

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

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Last words

In the end, what is painting? Is it the framed object, with its entourage of historical meanings, the gossip about its painter, and the ledgers and letters and files and reports and reviews and books it inspired? Or is painting a verb, a name for what happens when paint moves across a blank surface? Neither is complete without the other, but I have written hoping to convince people who spend time looking at pictures that it is not right to stress the first and neglect the second. The fundamental fact that argues for the importance of the act of painting, is that painters spend their entire lives working with paint. There must be a reason: the practice of painting cannot possibly be just an annoyance, or an efficient way to get images onto canvas. (As a way of telling stories or depicting objects, it is almost outlandishly inefficient. Practically anything else would be faster.) As I imagine it, an historian might think that a painter spends most time trying to get the representation just right (assuming the painting is not abstract). Certainly depicting things is a huge preoccupation, but it floats on the top of awareness. Oil paint can't be entrancing just because it can create illusion, because every medium does that. No: painters love paint itself, so much that they spend years trying to get paint to behave the way they want it to, rather than abandoning it and taking up pencil drawing, or charcoal, or watercolor, or photography. It is the paint that is so absorbing, so deeply attractive, that a life spent in the studio can be a bearable life.

It is no wonder that painters can be so entranced by paint. Substances occupy the mind profoundly, tethering moods to thoughts, tangling stray feelings with the movements of the body,

engaging the full capacity of response and concentrating it on unpromising lumps of paint and color. There is no meaning that cannot seem to flow from the paint itself. From the spectator's standpoint, looking at the finished paintings, marks can become eloquent records of the painter's body, and through that body come undependable but powerful ideas about the painter's feelings and moods. Paint incites motions, or the thought of motions, and through them it implies emotions and other wordless experiences. That is why painting is a fine art: not merely because it gives us trees and faces and lovely things to see, but because paint is a finely tuned antenna, reacting to every unnoticed movement of the painter's hand, fixing the faintest shadow of a thought in color and texture.

So I have tried to make a few points that will have seemed very simple and self-evident to painters. Painting, I said, takes place outside science and any sure and exact knowledge. It is a kind of immersion in substances, a wonder and a delight in their unexpected shapes and feels. When nothing much is known about the world, everything is possible, and painters watch their paints very closely to see exactly what they will do. Even though there is no contemporary language for that kind of experience, the alchemists already had names for it centuries ago. They knew several dozen varieties of the *prima materia*, the place where the work starts, and their terms can help us understand there are different ways of beginning the work. They had names for their transmutations, and those can help give voice to the many metamorphoses painters try to make in paint. Alchemists tried to give order to their nameless substances, and their names correspond to artists' colors and media. They worried about their knowledge, and whether it might be a sham (does it take a lifetime to make the Stone, or only a moment?); and the same anxieties are traditional in painting. And of course alchemists spent time thinking about the Stone, the ineffable goal of all their work; its qualities can also be ways to think about painting.

From an artist's point of view, I think the most important lesson of alchemy may be the alchemist's willingness to risk insanity. It is easy to forget the weird isolation and filth of studios, and the strangeness of spending so much time in silent congress with oil. Again art historians resist that, and there are theories about how studios were really social places, where artists worked alongside their patrons and friends. Sometimes: but the great majority of the paintings on the walls of museums could not possibly have been made to the accompaniment of social niceties. Often enough the paintings that prove most interesting are the ones that were prodigious efforts of imagination and technique—hardly the products of a public studio. No, I think studios

have always been mainly isolated places, disorienting for people who are not used to them, and potentially oppressive even for the painters. There are risks in self-imposed isolation, and they tend to be ignored by historians and critics who spend their time in clean, fresh-smelling offices and homes. Here alchemy is not a solace, but a predecessor.

There is an alchemical book that sums up the strangeness and obsession of the studio, and the way that substances trap the mind and keep it trapped for years. It is Johann Ernst Burggrav's *Lampas vitae et mortis*; it describes how to take some of your blood, distill it, and use it to feed a small oil lamp. Burggrav says the lamp will flare up when something good happens in your life, and it will gutter when you fall on hard times. The lamp will stay lit as long as you are alive, and when you die, it will go out.¹ What a mesmerizing thing such a lamp would be—who could take their eyes off it?—and what better illustration of the weird intimacy, the pitch of fascination, the life-long commitment that painters make to paint?

These analogies are the core of what I had to say. I do not think that they are new, but I hope that some of the unusual concepts I have borrowed from alchemy might help coax mute experiences from their isolation in the studio and let them find words.

Perhaps it is best to end this book twice: once with painting, and again with alchemy. Because it has been maligned so long, I will let alchemy have the last word.

Here, then, is a horseman, riding through a summer field (Colorplate 15). The landscape around him is softly glowing, with the kind of glow that happens in mid-summer when the humid air of spring has not quite dried away. Underfoot some of the grass is beginning to parch into Ochre and Manganese Violet. A far hill is still Emerald Green. The light is like a glassine envelope, wet and lucent. Originally, there was no horse or rider, and the field was uniform Raw Sienna and Viridian. A few strokes of Lead White gave the rider a spectral presence, but the painter left the rider's body empty, so it has the color of the meadow. His horse is a dark smudge of Burnt Sienna. From the knees down, the rider begins to merge into the horse—or rather the meadow seeps down the horse's back and then fades to the color of the horse. Above them, the sky is smeared with bright clouds, in ribbed and scumbled streamers. To the left the clouds, or the brushmarks, are mainly flat; on the right, they tumble and rise from the copse like heat waves over a fire. It's a thick sky, with all the weight of Lead White and Ochre, and all the heaviness of the slowly drying oils.

There is no escaping medium. This can never be just a horse, or a landscape in France. It can never just be about the happiness of peasant life, or any of the other things art historians write about. It is always also a picture of the leaden sky swirling, shining, and drying, with dust gathering brown in its crevices, and a long thin crack bearing down. It is about a rider who is just thin wisps of paint, and whose body coalesces into a shadow, that is also a horse. It is a world of paint, where the airiest clouds are resinous smears, and the most verdant field is a compound of rock and oil. The streaming air is not air at all, but tracks left by the brush, and their tufts are not cloudy castles but tiny serrations and crescents where the sticky medium clung to the bristles. A silent rain falls vertically through the picture, given form by the warp of the canvas. As Hubert Damisch says: painting is a cadmium yellow window onto the world.

From this distance, the paint and what it denotes are imbricated. If I step up even closer—and this is a tiny sample of a smallish painting—then there is nothing but paint. The sky becomes a stifling glissade of varnish. The meadow deliquesces into a wash of oil. Yet even in this airless realm where paint refers only to itself, there is still a tremendous richness of meaning, and it is the meaning proper and intrinsic to oil painting. I can imagine some historians thinking that my discussions of the paintings are too close, too exacting and formal, too shut away from the world where the paintings were made. Yet the body is what made them, and it is everywhere in the paint. No reading can be too close, because painters spend agonizing hours over just the kinds of nearly invisible passages I have photographed. It is sometimes hard for nonpainters to realize how much energy and thought can be poured into a few square inches of canvas, but that is where painters' attention is focused, and where their thoughts and gestures contact the canvas. The artist, Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot, could have just written about the meadow, or he could have painted it in watercolors, or etched it in copper. But he chose oil, and the reason has to do with the meanings of the colors and textures themselves. There are expressive gestures even in this small excerpt. Near the horizon, the sky is done in tender, slightly curling sideways motions ending in little hooks. They are an artist's version of the mechanical swipes that are most efficient in house painting: they retain enough of their utility to cover a large area, but they are also sensitive enough to give some variety to a surface. Some variety is all that is needed. The picture's marks speak about gentle monotony, and gently sustained attention. The meadow is scumbled and brushed into shape: not too carefully, but not too sloppily either. The hand that made it was at leisure.

Notice, from here, how easy it is to slip into the painter's mind, and how terribly unreliable. I haven't said much about painters' minds in this book, but I haven't avoided the subject either. To me, the mere fact that the marks in this part of this painting were executed by a relaxed hand argues for—no, it urges me to fall into—a tranquil frame of mind. Even without the meadow and the summer light, the paint expresses relief, and a measure of laziness. For me, if art historical research can support that conclusion, so much the better: but since I cannot stop myself from feeling it when I see the marks themselves, I cannot deny it. Substances can express any feeling, any motion.

And now a few last words about alchemy. Since it is such an out-of-the-way subject, it may be a surprise to learn that the world is still full of alchemists. There are plant alchemists and metallic alchemists in every major city, and there are schools of alchemy in the United States, England, Germany, and India. At least two schools in the United States offer five- and even eight-year courses in alchemy. Practicing alchemists usually keep far away from universities, though there are occasionally cases of professors propounding alchemical doctrines; as recently as 1993 at Texas A&M there was a chemistry professor who supported alchemical research.² From the point of view of science, virtually all alchemists are cranks, and there is no shortage of sad stories about their encounters with professional chemists and patrons who demanded gold. In past centuries, many alchemists were jailed and executed—one was even crucified on a cross covered with gold leaf as a brutal reminder of his fraud. More often alchemists who made spectacular claims just faded away. There are stories of alchemists who dipped coins into secret solutions and brought them out half golden—and there are even collections of coins that are half gold and half lead.³ (The alchemist would have switched coins, and handed over one that was actually half gold.) Stephen Emmens, whose recipe for slug gold is in chapter 3, went to Washington in 1899 and changed his alchemically-produced “Argentaurum”—which he said was the primordial matter from which gold and silver are made—into 954 U.S. dollars. Apparently he couldn't repeat his demonstration, and the ensuing media attention died away rapidly. His history has never been researched.⁴ Charles Henri, who wrote a book on color theory that influenced Seurat and the Postimpressionists, also spent time writing about the numerological significance of the numbers 1, 2, 3, and 4, and—in the words of a biographer—he “ended his days worn out by chemical experiments and mathematical calculations in an endeavor to discover a reagent

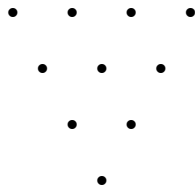
capable of converting water into petrol.”⁵ C. Louis Kervran claimed special things happen to atoms in the bodies of plants and animals that cannot be understood in terms of chemistry or physics.⁶ According to the “Kervran effect,” atoms can transmute within the body, so that people can be killed when their nitrogen atoms spontaneously become carbon monoxide.⁷ Kervran’s spiritual predecessor, Louis-Nicolas Vauquelin, believed that hens transmuted corn into calcium to make their eggshells. He is lampooned in Gustave Flaubert’s *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, along with the other follies of the world.⁸ There are hundreds of other stories like these, enough to fill several books.⁹

Alchemy is a discredited pseudoscience. It took a long time dying, but the end was in sight early on, as the sciences began to move forward after the Renaissance. Oswald Croll, a seventeenth-century German alchemist, wrote a book with a picture of himself emerging from the alchemical vessel and striking a kingly pose. It is supposed to be an image of the philosophical King, the very embodiment of the Stone. Croll calls his likeness “the earthly treasure and earthly God” but he is a flabby, nude, fifty-year-old man, and he looks pathetic—like an overweight suburbanite who stepped into a pot by mistake.¹⁰ Even then, in the golden age of alchemy, there were those who suspected that alchemy might be hollow. As modern chemistry got going, alchemy lost ground, and in the nineteenth century scientists stripped it even of the dubious prestige it had once had. In the last fifty years things have gotten even worse, because now alchemy is either mummified within Jung’s heavy psychological theories of the mind, or evaporated into New Age dreams.

In a perverse way, some alchemists reveled in the ruins of their discipline. If things looked bad, and they were expelled from court, or called quacks or “puffers,” then that meant their art must have some miraculous secret. Because it seemed empty, it must be full. Because it was despised, it must be magnificent. Countless books begin with versions of the epigram “What good are glasses to those who cannot see?”—implying that the book will not be understood by anyone unless they already believe in it. As the criticism from outside became more strident, the alchemists dug deeper into their unwavering convictions and unconscious self-deceptions. Current alchemy happens far from serious chemistry, physics, philosophy, and literature: that is the price it pays to keep its hopes alive.

The weight of history is against the alchemists, but in a sense they are right, because there is truth in alchemy even if it does not reside in vague recipes or ecstatic prayers. I hope I have

made it clear that alchemy is not just a fusty old activity fit for cranks, or a mystical New Age pursuit suitable for adolescents. It has its truths, and they were hard-won in encounters with unknown substances. Above all alchemy is the record of serious, sustained attempts to understand what substances are and how they carry meaning. And for that reason it is the best voice for artists who wrestle every day with materials they do not comprehend and methods they can never entirely master. Science has closed off almost every unsystematic encounter with the world. Alchemy and painting are two of the last remaining paths into the deliriously beautiful world of unnamed substances.



Notes to Chapter 9

¹ Burggrav, *Lampadem vitæ et mortis omniumque graviorum in microcosmo pathon indicem, hoc est, Biolychnium sive luceman* (Leiden: Arnold Doude, 1678), with two engravings. John Ferguson, *Bibliographical Notes on Histories of Inventions and Books of Secrets* (London: Holland Press, 1959), part 4, p. 34, points out that the original is in Christopher Irvine, *Medicina magnetica, Or, The Rare and Wonderful Art of Curing by Sympathy* ([Edinburgh:] C. Higgins, 1656), 98, and that the story also appears in Albertus Magnus der Andere [pseud.], *Das Ist: Geheimnisse der Nature und Kunst vor alle Stände, also für Künstler, Jäger, Oekonomen, Professionisten, Handwerker &c* (Altona and Leipzig: Johann Heinrich Kaven, 1797).

² Robert Pool, "Alchemy at Texas A & M," *Science* 262 (26 November 1993): 1367.

³ Vladimir Karpenko, "Coins and Medals Made of Alchemical Metal," *Ambix* 35 (1988): 65-76. It is easy to turn a copper penny into silver or gold. Put 5 g of zinc dust in a dish; dissolve 240g NaOH in 1 liter of water, add enough to cover the zinc, and heat to near boiling. A thoroughly cleaned copper penny (minted before 1980), dipped into this mixture, will turn silver. If the penny is dried and put on a hot plate, it will turn gold. The first step only coats the penny in a silvery sodium zincate, and the second step bonds the zinc with the copper to make a golden brass alloy.

⁴ Reported in Kurt Karl Doberer, *The Goldmakers, 10,000 Years of Alchemy*, translated by E. W. Dickes (London: Greenwood, 1948), reprinted (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1972).

⁵ Georges Bohn, "Quelques souvenirs sur Charles Henri," *Cahiers d'Etoile* (Paris, 1930), 74 ff. The quotation is from Sven Lövgren, *The Genesis of Modernism* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1959), 68.

⁶ C. Louis Kervran, *Biological Transmutations* (London: Crosby Lockwood, 1972), esp. 3 ff.; the original is *À la découverte des transmutations biologiques* (Paris: Le Courrier du Livre, 1966).

⁷ *Ibid.*, discussed in Hans Gebelein, *Alchimie* (Munich: Diederichs, 1991), 350 ff. The equation is $N + N \rightarrow O + O$.

⁸ Louis Nicolas Vauquelin (c. 1799), cited in Kervran, *Biological Transmutations*, *op. cit.*, 45 ff.

⁹ See the section on alchemists in Charles Mackay, *Memoirs of Extraordinary Popular Delusions* (London: Richard Bentley, 1841), 2 vols., reprinted (s.l.: L. C. Page & Company, 1932).

¹⁰ Croll, *D. O. M. A.... Chymisch Kleynod* (Frankfurt, 1647), 72, fig. 8, and 73.