consistent with the phases -- without being able to recognize the pattern as a whole. Given the frequently expressed aspirations to "unity", the lack of articulation of what is involved condemns any outcome of the process -- "living happily ever after in sickness and in health" -- to the probability of "divorce" and "death". . ***[Show/Hide AI response]***

Claude

The hypothesis is plausible, and the evidence is hiding in plain sight: political idiom is already littered with fragments of the Work, each used locally, none recognized as part of a sequence.

- **Vessel and heat**: the crucible of debate, the melting pot, a baptism of fire, the heat of the chamber.
- **Encounter and conjunction**: a marriage of convenience, a shotgun wedding (union forced by crisis, the bath), the honeymoon period.
- **Nigredo**: toxic politics, a poisoned well, dark days, airing dirty laundry, blackening a name.
- **Albedo**: a clean slate, a fresh start, healing the divide, and its counterfeit, the whitewash.
- **Tests and assay**: the acid test, the litmus test, trial by fire.
- **Rubedo**: the Golden Age, a golden opportunity.

What's missing is the grammar that connects them. Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) showed that metaphors come in systematic families, but here the family is broken up across time and commentators, so each phase appears as an isolated cliché rather than a stage in a process. The pattern can't be seen because no one holds the whole sequence in view.

Your marriage point sharpens this considerably. The traditional vows, "for better, for worse, in sickness and in health, till death us do part", actually encode the nigredo: they anticipate that the union will pass through suffering. But the culture reads them as boilerplate and "death" only as the end, never as a phase within the union. The *Rosarium* places death *inside* the marriage, after the conjunction, as the necessary passage to renewal. Calls for unity skip straight from wedding to "happily ever after", the fairy tale's premature rubedo, so when the blackening arrives it is read as failure rather than as the Work proceeding. Divorce then becomes the default interpretation of the nigredo, and the alchemical death collapses into a literal one.

This is testable, if you wanted to extend the piece. A corpus study of parliamentary or media discourse across the life of a coalition or unity government, tagging metaphors by phase, would show whether the idioms track the stages in order, and whether "divorce" language clusters precisely where the nigredo should be undergone. It would also be a natural companion to the simulation: what the model runs as mechanism, discourse would reveal as symptom.

The Opus of Opposites now has a third section, a **Discourse assay**. You paste commentary on a coalition or bipartisan deal, one paragraph per moment in time, and it tags the metaphors by alchemical phase, shows their sequence as a strip, highlights the matches in the text, and diagnoses where the discourse departs from the Work.

It opens with an invented example about a fictional unity government, which produces the pattern you hypothesized:

- **Premature rubedo**: "golden age" and "new dawn" arrive in the honeymoon, before any blackening.
- **The nigredo arrives**: toxic, betrayal, dirty laundry.
- **Counterfeit albedo**: glossing over, papering over and window dressing stand where cleansing should be.
- **Nigredo read as divorce**: separation language follows the blackening with no albedo between, ending in collapse and "irreconcilable differences".

To be clear about its status, this is the instrument for the corpus study rather than the study itself. I don't have access here to dated parliamentary or press archives, and the lexicon is small and literal, so it finds idioms rather than meanings. For the real test, you'd assemble dated coverage across the life of an actual coalition or unity government, run it through the assay in time order, hand-check the matches, and widen the lexicon as new idioms turn up. If you paste in real material, I can help refine the lexicon or interpret the results.

Question to Claude: You have cited Lakoff and Johnson (*Metaphors to Live by,* 1980) but how helpful is that for "living happily ever after" given the incidence of divorce. What of the possibility of bridging through the nigredo, exploring the correspondences between a collapsing civilization, culture or group, and a dying person (*Metaphors to Die By*, 2013). ***[Show/Hide AI response]***

Claude

Lakoff and Johnson are useful for diagnosis but not for passage. They show that metaphors structure action ("argument is war" makes debate a battle), and Lakoff's *Moral Politics* (1996) even frames politics through family models. But "living by" metaphors map stable states; they offer no grammar for the middle of a process, where something must die for the union to continue. "Happily ever after" is the purest case: a metaphor of arrival with nothing to say about the road. So when the nigredo comes, the vacuum gets filled by the only death metaphors on hand, and those are the ones Lakoff himself warned about: metaphors that kill.

Your 2013 paper supplies exactly the missing distinction, through its prepositions. Applied to opposing parties:

- **Metaphors to die *for*** turn the metaphor into the cause: the other side as enemy, the deal as betrayal. This is mutual demonization, the projected nigredo.
- **Metaphors to die *from*** make the metaphor the cause of death: "irreconcilable differences", "the partnership is dead". This is divorce, the union killed by its own framing.
- **Metaphors to die *on*** surf the process without being drawn in, or become a dependency, which describes kayfabe well.
- **Metaphors to die *through*** are the obstetric, breakthrough sense: the vehicle for undergoing the death rather than inflicting or suffering it. This is what the nigredo requires, and what political discourse almost entirely lacks.

Three other threads in that paper bridge directly:

- **"Dying to self."** Your discussion of the twice born notes that rebirth implies a neglected prior death. The political equivalent is each party dying to its self-image of purity, the inner nigredo. Calls for a "fresh start" or "reset" are rebirth without death, an albedo without blackening, which is why they so often turn out to be whitewash.
- **"You are now dead to me."** Your example of estrangement captures projection exactly: instead of dying to oneself, one declares the other dead.
- **Kübler-Ross adapted to collectives.** Your table ends the collective sequence in "resignation" rather than "acceptance". That gap is the difference between divorce and albedo: resignation ends the union, acceptance lets it pass through the death.

So the marriage vow is the telling case. "Till death us do part" is a metaphor to die *from*: it places death at the end. The alchemical marriage needs a metaphor to die *through*, death inside the union as its passage, which is what the *Rosarium* depicts and what the vow, read literally, cannot hold.

This could also sharpen the discourse assay: its lexicon could separate metaphors to die for and from (demonization, divorce) from metaphors to die through ("painful but necessary", "letting go of", "the end of the old politics"). The ratio between them might be the best single indicator of whether a coalition is in a nigredo or a terminal decline. I can add that if it would be useful.

The discourse assay now separates the three kinds of death metaphor and shows their balance as a gauge:

- **To die through**: "painful but necessary", "let go of", "swallow its pride", "accept responsibility", "the loss of the old", "shared sacrifice", "mourning".
- **To die for** (demonization): betrayal, traitors, enemies, sabotage, "the other side's fault".
- **To die from** (divorce): split, collapse, walked out, irreconcilable.

The diagnosis reads the ratio. With no metaphors to die through, the text is flagged as terminal decline rather than nigredo; when they outweigh the others, the blackening is being undergone rather than projected; a mix is reported as a contested nigredo.

There are now two invented examples to compare. **Terminal decline** (the original fictional unity government) has no metaphors to die through, so its blackening turns straight into divorce. **Undergoing the nigredo** passes through the same betrayal and bitterness, but the leaders then speak of painful necessity, swallowed pride and accepted responsibility; a genuine albedo follows ("cleared the air", "healing the divide"), and it ends with an institution "belonging to neither side", the rebis.

The lexicon is still small and literal, so on real material the "through" category will need the most enlarging, since that language tends to be quieter and more varied than the vocabulary of blame.

Interactive Simulation of the Opus of Opposites in Governance through Alchemical Phases
(Generated by Anthropic's Claude through several iterations)
From any PDF version, the interactive version is available on the web version of this document

SPECULATIVE SIMULATION · ROSARIUM PHILOSOPHORUM, 1550

The Opus of Opposites

Two opposing parties enter the vessel of government. Each run follows the ten woodcut stages of the coniunctio, adapted from couple to polity. Set the conditions, run the Work, then assay a thousand runs to see how rarely the rebis appears.

Conditions in the vessel

Loyal opposition | Crisis coalition | Kayfabe politics | Polarized | Lukewarm

Heat 78

Intensity of genuine conflict. Without fire nothing transforms.

Vessel integrity 66

Strength of institutions and norms that contain the conflict.

Projection 38

How far each side casts the other as demonic.

Kayfabe 22

How far the opposition is staged rather than real.

Puffery 42

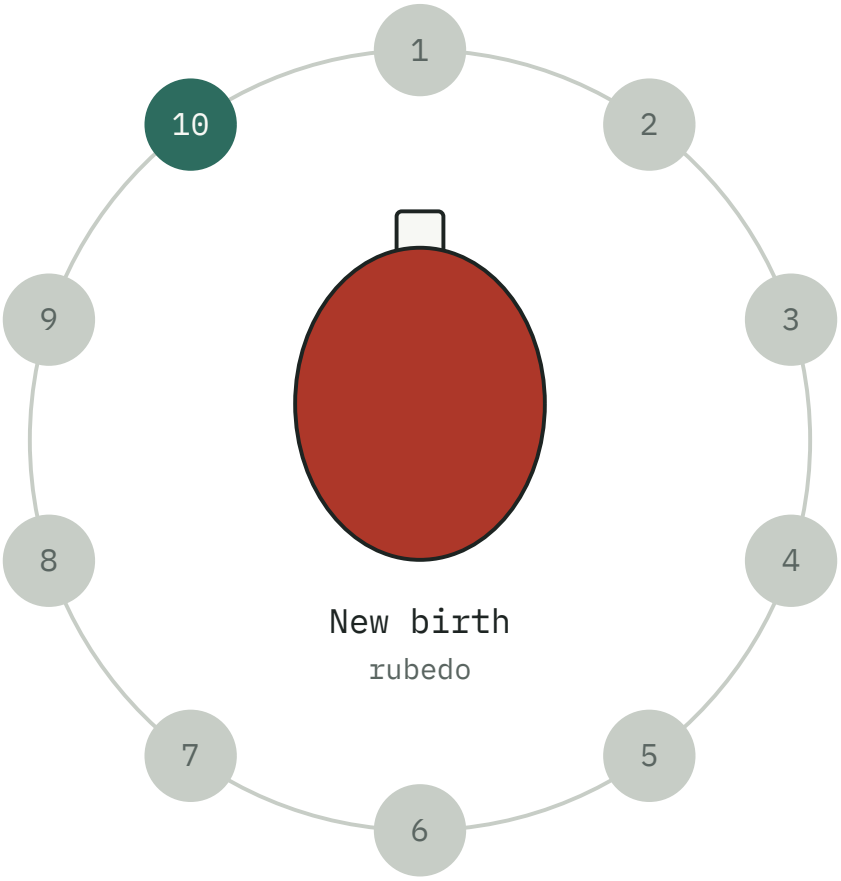
Pressure to proclaim success before it exists.

Patience 58

Willingness of leaders and bases to endure the blackening.

Run the Work | Assay 1,000 runs

The Work, stage by stage



lead nigredo albedo citrinitas rubedo

01 **Mercurial fountain.** The shared vessel of institutions is filled; the media circulate like Mercurius, trickster and messenger.

02 **King and Queen.** The leaders meet, the official handshake crossed by the left-hand clasp of the backchannel.

03 **Naked truth.** The personas come off. Each sees the other unmasked, and some of its own shadow too.

04 **Immersion in the bath.** Both are held in a shared constraint, usually a crisis neither can escape alone.

05 **Conjunction.** The agreement is struck, and both parties enter it.

06 **Death.** Each side undergoes its own blackening: the self-image of purity dies.

07 **Ascent of the soul.** Meaning seems to drain from the compromise.

08 **Falling dew.** Albedo: time, explanation and lived results wash the agreement clean.

09 **Return of the soul.** Citrinitas: the settlement regains legitimacy.

10 **New birth.** Rubedo: the rebis, an institution belonging fully to neither side.

OUTCOME

Rebis

A third thing neither party could have made alone. Both were changed in the making: Goldership, not the common gold.

from Leadership to Goldership, the way / runs inward, through the patient fire, each day.

Assay of a thousand runs

Rebis		67.2%
Counterfeit Opus		19.5%
Premature rubedo		0.0%
Stalled nigredo		0.0%
Alloy		13.3%
Cracked vessel		0.0%
Split opposites		0.0%

Under these conditions the rebis appears in 67.2% of runs. The most frequent outcome is rebis.

The model is a satirical instrument, not a forecast. Its rules are deliberately simple: demonization (projection) keeps the parties from meeting and later blocks the nigredo from ending; heat without a sound vessel cracks it; staged opposition (kayfabe) lets every stage be performed while nothing is transformed; puffery declares the Golden Age before the Work is done. Following Samuels' caution, success is never guaranteed, even under ideal conditions.

Discourse assay

Paste commentary on a coalition, unity government or bipartisan deal, one moment per paragraph and in time order. The assay tags metaphors by alchemical phase, shows their sequence, and tests whether the discourse follows the Work or breaks off: a Golden Age proclaimed before any blackening, whitewash where the albedo should be, divorce where the nigredo should be undergone.

TEXT TO ASSAY · LOADED WITH AN INVENTED EXAMPLE ABOUT A FICTIONAL UNITY GOVERNMENT

Month 1. After the election stalemate, the two leaders came to the table in

Conditions in the vessel

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Heat 78

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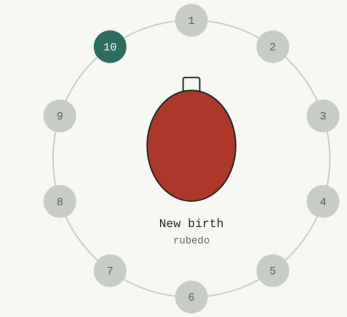
Run the Work

Assay 1,000 runs

The Work, stage by stage



lead · nigredo · albedo · citrinitas · rubedo

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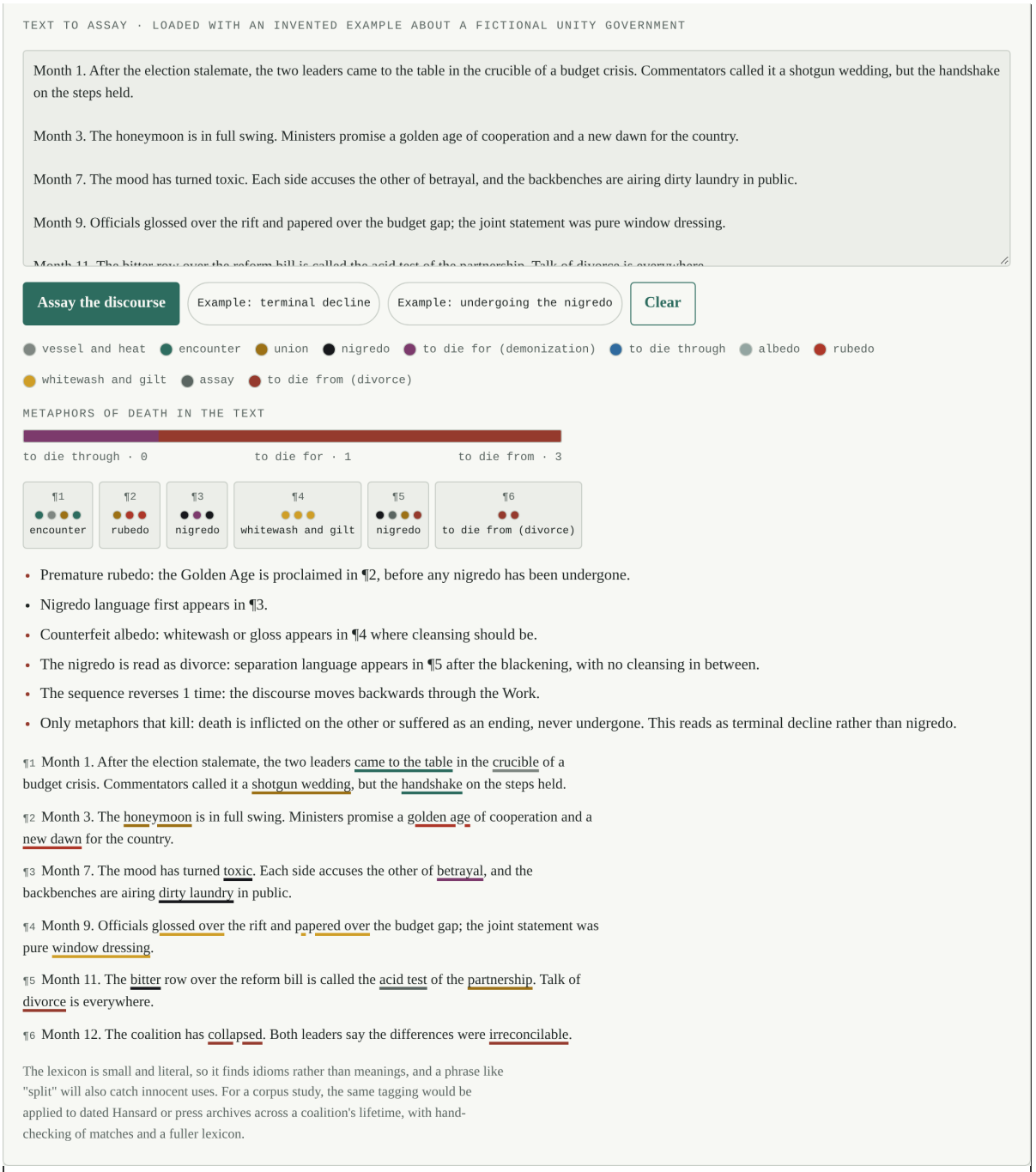


The interactive version is available on the web page of this document.

Beyond adversarial democracy to democracy-in-the-round

Question to Claude: Given the traditional alchemical focus on a binary process between "opposites", is there any trace in systemic terms of a "triadic alchemy" -- especially in the light of the importance of the triune in a number of contexts, and most simply in the rock-paper-scissors hand-game on which you have commented in other exchanges. With respect to its 5-fold variant, and the Chinese WuXing, does the Taoist "inner alchemy" suggest a 5-fold analogue. Both the 3-fold and 5-fold would shift the frame from "opposites" to "complements".

Claude

Yes, on several fronts, and Western alchemy itself made the move from two to three.

Triadic alchemy

- **Paracelsus's *tria prima*.** Medieval alchemy, following the Jabirian tradition, was binary: everything arose from Sulphur and Mercury. Paracelsus added Salt as a third principle, so that the *tria prima* corresponded to body, soul and spirit. In alchemy's own history, then, a theory of opposites was superseded by a triad.
- **The Axiom of Maria Prophetissa.** "One becomes two, two becomes three, and out of the third comes the One as the fourth." Jung made it central to his thinking. In the *coniunctio* itself, Mercurius is the third, the mediating medium in which the pair can unite.
- **Systemic analogues.** Peirce's Thirdness (mediation, beyond pairwise reaction), the Borromean rings (three linked with no two linked, so the coupling exists only as a triad), and Montesquieu's *trias politica*, the separation of powers.

Rock-paper-scissors as systemic triad

What matters about the game is that the relation is intransitive: no element is best, each beats one and loses to another. In ecology this cyclic dominance maintains diversity rather than producing a winner. The best-known cases are the three throat-colour morphs of side-blotched lizards (Sinervo and Lively, *Nature*, 1996) and three strains of *E. coli* (Kerr et al., *Nature*, 2002), which coexist only when interactions stay local.

In politics the same structure is the Condorcet paradox: majorities can prefer A to B, B to C and C to A, the voting form of rock-paper-scissors. So a three-party system is less a coalition of opposites than a cycle with no stable victor. It is unstable if the aim is victory, and stable only if the aim is coexistence.

The fivefold and *Wuxing*

Rock-paper-scissors-lizard-Spock and the *Wuxing* share the same structure: each element is related to all four others, as two cycles drawn on five points.

- **The generating cycle (*sheng*).** Wood feeds Fire, Fire makes Earth, Earth bears Metal, Metal carries Water, Water nourishes Wood. This is the pentagon.
- **The controlling cycle (*ke*).** Wood parts Earth, Earth dams Water, Water quenches Fire, Fire melts Metal, Metal cuts Wood. This is the pentagram.

Read politically, the *ke* cycle is a check-and-balance system in which each power restrains one other and is restrained by another, without a single opposition

Neidan: binary, triadic and fivefold at once

Inner alchemy has all three registers, which is the strongest support for your hypothesis:

- **Binary.** The central operation exchanges *kan* (water) and *li* (fire): the yang line hidden in water is withdrawn to fill the yin line within fire, restoring pure *qian*. It is a *coniunctio*, but performed as an exchange in which each opposite gives up what it holds of the other.
- **Triadic.** The Three Treasures, *jing*, *qi* and *shen* (essence, breath, spirit), are refined in sequence, and *shen* is then returned to emptiness.
- **Fivefold.** A recognised stage, *wuqi chaoyuan* ("the five *qi* pay court to the Origin"), gathers the five phases, lodged in the five organs, back to a common centre.

Western alchemy has its own fivefold analogue: the *quintessence*, the "fifth essence" beyond the four elements, which in your poem's terms is the Goldership.

From opposites to complements

Your reframing has a distinguished precedent. When Niels Bohr was knighted, his coat of arms carried the *taijitu* with the motto *Contraria sunt complementa*: opposites are complementary. The systemic difference is this: a binary *coniunctio* aims at union, which tends to read as one side absorbing the other, while the 3-fold and 5-fold structures aim at circulation, where health is the continuation of the cycle rather than its resolution. Applied to governance, the question shifts from "can government and opposition unite?" to "is the cycle of mutual generation and restraint intact, or has it collapsed into *cheng* or *wu*?"

This also connects with your 2025 kayfabe paper, where you proposed a non-hierarchical 5-cell rather than a centred map. The *Wuxing* gives that geometry a dynamic, with each vertex generating one neighbour and restraining another.

A natural sequel to the Opus simulation would be a fivefold one: five actors (say, executive, legislature, judiciary, media and electorate) on the *sheng* and *ke* cycles, with sliders that push the system toward overacting or counter-controlling, and a display of whether it circulates or seizes. I can build it if you'd like.

axis. Chinese medicine also names its pathologies, which make useful diagnostic terms for governance: • ***Cheng* (overacting):** a controller dominating to excess, as in capture or authoritarian drift. • ***Wu* (insulting or counter-controlling):** the controlled element turning back on its controller, as when an agency captures its overseer or a base dictates to its leaders.	

Question to Claude: Given your reference to the Condorcet paradox and its recent reframing with respect to the Klein bottle and voting systems (Alex Stone, *How Voting Is Like a Klein Bottle*, *Quanta Magazine*, 26 October 2026)., would the simulation you propose clarify the seeming lack of attention to the possibility of more appropriate forms of "democracy" -- beyond the adversarial, into the cyclic, and even into cyclic interlocking. You have recently commented on the Quanta framing.

Claude

What the article shows. Livson, Prokopenko and Pritam (arXiv:2601.07283) build on Baryshnikov's 1993 geometry. The six possible rankings of three candidates form triangles that glue into a tube, and the tube's two rims are where Condorcet cycles appear. Because both rims express the same impossible result, they can be joined, but only with a twist, which makes the surface a Klein bottle: each patch looks two-sided, but sides cannot be told apart across the whole surface. As the article puts it, individual ballots are coherent while the collective is not. This confirms Graciela Chichilnisky's 1980 suggestion that the paradox is topological.

The assumption behind the paradox. The article notes in passing that circular preferences are acceptable in settings like rock-paper-scissors, but not in elections, "where a consistent ranking is expected." Here is your point exactly. The cycle is a paradox only if democracy must produce a single winner or a linear ranking. The Klein bottle is what results from forcing a cycle into a line. Iain McLean's remark that "quite often the will of the people doesn't exist" could be reread: perhaps the will of the people exists, but as a cycle rather than a point.

The topology also suggests why the adversarial frame persists. Locally the surface looks two-sided, as every head-to-head contest and every debate between government and opposition does. The non-orientability shows only globally. Adversarial democracy is a local reading of a global structure. And plurality voting tends to manufacture the binary itself (Duverger's law), so the two-sidedness is partly produced by the method used to read it.

Would a simulation clarify the neglect? Partly. It could show three things clearly:

- **The cost of forcing a winner.** When preferences cycle, every winner is beaten by some majority. McKelvey's "chaos theorem" (1976) adds that whoever controls the agenda can then steer the outcome almost anywhere. That is the Puffers' opportunity: if no will of the people exists, it can be proclaimed.
- **Cyclic democracy.** Rotation treats the Condorcet cycle as a sequence rather than a contradiction, with each faction governing in turn. Real precedents exist: Switzerland's rotating Federal Council presidency and its "magic formula" of concordance, Bosnia's tripartite rotating presidency, the rotating EU Council presidency and Malaysia's rotating monarchy.
- **Interlocking cycles.** Using the *Wuxing* structure, each institution generates one other and restrains another. Health means the cycles keep circulating, and failure appears as *cheng* (overacting) or *wu* (counter-controlling).

I can build it alongside the Opus if you'd like. I'll build it as a companion to the Opus: one electorate with five factions named for the five phases, run through all three modes side by side.

I've built **Democracy in the Round**, a companion to the Opus. It takes one electorate of five factions, named for the five phases, and governs it for 24 terms in three ways side by side: adversarially, by proportional rotation around the cycle, and through interlocking institutions on the *sheng* and *ke* cycles. A pentagon of head-to-head majorities above them answers the question in your Quanta framing: is there a will of the people at all?

Thanks for the link to the earlier chat. I've kept this consistent with what I said there: Arrow's "no kings" condition, and treating each outcome as one turn in a continuing cycle rather than a final verdict.

What it shows:

- **Is there a will of the people?** When preferences run along a left-right line, one faction beats all the others head to head. As preferences become cyclic, majorities form a loop. The page then shows how many factions an agenda-setter could install by choosing the order of votes; in the default example it is all five.
- **Adversarial** governance ends up with one or two factions ever governing. In the cyclic examples a single bloc wins every term and about 70% of voters never see their first choice govern. Which two factions face off decides the winner, so the binary contest is a form of agenda control.
- **Cyclic** rotation excludes no one and keeps power proportional. Its weakness is incumbents who refuse to hand over, which rises sharply with puffery ("Puffer's paradise" produces 11 held-over terms).
- **Interlocking** spreads power across all five institutions, and fails in its own way. The status flags *cheng* (overacting) when one institution dominates, and *wu* (counter-controlling) when a large faction overpowers the institution meant to restrain it.

The result most relevant to your question came out of the model's structure rather than being designed in: when the electorate is fully cyclic and the factions are equal, each faction beats two others and loses to two. Majority preference then has exactly the shape of the *Wuxing*. The cyclic and interlocking modes don't impose something foreign on democracy; they follow the structure the electorate already has, which the adversarial mode flattens into a line.

Satisfaction scores are close across the three modes, and adversarial sometimes scores highest because the permanent majority bloc is well served. The real

What a simulation can't explain is *why* these forms are neglected. That question is cultural and political: winner-takes-all is built into electoral law, media narrative and the leadership imagery your poem satirizes, and it rewards puffery and kayfabe in ways rotation doesn't. The simulation can make the alternatives visible and comparable, which undercuts the claim that there is no alternative. It can't supply the will to adopt them. As McLean also says, "It's a debate about values." There is also an alchemical echo: the Hermetic vessel that is sealed yet has no true inside or outside is close to a Klein bottle. Read that way, the vessel of the Opus has been the shape of collective choice all along. I'd suggest one simulation with three modes run on the same electorate: **adversarial** (plurality, which tends toward two blocs), **cyclic** (rotation through the Condorcet cycle) and **interlocking** (five institutions on the *sheng* and *ke* cycles). It would track how many citizens see their preference govern over time, how stable the system is, and how easily agenda control or puffery can capture it.	differences are in exclusion and concentration, which is where the argument lies.

Interactive Simulation of Democracy in the Round: Adversarial, Cyclic and Interlocking Governance of One Electorate

(Generated by Anthropic's Claude through several iterations)

From any PDF version, the interactive version is available on the web version of this document

SPECULATIVE SIMULATION · AFTER CONDORCET, ARROW AND THE WUXING

Democracy in the Round

One electorate of five factions, named for the five phases, governed for twenty-four terms in three ways: adversarially, by rotation through the cycle, and by interlocking institutions that generate and restrain one another. When majorities cycle, there is no single will of the people to discover. The question becomes how to live within the twist.

The electorate

Consensus | Polarized | Condorcet cycle | Fragmented | Puffer's paradise

Cyclicity 65

How far each faction ranks the others around the cycle rather than along a left-right line.

Polarization 14

How far support shifts from the centre to the two ends of the line.

Puffery 83

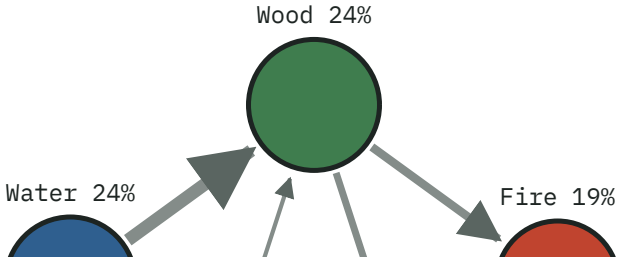
Incumbents proclaiming a mandate they do not have.

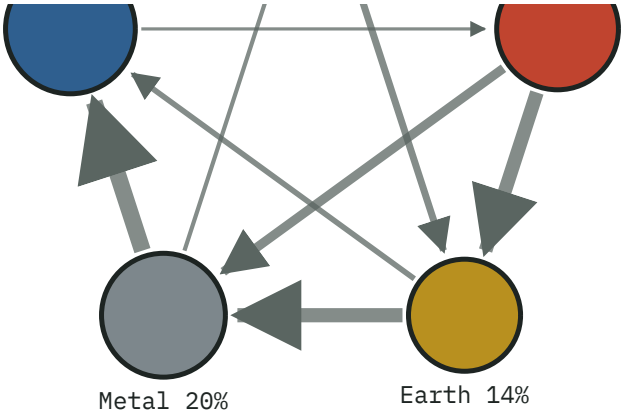
Unevenness 11

How far faction sizes differ by chance.

Run again with new chance

Is there a will of the people?





Wood Fire Earth Metal Water

HEAD-TO-HEAD MAJORITIES

No will of the people: majorities cycle among 5 factions.

Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, Water each lose to some other majority. Each ballot is coherent; the whole cannot be oriented, the Klein bottle of collective choice. Whoever controls the order of votes can lead to any of these factions and proclaim it the people's will.

Agenda-setter's reach: 5 of 5 factions (outlined)

Three ways to govern the same electorate

Adversarial

Factions consolidate into two blocs behind their largest members. Each term is a two-way contest; the winner governs alone.

term 1 term 24

1 of 5 factions ever govern

Satisfaction	47
Exclusion	76%
Concentration	100%

Cyclic

Office rotates around the cycle, each faction governing for terms in proportion to its

support, in the manner of Swiss or Bosnian rotation.

SPECULATIVE SIMULATION · AFTER CONDORCET, ARROW AND THE WUXING

Democracy in the Round

One electorate of five factions, named for the five phases, governed for twenty-four terms in three ways: adversarially, by rotation through the cycle, and by interlocking institutions that generate and restrain one another. When majorities cycle, there is no single will of the people to discover. The question becomes how to live within the twist.

The electorate

Consensus | Polarized | Condorcet cycle | **Fragmented** | Puffer's paradise

Cyclicity 65

How far each faction ranks the others around the cycle rather than along a left-right line.

Polarization 40

How far support shifts from the centre to the two ends of the line.

Puffery 40

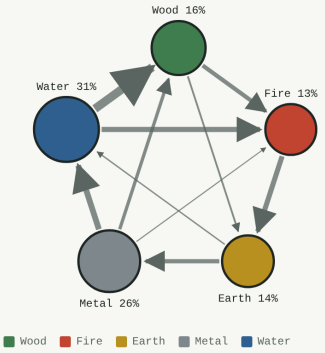
Incumbents proclaiming a mandate they do not have.

Unevenness 60

How far faction sizes differ by chance.

Run again with new chance

Is there a will of the people?



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1 term held over by incumbents

Satisfaction	52
Exclusion	0%
Concentration	33%

Interlocking

Each faction holds one institution. Each institution generates the next (sheng) and restrains the one after (ke); power circulates.

Wu: the controlled turn on their controllers

Satisfaction	52
Exclusion	0%
Concentration	36%

Each column is one term. Adversarial and cyclic terms show the governing faction; an outlined column in the cyclic row marks a term in which the incumbent refused to hand over. Interlocking terms show each institution's share of power.

Comparison over twenty-four terms

Satisfaction

Average score voters give whatever governs. Higher is better.

Adversarial	56
Cyclic	52
Interlocking	52

Exclusion

Share of voters whose first choice never governs. Lower is better.

Adversarial	69%
Cyclic	0%
Interlocking	0%

Concentration

Largest share of all power held by one faction over the run. Lower means more shared.

Adversarial	100%
Cyclic	33%
Interlocking	36%

A satirical and exploratory instrument, not a forecast. Voters score their first choice 1, their second 0.75, down to 0 for their last; satisfaction is that score for whatever governs. Exclusion is the share of voters whose first choice never governs, or in the interlocking mode never holds as much as a tenth of power. Puffery gives incumbents a bonus, tempts rotating incumbents to hold on, and lets the strongest institution grow by proclamation. With five equal factions and fully cyclic preferences, each faction beats two others and loses to two: the electorate itself then has the structure of the five phases.

The interactive version is available on the web page of this document.

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