

*[This is from What Painting Is (New York: Routledge, 1998). This was originally posted on [www.jameselkins.com](http://www.jameselkins.com). This version is unillustrated: some illustrations are on the website. Also some alchemical symbols have dropped out. See the website for context, other material from the book, and for contact information for the author. (September 2009).]*

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*The studio as a kind of psychosis*

It is important to never forget how crazy painting is. People who buy paintings, or who write about them, tend to think painting begins in the cosmopolitan world of museums and art galleries, and that its meanings are explored in departments of art history. But painting is born in a smelly studio, where the painter works in isolation, for hours and even years on end. In order to produce the beautiful framed picture, the artist had to spend time shut up with oils and solvents, staring at glass or wooden surfaces smeared with pigments, trying to smear them onto other surfaces in turn. Painting is peculiar in that respect. Writers and composers are much closer to the finished product: their words or notes appear instantly and cleanly on the page—there is no struggle forming the letters A, B, C, or writing h k e—but painters have to work in a morass of stubborn substances.

For those reasons, the act of painting is a kind of insanity. It may seem unfashionable to say so, because postmodern doctrine has given up on the old notion that artists are melancholic geniuses prone to manic depression and beyond the reach of ordinary common sense. But even the most commercially-minded artist has to wrestle with raw materials, and get filthy in the process. Except for a few nineteenth-century painters who worked in impeccable three-piece suits complete with watch chains and boutonnieres, painters have usually managed to coat themselves in spots and smears, and so to bring their work home with them like the smell on a fisherman. In an art school or a studio it is always possible to tell which artist spends the most time working, because the paint gradually finds its way onto every surface and every possession.

Françoise Gilot tells the story of visiting Alberto Giacometti's atelier. He was working in clay, and his studio resembled his work:

The wooden walls seemed impregnated with the color of clay, almost to the point of being made out of clay. We were at the center of a world completely created by Giacometti, a world composed of clay... There was never the slightest color accent anywhere to interfere with the endless uniform grey that covered everything.<sup>i</sup>

Sooner or later every one of a painter's possessions will get stained. First to go are the studio clothes and the old sneakers that get the full shower of paint every day. Next are the painter's favorite books, the ones that have to be consulted in the studio. Then come the better clothes, one after another as they are worn just once into the studio and end up with the inevitable stain. The last object to be stained is often the livingroom couch, the one place where it is possible to relax in comfort and forget the studio. When the couch is stained, the painter has become a different creature from ordinary people, and there is no turning back.

No one who has not experienced that condition can understand the odd feeling that accompanies it. When every possession is marked with paint, it is like giving up civilian clothes for jail house issue. The paint is like a rash, and no matter how careful a painter is, in the end it is impossible not to spread the disease to every belonging and each person who visits the studio. Some artists keep fighting it, and they turn up for work wearing clothes with only a few discrete stains. Others give way, and they become funny mottled creatures, like GI's in perpetual camouflage.

Working in a studio means leaving the clean world of normal life and moving into a shadowy domain where everything bears the marks of the singular obsession. Outside the studio, furniture is clean and comfortable; inside, it is old and unpleasant. Outside, walls are monochrome or pleasantly patterned in wallpaper; inside, they are scarred with meaningless graffiti. Outside, floors can be mopped and vacuumed; inside, they build up layers of crusted paint that can only be scraped away or torn up with the floor itself. The studio is a necessary insanity. Perhaps writers have insanities of paper, or of erasers, but they cannot compare with the multicolored dementia caused by fluids and stone.

Alchemy is the best model for this plague of paint, for the self-imprisonment of the studio, and for the allure of insanity. Alchemy, first of all, is a master of perversion. Its deviations flaunt the ground rules of sanity, tempting madness by mimicking its symptoms. There is an alarming list of alchemical transgressions. Young boys provide hair, nail clippings, and urine for

alchemical recipes. Secundines or “navel–strings” are the lint that gets trapped in the navel, and they were taken from infants to cure epilepsy and kill “malicious animals.” In alchemy the Latin word *faeces* meant any refuse. But alchemists also used shit, which Paracelsus called *carbon humanum* or Western Sulfur. Among other uses, it was putrefied “till there are small animals therein,” and then distilled as a cure for gout. Powdered mummies were in demand in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and in a pinch alchemists could substitute “hardened man’s flesh.” It was soaked in water, putrefied for a month and then strained, put in a bladder and mixed with wine, distilled, reverberated, sublimed, separated, and circulated until it became a pure quintessence—and then the “quintessence of mummy” could be mixed with treacle and musk to make an elixir that could cure the plague itself. Alchemists even used “the moss of the skull that grows upon it in the field after slaughter.” One recipe calls for “the brain of a young man under twenty–four, who died violently, with all its membranes, arteries, veins, and nerves, and with all the spinal marrow.” The alchemist is to beat it into a pulp, and immerse it in “cephalic waters” (*aquarum Cephalicarum*) made from peonies, black cherry blossoms, lavender, lilies, tile–flowers, and betony, to a depth of four or five inches. After it stands a while, it is to be distilled by cohobation (that is, repeatedly). The calcined remains, called *faeces*, make a salt, which can be remixed with the distilled spirit to produce a medicine that makes another cure for epilepsy. The author of this recipe, John Schroder, adds “you may make also a famous antiepileptic of the brain of the elk”; at the time elk’s horns, hoofs, brains, and even elk’s sleepies were thought to be good medicines.<sup>ii</sup>

There are recipes for urine, philosophical urine, the salt of urine, the oil of urine, and the mercury and sulfur of urine.<sup>iii</sup> Theophilus—the same who called for the blood of a red–haired man—thought “the urine of a small, red-haired boy” was best for tempering iron.<sup>iv</sup> There is an entire library worth of manuscripts devoted to the distillation of human blood, and there are texts calling for the blood of snakes, vultures, and “bloody” plants such as beets.<sup>v</sup> Those oddities and perversions routinely lead toward greater transgressions, always tempting actual madness.

The most famous such recipe is for the homunculus, the intelligent embryo born in a test tube. Goethe made the experiment famous in *Faust*, where an adept grows a little homunculus in a bottle, but it is extremely rare in the alchemical literature. Aureolus Phillippus Theophrastus Bombast of Hohenheim, known as Paracelsus, has become identified with the recipe, though the idea goes back much farther.<sup>vi</sup> In the recipe, the alchemist puts human sperm into a vial the shape of a gourd (*zucca*), seals the vial, sets it in a bed of horse dung, and lets it putrefy for forty days

or until the sperm begins to move. At that point it should have the form of a body, but transparent and incorporeal. From then on it needs to be fed every day with what Paracelsus calls the *arcano* of human blood—presumably blood that has been distilled and purified. Nine months later, Paracelsus says, the patient alchemist will produce a baby boy, “exactly equal to those produced by women, but much smaller.” He adds that the young homunculus will be eager to learn and must be provided with a good education.

Spit was also a common ingredient. The eighteenth-century alchemist Johan Gottfried Tügel tells about an experiment that turns spit into a corrosive salt able to “open”—that is, dissolve—gold.<sup>vii</sup> He collected about twelve quarts of saliva from healthy young men (one can only imagine the amount of spitting that required) and distilled it until he got a dry residue. (That would have filled the laboratory with steam from the spit, and Tügel comments that it does not smell good.) Then he poured the condensed distillate back onto the residue, and distilled it several more times. After six months of cohobation there was no more fluid in the saliva, and he was left with a “foliated grey salt.” He then exposed his salivary salt to the sun every day, and to the moon each night, so that it would be well digested and able to be liquefied again. After a month, the vessel was resolved into:

a red oil and a yellow salt, as big as a hazelnut, growing in the oil. This salt liquefied every night, and became dry salt in the sun, and it increased in volume from day to day, and the red oil became thick like honey and finally like beeswax, so that I could cut it with a knife.

The final product could dissolve silver and gold, and turn them into glass.

There are many of these oddities, but they are mild in comparison to the more serious ideas that lie beneath them. In particular alchemy joyously rescinds the incest taboo. A book called *The Hermetic Triumph* is the most Sadean in its exuberant directions: “open your mother’s breast,” it urges, “rummage in her entrails and penetrate her womb.”<sup>viii</sup> Michael Maier says we should “confidently” join brother and sister (*ergo lubens conjunge*), “hand them the cup of love,” and let them be man and wife.<sup>ix</sup> In another book, after an incestuous scene, a brother disappears into his sister’s womb.<sup>x</sup> Alchemy might have brought some people to try incest, if only because alchemical operations are sometimes said to be best when they are performed in tandem, by the alchemist and his “mystical sister.” (Some “sisters” were wives, but the phrase still applied.) As in any sensational subject, the actual transgressions were probably rare. What makes the incestuous doctrines pernicious, and brings them dangerously close to insanity, is that incest was

routinely expanded into a general principle of all alchemical work. Alchemy identifies heat with passion, but then it identifies passion with incest. To insinuate that every union is an incestuous one is either to say that thoughts of incest are hidden in every union (and this is the interpretation that Jung favors) or else (and this is what leads to madness) that union is incest.

The incestuous union produces a monstrous offspring, and even though it is usually killed or “absorbed” before the philosopher’s Stone appears, it is a center of attention. The commonest name for the child is “hermaphrodite,” and other alchemists also call it the rebis (from *res bina*, “two-thing”), the hermetic androgyne, and the Magickal Offspring. It is said to be the union of Sol and Luna, sulfur and mercury, King and Queen, or any two dyadic principles such as soul and body. The hermaphrodite first appears in a book written in 1572, and it is common until the eighteenth century.<sup>xi</sup>

The confusion about the nature of the hermaphrodite was due in part to the Renaissance confusion between partial and full hermaphrodites, passive homosexuals, and androgynes: few people had ever seen hermaphrodites, and their anatomical nature was open to speculation.<sup>xii</sup> The different forms are described as various stages of sexual union, or as less than perfect fusions of the parental principles. The most frequent is a single body with two heads, and there are also figures with matched genitals (although not in the configuration of actual hermaphroditism, but side by side), and asexual figures with unformed bodies. (The last may have been inspired by the legend that bear cubs are born as unformed lumps and licked into shape by their mothers, just as the hermaphrodite needed nurturing if it was to live.) In each variation the hermaphrodite is a midway stage, a partial fusion of opposites that is on its way to something more perfect. Some hermaphrodites go on to become the perfectly sexually balanced Son of Philosophy, an emblem for the Stone itself. In one plate, the alchemist stands triumphant, dressed as a woman but with a long beard: the ideal composite of opposed principles. Other hermaphrodites are way-stations, and they are melted down to produce the next stages. In that way the incestuous act gets obscured, folded back into the work like an inbred generation lost in a family tree. After a long process with many stages, the incest and its monstrous child may be scarcely visible, like the subtle effects of inbreeding in the third and fourth generation.

In painting, incest becomes a theme whenever the paint refers to itself. Increasingly, that moment seems to occur in every painting: self-reflexivity is endemic in modernism, and it is not possible to imagine an interesting work that does not in some measure speak about itself. Paintings have routinely referred to paintings since Manet, and they have referred to the act of painting since the Renaissance. Modernist painting also refers to what is called its “physicality”:

to its own canvas, the thickness of its paint, and most famously to the flatness of the picture plane. Cubism, abstract expressionism, and minimalism all play with those possibilities, and postmodern work such as Sherrie Levine's toys with the remaining possibilities. Art historians tend to call those moments "self-reflexive" or "historicist," and they leave the word "incestuous" to pejorative criticism. But in a very real sense, self-reference is self-love: it is solitary masturbation (another charge leveled against painting by unsympathetic critics) or love within the family of painting, and it always carries the taint of taboo and potential insanity. The hermaphrodite is so interesting because it is what the incest produces: it issues from the unnatural, routine bonding of painting with itself.

The hermaphrodite is a queasy embodiment of what a twentieth-century reader has to call psychosis. The alchemists were fascinated by it, and also wary, because it did not fit well with the Christian frame that alchemy was supposed to fill. As Jung noticed, the hermaphrodite is a concentrated image of the fear that plagued every alchemist who took note of his shaky relation to Christianity. It is strange enough to see a naked figure, fused from the waist down into a fleshy pedestal, with two sets of genitals and two heads. It is more unsettling to see the god Hermes, bearded but wearing a dress and a crown, purporting to be the dependable guide for alchemists who have lost their way. But it is desperately wrong to begin to confuse the hermaphrodite with Christian ideas.

Throughout the history of alchemy, the Church was unsure about whether to prosecute or ignore alchemists who seemed to be on the verge of heresy. (For related reasons, alchemy never became an official subject in universities.) The alchemists prayed to God in such a way that it is clear they conflated Jesus with the Stone, the elixir of life, and especially with salt. Georg von Welling calls Jesus the "holy eternal salt," "living salt," and—in a lovely phrase—"sweet fixed salt of the still soft eternity." Most of those prayers escape heresy by keeping to metaphors: they say Jesus is "our salt," instead of claiming Jesus *is* salt. But the language was not what a church-goer would expect, and the whole project was suspect. Heinrich Khunrath, for example, waxes eloquent about penetrating the "true center" of the philosopher's Stone,

the salty, universal, purest, triune, mercurial prime substance, that is the primal, salty, Catholic mercury of the philosophers, alone and unique in the world, triumphing over natural things, the mercurial salt of wisdom, nature, art, and the wise, prepared by pure fire and water.<sup>xiii</sup>

Are there grounds for excommunication here, or is Khunrath less a demented alchemist than a visionary Christian?

In Jung's reading the Church's anxiety about alchemy was a sign of something deeper than the vague possibility of schism. He argued the alchemists realized, on an unconscious level, that Christianity is incomplete, and that Christ requires a bride. Alchemy provided what Jung calls the "hermaphroditic psychopomp," meaning the hermaphroditic guide for souls. (Hermes was a "psychopomp" in Greek mythology, leading souls up and down from Hades.<sup>xiv</sup>) And as the ultimate guide of souls, and the ultimate referent of the ubiquitous metaphors of resurrection, Christ is the inevitable counterpart and companion for the hermaphrodite.

The unconscious hermaphroditic bride of Christ is a fascinating idea, one of Jung's most bizarre claims. From a believer's point of view—and the great majority of alchemists were devout, if eccentric, Christians—the very idea that Christ might have a hermaphroditic alchemical bride (with whom he might sometimes be identified) would be not only doctrinally heretical, as Jung knew, but also an open road to madness. Jung's point is that this ultimate meaning of the hermaphrodite must have remained unconscious, so that the people who created it could not have understood what they were doing. But Jung's books, such as *Psychology and Alchemy*, make it explicit, and by doing so they lead as forcibly away from sanity as any books I know. It is a crazy idea, designed by Jung (perhaps unconsciously?) to be so unsettling that it opens the ground beneath sure knowledge: it is like a signpost leading toward what Jung and Freud called a psychotic break.

The hermaphrodite acts as an embodiment of psychosis in a conceptual field that is attracted by madness. No one working with these symbols could have entirely ignored their potentially schismatic meanings. It is likely that many sensed the strangeness, even the danger, of their pursuits. Alchemy is at home in depression, uncertainty, and melancholy, and the pathos of solitary labor and wasted time, and I wonder if the alchemists could have been as oblivious as Jung imagines them. Alchemy had a strange effect on Jung, or rather, it accompanied and deepened a strange period in his life. Rather than keeping up with his profession Jung sequestered himself for nearly a decade reading alchemical texts that everyone thought were worthless. He took seriously the alchemical injunction to balance the male and female sides of the soul—more seriously, I might say, than the glib spokesmen for the "mens' movement" do. He followed the female spirit, the *anima*, which he saw as an untrustworthy Melusina, a siren who might save the soul or lead it toward disaster. The result of his solitary work was several lectures, two long books (*Psychology and Alchemy* and *Mysterium Coniunctionis*), and a secret diary full of visions and invented characters. That is what I find most admirable about Jung's encounter with alchemy: its absolute immersion, and the tremendous risk of thinking directly about incest,

the hermaphrodite, and its uncanny similarity to Christ. Very few books can be counted as genuinely unsettling, and I think Jung's works on alchemy have to be among them—along with some of the alchemical texts he studied. It is easy to read his books and come away with a sense of whimsical eccentricity, but if the ideas are taken seriously they can have a corrosive effect on indispensable ideas in Western thought. “This is the Omega,” say the Rosicrucians, “which has caused so many, many evil days and restless nights” (*Dieses O ist es, daß vielen so viele böse Tage und unruhige Nächte verursacht hat*).

Like all truly dangerous ideas, this one seems a little quaint or merely outrageous at first. But the alchemical lesson is that incest is necessary, and even universal, and that its monstrous offspring is nothing less than God. Nothing that spectacular happens in the inward moments of painting. What matters in painting is the *necessity* of self-reference, its forbidden nature, and the many strange marks it leaves on the work. In Rembrandt's self-portrait, his skin is paint, and the paint is his skin. Paint refers to itself, smearing over itself, sliding over itself, caressing itself—its illicit sensuality is constantly apparent, a droning sound under all painting. And what can it possibly mean to say that skin *is* paint?

In the alchemists' terms, the hermaphrodite is a lodestone and a siren for improper thoughts; but it is also necessary, an unavoidable part of the process. Any self-referential mark in painting is the hermaphrodite: any place where a brushmark stands out, reminding the viewer of the paint, or where the canvas shows through, recalling the unavoidable picture plane. The conditions of incestuous awareness are much more general than it would appear from the art historical examples, and incestuous meaning is latent in any picture. Paint itself is insistently sensual. It is always sullied and impure, never pristine. The harder an artist struggles to pretend that there is no paint, that there has never been a battle with oils and varnishes, that there is no sensual appeal to the smell and feel of paint, the more it becomes obvious that there *has* been a struggle, that the transgressions of the paint can never be successfully subdued. Paint itself is the sign that incestuous work has been underway.

Michael Maier's thirty-ninth emblem is a landscape, telling the story of Oedipus (Figure 7). The foreground figures embody the riddle of the Sphinx: What walks on four legs in the morning, on two at noon, and three in the evening? At the right, Oedipus is killing his father, and behind that, he is taking his mother's hand in marriage. On the left Oedipus answers the Sphinx's riddle, and she prepares to throw herself off the cliff. In the background, the Sphinx makes a portentous gesture, reminiscent of Jesus's gesture in the Last Judgment (damning with a

lowered hand, and blessing with a raised one), and behind her is Thebes, Oedipus's city. The Sphinx in the background isn't an element of Sophocles's story: she is more like Oedipus's psychopomp or *anima*, the siren of his soul that leads him into ruin.<sup>xv</sup>

Just by itself, Maier's plate is not out of the ordinary, though Oedipus is an unusual subject for artists in any period. What sets it apart is what he says in the accompanying text.<sup>xvi</sup> First he reinterprets the Greek story as an allegory of alchemy. Alchemical allegories of myths were Maier's intellectual specialty, and when he wrote this book in 1617, he had recently completed a long volume on that topic.<sup>xvii</sup> The allegories usually turn on a single resemblance between alchemy and mythology, and then the remainder of the alchemical story has to be forced to fit. In this case, Maier acts as if he has never read Sophocles, and that he is not sure what happened to Oedipus. He says Oedipus's answer to the sphinx "is not known," and he proposes that the "true meaning" involves a square, a hemisphere, and a triangle. The first signifies the four elements, the second "white Luna," and the third means body, soul and spirit (or else sun, moon, and mercury). He shows them stamped on the heads of the three figures, so he must have known Oedipus's answer.<sup>xviii</sup>

In Greek, the name Oedipus means "swollen feet," because as an infant he was abandoned on a mountain top with a metal pin through his ankles.<sup>xix</sup> Maier intends Oedipus to symbolize an alchemically "fixed" substance, one that has been treated until it is no longer volatile (so that it cannot escape from the vessel):

Oedipus has swollen feet, on account of which he cannot run, but can only move like a bear or like a slow toad; behind this is hidden a great secret. On account of his slowness he reduces other things to a solid condition and is not volatile to fire.<sup>xx</sup>

In another part of the same book, Maier illustrates a man without feet, walking on the stumps of his ankles. Oedipus's meeting with the Sphinx, therefore, denotes the encounter between the principle of fixation and the inchoate *materia prima*, and the solution to the riddle embodies essential elements of the alchemical work. In accord with alchemical ambiguity, the symbols and the Sphinx can be variously interpreted, but always in harmony with common processes and substances.

This is standard alchemical strangeness; but things get very odd when it comes time to draw the conclusion to the allegory. If Oedipus's life is a mirror of the alchemical work, and if alchemy is the highest path to the secrets of nature and God, then something must be right about

what Oedipus did. The Oedipus story is the perfect myth for alchemy, even more perfect than Freud thought it was for psychoanalysis.<sup>xxi</sup> It contains the idea of dangerous secrecy (in the Sphinx's riddle), the idea that the progenitors must be destroyed (when Oedipus murders his father), and above all the injunction of incestuous union. These are each steps that alchemists were encouraged to take, and so—by a twist that would have surprised Freud, and set psychoanalysis on a very different track—the absolute paradigm of tragedy and disaster becomes a model life: Oedipus becomes a hero.

As an alchemical allegory, Oedipus's life has very little that is tragic about it. The marriage to Jocasta is done as a Renaissance-style dance, and Thebes is displayed as a glorious kingdom. The emblem has nothing to say about Oedipus's horrible fate, and that is why Maier pretends not to know what happened to him. There is no desperate moment of revelation when he realizes what he has done, no scene where he plucks out his eyes, and no years of desolate wandering. This Oedipus is not Freud's or Sophocles's: he seems to know everything that happens to him, and he accepts it as if he were privileged to act it out.

But what can it possibly mean for an alchemist to know all these elements of the tragedy, and do them anyway? What would happen to someone who knew he was killing his father and marrying his mother, or, in Maier's case, to someone who understood all those things, and set them out as models for everyone to follow? Maier hedges his bets a little: he says essentially that things may not be exactly as they appear, and that "the philosophers" know how to understand these images correctly. The reader understands that Maier is not asking him to go out and kill his father. But when it comes down to it, that is perilously close to what Maier means. Everything about Oedipus's life is good and worthy of emulation (as the church fathers say of Jesus). Philosophers "need these despicable means" (*vili medio*) because there is no better way.

I do not think it is possible to overestimate the insanity of this scene. For Freud, the Oedipus complex could only work if the period of "infantile sexual experimentation" were repressed for years, and then unconsciously reintegrated into adult sexuality, or fitfully recalled in neuroses. For Sophocles, Oedipus's life was ruined, and his sufferings fit his crimes, until he was finally swept off the earth in a gust of wind. But for Maier and the alchemists, parricide and incest are goals, and Oedipus is a role model.

Alchemy is replete with such bizarre scenes. In one manuscript a bug-eyed medusa stabs herself in the breast while she rides a pock-marked dragon, and a crowd of cripples and smallpox victims do her "gross reverence."<sup>xxii</sup> Another shows a peaceful landscape, with a

woman turning the screw on a winepress, squeezing the juices out of a spotted boy. She is performing the action ordinarily called juicing or pulping; the alchemists solemnized it with the word extravasation (meaning literally, squeezing the blood out of the vessels). One of the few women alchemists, Dorothea Juliana Wallich, tells a perverse version of the creation story: she says that as soon as Eve was taken from Adam she was thrown in a flask and distilled, in order to rid Adam of the poisonous mercurial water of his “fluid wife.”<sup>xxiii</sup> There are innumerable hermaphrodites, double-headed twins, bicorporate figures sharing a single head, cross-dressing alchemists and androgynous gods—but in a sense they are all forms of the single unimaginable transgression, the self-involvement that breeds on itself.

This is the realization that painting does not always achieve. Painting is a bodily art, much closer to itself than mythmaking or even the spidery fantasies of alchemical stories. It has to do more intimately with the act itself: the muscles that burn after repeated gestures, the thin sweat of constant activity, the rubbing and caressing of paint against paint. The studio comes before art history: at first painting *is* the illicit scene, and only later a story told about it. Painters don't read about these lurid scenes in some curious book: they live them in everyday life. The studio is the warm womb, packed round with manure, and the artist is the slowly rotting pulp inside. Or to use another image: the studio is the pelican, incurved against itself, and the artist is the fluid continuously rising, condensing, and pouring back into itself. Those are descriptions of digestion and circulation, and other metamorphoses would work as well. Oedipus and the hermaphrodite are distant fables by comparison with the interminable solitary confinement of the studio and its infectious squalor. Waking each morning and going into a room suffused with the penetrating sharp odor of turpentine and oil, standing at the same table so covered with clotted paints that it no longer has a level spot for a coffee cup, looking at the same creaking easel spattered with all the same colors—*that* is the daily experience of serious painters, and it is what tempts insanity. Some artists try to keep the studio at bay by keeping it neat, or by putting their easel in the corner of a larger room, but the effect is like cleaning an infection: no matter how well swabbed the wound may be, it is useless to pretend it is healthy, or that the infection does not exist. They say that we spend twenty years of our lives sleeping, and painters who work steadily might easily spend that much time in the studio. How different must two people be, one of whom has spent that twenty years in a stuffy paint-filled box, and the other in an antiseptic office.

Alchemy can only match that intimacy in one case: in the deviant modern practice of “sexual alchemy,” in which the experimenters' bodies become the ovens and crucibles, and their

excretions become the desired Stone. Like “creamy” or “buttery” paint, the hermaphrodite is sometimes juicy and liquid, and that’s the connection between metallic and bodily alchemy. According to one traditional alchemist, sulfur and mercury normally combine to make pure offspring; but when they are themselves impure, they create a peculiar liquid:

When the two embrace one another, shut up close in the rocky places, then a moist, thick vapor rises from them by the action of natural heat... and it condenses into a mucilaginous and unctuous matter that is like white butter.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Oily and buttery things are also sexual, like the bodily fluids from which all things are born. The same author continues:

Mathesius calls this substance *gur*. Farm workers find it in their groves, but nothing can be made out of it, because no one knows what nature intended to do with it. It could just as easily have been a marcasite, or a metal.

*Gur* is the substance that congeals into anything: it is equally fitted, as the author puts it, “for the information of an ass, or an ox, or for any metal.”

Modern sexual alchemy explores these same textures, but directly on the body. There is a sequence of alchemies beginning with traditional metallic alchemy (both practical and “spiritual”), continuing across the often blurred boundary to alchemies that use animal parts and vegetables, and ending in sexual or “human alchemy.”<sup>xxv</sup> In spiritual alchemy, what happens in the vessel is an enactment of what takes place in the mind; but in sexual alchemy, the laboratory mirrors what happens in the body. Like meditative alchemy, sexual alchemy tends to do away with laboratory equipment: it conflates spiritual meditation with bodily enactment, and what is more remarkable, it also conflates laboratory apparatus with bodily parts. Everything that normally takes place in the laboratory (whether literally so, in practical alchemy, or metaphorically, in spiritual alchemy), is moved into the body itself. The bodies of sexual alchemists heat, distill, conjoin, and putrefy, and when they produce the Stone—a fluid rather than a metallic product—it is not merely a metaphor for their minds or bodies, it is also contained within, and born from, their bodies. The fusion or *coniunctio* of the alchemical texts, which was often imagined as a kind of sexual fusion—whether it was between brother and sister, or King and Queen—is made into an actual lovemaking session.

Sexual alchemists have adopted some of the language of alchemy, rewriting it to cover bodily functions. The “Eagle” is the woman, and the “Mother Eagle” is the mucous membranes. The “Lion” is the male, and the “Red Lion” is the semen. (Tantric alchemy is an influence here, since mercury is the semen of Shiva.<sup>xxvi</sup>) In ordinary Western alchemy, menstruum is any fluid

that dissolves solid matter. Sometimes it is a gentle bath that soaks and permeates a substance, and in other texts it is a harsh acid that envelops a solid in a bubbling foam. The alchemists were aware of the anatomical meaning of the word, but they did not always make it explicit. According to one dictionary of alchemy, menstruum is the fluid proper to animals, just as plants have rain water and minerals have quicksilver.<sup>xxvii</sup> In general, menstruum just meant solvent, with overtones of sexuality and generation. The sexual alchemists make it explicit: for them menstruum is “the magick solvent of the female organ.” In the same fashion, sexual alchemists also reinterpreted phlegm. In traditional alchemy, phlegm normally meant the liquid product of distillation. The alchemists had adopted that usage from medieval medicine, where phlegm was one of the four fluids of the body (the others were black bile, yellow bile, and blood). The sexual alchemists made the alchemists’ phlegm back into the doctor’s phlegm, keeping the connection with distillation, but insisting it is a real, organic, human fluid.

There are various practices in sexual alchemy, some involving orgasm and some not, and many artificially prolonged (in the way alchemists prolonged heating). Using this language, Louis Culling gives a veiled description of a common sexual problem:

It is the male Lion who is in command of the process of putting the quintessence into the care of the absorbing Mother Eagle i.e., the various mucous membranes, and therefore the Lion should have a conscience about making an undue imposition upon the Eagle when the operation is entirely for the benefit of the Lion.<sup>xxviii</sup>

Vaginal fluid, called “Gluten of the White Eagle,” is judged for taste, as semen is in Indian medicine, and the quality and physical origins of orgasm are carefully watched.<sup>xxix</sup> The vaginal and spermatic fluid that “merges” in the vagina after intercourse is removed and inspected. Its most important quality is its taste (it may be sweet or sour, effervescent, or “electrical”), though it is also judged for texture and color. Sexual alchemists also look for signs of the Stone elsewhere on and in their bodies: in a change in the feel of the skin, in a sense of “irradiation” or “aura,” and in the quality of the orgasms. The seven metals are sometimes associated with “invisible colours” given off by seven particularly excitable parts of the body.<sup>xxx</sup> Various parapsychological and Eastern doctrines are mixed in the idea that the word “secretion” should be traced to “secret ion,” motile force of the body’s *chakras*, “currents and charged perfumes.”<sup>xxxi</sup>

Alchemical experience is ordinarily balanced between theory and practice, substances and allegories, observation and empathy. Sexual alchemy is a conceptually extreme practice, and it shows what happens when those distinctions collapse. Its practices pose curious philosophic problems. Even in the most purely meditative alchemy, there is a parallelism that provides an indispensable structure to alchemical thought: on the one hand is the chemical apparatus, and on the other is the alchemist, whose mental state follows and mirrors the metamorphoses of the materials. Sexual alchemy breaks that barrier and insists on the radical impossibility of distinguishing observer from observed, subject from object. It is true that in ordinary alchemical practices it is not always certain whether the adept is in the laboratory, watching the vessel, or inside the vessel, looking out. In illustrations the “son of the philosopher” is sometimes pictured inside his own “hermetic egg.” Sexual alchemy collapses even that tenuous distinction and compels the alchemist to watch his own transformation from within his own body.

One of the crucial traits of alchemy, that makes it an apposite metaphor for artistic creation, is the “involvement” of the observer in the process. “Active” alchemical thinking has been compared to Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle, and though there are problems with the parallel, its general sense is valid: in alchemy as in quantum mechanics, observation is intervention, and there is no neutral, hands-off description.<sup>xxxii</sup> Alchemists have long insisted on the inseparability of the object and its observer. But sexual alchemy goes further, and actually *conflates* the substance with the agent. Sexual alchemy declines allegory completely, or rather it sets up an inverted allegory, where laboratory processes are to be understood as imperfect versions of what happens in the body.

Sexual alchemy is the most epistemologically chaotic doctrine I know. The sexual alchemist initiates an “experiment” by beginning a sexual session, but from that point onward he or she becomes the *prima materia*, the *doctor philosophia*, and the *athanor* (furnace) all at once. Even when the process is complete the traditional dualism is not securely restored, because the fluid that the alchemists inspect (once the orgasms are over, and the alchemists are somewhat detached from their *labor*) is also manifested in and on their own bodies.

Sexual alchemy is the nearest parallel in any field to the involvement of artists in their creation. Artists know the feeling that others can only weakly imagine, of being so close to their work that they cannot distinguish themselves from it. As students, artists routinely suffer from criticism when they do not have a clear awareness of the distance between themselves and what they have made. In that state of mind, there is no distinction between theory and practice, observer and observed, substance and allegory, observation and empathy. They are their work. It

is just as intimate, and much more confused, than the relation between a mother and her unborn child. The mother knows that the child is inside her, and she hopes that the child is intact as it grows. An artist, on the other hand, may not be sure of any categories—there is no clear difference between the artist and the half-formed work. Neither is in control, neither clearly “makes” the other. The “experiment” of art changes the experimenter, and there is no hope of understanding what happens because there is no “I” that can absorb and control concepts—nothing has meaning apart from the substances themselves. All that is known with certainty is the flow of fluids, back and forth from the tubes to the palette, from the brush to the canvas.

In this domain nothing is secure. The alchemical or artistic work is strangely *inside*, and the human mind that directs it is also partly its inert substrate. What was once the agent of conceptual control over the work has become the bricks of its furnace, the weave of its canvas. The furnace produces a product that *is* the furnace, and the mind tries to watch a process that *is* the mind. Sexual alchemy is a form of the same disease: both propose a treacherous anarchy of unreason.

In the beginning of the alchemical work, the King and Queen sit demurely, with straight backs, on opposite thrones. Secretly, in glances scarcely visible, they know they are brother and sister. Their feet dangle in a warm pool of menstrual fluid. They will mate, melt, and re-emerge, and afterward melt again many times before the Stone emerges.

Liquids are life, and so it is particularly important that oil painting takes place between solid and liquid, in the realm of the viscous, the gluey, the phlegmatic. The menstruum is also called the Hermetic stream, heavy water, philosopher’s water, and embryo’s water. Like placenta, the menstruum is a cannibalistic, invasive fluid: just as real placenta will attach itself to adjacent organs and attempt to invade them, the menstruum eats away at the King and Queen, eventually dissolving them. The pool and thrones are set in a vase, which has been hermetically sealed. The vessel is most obviously a womb, though alchemists call it a brooding chamber, an egg, the House of the Chick or House of Glass, or the Prison House of the King.

For painters the studio is the Prison House, and paints are the fluids that circulate inside it. Alchemy’s lesson here is that everything actually takes place within the body. The insanity of the studio is that it is not architecture—it is not made of wood and cement—but it is nothing other than the inside of the body.

## Notes to Chapter 6

- i Gilot and Carlton Lake, *Life with Picasso* (New York: Signet, 1964), 194.
- ii Johann Schröder, *The Compleat Chymical Dispensatory, in Five Books*, translated by William Rowland (London: John Darby, 1669), 517–522; the original edition, Schröder, *Medico-Chymica. Sive Thesaurus Phramecologicus*, (Ulmae Suevorum: Johannis Görlini, 1662), 287–299, has a list of symbols. Elk recipes are discussed in my *Things and their Places: The Concept of Installation from Prehistoric Tombs to Contemporary Art*, work in progress.
- iii Cleidophorus Mystagogus, *Trifertes Sagani, Or Immortal Dissolvent* (London: W. Pearson, 1705).
- iv Allison Coudert, *Alchemy: The Philosopher's Stone* (London: Wildwood House, 1980), 131. She also mentions Pliny, *Historia naturalis*, for prescriptions of boys' urine.
- v Hans-Joachim Romswinkel, “‘De Sanguine Humano Destillato,’ Medizinisch–alchemistische Texte des 14. Jahrhunderts über destilliertes Menschenblut,” PhD dissertation, Rheinischen Friedrich–Wilhelms–Universität Bonn (Bonn: Horst Wellm, 1974).
- vi Paracelsus's recipe is cited in Alessandro Olivieri, “L'homunculus di Paracelso,” *Atti della Reale Accademia di Archaeologia, Lettere e Belli Arti*, Naples n. s. 12 (1931–1932): 375–397, especially 378; and see Edmund Oskar von Lippman, *Der Stein der Weisen und Homunculus*, Beiträge zur Geschichte der Naturwissenschaft und der Technik. (Berlin, 1923). Paracelsus describes several species of homunculus. One is the product of sodomy; another is the “alreola” or “mandragora.” See Olivieri, “L'homunculus,” *op. cit.*, 379–80, Paracelsus, *De vita longa* 63b.
- vii The recipe follows an English edition: Tügel, *Experimental Chemistry* (1766), translated by Sigismund Bacstrom (1798), in the series Restorers of Alchemical Manuscripts Society, edited by Hans Nintzel (Richardson, Texas, n.d. [c. 1985]), 18–21. I have been unable to trace the original.
- viii *Le triomphe hermetique*, quoted in Jacques van Lennep, *L'Art et l'alchimie: Étude de l'iconographie Hermetique et ses influences* (Brussels: Éditions Meddens, 1966), 25.
- ix Maier, *Atalanta fugiens* (Oppenheim: Hieronymus Galler, 1617), facsimile edition (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1964), emblem IV, p. 25.
- x *Ænigmata ex Visio arislei*, in *Artis auriferæ, quam chemiam vocant*, 3 vols. (Basel: Conrad Waldkirch, 1610 [1572]), vol. 1, 94–98 (pp. 146–54 in the 1572 edition). Arislæus or Arisleus is the pseudonymous name of the author of the *Turba philosophorum*, in *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 1–42. See further Julius Ruska, “Die Vision des Arisleus,” in *Historische Studien und Skizzen zur Natur- und Heilwissenschaft*, edited by Karl Sudhoff (Berlin: J. Springer, 1930).
- xi Incertus author, *Liber de arte chymica*, in *Artis auriferæ, ed. cit.*, vol. 1, 369 ff. (pp. 391 ff. in the 1572 edition).

xii James Saslow, *Ganymede in the Renaissance: Homosexuality in Art and Society* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988).

Welling, *YHWH: Opus Medico–Cabalisticum et Theologicum* (Frankfurt: In der Fleischerischen Buchhandlung, 1784), 6, 38, 31, quoted in Petra Jungmayr, *Georg von Welling (1655–1727), Studien zu Leben und Werk*, Heidelberger Studien zur Naturkunde der frühen Neuzeit, edited by Wolf–Dieter Müller–Jahncke and Joachim Telle, vol. 2 (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1990), 57.

xiii Khunrath, *Ampitheatrum Sapientiae Aeternae, Solius Veræ* (Hamburg [?], s.n., 1595), quotation as in Khunrath, *The Ampitheatre Engravings of Heinrich Khunrath*, translated by Patricia Tahil, edited by Adam McLean (Edinburgh: Magnum Opus Hermetic Sourceworks, 1981), 36.

xiv Karl Kerényi, *Hermes der Seelenführer*, *Albæ Vigilæ* no. 1 (Zurich: Rhein-Verlag, 1944); the English translation is *Hermes, Guide of Souls: The Mythologem of the Masculine Source of Life*, translated by Murray Stein (Zurich: Spring Publishers, 1976), 9.

*Geheime Figuren der Rosenkreuzer* (Altona: J. Eckhardt, 1785 [–1788]), n.p.

xv See Sophocles *Ædipus Rex* V.955ff.

xvi Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*, *op. cit.*, 166–67.

xvii Maier, *Arcana arcanissima, hoc est Hieroglyphica Aegyptio-Græca* ([Oppenheim]: s.n., 1614).

xviii This is not a “mistake” on Maier’s part; see Coudert, *Alchemy*, *op. cit.*, 139.

xix John Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers: The Abandonment of Children in Western Europe from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance* (New York: Pantheon, 1988), 76 n. 77.

xx H. M. E. de Jong, *Atalanta Fugiens: Sources of an Alchemical Book of Emblems* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1969), 258, translation modified; Latin from Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*, second edition (Oppenheim: Hieronymus Galler, 1618), 167.

xxi Freud, *Gesammelte Werke* (Frankfurt: S. Fischer, 1940– ), vols. 2–3, p. 270; vol. 9, p. 100; vol. 14, pp. 166–67.

xxii *Das Neu erleuchteten Mosqueteurs Vierfache Stumme Rede–Kunst des Fermontischen Steines Nach der arth der Vier Elementen Vermittelst die Vier Vnheilbahren Krackheiten, nach der Vierfachen Influenz des Himmels, als da ist Die Gravitetische Wasser–Sucht, Das Ehrbahre Podagra, die geschminckten Frantzosen, vnd gepuderte Pestilentz Mit verleihung der Gnaden Gottes, durch den Lapidem Fermonticum sambt denen Arcanibus Specificis vel Magneticis, auf vierfache Arth können geheÿlet, vnd gewendet werden.* 18th century. Glasgow University, Ferguson MS 11, n.p.

xxiii Wallich, *I. Das Mineralische Gluten, Doppelter Schlangen–Stab...*, *II. Der Philosophische Perl–Baum...*, [and] *III. Schlüssel zu dem Cabinet der geheimen Schatz–Kammer der Natur* (Frankfurt and Leipzig: Georg Christoph Wintzer, 1722), 10: “Nimm von diesem Mann, wenn er schläfft, sein Weib, seine Riebe, distillire das flüchtige Weib, das giftige Aal Wasser von ihm.”

xxiv Johann Grasshoff [Chortolassæus, Grasshoffer, Grossæus, Condeesyanus, Crasseus], *Arca arcani artificiosissimi de summis naturæ mysteriis*, in *Theatrum chemicum*, 6 vols. (Strassburg: E. Zetzner, 1659–61 [1602]), vol. 6, 294 ff., especially 305.

xxv See further Israel Regardie, *The Tree of Life* (Wellingborough: Aquarian Press, 1969); Regardie, *The Philosopher’s Stone* (Saint Paul, MI: Llewellyn Publications, 1978).

xxvi The Sanskrit word is *harabija*, literally the “creative seed” of Shiva. I thank Steven Feite for this information.

xxvii Antoine-Joseph Pernety, *Dictionnaire mytho-hermétique* (Paris: s.n., 1758), v. “nature,” 320.

xxviii Culling, *Sex Magick* (St. Paul, Minnesota: Llewellyn, 1989), 57 and 60; and see his *The Complete Magick Curriculum of the Secret Order G B G* (St. Paul, Minnesota: Llewellyn Publications, 1969).

xxix Peter Redgrove, *The Black Goddess and the Unseen Real* (New York: Grove Press, 1987), 200 n. 86.

xxx *Ibid.*, 144.

xxxi For the mixture of doctrines, see Culling, *Sex Magick*, *op. cit.*

xxxii Helmut Gebelein, *Alchimie* (Munich: Diederichs, 1991), 32, 368, 371.