Fortress of the Soul
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Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

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The Art of the Earth

“And you,” she said to her youngest son, “what have you brought me?”

The prince then took the nut from his pocket. This caused the entire assembly to break out in laughter. But the queen had already cracked open the shell and found a silk gown of indescribable fineness and color hidden inside.

“To you my kingdom,” said she, “but on one condition, you must tell me who made this gift.”

—“The Prince and the Frog,” or “The Tower of Broue,”
a traditional Saintongeais folktale

The near absence of an authentic, continuous oral tradition, which logic dictates should survive in some form from the sixteenth century, is a remarkable feature of southwestern France’s artisanal history. This curiosity was compounded when, in 1971, a government-sponsored archaeological team headed by Jean Chapelot of the École pratique des hautes études arrived in the region to begin an intensive investigation of medieval and early modern Saintongeais kiln sites, potters, and pottery. Until 1971, these humble artisans and their production had only been superficially investigated by early twentieth-century British antiquarians, interested primarily in certain narrow aspects of pottery diffusion along La Rochelle’s Atlantic trade network with England, starting around the thirteenth century. Chapelot, however, was concerned with diffusion to the North American market, where Saintongeais pottery has consistently been found in significant quantities at early modern archaeological sites.

Saintongeais pottery was produced at more than twenty-nine kiln sites between the twelfth and eighteenth centuries, which Chapelot’s team unearthed at nine towns in an arc around Saintes: La Chapelle-des-Pots (with the earliest, most renowned sites);
Ecoyeux, Brizambourg; Venerand; Saint-Cézaire; Fontcouvert, Le Douhet; Saint-Bris-des-Bois; and Chaniers.4

Polychrome shards discovered at these sites suggest that the kilns were in continuous operation from the twelfth century—with a decline during the war years of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries—until the last traditional atelier (built ca. 1857), which belonged to the potter Philippe Machefer, ceased operations at the tiny hamlet called Chez Lorin (Venerand) in 1925.5 Ten medieval and eighteen eighteenth-century kiln sites were found, but only three can be verified for the anarchic sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, all three at La Chapelle-des-Pots, where Palissy claimed he was picking up potter’s clay in March 1563 when the Catholic church in Saintes was being vandalized by heretics.

Chapelot’s modern Saintongeais informants, hindered by a dim understanding of the intense violence of their region’s religious and artisanal history, exhibited almost no authentic local memory going very far back:

It is difficult to hope to get, from local informants, oral data going back further than the second generation of their ancestors. It is very awkward for an archaeologist in this particular region to deal with a memory that is still alive, though distorted most of the time, of regional ceramic activity, despite the fact that it has ceased to exist for at least two generations. The answers lead systematically toward the most recent vestiges or are narrowly conditioned by a local mythology of a “savant” origin founded on “memories” and the “tradition” of Bernard Palissy. Because of these two aspects, recent memories of the artisanat [and] Palissian “mythology,” it is very difficult, even more difficult than elsewhere, to obtain commonplace information such as, for example, that inevitably given by a plowman or a winegrower [as to] whether any archeological vestiges exist in their fields.6

It is fascinating that Chapelot’s quest for oral testimony about commonplace details should have proven so unproductive, especially because the majority of his informants were small landowners working an agrarian landscape, where contours have changed little since medieval times. One might suppose that in such a milieu, the “average” farmer or winegrower would have formed a quite specific (almost genealogical) mental map of the history of his domains and probably those of his near neighbors as well. However, Chapelot’s team could obtain information about only two generations, remarkable in comparison with the long memory of informants elsewhere in France under apparently similar conditions. Huguenot informants from southeastern France, in the oral tradition of ten generations of ancestors, have long been actively engaged in the revision of official historiography to correspond more closely with the Camisard saga of the civil wars.

To be sure, commonplace details are the foundation of Chapelot’s discipline, yet he is perhaps too dismissive of “local mythology” as a mnemonic “distortion.” One task
of archeology is to define boundaries between history and myth with precise empirical markers. Unfortunately, such boundaries are blurred as they emerge from Saintongeais popular memory. For Chapelot, the “narrowness” of “Palissian ‘mythology’” has reduced Saintongeais oral testimony to mere rhetoric and childlike repetition—“savant’ . . . ‘memories’ . . . ‘tradition’”—of no practical value to archeologists. Chapelot thus fell into the trap of mystification. He conflated cause with effect.

It was not just mythology or a failure of long-term memory but rather war, demography, geography, and migration that caused the responses that misled him. The vast majority of Saintongeais Huguenot artisans (potters included) had emigrated from the southwest by 1730, and precious few Protestant families remained in the region to remember the early years of ceramic production in the Charente River Valley.

Although isolated on land, southwestern Huguenot culture was molded by its proximity to the Atlantic trade routes. Whether they were wealthy Rochelais merchant-shipowners or common potters producing ceramics for export, all Huguenots were tied together by this overarching oceangoing mercantile commerce. When, by 1685, the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes made life for Huguenots unsupportable, the structures of escape for the Saintongeais were already firmly established. The region’s Huguenot artisans took their oral history with them when they left, diffusing centrifugally from France. By the time of the French Revolution, the most coherent vestiges of southwestern Huguenot culture could be located in the centers of refuge in northern Europe, Dutch South Africa, and British North America.

Not so for the southeastern Huguenots. The Camisards’ was a centripetal mountain culture with limited access for dispersion en masse to the larger Protestant world. While a number of “prophets” and others from that region made it to London and elsewhere, the majority of southeastern Huguenots could not escape France in the way common Saintongeais artisans were able to do. Perhaps because they could escape by sea to join a network of family members already in place in new host countries, southwestern Huguenots were more susceptible to an eschatology of waiting. They could afford to be patient. In the absence of such a safety valve, southeastern Huguenots, isolated in a pressure cooker of war from which they saw no real escape except martyrdom, might naturally have adopted the millennial tradition of imminent apocalypse. Unlike the southwestern Huguenots, then, the southeastern “tribes” stayed in their region in great numbers, where they cultivated a sophisticated oral tradition beginning in the war years of the sixteenth century.

That is why the great weakness of Chapelot’s otherwise valuable study lies in his inability to document the confessional allegiance of Saintongeais artisans. In most cases, however, the documents that survive in the region are unyielding on this subject. Predictably, the best information Chapelot has yet been able to uncover about the religion of one of his potters, Jean Aumier, was found in Québec, where the name of
Aumier (or Houlmier or Osmier) appears in archives beginning in May 1676, when he entered into partnership with a brick maker named Jean Vivien. In another document dated November 30, 1676, Aumier is referred to as a “maître-potier” and the son of Jean Houlmier of Escoyeux, also a “maître-potier de terre.” This sent Chapelot back to the archives of Ecoyeux, where, in a document dated 1653, he discovered Jean Hommier (probably the father), a Calvinist who abjured his religion for Catholicism. The specific context of Hommier’s abjuration is unknown. That he did so was possibly linked to his decision to emigrate to New France. Had he gone to Britain or colonial America, he would certainly have remained an overt Protestant. But the larger point is made. Following what we know from Palissy’s history, this brief biography of Aumier and others indicates that a great many, perhaps the majority, of these Saintongeais potters began their lives as Protestants. When they left the southwest in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, however, there remained only a dwindling number of examples of their pottery (many examples of which are also to be found in museums in the host countries of the diaspora) and, whether Chapelot accepts it or not, what Palissy tells us in his books.

That is why the catechistic oral style Chapelot recorded is perhaps more indicative of a commonly shared grammar or parochial school rhetoric. This rhetoric is based upon mnemonic repetition of certain appropriate themes and key phrases common to the education of a French écolier rather than local oral history surviving in living memory. This is particularly true of the so-called Palissian myth. What Chapelot heard was likely the result of a regional revival of interest in Palissy’s writings beginning with the reprinting of his Oeuvres complètes in 1844 and 1880, two centuries after the dispersion. Following the final eighteenth-century edition of his works in 1777, the potter was forgotten locally for almost one hundred years. The 1880 Charavay edition, with an introduction by Anatole France, inspired a popular one-act play in French verse by Eugène Brieux (1880), which has been taught to southwestern schoolchildren ever since. Palissy’s ascension as a local cultural hero was a nineteenth- and early twentieth-century phenomenon.

Local memory of regional material culture in general and of Saintongeais pottery specifically runs a roughly parallel course. On Christmas 1924, the popular journal of regional French folklore and material culture La Vie à la Campagne produced a special issue on the houses and furniture of southwestern France, in which even passing mention of Saintongeais pottery was conspicuously absent. This particular issue was also the first publication of any kind to include a systematic discussion of Saintongeais regional house types and furniture. Local memory of indigenous pottery and craftsmen in general was reconstructed as late as the 1930s, partly as a result of the rise of fascism and regional interest in folkloric subjects in France as well as Germany, but primarily because of British interest. In 1933, the influential British antiquarian jour-
nal Archaeologia published an article by G. C. Dunning in which he reported the discovery of curious green-glazed and polychrome pottery dug from sites scattered about medieval London, as well as from contemporary rubbish trenches in the foundations of a gatehouse at Kidwelly Castle, Carmathenshire, South Wales. Dunning concluded that London was only a transshipment point for this pottery. In a call for future research, he wrote.

This is as far as we can carry the problem at present. . . . The manufacture of these somewhere in southern France seems probable; it will be observed, moreover, that their distribution in Britain favors Bordeaux or some adjacent port as the place of shipment. Research in the museums of southern France and, it may be added, those towns in Ireland reached by the Medieval wine trade, is clearly indicated as likely to produce definite results.

Following up quickly on Dunning’s pathbreaking research, British colleagues and archaeologists from all of La Rochelle’s early modern trading partners soon discovered that the “local” pottery in their museums had originated in the towns around Saintes, and they began to map its diffusion to the north and west, out into the Atlantic world. As with so much of the history of southwestern France, its material culture was not defined by itself but by others. Neither mythology nor distorted memory was the cause of the “narrow” oral history of Saintonge; rather, Chapelot’s peasant informants were indirectly communicating that the vestiges he sought were remnants of an alien culture, discontinuous with their own. That was why they did not remember.

The “earthen cup”

Of all the many “Palissian myths” that burdened Chapelot’s research, the one he undoubtedly endured most often involved the story still taught to schoolchildren from La Rochelle to Bordeaux: how Bernard Palissy used his furniture and floorboards to feed his kiln while searching for the secret of the elusive white glaze. This particularly dramatic scene was taken from Palissy’s most important contribution to the literature of Paracelsian artisanry, his essay “On the Art of the Earth, its Usefulness, On Enamels and Fire,” first published in his Discours admirables in 1580.

This essay has been commented upon by decorative arts scholars concerned with the potter’s shop practices, methodology, and the geographic origin of the faience cup that obsessed him. Palissy biographers have extracted one or another vivid scene to humanize their accounts of the potter’s apparently unhappy personal life. And, of course, modern schoolteachers in the Charente River Valley use the essay didactically, to educate their young students about the importance of personal sacrifice to achieve a
greater goal. But none of the Palissy literature analyzes the essay as a revelation of his apprenticeship as a Paracelsian artisan, an adaptation and extension of traditional accounts of alchemic initiation rites, or as a commentary from the rustic periphery on the skilled craftsman’s concept of spiritual honor.

The essay is structured as a dialogue between Theory and Practice, a form Palissy employs throughout both his books. In the *Recepte véritable*, Question is the unenlightened novice and Answer the natural philosopher possessed of great wisdom and many valuable craft secrets. In “On the Art of the Earth,” Theory plays the role of an ambitious artisan’s apprentice to Practice’s experienced master:

**Theory:** You promised to teach me the art of the earth: and . . . I was very happy, thinking that you wished to teach me the whole of this art; but I was quite surprised when instead of continuing, you told me to come back later in order to make me forget my affection for this art.

**Practice:** Do you think a man of sound judgment would want to give away the secrets of an art that cost him who invented it dearly? As for me, I am not willing to do so unless I know a reason for it.

**Theory:** There is indeed no charity in you. If you wish thus to keep your secret hidden, you will carry it to the grave and no one will benefit from it, and thus your death will be accursed: for it is written that every man, according to the gifts he has received from God, should give to others: from this I can conclude that if you do not teach me what you know of this art, you are misusing the gifts of God.13

Practice’s task in the remainder of the text is to prove the power and “benefit” to others of his hidden understanding. For the Paracelsian artisan, experience was crucial, and the real significance of “On the Art of the Earth” lay precisely in the “extremely violent” quality of artisanal experience that Practice passes on to his would-be apprentice. In these and other ways, this essay served as a natural culmination of all the inferences—both metaphysical and material—about Paracelsian artisanry that came before it.

Palissy’s experience also taught him to reserve the secrets of the trade to himself for economic reasons. He remembered the hard lessons he had learned as a painter of stained glass, during which time (much as in the case of the Boston leather chair), manufacturing the product had become “too mechanized,” causing overproduction, devaluation, and a glut on the market:

**Practice:** My art and its secrets are not like others. I am sure that a good remedy against a plague or some other pernicious disease ought not to be kept secret. The secrets of agriculture ought not to be kept secret. The hazards and dangers of navigation ought not to be kept secret. The word of God ought not to be kept
secret. But in the case of my art of the earth and many other arts, that is not so. Many charming inventions are contaminated and despised because they are too common. Also, many things are highly prized in the houses of princes and noble-men that would be less prized than old kettles if they were common. I pray you consider a little the glasses that are so low in price because they are too common, so that those who make them live more poorly than the porters of Paris. The profession is noble and the men who work at it are noble: but many who are gentle-men because they practice this art would like to be commoners and have money enough to pay the income of princes. Isn’t that the trouble of the glassmakers of Périgord, Limousin, Xaintonge, Angoulmois, Gascogne, Béarn, and Bigorre? Where glassmaking is so mechanized that they are sold and auctioned off in the villages by the same men who peddle old clothes and iron, so much so that those who make them and sell them have a hard time making a living.14

To glassmakers, Palissy added makers of enamel buttons and Limoges enamels (including makers of “badges of office . . . but also . . . ewers, salt-cellars and all kinds of other vessels and other things”); “painters and clever draftsmen” (who had been undercut by “coarsely printed” images); and sculptors (whose original work was cheaply copied and resold by cast makers). Indeed, as in New York, refugee Huguenot artisans became well known themselves for underselling originals with copies. And Palissy, of course, substituted clay for metal in medallions and perhaps badges as well. Still, he listed many other kinds of tradespeople who had been put out of business by “mech- anization,” which he traced to the free dissemination of tradecraft:

**Practice:** You can easily understand by these examples and a thousand others like them, that it is better for one man or a small number of men to make a profit from some art while living honorably, than for a great many, who will harm each other so much that they will be unable to make a living save by profaning the arts, leaving things half done, as is commonly seen in all arts whose number is too great: however, if I thought you would keep the secret of my art as jealously as it deserves, I would not hesitate to teach it to you.15

Theory calls Practice’s bluff and cajoles “If you will please teach it to me, I promise to keep it as secret as any man to whom you could teach it.”16 But Practice’s response seems to suggest that the economic benefit of secrecy, though probably pertinent, is at the same time an obfuscation secondary to a larger purpose. A subtle shift in the dialogue occurs at the moment when Practice says: “I should like to do much for you, and to advance you as willingly as I would my own child: but I fear that if I teach you the art of the earth, it would retard rather than advance you” [emphasis added].17 Practice thinks of Theory’s progress “as I would my own child.” Hence the secrets of the art of the
earth were not forthcoming easily, but through the hard travail of creative birth.
Theory presses on nonetheless. He freely acknowledges all that Practice has endured
but now requests that the specifics of Practice’s tradecraft passed on to him in writing:

**Theory:** I know that you have borne much poverty and trouble in learning it: but
that won’t happen to me: because the reason of your trouble was that you had a
wife and children. [Moreover] you had no knowledge of it before and had to
guess . . . you could not leave your family to go and learn this art . . . [and] you
had no money to pay servants who could help you . . . But that won’t happen to
me: because, according to your promise, you will give me in writing all the means
of guarding against the losses and hazards of fire: also the materials from which
you make enamels and their proportions, measures and composition . . . why
should I not make fine things without running the danger of losing anything?\(^{18}\)

To which Practice predictably replies:

Even if I used a thousand reams of paper to write down all the accidents that have
happened to me in learning this art, you may be assured that, however good a
brain you have, you will still make a thousand mistakes, which cannot be learned
from writings, and even if you had them in writing, you wouldn’t believe them
until practice has given you a thousand afflictions . . . you will see that nothing
will be attempted or completed, to render it in beauty and perfection, without
great and extreme labor, which never comes singly but is always accompanied by
a thousand anxieties.\(^{19}\)

“On the Art of the Earth” thus becomes Palissy’s ultimate definition of “great and
extreme” labor itself. In such a definition, “proportions, measures and composition,”
like writing, are superfluous. One must begin at the beginning: “I will give you here in
order all the secrets that I have found about the art of the earth,”\(^{20}\) Practice says, and
with this he tells Theory:

[M]ore than twenty-five years ago, I was shown an earthen cup, turned and
eenameled with such beauty that I was immediately perplexed . . . and immedi-
ately, without thinking that I had no knowledge of clayey earths, I started to look
for enamels, the way a man gropes in the dark. Without having heard of what
materials these enamels were made, I cracked, in those days, all sorts of things
that I though could be used, and after having pounded and crushed them, I
would buy a number of earthen pots, and after breaking them to pieces, I would
put the things I had crushed on them, and after making them, I would write
down the compounds [*drogues*] I had put on each one, as a reminder, then after I
had built a kiln to my liking, I put these pieces to bake to see if my compounds
could produce some white color: for I was looking for no other enamel than white: because I had heard that white was the basis of all other enamels.\(^{21}\)

“Perplexed” is a word Palissy uses interchangeably with “awe” to signify his experience of a natural-philosophical epiphany at the nexus of the macrocosm and the microcosm. He experienced the same feeling during his walk along the Charente River. This time, however, the effect of the Neoplatonic harmonics of song and the Paracelsian separation, perfection, and regeneration of water and salt was signified by a man-made object: the turned earthenware cup with a beautiful enamel glaze.

The hypothesis has been made that the cup Palissy was shown was an example of either Italian majolica or Saint-Porchaire ware from the Poitou.\(^{22}\) Both are reasonable suppositions. However, no matter what type of cup the potter actually saw twenty-five years before publication of the *Discours* in 1580, his quest may well have been influenced by his awareness of another cup, famously associated with Jean Calvin. In Théodore de Bèze’s widely read martyrology *Histoire de la vie et mort de feu Mr. Jean Calvin*, Calvin’s will was published to refute claims that he had profited from his ministry in Geneva. “He was a man clearly void of all greedinesse of the goodes of thys worlde,” de Bèze wrote:

Was there any house considering the estate of the man . . . more slenderlye furnished with moveables? And if men will not believe me and ten thousand witnesses with mee, at least let them believe the slender wealth of his brother and onely heire, and also the inventory of all his goods, and it shall be found that all that ever he lefte behinde him (accompting also hys bookes which were dearely solde because of his precious memorie, to all men that were learned) doth not exceede the value of two hundred crownes.

Indeed, Calvin bequeathed only one “moveable” in his will:

Concerning the final portion of goods, which God hathe given me here to dispose, I doe ordaine and appoynt for my only heir, my welbeloved brother, Antonie Calvin, only for credites sake, giving him for all his part, the cuppe that I had of Monsieur de Varennes, praying him therwith to content himself (as I am assured he wil) seing that he knoweth wel that I do it for no cause els, but to the end that that litle which I leave, may remain to his children.\(^{23}\)

This cup held great talismanic qualities as a container of Calvin’s memory, augmented by the ancient association of the sacrificial cup with the Lord’s Supper. Though Palissy had problems with Calvin’s writings, through which, following de Bèze, it “pleased God to make him to speake [and] . . . be heard of the posteritie to the ende of the world,” his search for an artisanal voice may have been influenced by Calvin’s one surviving household possession.\(^{24}\)
Palissy's obsession was to make the perfect glaze, in much the same way as he was moved to construct a delectable garden by hearing the words of Psalm 104. For Palissy, the white glaze signified the flash of astral spirit materialized and then merged with the macrocosm in enamel: “I had heard that white was the basis of all other enamels,” he says. From Palissy’s understanding of the generation of stones, the white enamel was for him a pure fusion of salts and water, so that all color—and hence the earth’s impurities—was removed, refined, and made transparent by fire in the furnace. The white glaze existed in the absence of earth. It was the potter’s diamond from the foundation of the New Jerusalem: “nothing else but a water, . . . but it was jelled by some rare species of salt, pure and mordant, . . . its excellent beauty came in part from its hardness.”

As an artisan who had “taught myself alchemy,” Palissy could appreciate the possibilities for a material-holiness synthesis in the ceramic process, a synthesis that had been achieved before by artisans only with painted glass. The insight that the “flash” or “sparkle” of the astral spirit could appear in a simple, everyday hand-wrought vessel was also revealed to Jakob Böhme in the second and most famous of his three visions of divine light, which took place in 1600 and which survives in the relation of his friend, the German theologian Abraham von Frankenberg:

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, notably in 1600, when he was about twenty-five years of age, [Böhme] was, for the second time, seized by the divine light, and the sidereal spirit of his soul was introduced by the sudden appearance of a pewter vase . . . in its bottom or center the most intimate aspect of its nature was hidden, and thereupon, a bit suspicious, he went into the countryside to hunt for this spirit of his imagination . . . and for all that, to experience more and more clearly this gift of sight that he had come to receive, in such a manner that, by the medium of [“brilliant and jovial”] signatures, or figures, traces, and colors, he was able to penetrate with one look into the heart itself and into the most intimate nature of creatures . . . after that, pierced with a great joy, he praised God and returned to his place of business [a cobbler’s workshop] and spoke very little or not at all about his experience.

Alexandre Koyre’s characteristically metaphysical analysis of Böhme’s “vision” is pertinent to our understanding of Palissy’s “perplexed” experience with the earthenware cup:

Boehme does not speak, it is true, of the exterior manifestation of his vision—of the light playing on the surface of a pewter vase—but we have no reason to doubt its reality . . . Frankenberg—who obviously did not understand this meaning—could not have invented this luminous symbol of one of the aspects of Boehme’s doctrine; he did not see, as Boehme saw, the light that, invisible in itself, would reveal itself in its splendor and its
brilliancy as it set itself, and as it hit a polished and opaque pewter surface, the true sym-
bol of God, of the divine light, which to reveal and manifest itself needed an “other,” a re-
sistance, an opposition; which, to sum it up, needed the world in which to reflect, express,
oppose, and separate itself.29

Both pewter and ceramic—two of the most common and inexpensive materials to
be fabricated in a furnace—shared opacity as a principal optical quality. There is little
doubt that Palissy’s encounter with the enamel cup can be understood in much the
same way as we now understand Böhme’s perception of “the sidereal perception of his
soul,” “playing . . . at its bottom or center” over the surface of a pewter vase. This en-
abled him “to penetrate with one look into the heart itself,” like Paracelsus, “by the
medium of signatures, or figures, traces, and colors”; what Koyré calls “the true sym-
bol of God, of the divine light.” Such optical qualities encompassed Palissy’s observa-
tions about light refracting in stones, which included “diamond points,” “sparks,” and
“flashes,” the same optical effects he tried to replicate in the rustic figurines. And both
Böhme and Palissy would agree that divine light could only become visible in opposi-
tion to the pain, corruption, and materiality of the microcosm. Recall that Palissy’s as-
tral light borrowed substance from salts in adjacent earths and, as Koyré points out,
Böhme’s light “needs the earth to reflect in, to express itself, to oppose and to sepa-
rate.” The essence of a glazed ceramic for Palissy was that it could make permanent the
optical effects perceived in his luminous but evanescent moment of opposition of “love
and wrath” between spirit and matter.

Böhme’s response to his vision was to turn inward and begin to write a multitude
of volumes in the most energetically oppositional language imaginable for his time. So
much so, in fact, that Hegel championed Böhme’s work as the origin of the German
dialectic.30 Palissy also turned inward, but he was initially seized with a Paracelsian ar-
tisan’s mimetic desire to crystallize his vision out of the earth’s natural materials. More
than Böhme could probably have imagined, Palissy’s obsession with his found artifact
grew out of his personal history as a Saintongeais Huguenot artisan whose conscious-
ness was formed during the civil wars of religion, and consequently also out of the
structural complexities of his social and historical experience. Who could now argue
that Palissy did not at some level also perceive the totality of his community’s history
of liminality, disguise, ambiguity, mimetic oppositional violence, and reversal con-
tained in the charismatic little cup that, unlike the pewter vase in Böhme’s vision, the
potter could feel with his own artisan’s hands and copy?

At the moment that Practice begins to draw Theory deeper into his consciousness
as a rustic artisan, he simultaneously suggests the ambiguity of such a journey by draw-
ing himself physically deeper into the earth’s matrix. “On the Art of the Earth” broke
down the conceptual and physical barriers between man and Nature and joined the
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Palissy’s artisan’s pilgrimage in search of the white glaze became a journey of mythological torment. He could not control the violence of the kiln fire so that the white glaze would hold:

Now, since I had never seen earth fired, and did not know at what heat this enamel would melt, I could do nothing in this way, even if my compounds had been good, for at one time my work had been heated too much, at others too little, and when these materials were too little baked or burned, I could not find out why I was making nothing good, but put the blame on the materials, although sometimes the work might have been good, or at least I could have got some hint toward achieving my goal if I could have controlled the fire according to the requirements of the materials.31

After years of failure, Palissy decided to try a kiln belonging to another potter (probably in La Chapelle-des-Pots) only to discover that common pottery furnaces fired too low to melt his “compounds”:

When I had thus blundered about unwisely for several years, with sadness and sighing, because I could achieve no part of my goal, and remembering my waste of money, I thought of sending the compounds I wanted to try out to some potter’s kiln, to avoid such great expense; and having made up my mind about this, I immediately bought several earthen vessels, and after breaking them into pieces, as usual, I covered three or four hundred pieces of them with enamel and sent them to a pottery a league and a half away from my home requesting the potter to fire these experimental pieces inside some of their vessels; which they did willingly; but when they had fired their kilnful and drawn out my pieces, I had only shame and loss from them, for they included nothing good, because the potter’s fire was not hot enough, also because my experimental pieces were not fired as they should be nor according to what I knew; and because I knew not why my experiments had not turned out well, I put the blame . . . on the materials: I would immediately make
numerous new combinations and send them to the same potters, to be treated as before: Thus did I lose time, suffer confusion and sadness many times, always at great cost.32

Yet he was virtually unstoppable. If one experiment failed, he would try another. Only when Palissy manipulated the far hotter temperatures attainable in the glass furnace did he begin to see that success in achieving the white glaze was possible:

seeing that I had been unable to do anything in my kilns or in those of the potters, I broke about three dozen brand new pots, and having crushed a great quantity of various materials, I covered all the shards of these pots with drugs brushed on: but you must understand that of two or three hundred pieces there were only three of each mixture: having done this, I took all these pieces to a glass house, to see if my material and mixtures might not turn out well in the kilns of the glass works. Now, because their kilns are hotter than those of the potters, after putting all my experiments into the kilns, the next day when I had them taken out, I saw that part of my mixtures had begun to melt, which caused me to be further encouraged to seek for white enamel, for which I had worked so hard. As for other colors, I did not worry about them at all; this little showing which I had found them, made me work for two more years looking for white, during which two years I did nothing but come and go to the nearest glass works, trying to achieve my goal.33

In the next set of passages, however, Palissy revealed for the first time what had been implicit all along; that is, how closely linked his quest to craft a white glaze on ceramic had become with his personal quest for self-mastery, purification, and salvation:

God willed that just as I began to lose hope, and for the last time had gone to a glass works with a man carrying more than three hundred kinds of experiments, it happened that one of them melted within four hours of being put into the kiln which was so white and polished as to cause me such joy that I thought I had become a new man: and I thought immediately that I had complete mastery of white enamel: but I was far from my goal.34

“I had become a new man,” was of course, another way of saying that Palissy felt “born again” when he perceived the white glaze as the externalization, through labor, of his own newly purified soul. By analogy, “complete mastery of the white enamel” should have signified that Palissy’s internal process of separation and purification had been “mastered” as well, and his pilgrimage of revelation ended. But Palissy’s use of such language in this context has to be considered both ironic and didactic. Mastery implied an artisan’s successful journey from apprenticeship to master status. However, in the soulish discourse used by enthusiasts and natural philosophers, it also connotes a negative characteristic of personal willfulness, a surfeit of profane carnality, akin to
a surfeit of unpurified earths in the alchemical process. For the astral light to enter freely, such willfulness had to be negated, violently if necessary, to achieve sufficient bodily transparency. Only the deity determined the appropriate moment, which was unknowable. The Paracelsian artisan’s journey was time-consuming. His spirit would not emerge quickly. As Practice painfully moves from the first to the third stage of his experiments (kiln 1: his own construction; kiln 2: a potter’s kiln; kiln 3: a glass furnace), he drew closer to the hottest source of creation in the microcosm—the generative power of the earth’s matrix. In exchange, he had to sacrifice that much more of his corporeal self to the kiln for the power to “control” the “violence” of the fire and finally achieve the pure white glaze.

This could not be done by “thought” alone. When Practice says, “I thought immediately that I had complete mastery of the white enamel,” it is only a mirage. For the Paracelsian artisan, experience preceded theory (or “thought”). As Böhme argued, information was transmitted by feeling (or touching) in the body first, and only after the heart was animated did understanding reach the brain. “On the Art of the Earth” thus proceeds with Practice demonstrating to Theory that only through immense internal and external suffering could authentic performance be transformed into the beginning of a millennial event: “I was so stupid in those days, that as soon as I made this white which was singularly fine, I started to make earthen vessels, although I knew nothing of clay, and having taken seven or eight months to make these vessels, I started to put up a kiln like that of the glassmakers, which I built with incredible labor.”

Why did Palissy report it had “taken seven or eight months to make these vessels,” and after that “I started to put up a kiln like that of the glassmakers, which I built with incredible labor” to finish production and grow the enamel? Counting the time he took to build the kiln and fire the pots, the potter describes a nine-month birthing process. With these passages, Practice begins an account of his metamorphosis from a man with artisanal powers limited merely to external and artificial labor to the inner, androgynous craftsman capable of natural labor. Indeed, he was transformed, experientially, into a hermaphrodite.

Here was a figure par excellence of the liminal body and a standard alchemical trope for astral conjunction. The astral seed with which Palissy was inseminated could now be brought forth in the form of a white glaze by “incredible labor.” “Labor” took on its obstetric meaning necessary for the issue of the union of love and wrath in the macrocosm and microcosm to emerge. Like the sexually ambiguous creatures on Palissy’s rustic pottery, he used his ambiguous sexual status to generate new life out of himself autogenously, its seed inseminated by an invisible light from God. After Practice “made this white” and “had become a new man,” he “started to make earthen vessels” like Mother Earth, which took “seven or eight months” and after gestation began the labor of birth in the ninth month.
This labor was “incredible” in terms of both maternal pain and artisanal work, for the delivery of the white glaze occurred through a vaginal matrix like that in the earth that generated transparent stones and the glassmaker’s furnace that generated crafted material with precious little of “this world” in it:

for I had to do the stone work alone, mix my mortar, draw the water for mixing it, and fetch the brick on my own back because I had no money to pay a man to help me with this business. I baked my vessels for the first firing: but when it came to the second firing, I had sorrows and labors such as no man would believe [emphasis added]. For instead of resting from my previous labors, I had to work for more than a month, night and day, to crush the material from which I had made that beautiful white in the glassmaker’s kiln; and when I had crushed these materials I covered the vessels I had made with them: this done, I lighted my fire at both openings, as I had seen the glassmakers do; I also put my vessels in the kiln, to melt, I thought, the enamels I had put on them: but that was an unfortunate thing for me: for although I spent six days and six nights in front of the kiln without ceasing to burn at both openings, it was not possible to melt the enamel, and I was like a desperate man: and although I was quite groggy from the work, I went and thought that my enamel contained too little of the stuff that was supposed to melt the other materials, and so, I started to proceed and crush this stuff, without, however, allowing my kiln to cool, so I had to do double work, pound, crush, and fire up the kiln.36

Ambiguous mixing, cosmic dualism and androgyny intensified. Practice began to merge with the earth, becoming male and female, a process signified by the sentence, “I had sorrows and labors such as no man would believe.” This process of firing the kiln and crushing materials for the enamel took “more than a month, night and day” to add up to the requisite nine months gestation before birth. He lit his fire “at both openings” in the kiln, which he tended for “six days and six nights”—the duration of creation in Genesis—“without ceasing to burn at both openings,” to do which would threaten the success of the synthesis of macrocosm and microcosm. But Practice thought his “enamel contained too little of the stuff that was supposed to melt the other materials” (astral salts), so he was forced to “pound and crush this stuff, without, however, allowing my kiln to cool, so I had to do double work.” Practice’s “double work” refers to the Paracelsian cosmos as well as the heat and compression functions of the matrix. These were now inseparable from the functions of his own creative body in the throws of birthing spiritual matter.

Practice then had to do the one thing that caused Palissy’s memory to remain alive for the schoolchildren of southwestern France:

When I had thus made up my enamel, I was forced to go out and buy more pots, to try out the enamel: since I had lost all the vessels I had made: and having covered the pieces with
the enamel, I put them into the kiln, keeping the fire high: but then another unfortunate thing happened which made me very angry, which is that when the wood was used up . . .

I was forced to burn the tables and the floor of my house, in order to melt the second mixture. I was in such anguish as I could not describe: for I was quite dried out because of the work and the heat of the kiln; for more than a month my shirt had not dried on me.\textsuperscript{37}

Practice here, in effect, takes inventory of his bodily dissolution and distillation. When he sacrificed his tables and floorboards to the kiln, Practice took three steps toward the end of the process. First, he began to feed the kiln’s flame with domestic extensions of himself, extensions that protected his laboring body from the natural elements crucial to alchemical distillation. Second, the tables and floorboards signified two levels of horizontal barriers, fixed below the body, which separated Practice physically from the compressive and heating properties hidden deep in the bowels of the earth, with which he began to merge without protection beneath his feet. Third, the process began to take its toll on Practice’s body; it became desiccated because of “the work” and “the heat of the kiln.” At the same time, “for more than a month my shirt had not dried on me,” while distilled fluids from his body condensed as in an alchemic experiment. Just as geodes grew diaphanous interior crystals so too Practice’s astral body began to separate and distill as his bodily salts congealed with bodily fluids, emerging even as his body became “quite dried out.”

The brutal process of sacrifice of physical and material gifts of the self to the kiln continued when Practice hired a potter to make “some vessels according to my ideas” and was forced “to give some of my clothes as salary.”\textsuperscript{38} And the gradual decomposition of his independent household worsened when “I suffered another affliction related to the above, which is that the heat, cold, winds, rain and leaks in the roof spoiled most of my work before it was fired; so much so that I had to borrow lumber, lath, tile, and nails to establish myself.”\textsuperscript{39} When Practice lost the roof to his workshop air and water mingled with the earth and fire, thus creating a storm of biblical proportions, which left him vulnerable to all of the elements, except the fifth growing inside of him, the one that allowed everything to say “I am”:

I was every night at the mercy of rains and winds, with no succor, aid or consolation [fig. 8.1], except for the owls hooting on one side and the dogs howling on the other; sometimes winds and storms sprang up which blew so hard over and under my kiln that I was forced to leave everything, losing my labor; and it happened often that having left everything, without a dry rag on me, because of the rains that had fallen, I went to bed at midnight or at dawn, dressed like a man who had been dragged through all the mud holes of the city.\textsuperscript{40}

The result of the process of his own putrefaction and decomposition, in which he had sunk deep into the earth and “all the mud holes,” was “that I did nothing but build
"The old man transformed in a dismal rock pit," from Johann Daniel Mylius, *Philosophia reformata* (Frankfurt, 1622). Courtesy Glasgow University Library, Department of Special Collections. Paracelsus believed that the magi—or the elect—through wisdom mobilized by inner powers, possessed free will to resist the outer influences of the stars, or we "shall not know from one moment to the next whence a gust will come and where we shall be blown." An old philosopher retreats to a subterranean refuge where he is brought to the edge of bodily death by buffeting, demonic winds representing the higher elements of air and fire (see also figs. 10.7, 8), while a scavenging raven hopes for a meal. Yet instability and bodily destruction also begins a process of inner soulish expansion, as the earthy cavity serves as a sort of crucible for this adept who simultaneously resists the stars aligned above his head. He is connected to benign sources of animation in the macrocosm by the two angelic messengers. Internal conjunction of macrocosm and microcosm is signified by tightly crossed arms (see fig. 7.2)—indicating a man withholding powerful secrets—and the shape of his beard, a Trinitarian triangle clipped to point upward. This completes a soulish conduit from the heavens to the earth that is repeated in a similar context in figure 8.5. The younger Winthrop—his Calvinist predestinarian tradition notwithstanding—assumed the magis' position of patience and exerted powerful influence over the stars from his physician’s chair (fig. 6.2).
and tear down.” This artisan was “building with the destroyer.” Practice gave up to the kiln everything he needed to maintain his outer body, for he “was forced to use the things that were necessary for my sustenance to build the commodities necessary to my art.” Yet by this sacrifice Palissy knew he stood to gain far greater wealth and power. By exchanging sustenance for art, Practice was committing metaphoric suicide, offering his decaying body to the kiln in exchange for mastery to build his second, astral body in white ceramic glaze. Like his tiny, live-cast creatures, his body would remain permanently transparent, durable, and pure. Far from “accursed,” the “death” of Practice during this process was sanctified.

Practice’s bodily decay during this process of separation and quest for alchemical purification, was mirrored by the stages of his separation from the community. He was accused of bizarre, asocial behavior. His denial of sustenance and loss of personal protection were only the beginning. Practice also rejected commercial aspects of his trade and therefore his status as prideful artisan and paterfamilias. This resulted in his marginalization, loss of honor, and ultimately complete social ostracism. Practice became the wild man of Saintes:

to console me I was jeered at, and even those who should have helped me, went about the town shouting that I was burning up the floor; and thus I was made to lose my credit, and I was thought to be crazy. Others said that I was trying to make counterfeit money [a common charge against alchemists], which was an evil thing that made me dry up on my feet; and I went about the streets hanging my head, like a man ashamed: I had debts in several places, and usually two children being nursed and could not pay for it; no one helped me: but on the contrary they jeered at me, saying: he richly deserves to starve to death, for he neglects his trade. All this news reached my ears as I passed in the street . . . [and later] as I drew out my work I was given nothing but shame and confusion. For all my pieces were dotted with little pieces of pebbles that were so well stuck to them and bound into the enamel, that when the hand was passed on them, the pebbles cut it like a razor; and although the work was spoiled by this, still some people wanted to buy some at a low price: but because that would have been a mockery and a loss of honor for me, I completely broke up the whole kilnful and went to bed from melancholy, not without reason, for I no longer had the means to support my family; . . . my neighbors, who heard about this, said that I was nothing but a fool and that I should have had more than eight francs for the work I had broken up, and all these things added to my sorrow.42

But the bodily transformation that the dishonored Practice was forced to endure brought the most singularly painful episode of “sorrow” and “shame” to his own house. It is important to remember that in early modern France, sorrow also described the legacy of Eve, and shame connoted the feelings of pregnant women who had conceived out of wedlock or were forced to expose their “private parts” during childbirth.43
As Caroline Walker Bynum and Thomas Laquer have shown, just as Jesus was conceived as both male and female, so too were the reproductive bodies of men and women. The female body was more material, and the male more formative and spiritual. “On the Art of the Earth” shows Practice’s body continue to take on qualities of both sexes. “Woman’s reproductive system was just man’s turned inside out,” Bynum writes. “In the sixteenth century, Ambroise Paré even suggested that woman could turn into man if, owing to an accident, their internal organs were suddenly pushed outward.”44 The opposite could also happen in a context of “extreme violence.” Not surprisingly, then, the marriage bed was the focal point of Practice’s “anxieties” and the battlefield upon which the results of his sexual metamorphosis were contested:

in my house I got nothing but recriminations; instead of being comforted I was cursed.

. . . And what is worse, the motive of these jeers and persecutions came from those of my household, who were so unreasonable as to wish me to work without tools, which is more than foolish . . . the more this was unreasonable, the more the affliction was great for me . . . [until finally], and in retiring thus, I stumbled about without light, and falling on one side or the other, like a drunkard, filled with great sadness: because after having worked a long time I saw my labor lost. Now, in retiring thus dirty and wet, I would find in my bedroom a second persecution worse than the first, which makes me wonder now that I did not die of sadness [emphasis added].45

The scene of consummation had shifted from the bedroom, where “I saw my labor lost,” to the kiln. More female now than male, Practice sacrificed his male sexuality by castration (“to work without tools”). Physical symbols of male honor, fertility, willfulness, extension, and penetration outside of self were reversed, so that Practice could open up and passively receive the astral spirit in his body through the space of absence left behind by his neutered penis, as a woman would receive semen from a lover. At the moment of conjunctio, Practice experienced the “similitude” of love with God through Nature.

Like Palissy and Paracelsus, Böhme seems to have had unsatisfactory sexual relationships: “But this Earthly love is only cold Water, and is not true Fire: A man cannot find any full similitude of it in this half-dead world; Only the Resurrection of the Dead at the Last Day, is a perfect Similitude in all divine things, which receive the true Love-fire.”46 But Palissy’s transparent stones were taken from Revelation, and although for Böhme, true consummation between spirit and matter must await the apocalypse, he was still able to write:

And this is wholly hidden as to my Body, but not as to my animated or soulish spirit, for so long as it qualifieth or worketh with and in God, it comprehendeth the same, but when it falls with sin, then the Door is shut against it, and the Devil holdeth it up fast, and it
must be set open again with great labour and industry of the spirit . . . [for] I cannot resist him, though my earthly Body should go to wrack for it, yet my God will glorifie me in my knowledge.47

Where then, was the “door” on the body of Practice? Further, after insemination with the astral seed, Practice’s “earthly Body” was crushed, dissolving even as the glazing material was pulverized and the desiring spirit grew inside him:

I had to do work that I thought would kill me. For after many days during which I tried myself pounding and calcinating my material, I had to crush them without help, with a hand mill, which it usually took two strong men to turn: the desire [emphasis added] I had to attain my goal made me do things that I would have thought impossible. . . . The next day, when I took out my work, after putting out the fire, my sorrow and pain were so heightened that I lost all countenance [thus Practice literally loses “all appearance,” becoming invisible].48

The crucial moment of transformation comes when Practice’s body finally succumbs utterly to the wracking presence of the spiritual seed growing inside:

For having made a certain number of rustic ewers and fired them, some of my enamels turned out fine and well melted, others were poorly melted, others were burned, because they were made of various materials that were fusible to various degrees; the green of the lizards was burned before the color of the serpents had melted, also the color of the serpents, crayfish, turtles and crabs had melted before the white had attained any beauty. All these mistakes have caused me such labor and mental anguish that before I had made my enamels fusible at the same degree of fire, I thought I would be at death’s door: also as I worked at such things for more than ten years my body was so wasted away that my arms and legs had no form or trace of muscles, but on the contrary my legs were like sticks: so that the laces with which I tied up my stockings fell down to my heels with the rest of my stockings as soon as I walked. I often went for a walk in the meadow of Xaintes thinking over my misery and troubles. And above all that in my home itself I could obtain no patience [emphasis added], nor do anything that was considered good. I was despised and jeered at by everyone.49

Now in the final stages of putrefaction, Practice’s “was at death’s door.” His body resembled the transi state Richelieu and others described in their accounts of the physical condition of the last survivors of the siege of La Rochelle in 1628. Like the stone that liquefied in the bowels of the earth, Practice’s “body was so wasted away that my arms and legs had no form.” Recall Palissy’s “fifth,” form-giving element, without which “nothing could say I am.” And yet, Practice still avoids giving Theory any specific information. He reveals nothing that even vaguely resembled the operatic
emergence of the white glaze as an end in itself. Indeed, Practice hints at this, and early on, long before the final pages of his discourse, when he says to himself, “[W]hat are you sorry about, since you have found what you were looking for?” In a sense, the vision of the earthen cup, and the lifelong quest for understanding “the work” it animated, are sufficient. Still, Theory complains: “Why are you giving me such a lament? Is it rather to turn me away from my invention than to make me get closer to it; you have really made a fine speech about the mistakes that are made in the art of the earth, but that only serves to scare me: for you haven’t said a thing about enamels.”

Practice, however, has already said everything he intends to say—a fortiori, everything a Paracelsian artisan needed to know—about enamels. And what he has said returns us forcefully to this southwestern Huguenot’s artisanal formulation of the Paracelsian millennial quest and above all, to his artful conceptualization of the materiality of time. Practice describes a scene of premature or mistaken birth, rather than rebirth. His tiny creatures suffered violence in the fire only to emerge from the kiln grotesquely deformed in precisely the same way as fetal “monsters and marvels” that Palissy’s friend Ambroise Paré documented. Many of the mothers of such monstrous offspring, Paré thought, had suffered “the wrath of God,” because “the ordinary course of Nature seemed to be twisted.” The time was not yet right for the birth of Palissy’s rustic figurines as a complete millennial event. The astral seed for the enamel had not received a gestation period sufficient to allow the various colors and materials to fuse together “at the same degree of fire” at the end of the process (“at death’s door”). That was why some of the millennial glazes finished “fine and well melted, others . . . poorly melted . . . others were burned. Indeed, “the green of the lizards was burned before the color of the serpents had melted.” But, most important, the white glaze, the material of desire as the “basis” of all the other colors, set insufficiently to form the astral foundation of the work: “the color of serpents, crayfish, turtles and crabs had melted before the white had attained any beauty.” A pious artisan could not construct the surface without its framework of support.

The ultimate reason for this failure to achieve unity in the glazes was, then, essentially one of timing. Practice “could obtain no patience” at home for his sexual metamorphosis and the resulting pregnancy and labor of generating transparent material. Thus he did not add the most important ingredient of the recipe. Böhme would later say of this predicament that it was shared by all men of the spirit: “thus I stand yet as an anxious woman in travell.” The initiation of Theory by Practice ends with a clear message: the southwestern Huguenot artisan was actively engaged in constructing artifacts of an eschatology of waiting that were the embodiment of millennial historical processes. More than mere “virtue,” the operative component in this combination of internal and external labor was above all patience. Premature interference by uninitiated and hence inexperienced artisans with the orderly unfolding of natural obstetric
processes would be catastrophic and could engender the birth of monsters. Consequently, telling Theory outright, without his personally experiencing the pain of the laboring spirit, would also be premature, even dangerous. If Theory wished to know how to perform “the work,” he must put aside a false sense of the superiority of scholastic reason and patiently endure the same long experience of “incredible labor” as Practice in order to achieve practical knowledge, or praxis:

The mistakes I made while I found out the dose for my enamels taught me more than the things that were easy to learn: therefore I judge that you should work to find this dose, just as I have done: otherwise you would esteem the knowledge too lightly, and perhaps that would cause you to despise it: for I am certain that no one in the world takes lightly the secrets and the arts save those who got them cheaply: but those who have learned them at great cost and labor do not give them away so lightly.55

Palissy and Cellini: Toward a Common Language of Things?

Historians of the Italian Renaissance will doubtless recognize certain structural similarities between Palissy’s “On the Art of the Earth” and the Roman Catholic sculptor Benvenuto Cellini’s well-known Autobiography (dictated to his studio boy, 1558–66; first published edition, Rome, 1728). This is particularly true in Cellini’s extensive account of his heroic personal travails in the casting of a bronze statue of Perseus:

I fought these threatening disasters for several hours, exerting myself beyond my strength until I could stand it no longer. A sudden fever, of the utmost intensity, overcame me, and I had to go and fling myself on my bed. I dragged myself away from the spot, after entrusting the rest of the job to my assistants, ten or more in all what with master founders, handworkers, country fellows and my own special journeymen.

"Observe all the rules I have taught you," I said to my apprentice. "Do your best with all speed, for the metal will soon be melted. You cannot go wrong. These men will have the channels ready. You will be able easily to open the two plugs and my mold will fill like a miracle. I feel sicker than ever before in my whole life and I believe that this fever will kill me before many hours are past."

With despair in my heart, I left them and betook myself to bed, where I spent two hours battling with the fever, calling out all the time that I felt I was dying. While I was writhing in agony, the twisted figure of a man came into my room and, in a mournful, doleful voice, like one announcing their last hour to men condemned to die on the scaffold, he moaned to me, “Oh, Benvenuto, your statue is spoiled and there is no hope of saving it.”

I no sooner heard the wretched shriek than I let out a howl that could have been heard from hell, jumped out of bed, and throwing on my clothes, strode out to my workshop de-
terminated to make trouble. . . . I filled the grate under the furnace. The logs caught fire, and oh! how the caked metal began to stir under the fearsome heat, to glow and sparkle in the flames! The new, roaring fire intensified the conflagration on the roof, so I sent men up to beat the flames out. I ordered boards, carpets and other hangings to be set up to protect us from the violence of the rain in the garden.

The cake stirred and was on the point of melting. . . . The dead had come back to life against the firm opinion of all those ignoramuses. Such strength surged through my vein that all the pains of my fever vanished.

. . . But I noticed that the liquid metal did not flow as rapidly as usual. . . . So I sent for all my pewter plates, my porringer and dishes, numbering in all about two hundred pieces, and cast part of them, one by one, into the ducts and into the furnace proper. The expedient worked miraculously. My bronze was in the most perfect liquid state and in a moment my mold was filled. Seeing my work finished, I fell on my knees and with all my heart gave thanks to God . . . then turned to a plate of salad lying on a bench there, and with a splendid appetite ate and drank, and all my gang of men along with me.56

The similarities between the essays by Palissy and Cellini are quite marked. These would include among other things: the labor-pregnancy metaphor; the interrelationship between birth and death; the disasters; the stupid, directionless apprentices and laborers; the sparkling optical effects; the disintegration of the workshop roof; the sacrifice of personal domestic items including boards in exchange for cosmic protection or for the cooperation of the kiln; and the mold with two channels which “will fill like a miracle.” It is difficult to draw confident generalizations from the similarities between these two artisans’ discourses other than that they were obviously drawn from a shared alchemical discourse of artisanal self-fashioning or mythologizing, including a sense that under certain conditions, artisans could actively enter the cosmic process through their work.

Although Paracelsus was widely read in Italy, no common literary source for these particular passages can be located, and the survival rate of such artisans’ texts from the sixteenth century is rare. Yet there is the intriguing possibility that Palissy and Cellini may have influenced one another. We know that Cellini was in Paris in the employ of François I between 1540 and 1545, after which he returned to Florence under contract to Cosimo I, where he cast the Perseus. Palissy took up residence in Saintes during this period, where he stayed until 1565. So the chances of personal contact seem remote. There remains the possibility that some of Cellini’s thoughts may have been written down while he was in the employ of François I—although the Perseus was cast for Cosimo—and they might then have fallen into the hands of Palissy when he entered royal service in the 1560s. Palissy may also have obtained a manuscript copy of Cellini’s Autobiography before publishing his Discourses in Paris in 1580. In that case, a
likely source would have been publisher and translator Jacques Gohory or a contact in Gohory’s publishing network.

As intriguing as the similarities between the casting of the Perseus and “On the Art of the Earth” are the differences. These differences may be explained by religion. Cellini was a Roman Catholic who had fought bravely against Protestants in the sack of Rome in 1527. Although timing is crucial in both essays, Cellini encouraged his apprentice to “do your best with all speed,” whereas Practice counsels “patience.” Moreover, while Cellini had his share of enemies, he did not suffer social ostracism in making the Perseus, nor did he work completely alone. Practice did not have the benefit of a work crew, and he refuses to tell Theory anything about the glazing process beyond the incredible labor it necessitated. Conversely, although he was finally forced to take matters into his own hands, before collapsing on his bed, Cellini took care to remind his apprentice, “Observe all the rules I have taught you.” There is, in short, a sense of companionship and camaraderie—of male bonding and society—in the Autobiography that is painfully absent in the Discourses. This may be partially explained by Palissy’s commitment to the Paracelsian idea that the road to knowledge was a lonely, interior one. But I am convinced that Palissy’s inability to articulate the sense of a community of practice was a metaphor for Huguenot life, labor, and martyrdom in the désert. When Practice finally discovered the most heinous sort of “persecutions . . . in my home itself . . . [where] I was despised and jeered at by everyone,” it was as much a lament on history and the loss of community as on a sexual failure and the disintegration of an artisan’s household.

That was also one reason why the endings stand in such stark contrast to one another. As Theory is the first to complain, Practice shows him virtually nothing of the actual process of fashioning the white enamel. Theory is pointedly denied access to the final product as well, and with it, the sense of an ending. Cellini, on the other hand, provides a detailed account of how he made the Perseus, complete with an operatic conclusion when the cast “came out admirably” and he “fell on my knees and . . . gave thanks to God.” Conversely, Cellini, “and all my gang of men along with me,” almost immediately turned from the spiritual component of their work “and with a splendid appetite ate and drank” to replenish those parts of their physical selves sacrificed but not lost to the kiln. While these two episodes of generation and production ended differently for the artisans involved, both articulated experience through a metaphysical language of things.

anthropomorphic Vessels from La Chapelle-des-Pots

For Palissy, there could be no replenishment of loss in the désert, no quick sense of closure. Hence, the final lines of “On the Art of the Earth” refer to the Jews of the dias-
pora in their function as brickmakers. Practice speaks only of endurance and the sacrifice of the artisan’s body to the perpetuation of spirituality in workmanship. But there was also hope for the wrought millennial artifact made from such bodily sacrifice, because Practice could now finally argue that clay vessels had greater potential for longevity in history than stone:

How highly do you think our ancestors prized the usefulness of the art of the earth? It is well known that the Egyptians and other peoples have built many splendid buildings through the art of the earth, many emperors and kings have built great pyramids of clay, to perpetuate their memory, and some of them did this fearing that their pyramids would be ruined by fire if they were made of stone. But knowing that fire has no power against buildings of baked clay, they had them built of brick, as witness the children of Israel, who were terribly oppressed while making the bricks for these buildings. If I had to write down all the uses of the art of the earth, I should never have done: therefore I leave it to you to think about its other uses. As for its esteem, it is now despised, but it has not always been so. The historians assure us that when the art of the earth was invented, vessels of marble, alabaster, chalcedony and jasper fell into disrepute: and many earthen vessels have even been consecrated to the service of temples.57

There is artifactual evidence to indicate that at least some of the ideas that Palissy committed to paper in “On the Art of the Earth” were “perpetuated” into the seventeenth century by potters working at La Chapelle-des-Pots. Practice may also make veiled reference to this place-name when he says, “and many earthen vessels have even been consecrated to the service of temples.” Several remarkable anthropomorphic ceramic vessels have survived, glazed in variegated polychrome patterns and measuring between 15 and 35 centimeters in height (fig. 8.2). These vessels are known to have been fired in the kilns of La Chapelle-des-Pots, ca. 1625–1650.58

Chapelot’s cursory commentary on these artifacts is restricted to his description of them as “bottles in the form of a woman” and his speculation that they had functioned “to contain a liquid, perhaps alcohol.” But he questions their practicality, for “the openings to fill them up, above all for the smallest vessels in the group, are very narrow and of little practical value.”59 This fascinating group of artifacts deserves a more complex archeology. Chapelot is only partially correct when he describes the form of the containers as feminine. He neglects to mention the proportionally outsized, erect, and uncircumcised “phallus” (the male prepuce is represented by the deeply scored graduated rings modeled on its shaft) that projects out and sharply up from the “feminine” genital area hidden underneath the folds of the figure’s apparently noble dress, except in terms of its most obvious use as a passage for distilled liquid.

Again, Chapelot is only partially correct about the opening. His assertion that it is there so that the bottle can be filled up is true, because no other opening is available.
But this information once again raises the problems of utilization and context. Wine or spirits, water, oil, animal blood, and milk were five liquids for which specific ceramic containers were made in seventeenth-century Saintonge, and indeed, the liquid in this case would probably have been an alcohol. La Chapelle-des-Pots would undoubtedly have supplied all the ceramic needs of the Cognac area. One can assume, then, that the anthropomorphic vessels were originally modeled to contain eau-de-vie, for which Cognac was famous by early modern times.

“Eau-de-vie,” of course, translates literally as “water of life.” We have already seen how crucial water was in Palissian science, where it was perceived as a principal life-generating element. But “eau-de-vie” was also an idiomatic expression related to the “breath of life” alluded to in Psalm 104 (and commonly) as a well-known figure for the Holy Spirit. Here was the ceramic embodiment of what had become, by the seventeenth century, a regional ceramic type for the cosmic hermaphrodite that was first introduced to the southwest within Palissy’s artisanal community. The degree of “circularity” in this instance can never be measured precisely. One can say that Palissy’s most important contribution to southwestern Huguenot artisanal culture (and to historians who seek to understand it) was that he possessed the peculiar ability to systematize and act as intermediary. He bridged the gap between local folkways and the larger scientific, economic, and political world. He was able to articulate those folk conceptions in both writing and artisanry, using charismatic Paracelsian language that he had absorbed and taught from his earliest arrival in the region. That language mediated his
experience and launched an enduring regional Huguenot artisanal tradition, which was dispersed with its artisans but “reseeded” itself in places throughout the Atlantic Huguenot community.

From the perspective of Palissy’s discourse, the hermaphroditic vessels left behind in Saintonge were complete symbol systems. The liquid “breath of life” was poured through the phallic spout and into the empty outer body made of clay, just as the androgynous Practice was inseminated by the animate seed of his astral body. As the “water” replenished the container, the feminine form was also filled up and impregnated by the motion of the liquid until it expanded to press the limit of the vessel’s “womb” and threatened to spill out through the spout. With the inner body of the container full, synthesis occurred, and the sparkling glazes attained their potential for transparency on the vessel’s outer body. When the spirit bottle was held up and poured down in a stream from above, the drinker drew the eau-de-vie through his mouth, like the word, and, instructed by the language of the vessel, experienced his own body transformed into a vessel that contained the regional signifier par excellence of the conjunction of macrocosm and microcosm.

Might this courtly figure imagined in rustic pottery represent some historical or mythological personage? Perhaps it was the contemporary Princess Elizabeth of England (fig. 8.3), whose widely disseminated image in a similar costume resembles the vessels. Her marriage to the Elector Palatine of Bohemia in 1613 reminded Huguenot artisans of Protestantism’s roots in the Germanic Reformation. Elizabeth’s marriage also symbolized a portentous moment of astral conjunction for Rosicrucian inheritors of the Paracelsian tradition, who prophesied apocalyptic end times during the Thirty Years’ War, and it was commonly called “the marriage of the alchemical king and queen.” Some of these vessels from La Chapelle-des-Pots show the figure with a small animal, too crude to identify precisely. Engravings of the royal couple are often accompanied by the Palatine lion, and occasionally a dog. Both are possibilities. Other female candidates are figures that appear in courtly dress in addition to Elizabeth, including nature, the moon, and planets. There were many women in local Saintongeais folklore as well, and it may be that like the frontispiece in Simplicissimus, the vessels were a composite image.

Yet a far more direct comparison may be made to another group of contemporary vessels, also with a Germanic lineage, with further links to Calvinist material culture in the British Isles. Starting in the last quarter of the sixteenth century, drinking vessels made of silver, called “wager cups,” “marriage cups,” and “maiden cups” (Jungfrauenbecher), were produced by goldsmiths in Nuremberg and Augsburg (fig. 8.4). Like the pottery, parts of these metal vessels appear to have been fired with enamel surfaces. The German maidens wear courtly dresses similar to those on Saintongeais vessels. The distinctive costumes were copied from designs by the Italian Cesare Ve-
cellio and the refugee Theodore de Bry, Robert Fludd’s main image maker, who published most of his designs in Frankfurt, suggesting common sources for both the German and French vessels and perhaps for images of Elizabeth’s costume as well. Did Elizabeth’s marriage inspire some German examples?

Unlike the Saintongeais vessels, where the spout extends from below the waist, the maiden cups were built in two parts; each was a receptacle for spirits. The maidens’
skirts form the larger cup, while another, smaller cup was placed on a pivot between upraised hands. The wager referred to a game at table where a host awarded his guests the cup if they succeeded in draining both the small and the large receptacles simultaneously without spilling the contents. The association with marriage comes from the custom of offering the groom the larger cup and his bride the smaller. Like the survivals from Saintonge, the market for such vessels had faded in Germany by the mid seventeenth century, but not before it had extended briefly to Holland and especially England. In England, while both the form and function remained generally the same,

**Figure 8.4.** Hieronymus Imhof, wager or marriage cup, Augsburg, ca. 1610–15. H: 8", W: 4", D: 4". Silver gilt and enamel. Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917.
the maidens’ costumes were decidedly more bourgeois, more befitting the wife of a tradesman or a lawyer than a courtier. Hence, English variants have been linked with Puritan influence during the commonwealth period. Be that as it may, the last surviving English wager cups were made for use in guild rituals by the Worshipful Company of Vintners in London. In these ribald instances, however, Puritan asceticism may have been the butt of a joke.

Despite differences, certain similarities between the Germanic and Saintongeais anthropomorphic vessels seem suggestive. Applying what we know of the French vessels to their German counterparts, there is cosmological resonance. The Augsburg and Nuremberg goldsmiths were much closer to the source and language of Paracelsianism than were Palissy and his followers. Is it unreasonable to say that alchemic discourse was built into the maiden cups? Is it only a coincidence that the ritual interplay between the larger and smaller cups, which must operate together simultaneously to function properly, seems also to imply the larger and smaller world of the macrocosm and the microcosm? Synthesis and risk in the alchemic operation is also implicit in the marriage game, as are the dangers of court life. To drink from the cup of courtly patronage was a two-edged sword for artisans such as Palissy.

What then, are the consequences of the fact that Hermaphrodite vessels were made at La Chapelle-des-Pots just when La Rochelle was facing its final siege?

“A Delectable Garden” as Fortress of Patience

Behold the discourse of the four cabinets! . . .

. . . And in order that ingratitude shall not be expressed even by the things which are insensitive and vegetative, here will be inscribed on the frieze a quotation taken from the book of wisdom, where it is written: When fools will perish, then they shall call upon wisdom, and she will mock when their fear cometh, because they would have none of her counsel when she uttered her voice in the streets, when she cried in the chief places of concourse and in the openings of the gates, and uttered her words in the city. This will be written in the said frieze, so that the men who reject wisdom, discipline, and doctrine shall even be condemned by the evidence of vegetable and insensible objects. . . .

. . . I . . . would like to make certain statues, which shall hold a vase in one hand and in the other a tablet of writing, and thus when someone shall come to read the writing there will be an engine which shall cause the statue to pour the vase of water on the head of the one who would read the said epitaph.

—Bernard Palissy, A Delectable Garden

In A Delectable Garden, Palissy expanded his invention of a refuge for self-transformation to include a community of others in a pluralistic subterranean matrix that was also a rustic fortress of deception and waiting: “in which to retire and recre-
ate my spirit in times of domestic quarrels, pests, epidemics, and other tribulations which confound us mightily in these days.” With the successful completion of his small-scale “experiments,” Palissy achieved the competency required to undertake the realization of his total Neoplatonic vision (a garden and amphitheater modeled on Psalm 104), “dreamt” as a consequence of the musical doctrine of effects while walking along the Charente River as it bisected war-torn Saintes. These material-holiness harmonies signified a material-temporal synthesis in which figures for history (the clay earths) and the chemical millennium (diaphanous glazes) coexisted in simultaneous relation to one another. All existed in a state of both being and becoming at once, in historical time and artifactual material, just as they did in the most secret, intimate refuges of both the heart and body of the philosophical artisan himself.

The location had to be mountainous for many reasons. In a play on words that refers obliquely to final things, Answer informs Question “that for the last days I have been busy going from one place to another seeking a mountainous location proper and appropriate for constructing a garden.” This passage recalls the apocalyptic mountain of Nebuchadnezzar’s Dream, refugee strongholds in the mountainous Cévennes and, of course, the fact that mountains had long been associated with the literature of final things. Yet Answer seeks a mountainous location, Question points out, because it is specific to his historical concerns: “you say you require a mountainous place in which to build a delectable garden . . . because you say that you wish also to build a sanctuary for the exiled Christians.”

Above all, however, a mountainous location was the best place to apply the principles of rustic natural philosophy to Palissy’s historical problem of building a “sanctuary” that also functioned “over the succession of time” as an appropriate place “to retire and recreate my spirit.” Height for movement of water was key:

**Answer:** To find a proper place suitable for a garden there must be some fountain or rivulet which runs through the garden, and for that reason I shall choose a level place at the foot of a mountain or rising ground in order to take a spring of water from the said height and cause it to flow according to my pleasure to every part of my garden.

**Question:** And where do you think to find a height where there will be a spring and a plain at the base of a mountain, as you require?

**Answer:** There are in France more than four thousand noble domains where such situations are easily to be found and especially nigh unto rivers. . . . This is not unattainable. I will soon find a suitable place on the banks of a river which fulfill my requirements.

Hence, the Neoplatonic river of separation, purification, and reunification was to issue “through” the garden “plain” located “at the foot of a mountain or rising ground.”
The spring water or generating element would be taken “from the said height” and caused “to flow according to my pleasure to every part of my garden.” In Palissian geology, mountainous regions represented a topography of particularly fertile—that is to say, pregnant—locations on earth. Palissy tells us that natural springs that emanate from mountains draw waters from the deepest reaches of the earth’s matrix. Answer would “take” this seminal fluid from the “height” of his phallic “mountain or rising ground” and cause it to flow . . . to every part of my garden.” The artisan thereby ordered the earth’s reproductive powers for his own “pleasure” so that the generating element seeped back into the earth’s matrix through animal holes and other cracks and crevices, in which the astral seed was planted and the generation of diaphanous materials could begin. Mountainous locations were also the most logical places for Huguenots to go underground in grottoes—defined as “an excavation or structure made to imitate a rocky cave”—to await and work toward the chemical millennium.

The formal structure of Palissy’s garden was initially laid out (in a manner familiar to all his artisanry) with compass and rule:

In the first place I would mark the quadrature of my garden of such a length and breadth as I would deem necessary, and would make the quadrature in a plain, environed with mountains hills or rocks, facing the north and west winds, in order that the said mountains, hills, or rocks could serve a purpose. . . . But above all I would devise my garden in a place where there is a meadow below it, so that one could pass sometimes out of the said garden into the meadow. . . . And thus having laid out the site of the garden, I would then divide it into four equal parts, and to separate the four said parts there would be a pleached alley, formed like a cross, in the garden, and at the four ends of this cross there would be at each end, a cabinet, and at the center of the garden and cross, there would be an amphitheatre. . . . At each of the four corners of the said garden there shall be a cabinet, which shall make in all eight cabinets and an amphitheatre, which will be built in the garden; but thou must understand that all eight cabinets will be diversely carried out of such contrivance as has yet never been seen or heard tell of. That is why I wish to build my garden from the one hundred and fourth psalm. . . . I also wish to build this admirable garden in order to give men occasion to become lovers of the culture of the earth, and to relinquish all other occupations or vicious pleasures and evil traffic.

Palissy’s garden, from the very inception of its design, took on the tripartite functions of fortress (amphitheater surrounded by rocks), matrix (androgyny, generating waters), and utopian space (the Psalm 104 archetype: “give men occasion to become lovers of the culture of the earth, and to relinquish all other occupations”).

Answer’s task after laying out the general plans of the garden is to provide details specifying the construction and function of the first four cabinets. In sixteenth-century French, a cabinet was an article of furniture, but also “a little chamber . . . wherein one
keeps his best, or most esteemed, substance; also an arbor in a garden.” In Palissy’s
garden, cabinets can connote all three meanings, but may be imagined as the equiva-
 lent of separate rooms “or bower[s]” enclosed by “nature”:

*Of the First Cabinet:* The first cabinet or bower . . . at the base of and joining the foot of
the mountain or rock, I will build of baked bricks; but these will be fashioned in such a
wise that the cabinet shall have the semblance of a rock, which might have been quarried
on the very spot. Within the walls there will be several concave seats, and in the space be-
tween the seats there will be a column, and under this a pedestal, and above the capitals
of the columns there will be an architrave, frieze and cornice . . . on the side of the north
and the side of the west the cabinet will be cemented against the hills or rocks, in such a
fashion that in descending from the higher level one could walk atop of the cabinet with-
out knowing that any building was below it. . . . I shall have planted on the roof of it sev-
eral shrubs, bearing fruits to delight the birds and certain herbs they feed upon in order to
accustom the said birds to come to the bushes to rest and sing their little songs, which shall
please those who shall be within the cabinet or garden.

And the outside of the cabinet will be built of large stones from the rocky hills with-
out being polished or carved, so that the outside of the cabinet shall not bear any resem-
bance to a building. . . . I will lead the water in a pipe, which I will build between the
rockwork and the wall, and it will issue again in jets, which shall flow out of the cabinet
in such a fashion that, the cabinet resembling a rock, the people will think the jets
flowed from the cabinet without artifice. . . . But I wish . . . to discourse thee of the beautiful
shining surface of the inside of the cabinet.

When the cabinet shall have been thus constructed, I will cover it with several colours
of glaze from the height of the vault to the ground and pavement of the aforesaid; this
done, I will make a great fire inside the cabinet until the said glazes shall be melted or
liquified on the masonry. In melting, the glazes will flow, and in flowing will intermingle,
and in intermingling will form highly pleasing figures and patterns. The fire being extin-
guished in the cabinet, it will be found that the glazes will have covered the joints of the
bricks of which the arbour shall be built, and in such a way that the arbour will seem all
of one piece upon the inside, there being no sign of jointures. And the cabinet will shine
so brightly that the lizards and crayfish which enter in will see themselves as in a mirror
and will admire the images; if someone come upon them by surprise they will not be able
to mount the wall of the cabinet because of its polished surface. And in this fashion the
cabinet will last forever, and will not need any tapestry, for its decoration will be of such
beauty as it were of jasper, porphyry, or chalcedony, well polished.

The “discourse” of the cabinets was, in effect, a synthesis of all we have learned from
Palissy’s personal history, thoughts about artisanal sûreté, and notions about the geol-
yogy of clay and glazes. The entire edifice was to be built with materials taken from lo-
cal geological formations or naturalistic materials made in the manner of Palissy’s “On the Art of the Earth.” Question is encouraged to perceive the first cabinet as encapsulating the earthly element moving in the Paracelsian continuum between its “raw” state as unpurified earth and its ultimate millennial “cooked” state as purified diaphanous glazes. Like Palissy’s little earthen cup, the first cabinet was also an allegory of temporality materialized.

Palissy’s rustic figurines meant for domestic spaces and his outdoor garden cabinets were inextricably intertwined. The garden was conceptualized and intended to be constructed in the manner of the basins, scaled to gigantic proportions. Imagine one such basin reversed so that its innocuous clay underside is turned-up to face the surface as a disguise to inhibit unwanted visitors. As a result, the molded and glazed interior is turned down to form the subterranean ceilings, walls, and furniture of the grotto-bower. That was why the edifice was built of “baked bricks . . . fashioned in such a wise that the cabinet shall have the semblance of a rock, which might have been quarried on the very spot.” It was also why “the cabinet will be cemented against the hills or rocks, in such a fashion that in descending from the higher level one could walk atop of the cabinet without knowing that any building was below it . . . and the outside . . . will be built of large stones from the rocky hills without being polished or carved, so that the outside of the cabinet shall not bear any resemblance to a building.” After having “planted on the roof of it several shrubs, bearing fruits,” Palissy will have completed the surface prospect of his fortress of deception. Here was the perfect counterpoint to the fortress and enceinte of La Rochelle, standing visible to the state as the very definition of noblesse d’épée sûreté and defiance. The enceinte of Palissy’s fortress however, was to be understood as a literal womb hidden in a subterranean shell of earth and rocks, so its interior matrix remained imperceptible from the rest of mountainous nature outside. Resonances from Palissy’s written texts are multiple, but the “knotty” exterior of his geode comes to mind immediately.

The geodelike matrix manifested precisely the opposite effect, with its “beautiful shining surface of the inside.” When Palissy built “a great fire inside the cabinet until the said glazes shall be melted or liquefied on the masonry,” the interior of the cabinet itself became a kiln to expand its capacity for internal growth. At this point, while the flow of liquefied glaze settled into its final pattern, Palissy allowed a rare insight into this Paracelsian artisan’s thoughts about surface decoration. They are in no way iconographic in the traditional sense of the symbolic lexicon from which historians of the fine arts draw most of their understanding of the term. Here, it is clear that the significance of the glaze was communicated first by its rather haphazard optical effects, next, in the movement of the material itself as it mapped the interior process of its “growth,” and finally in its permanent disposition on the cooled ceramic surface.

In the formal sense, especially, the movement of the liquefied diaphanous glazes as
they flowed down in the subterranean matrix was a perfect ordering and figuration of Paracelsian Neoplatonism. Recall the moment of internal intermingling of the macrocosm and the microcosm experienced by Palissy as his dream-vision of Psalm 104. This signified as the “shining surface of the inside of the cabinet,” when “in melting, the glazes will flow, and in flowing will intermingle, and in intermingling will form highly pleasing figures and patterns,” probably much like the surface patterns on the hermaphrodite vessels. Astral conjunction in the fusion of the glazes was nowhere better represented than when “it will be found that the glazes will have covered the joints of the bricks . . . there being no sign of jointures,” such that all perception of difference is eliminated. This was the essence of natural artisanry: that no artifice was revealed in the construction of the potter’s perfectly invisible joints. Hence the “lizards and crayfish” (Palissy’s tiny industrious creatures) “will see themselves as in a mirror and will admire the images.” The mirror reflected parallel worlds in which they faced each other, even as the tiny creatures faced and “admire the images” of their “permanent,” astral selves.

Palissy’s figures for Huguenot refugees safely awaited the millennium in a desiring, pregnant condition, because the “brightly shining surface” of the interior was so well “polished” from the hermetic conjunction of its “jointures” that “someone” (perhaps the snail’s enemies?) would be unable “to mount the wall” to devour them. The bower of the just was protected by a hidden internal light. Diverse internal events were completely obscured to those outside the community by deceptions, and yet were still perceived to be completely natural and hence totally “without artifice."

Within this setting, furniture for the eschatology of waiting was introduced for the first time: “Within the walls there would be several concave seats . . . which shall run around the said cabinet.” The furniture of the millennium will be “natural” chairs (ones made “without artifice”), and so the bodily position of waiting became sitting. “Seats” in the first cabinet were set back into the rocky wall of the matrix facing out into public view. The front of the sitter, as well as the chair itself, would therefore also have to function as a part of the deception. The southwestern Huguenot’s history of disguise would serve him well in such a position and it must also be remembered that, conceptually speaking, as in Winthrop’s chair, the sitter’s hidden back would be molded by the heat, sparking light, and transformative powers of the internal matrix. In the light of Practice’s revelations about his androgynous sexual metamorphosis and astral impregnation, it is reasonable to assume that the cabinets in A Delectable Garden would also reveal elements of Palissy’s sense of his own internal bodily matrix in the process of producing diaphanous matter.

The second through fourth cabinets contained extrapolations or variations on themes introduced in the first.72 The second cabinet:
will be built entirely of bricks . . . and there will be several terminals inside . . . which shall serve as columns . . . placed upon a continuous base, which shall serve as a seat for those who would be seated in the cabinet . . . The glazes . . . would be melted in the spot itself . . . the joints of the masonry shall not be perceived and the whole shall shine like crystal.

The third cabinet would “be entirely rustic, as if the cavern had been hewn out of the rock with great blows of the hammer . . . in the cabinet there will be certain cavities hollowed out of the wall which shall serve as seats.” The sitters would take their places in the “cavities” of this cabinet like seeds absorbed into the uterine wall of the earth mother. Unlike the seating arrangement in cabinet one, the furniture in cabinet three was entirely inside, facing the matrix (fig. 8.5). Therefore, the chairs would “be covered with a white glaze, which shall have divers colours mottled, speckled, and marbled upon it in such a way that the glaze and divers colours will cover the joints of the bricks and masonry.” This would give the chair backs (and by implication the absent sitter’s upper body) the optical effect of Palissy’s “sparks and flashes” and Böhme’s “figures, traces, and colors.” The fourth cabinet would “be lined with bricks” as the others “and present no appearance whatever of sculpture or labour of the hand of man.” Finally, the outside of the cabinet shall resemble a natural rock. And since the cabinet will be erected against the foot of the mountain . . . having the top covered with earth and having several trees planted in this earth, will have very little semblance of a building, because descending from the height above, one will be able to walk on the roof of the cabinet without perceiving that there is any manner of building there.

The remaining cabinets outlined in the beginning of *A Delectable Garden* generally followed the same framework as the first four except that in addition to earths and clays, Palissy introduced wood as his second basic material. His interest here was again to subvert (indeed, to reverse) the classical (and hence, artificial) order with the “rustic” order. Palissy’s polemic revolved around his reading of “Vitruvius and Sebastian who wrote books on architecture.” These architectural treatises demonstrated that the “rules [proportional relationships] they have adopted in fashioning their columns” were derived not only from the human body but, of far more import to Palissy, the gardener, from trees grown in Nature as well. In the divine order of things, then, trees made by the deity superseded columns made by man in imitation of them:

If you had read the books of architecture which you quote, you’d have found that the ancient creators of excellent edifices took the examples and models for their columns from the trees and from human forms . . . And also the columns made of trees will always be found rarer and more excellent than those of stone; but if you wish so to honour those of stone as to prefer them to those made of the trunks of trees, . . . it is against all order of
Figure 8.5. Seven earth spirits sitting in a subterranean refuge and matrix, from *Musaeum hermeticum* (Frankfurt, 1625). Courtesy Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin. Compare figure 8.1. Triangles point simultaneously up to the macrocosm (fire and air) and down to the microcosm (earth and water), their conjunction manifested by the six-pointed star at center, known as the mystical seal of Solomon’s wisdom. Hidden wisdom at the center of the earth is made accessible by the well, a motif that is central to figure 8.6, and one famously associated with Jesus in John 4:14, when he says that “the water that I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life,” and so a source for conversion and baptism. One of the earth spirits plays a lyre. Could these be the “virgins” Palissy heard harmonizing on his walk along the Charente River?
divine and human right, for the works of the First Builder should be held in greater honour than those of human builders.

Item, you know that where a portrait has been copied from another portrait the copy will never be as much esteemed as the original from which one took the portrait. It follows that columns of stone cannot glorify themselves against those of wood, nor say, “We are more perfect,” and this especially since those of wood have engendered or at least taught us how to make those of stone.73

Palissy admitted, however, that columns made of diaphanous stone would always take precedence, even over those “grown” by God from wood: “and since the Sovereign Geometrician and First Builder set His hand to it, we must esteem them [wooden columns] more than those of stone, rare as the stone may be, save that they be of jasper or other semi-precious stones.”74 Palissy made this single qualification because transparent stones were further along toward the chemical millennium than wood, and also because he perceived that wood and stone, both of which grew out of the earth’s matrix, existed in precisely the same alchemical material-growth continuum. Hence, trees and other wood and vegetative elements became crucial signifiers of subterranean activity on the surface. If we return to Palissy’s geological discourses, it becomes absolutely clear that in the hands of the Paracelsian woodworker as well as the potter, turning and joinery would contain within its primary material the seed and potential for hardness, diaphanousness, and astral animation just like earths and shells. In the proper context, wood could and would become stone and, without losing its original form, be purified by the earth over the succession of time:

There is some wood that is reduced to stone . . . and I know why it happens. . . . It may be hard for you to believe it: but for me I know it is the truth . . . there was a certain forest of Fayan, which was in part a bog. From this I conclude in my spirit that the wood of Fayan contained more salt than any other kind of wood: because of that, we must believe that when this wood is rotten, and when its salt is moistened, [this] reduces the wood which is already rotten to a kind of manure or earth, and from then on, the salt that is dissolved from this wood hardens the rotten humor of the wood and transforms it into stone, which is, as I told you, what happens to shells; it is for that reason that when [the wood] softened and reduced into a stone, it didn’t lose its shape: in the same way, the wood being reduced to stone still keeps its shape of wood, just as the shells did. And this is how [one state of] Nature is never destroyed without being reborn immediately into another state, which is what I have always told you, that the earth and other elements are never idle.75

That was why Palissy imagined that an additional “four green cabinets” would be fashioned, in part, from “the trunks of the elms [which] shall serve as columns and the branches form an architrave, frieze, and cornice, tympanum, and pediment”; or would
contain wooden “coils fashioned in the manner of spiral lines . . . twisting”; or “on the right and on the left of the [third green] cabinet there will be several seats between the columns, which shall be made of certain sprouts, rising from roots of the young elms which form the columns, for it is the nature of elms to produce off-shoots from their roots; or finally, in the last green cabinet, “between the columns, which shall be the trunks of the poplars, there will be certain soft vines, which shall be woven, interlaced, and arranged in such a way that they will serve as partitions, seats, and backs between the columns; and above the seats and backs a portion will be woven flat to form a platform, upon which will be set several dishes and cups.”\textsuperscript{76} The potter imagined that “over the succession of time,” when subject to the action of the astral waters, salts, and matrices that animated his Delectable Garden, the wooden components which he helped to fashion themselves would, if worthy, grow not only externally but internally as well. In this, the final Palissian reversal modeled on the Genesis psalm, the artisanry of man was silently upended by the subterranean artisanry of nature, both operating to restore the natural historical order and to assure the millennial continuity of animate matter.

\section*{La Chapelle-des-Pots: Seventeenth-Century Extensions}

It is to be stressed that the sixteenth century, with the research of Bernard Palissy in the area around Saintes, has a particular importance in this region and that its value as a yardstick in the evolution of local ceramics is without any doubt primordial. — \textsc{Serge Renimel}

Serge Renimel, an archeologist who accompanied Chapelot’s team to Saintonge in 1971, discovered a mysterious anomaly in his data.\textsuperscript{77} The kiln sites in and around the immediate vicinity of La Chapelle-des-Pots showed evidence of intensive production during the Middle Ages (ca. 1250–1320) and again in the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (ca. 1650–1750). However the kiln sites also revealed perceptible gaps in production during the fifteenth century (perhaps a result of the Hundred Years’ War?) and, above all, from the mid-sixteenth through the mid-seventeenth centuries (ca. 1550–1650). Although Chapelot’s team refused to consider the problem of religious conflict in its report, this time frame also roughly encompassed the period of intense evangelism from Germany. This was followed by enthusiastic conversions in the local artisan community that led ultimately to uninterrupted civil war in the region until 1628.

But war provides only part of the answer. Also central (yet this too is an effect of war) is Renimel’s observation that this period saw relative economic decline. As a result, Saintongeais artisans departed the region or relocated to the nearest urban area in search of work. For Saintonge, that could only mean Saintes, where, during this
time Palissy had his workshop. Reminel has observed Palissy’s “primordial” influence on the local seventeenth-century style, but fortuitous location was not the sole reason. Palissy himself, in “On the Art of the Earth,” lamented that pottery was “now despised.” Palissy’s material-holiness synthesis would surely have had a profound and convincing effect in such a fluid, oppositional milieu, where artisanal morale, honor, and self-esteem were in decline. Recall that Palissy’s own conversion experience occurred at a similar point in his personal history.

In addition, one can speculate that Saintongeais potters may have become too ingrown. Over the course of centuries, ceramic production among isolated, town-centered networks of intermarried families may have left local potters ill equipped to meet the challenge of the international Renaissance and early modern molded, naturalistic styles originating in Italy and Germany. Because he had traveled and read extensively in the Paracelsian tradition, and had therefore experienced many places far beyond his place of birth, Palissy served as the needed agent of change to help local artisans comprehend a marketplace driven by the thirst for innovation and novelty. And indeed, in this context, change amounted to a paradigm shift. But Palissy’s program was, as we have argued, profoundly spiritual in nature. It would be naïve to attribute its local success solely to the marketplace. While Practice expressed his regret that pottery was “now despised,” he ended with a hopeful reminder that in the past, when the art of the earth predominated, pottery had “even been consecrated to the service of temples.”

Jean Chapelot expands in more specific artifactual terms upon Renimel’s initial observations. These violent years between 1550 and 1650 also bracketed the time Palissy first arrived in Saintes, his removal to Paris and eventual death in the Bastille, and the beginning of the first massive dispersions from both Aunis and Saintonge to northern Europe and America following the collapse of La Rochelle. Chapelot’s scrupulous research in the kiln sites, in conjunction with similar findings in places in northern Europe to which the pottery of Saintonge was exported, allows him to offer the following important information about precisely what sort of ceramics were being produced by Palissy’s artisan followers during this period:

It is, moreover, in this last category that a new kind of ceramic production belongs. It appeared at a date in the sixteenth century that is hard to pin down today and seems to have continued to exist into the middle of the seventeenth century without any modification. It went on to influence future regional production to a greater or lesser degree until the nineteenth century.

This new sort of ceramic is characterized by a taste for applied decoration in relief, [and] the use of polychrome glazing, often in pursuit of colors that will produce a marbleized or jasper decoration. This kind of production, which uses a white slip [liquid clay
undercoat below the glaze], limits itself to ceremonial forms: warming plates, platters, bottles in the shape of a woman . . . and they must certainly have been made in conjunction with ceramics for everyday use.

This manufacture poses historical problems: first of all, its relationship to Bernard Palissy’s work is now little known. . . . One knows that Bernard Palissy worked in Saintes. The technical relationship between his products and those of the regional workshops are assured, as well as the decorative and iconographical relationships. But it is difficult to know in which direction the influences traveled.

What is significant in relation to this [type of] ceramic is its relative rarity in the ceramic material of Port-Berteau. . . . It is possible that from the fifteenth to the mid seventeenth century, there was either a reduction of production in Saintonge or a relative stoppage of exportation by the [Charente] river.78

This new ceramic type had never appeared in regional material culture before Palissy’s arrival and is attributable to Palissy’s artisanal paradigm. Like Palissy’s “rustic figurines,” the earliest of these new molded forms had polychrome glazes, often in marbled or jasper (mottled) patterns. But just as often they appeared in the overall vivid copper oxide green that has also been discovered in excavations of Palissy’s workshop in Paris and that became the dominant Saintongeais pottery glaze beginning with the early seventeenth century. Most ceramics installed in the “green cabinets” of the delectable garden would have been glazed in this color.

Most important from the perspective of social history, however, hard archaeological evidence clearly attests that this heavily molded and relieved pottery was not the work of a few highly skilled and specialized elite artisans, but was, rather, within the competence of every “common potter” (to borrow Palissy’s term) who had an established working kiln near Saintes during this period. The diffusion of the Palissian paradigm throughout the region of La Chapelle-des-Pots is proven by the survival of an abundance of molded shards lying side by side with everyday, unadorned common pottery in most of the kilns. While one might argue that this evidence suggests an abundance of molds available for all, it also means that “common” and not “art” potters were producing both everyday and molded wares simultaneously. Moreover, this archaeological information is supplemented by the crudity of these seventeenth-century molded wares compared with shards found in excavations of the Louvre and Tuileries that are attributable to Palissy himself. Clearly, this local pottery is not of “elite” workmanship. Even Chapelot, who earlier in his report attacked the “Palissian myth,” here allows that Palissy’s influence may have been the cause of the paradigm shift, albeit with the caveat that “it is difficult to know in which direction the influences traveled.”

Although again he is not sure why it should be so, Chapelot shows that molded Saintongeais pottery was evidently not made for export, inasmuch as very little was
found left at Port-Berteau, an important loading site on the Charente. And, although a few examples of such molded ware has been discovered at British sites, Chapelot (like Renimel) concludes only that there was a marked diminution of production ca. 1550–1650, probably owing to market conditions. Perhaps the most simple answer to the complex problems posed by this significant but anomalous (in that it was not exported) ceramic type is that Saintongeais Huguenot potters made molded ware primarily for themselves, local courtly patrons, and their immediate communities, in hundreds of individual, private Paracelsist “experiments.”

But this fails to address the question of production during the siege years (1620–28 specifically), when export of most materials from the Saintongeais hinterlands ceased through the port of La Rochelle. Archeologists are relatively certain that most surviving green-glazed molded pottery was produced in the first third of the seventeenth century, some undoubtedly during the siege years, when there was little hope of export. Like Palissy before them, perhaps some Saintongeais Huguenot potters engaged in an Paracelsian artifactual dialogue with war and even with the siege of 1628, perceived from La Rochelle’s periphery, through the production of things. Based on these undated artifacts alone, however, such speculation must remain just that for the moment.

Consider two examples of the green molded pottery from this period. Each is a monument of the style, and in that sense communicates more fully than the numerous other survivals, but they are far from unique forms, and an understanding of their symbolic language can therefore serve to illuminate most, if not all, the other survivals of this type.

Chapelot calls the first example a “large circular platter.” Here it will be addressed (in lieu of its unknown period name) as a circular ceramic cosmology (fig. 8.6). Measuring 35 centimeters in diameter (5 centimeters in depth), it is currently in the collections of the Musée national céramique de Sèvres in Paris. The second example (fig. 8.7) is called descriptively a “decorative vase in green glaze; closed form, with two holes under the foot,” but here it will be addressed as a hermetic vessel. This measures approximately 35 centimeters in height and has been in the collections of the Louvre Museum since 1897. Not much is known about the provenance of the two artifacts, except that the vessel was donated to the Louvre by a certain Bardac, who also presented the museum with other distinguished examples of molded green-glazed pottery from La Chapelle-des-Pots. Even a glancing comparison between the circular cosmology and any standard basin by Palissy reveals a strong family resemblance. The Palissian heritage of this seventeenth-century follower is especially marked when one considers that molded and applied decoration in relief has no history in the region before Palissy’s arrival. The question of color is basic to Palissian ceramics, especially in distinguishing between sixteenth- and seventeenth-century types.

The predominant colors in both cases are the legendary white and green. We have
already witnessed the associations that the color green had in the history of the violent beginnings of the “primitive” Church in Saintes and the symbolic significance of the green man, as well as the green cabinets in Palissy’s garden. From Paracelsus to Palissy and beyond, to Francis Bacon and his circle, the color green was always intimately associated with both the natural philosophy and the metaphysics of water as a generating element in vegetative matter. In his *Garden of Cyrus* (London, 1658), Sir Thomas Browne (1605–82), a follower of Bacon devoted to writing a full explanation of Bacon’s notions about the water principle, made the scientific association between

![Cosmology. Early seventeenth-century lead-glazed earthenware, La Chapelle-des-Pots, France. Diameter: 35 cm. Musée national céramique de Sèvres, Paris. © Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, New York. Here the well serves explicitly as the vehicle of rebirth and eternal life cited in John 4:14. The youthful figure emerges from the well carrying a bouquet of flowers intertwined with the sweet smell of sanctity, cosmological unity, and resurrection.](image-url)
seminal water and vegetative greenness plain: “And this is also agreeable unto water it self, the alimental vehicle of plants, which first altereth into this colour [green]; And containing many vegetable seminalities, revealeth their Seeds by greennesse.”

The white and green of the glazes on a basin from Palissy’s workshop move outward from the cluster of four white shells at its epicenter (fig. 2.2), which appear to
emerge at least partially from below the surface. The next concentric level up and out on the earth’s surface is green, and is occupied by vegetable matter, spiral-shelled creatures, and frogs. The green frogs are touching the next concentric band of white water, because they are amphibious creatures at home in both elements. We are reminded immediately of the relationship of the frog to the snake in figure 2.4. The snake descends from above (sun) to join the frog (moon)—perhaps to gently consume it to complete the conjunction—as the frog emerges from the earth’s subterranean regions. Indeed, basins attributed to Palissy survive where the frog and snake appear together in an analogous relation (fig. 8.8). Within the water itself there are minnows swimming centripetally, in opposite directions. The smaller ones are all white, while the larger ones are green and white, having grown somewhat from the watery seed. The next green level (following the spiral growth suggested by the spiral shellfish) includes more frogs, taller plants, flying insects (elemental air), spiraling snakes or worms slithering toward conjunction on the margins, and a chameleon, which of course encompassed multiple levels, because it can exist in either green or white.

Palissy’s ceramic cosmos suggested that life bubbles up from inside the watery matrix, moves upward with the seminal fluid (astral white) and out by anastomosis through vegetable and animal matter (green) to the rivers of the earth (white), and so on to every classification of life on earth. White, “the basis of all other colors,” was
clearly the foundation and animating color. That man was also derived from this process of combination of water and salts ejaculated from the matrix was of course implied and may in fact be represented in the form of the tiny “industrious creatures” that populate the Palissian cosmos and functioned as metaphors for Huguenot artisans during the war years. Paracelsus said of the outward circular movement of waters from deep inside the earth’s matrix: “For, as the element of water lies in the middle of the globe, so, the branches run out from the root in its circuit on all sides towards the plains and towards the light. From this root many branches are born. One branch is the Rhine, another the Danube, another the Nile, etc.”

For Palissy, the Saintongeais “branch” was doubtless the Charente, always represented as the white watery element circulating among Palissy’s “rustic figurines.” In addition, he insisted that there had to be a “meadow” below the delectable garden, upon which the waters might eventually flow. Palissy’s seventeenth-century follower conceptualized the relationship between white and green in precisely the same way, although he crafted it somewhat differently. Here the white is hardly in the glaze at all; rather, as the basis for all other colors, it is almost hidden underneath the green in the clay material itself, which, during this period, fires almost completely white. As if to make the subtle point that the astral white can emerge in spots like flashes or sparks, the potter allows certain tiny points to glaze white so that they appear to emerge through the green.

This connection between the white clay and green surface glaze would not have been readily apparent but for the fact that the potters of La Chapelle-des-Pots had extracted all the clay that fired white in their region before 1650 and were thereafter forced to use clay that fired a fleshy red color. Hence, the famous “vert et rouge” pottery shipped from La Chapelle-des-Pots through La Rochelle to the entire Atlantic market in the century between 1650 and 1750. Potters compensated for the red with a white slip, which they applied just beneath the green glaze, evident on the pitcher and saucer, ca. 1680, depicted in figure 8.9. These artifacts were excavated from the subaquatic site at Port-Berteau, where they were discovered by divers lying side by side when the sand was vacuumed away. If the astral spirit was the thin agent of conjunction between macrocosm and microcosm, then what better material embodiment for it than a white slip that conjoined the fleshy pink ceramic body to the diaphanous millennial green glaze? The seminal quality of the slip was made all the more obvious by the drippy veil with which it was inevitably applied.

It is interesting to consider that by the late eighteenth century, at a time when the last of the Huguenots of the désert and even the nouveau convertis had either died out or departed the region, the white slip also disappeared from La Chapelle-des-Pots. Though nineteenth-century potters still used the red clay, most did not bother to apply the slip, and with their production, a vital material link to Palissy and the Huguenot...
artisans of the désert was lost. The loss, however, was of little consequence. Faience produced in La Rochelle and decorated with fashionable scenes from the Orient had begun to supplant traditional Saintongeais green earthenware as early as 1750. By 1800, the traditional ware was no longer important in the local economy.87

But in the early seventeenth century, when the ceramic cosmology in figure 8.6 was fired at La Chapelle-des-Pots, green earthenware and the mental and material context with which it was inextricably intertwined were still intensely vital elements in the artisanal landscape of Saintonge. The clay for the cosmos would have been gathered, not by the potters themselves, but by the highly marginal members of local society whose job it was to dig clay for them. In this way, these marginals performed a valuable service and were able to make enough money or barter to survive. After the clay was sifted for impurities and the air pockets removed by beating and kneading, in a process not dissimilar to preparing dough for bread, it was portioned into workable quantities and dried (or moistened) to a malleable consistency. Then a measure was gathered, kneaded still further, and rolled out on the potter’s bench like a piecrust.

**Figure 8.9.** Pitcher and plate, La Chapelle-des-Pots, France, ca. 1680. Private collection, 1983. Photo, Neil Kamil. These examples of common “vert et rouge” export ware, of a sort found in archeological sites throughout the Americas, were excavated by divers from the Charente River. They probably fell from a pirogue that had just shoved off from Port-Berteau with its delivery of local wares intended for a coastal skiff heading up to La Rochelle (and transshipment north), or even a large merchant ship anchored near the mouth of the river in the Bay of Biscay.
Taking his compass in hand, the potter placed its point at the epicenter of the mass of rolled clay and drew an arc to the desired diameter of the cosmos. In this particular example, the potter, after cutting away the excess clay around the circumference, simply turned one more arc in the center to mark the boundary of the central molded elements. At this point, while the circle was still flat, the mold and star punches were applied with pressure or a gentle hammer strike. It is also possible that the entire molded surface was applied by a plate mold. If that were the case, the flattened clay would be cut out, left blank, and lifted into the mold to achieve its final form before firing. The wet clay was allowed to rest in this position until completely dry, then it was partially fired, the glaze applied, and the whole fired to completion.

Let us take inventory of the molded elements as they appear in this artisan’s cosmology. Remember that “the earth and stars are never idle,” so these molded elements are also in perpetual motion. At the center is a circular image containing three figures; two figures are dressed, with the third naked and emerging from what appears to be a central portal by climbing a ladder. All three figures are animated by expansive gestures, their arms signaling up and out. The central figure also appears to be holding up two flowers in his right hand, while the witness to this event on his left is touching a tall plant. There is a roundel of floral images surrounding the event. Behind the second witness on the right of the climbing figure is a chimneyed, one-bay structure, with steps leading up into another large arched door. The body of the platter is earth, from which all the elements except air emanate. The second tier outside the central roundel contains a fish (water). It also has a bird (air) as well as a salamander consuming its own tail (the alchemical fire). A crenellated fortress structure also occupies the second tier, along with another man with a similar upraised arm gesture. Finally, the capital letters “F” and “H,” both crowned and touching at their bottoms float by and vie for space with opposed connecting linear volutes.

The third, outermost, and final level shows the man with upraised arm twice more in revolution, an image that may have found its inspiration in the device Barthélemy Berton used for the title page of Palissy’s *Recepte veritable* (see fig. 14.34). Both images are conjoined with winged effigies (one rides a bird, the other’s hands have wings). This suggests elemental air and the movement of angelic or astral bodies in the outer rings toward heaven. This is reinforced by the reappearance of the bird. There are three grotesque masks, two of which are identical and sprout phallic horns from their heads. Two other images are up in the airy realm, one an armorial shield with three fleurs-de-lis, and the other is now almost lost, although it appears to have represented a repetition of the bird. In this context, the bird may recall the dove that was sent to find the earth after the Flood. Finally, though star punch decoration saturates the elements of water and air, there is none in the innermost central element. This implies that these
FIGURE 8.10. Johann Theodore de Bry, De macrocosmi structurae, from Robert Fludd, Utriusque cosmi majoris scilicet et minoris metaphysica, physica atque technica historia in duo volumina secundum cosmi differentiam divisa . . . tomus primus De macrocosmi historia (Oppenheim, 1617; 2d ed., Frankfurt, 1624). Courtesy Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin. A Ptolemaic macrocosm showing how the disunification of the cosmos and its ultimate duality proceeded outward from the original sin of Adam and Eve at center, creating the sublunary world.
effects appear in time after the primordial creative event has already occurred, because floral elements fill the voids between figures and edifices instead.

What are we to make of the entities inhabiting this artisan’s molded cosmos of clay and enamel? Chapelot claims that the central element “evokes the legend of Saint-Eutrope saving a child who fell into a well.” It is easy to understand how Chapelot could read the crucial central image in this way. Saint-Eutrope is the patron saint of Saintes, and the legend of the child and the well is a principal one in Saintongeais folklore. Though I will argue here for a somewhat different reading, Chapelot has led us in the right direction. He perceives the naked, climbing figure as a child.

Had Chapelot not denounced Palissy and his “mythologies” as superfluous impediments to his archaeology, he would have been able to give this artifact the sociocultural context it needs in order to communicate in its own historical language. Like the language of the hermaphroditic vessel to which this cosmology was intimately related, that language is inseparable from Paracelsian discourse, as it was refracted, in southwestern France, through the lens of the Palissian artisanal paradigm. After Palissy’s removal to Paris and death, rustic naturalism emerged in combination with far more overt seventeenth-century Rosicrucian discourses developed by a new generation of Paracelsians. This was a new political language used in response to the horrors of the Thirty Years’ War in general, and, in southwestern France, the siege of La Rochelle in particular. In many ways, this cosmology provides a supreme example of the intimate relationship the Saintongeais had developed between print culture and artisanal culture by the early seventeenth century. One might read this molded surface as the ceramic equivalent to a printmaker’s woodblock print. Both were effected with carved wooden “molds,” and both emerged from Germanic artisanal origins. Moreover, there is every indication that the iconography of this artifact was derived almost entirely from contemporary (and mostly German) prints, adapted for local use. The sense of a “printed” cosmology begins with the winged effigy that appears in the outer two rings, but it is also a visual analogue (with its outstretched wings) for the central figure with outstretched arms. As a result, flying or rising is both implicit and explicit on all three levels.

The winged effigy synthesizes the “flying eagle” (fig. 2.4) and the “dove of the Holy Ghost,” the image of which was widely disseminated throughout the Continent, Britain, and America. The bird appeared in originals and reproductions of an engraving (fig. 8.10) of “The Creation of the World” (after original sin) first printed in Robert Fludd’s influential and widely copied book of Paracelsian cosmological images, *Utriusque cosmi majoris scilicet et minoris metaphysica* (Oppenheim, 1617; 2d ed., Frankfurt, 1624). The creation of the world, according to Rosicrucian Trinitarianism and Paracelsians such as Jakob Böhme and Robert Fludd, proceeded from a cloud representing the perpetually hidden Father, to “FIAT,” the Word or the Son, whence it flew
on the wings of the Holy Ghost in a gigantic circle, which formed the circumference of the Rosicrucian ceramic cosmology. When the dove was sent again after the Flood, it was, in effect, re-creating this moment of the birth of nature. Fludd’s “universe wholly created” showed the conjunction of the Ptolemaic and Copernican cosmos resulting from Trinitarian creative impulses (fig. 2.3). Earth occupied the central sphere and proceeded outward to the elemental water (fish), air (birds), and fire. The sphere of fire appears in the Saintongeais cosmology as the alchemical mercury devouring its tail, implicit in the “fired” ceramic itself. The dove continued on its circular flight until the end of history, and so all the other spheres had also to be imagined in a vital “spinning” motion—to use a Boehmian word—in perpetuity.

Let us leave the sphere of the bird for a moment and return to the enigmatic central image. This return should call to mind not simply the image of a well but instead the wealth of subterranean cave and matrix images that animate the “discourse of the four cabinets” in Palissy’s Delectable Garden. And indeed, those subterranean images were again merged with thresholds when related to Heinrich Khunrath’s Porta amphitheatri sapientiae aeternae (The Gate of the Amphitheater of Eternal Wisdom) (Magdeburg, 1609), in which the philosopher ascends the stone steps of the Platonic cave of shadows toward a gate (or portal) that opens onto the light of Nature infused with the light of grace (fig. 8.11). Note the trees and other foliage that grew atop the cave, thus, in Palissy’s conception, obscuring it like a fortress of patience. Frances Yates argues convincingly that the source of many of Khunrath’s ideas was Palissy’s English contemporary John Dee, who also published his important Mones hieroglyphica in 1564 and who therefore may have influenced the Recepte véritable.

Yates also argued that Dee’s ideas were behind the “rise of Christian Rosencreutz,” the central mythological figure of Rosicrucianism, whose legend of rebirth was expounded in the so-called “Rosicrucian manifestos” (ca. 1612–15), the context of which, Yates is quick to point out, was allegorical and not intended to be taken literally by their authors. I would argue, then, that far from being a representation of the legend of Saint-Eutrope saving a child from a well, the central image of the Saintongeais artisan’s cosmology, while indeed representing a “child,” was instead indicative of the chemical rebirth of an adult, much as Palissy was reborn in “Art of the Earth.” The central roundel thus represents the seminal event of Rosicrucian mythology, which occurred in 1604, when, according to the manifestos, Christian Rosencrutzel’s “mystical sepulcher” was said to have been opened and his reborn aged “child’s” body disinterred by adepts of the third circle, after 120 years of entombment (fig. 8.12).

Yates argues that “the opening of the door of the vault symbolizes the opening of a door in Europe,” for the great chemical instauration. Unfortunately, the original image from 1604 is now lost. The engraving shown in fig. 8.12, published as the frontispiece to Denis Zacaire’s Die Naturliche Philosophia (Dresden, 1724), an early eighteenth-
century attempt by adherents of Rosicrucianism to retrieve its sixteenth- and seventeenth-century iconography, is probably a close copy of the original. Until the original image of Rosencruetz’ mythological disinterment surfaces, the molded version on the Saintongeais artisan’s cosmology remains an important copy from the period.

There remains the possibility as well that the mold is instead an adaptation from numerous written accounts of the event. Within this context, the “child” with arms outstretched became a figure for “Rosencruetz,” the “well” (like the one in fig. 8.5) his subterranean tomb—which was really a matrix when it is understood that the chimneyed one-bay structure is also a kiln—and the two witnesses adepts of the third circle. The two roses the child holds in his hand signify the growing together of macrocosm and microcosm and hence personal hermetic transformation. The ladder is Jacob’s ladder of the six stages of transformation, from the world of the senses to the inner...
world of the imagination and hence knowledge. The “child” stands well above the sixth and final rung, not unlike the children in Johann Theodore de Bry’s *De macrocosmi structure* (fig. 8.10).95

The juxtaposition of the two images of disinterment clarifies the relationship between them, just as it does that of Palissy’s sixteenth-century subterranean fortress-garden and the seventeenth-century Rosicrucian fantasy of hermetic rebirth to a new world of chemical unity. While Palissy’s subterranean fortress considered patience in awaiting the chemical millennium, and planting seeds in the wall of a matrix of light that is animated but yet hidden from the world of violence, this cosmology wrought by a seventeenth-century inheritor of his program manifested the artisan’s unrealized dream of rebirth in perfection from the womb of the chemical millennium in the midst of a new dawn for mankind. But, of course, this was merely the extension to its logical end of the material–holiness synthesis through the rebirth of materials that Palissy planted in the region in the sixteenth century with his experiments in search of the white glaze. The Paracelsian artisan, exploiting his special transformational relationship with materials, could in this sense experience a spiritual rebirth every time he performed artisanry to externalize his internal millennial event. In this way every Paracelsian artisan became “Christian Rosencreutz” by separating purified matter—and his soulish self—from the earth’s impurities. The extension of Rosicrucianism into Saintonge during the Thirty Years’ War then, was a local reiteration of Palissian natural language, which used an expanded, more overtly occult symbolic language.

After having emerged from the subterranean garden-matrix, the language of the second and third tiers of this cosmological amphitheater became even more overtly
Philosophorum
Conceptio seu putrefactio
factic

bye ligen konig und koningin dor/
Die sele scheydt sich mit grosser not.

ARISTOTELES REX ET
Philosophus.

Vinquam vidi aliquod animatum crescere
fine putrefactione, nisi autem fiat putris
duminuanum erit opus alchimicum.

Figure 8.13. Conceptio seu putrefactio, from Rosarium philosophorum (Frankfurt, 1550). Courtesy Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin. Putrefaction in the alchemical process represented as postcoital synthesis. Male and female figures unite under a single crown, forming a kind of chemical hermaphrodite.
Palissian. This is particularly true in the images of the hermaphrodite floating in the liquid element. Palissy's friend Ambroise Paré provided a valuable clue that suggests what the crowned initials “F” and “H” may have stood for in “On Hermaphrodite or Androgynes, That Is to Say, Which Have Two Sets of Sex Organs in One Body,” in On Monsters and Marvels, where he wrote: “Hermaphrodites or androgynes are children who are born with double genitalia, one masculine and the other feminine, and as a result are called in our French language hommes et femmes. (Androgyne in Greek means man and woman, woman and man) [emphasis added].”

The crowns were again derived from prints of the conjunction of macrocosm and microcosm when represented as the crowned sun and moon engaged in inseparable coitus—and hence they are effectively one androgynous entity—as in figure 8.13, taken from the Rosarium philosophorum (1550). The bottoms—figuratively speaking, the “genitalia”—of the letters, were in contact as they moved in opposite directions, connoting the conjunction of opposites. As if to confirm this analysis, the reborn child now floats also, though barely perceptible, in the liquid near the crown of “H,” where it seems to display swollen feminine breasts and masculine genitals. Inasmuch as the hermaphrodite is flowing in the liquid element, its image resonates with that of the virgin lactating distilled liquid into the sea of renewal, in Daniel Stolcius de Stolcenberg’s Viridarium chymicum (1624) (fig. 8.14). The swollen breasts and male genitals are again made quite pronounced in both molds depicting the reborn child “riding” his spirit around the cosmos through the elemental air. Like Practice before him, this child is engaged in the spiritual regeneration of himself out of his own body, through the astral conjunction of macrocosm and microcosm—or in artisanal terms, a material-holiness synthesis—in the earth’s matrix. In this, one of the most significant of the anonymous southwestern Huguenot artifacts of desire for soulish conjunction, the artisan built his astral body emerging into the light of a new world, cleansed and purified. Even if his corresponding corporeal body had to remain behind in historical time, a shell of disguise contained his animated spirit until the millennium.

The desire for alchemical conjunction is most famously depicted in Heinrich Khunrath’s engraving of Paullus van der Doort’s The Cabalist-Alchemist (fig. 8.15), also from Khunrath’s Amphitheatrum sapientia aeternae. Here, the alchemist is depicted kneeling in prayer before the light emanating from a book opened to cosmologies of the macrocosm and the microcosm on succeeding pages, positioned next to another book representing either the Scriptures or the Book of Nature. His arms are spread in a gesture of both passive embrace and astonishment as he tries to accommodate the conjunction of both the big world and the little world to the celestial center in his own body. Following mannerist perspective back into deep space, the engraving ultimately resolves in a central vanishing point that is also a “prospect door” framed, once again, by columns of the Doric order. The door opens inward and yet out into the light.
in much the same way as the alchemist’s physician’s armchair, situated just before the
door in the beholder’s line of perspective, seems to repeat the door’s open framing of
the light in its back.

While the open door may have carried much the same meaning for Khunrath
as it did for the writers of the Rosicrucian manifestos, it simultaneously calls to
mind Böhme’s analogy of the body’s opening up to the spirit as similar to a kind of
open door that must also be barred against entry by the devil. In this context, the
open door in the far distance adumbrates the alchemists’ goal, to be achieved only at
the end of much labor and time, to experience the astral conjunction he can only desire
in his imagination in the foreground. The advantage to utilizing the artisan’s glazed
ceramic cosmology as an artifact of desire for conjunction is that, conceptually speak-
ing, the glazed ceramic had already undergone conjunction in the kiln and hence
represented the material unification of the two cosmologies, which must be depic-
ted separately in Khunrath’s printed representation. But in the cosmology from

**Figure 8.14.** Virgin lactating into the sea of renewal, from Daniel Stolcius de Stolcenberg,
_Viridarium chymicum_ (1624). Courtesy Yale University, Harvey Cushing / John Hay Whitney
Medical Library. Dualities are purified by alchemical synthesis and find unity in “the sea of re-
newal.”
The room is bracketed by a shrine to metaphysical contemplation on one side, where the worshipful alchemist opens his arms to contain and unify occult images of the macrocosm and the microcosm illustrated in the open cosmology on the altar; and, on the other, the crucible and forge, a shrine to “Experientia” and the manual arts. On the table are musical instruments and a scale to signify harmony and balance between these dual forces of spirit and matter. The physician’s chair, its diamond-carved back connecting the sitter’s heart with God’s secrets, revealed only to adepts (such as John Winthrop Jr.), directs his spirit through the narrow door of inner illumination at the room’s vanishing point.
La Chapelle-des-Pots, macrocosm and microcosm were literally superimposed on (and in) one another.

Other images of balance and conjunction of opposites occur in the second and third levels and in the intertwined volutes (fig. 8.16), which are nonetheless in motion in opposite directions, as well as in the multitude of “star” punches. The volutes represent an early attempt in the region to express the physics of the movement between the macrocosm and the microcosm in an abstract, linear way. This innovation would have profound implications for Huguenot artisans working in other mediums but especially in woodworking, where the tastemaker Daniel Marot adapted them for his influential design book. And the “stars” were later abstractions of Palissy’s “sparks” and “flashes,” a mixture of air and fire so common in printed cosmologies. When perceived in flickering candlelight, the star punches would produce the desired sparkling effect by increasing opportunities for refraction in the glaze of the already raised and irregular surfaces of the cosmology. In corpuscular theory, no space is a vacuum; the air is filled with imperceptible atoms. Finally, the two grotesque bearded masks in the elemental air suggest standard figures for the winds. With phallic horns expending in opposite directions—inferring sexual conjunction—this also connotated a representation of Moses, the most pervasive Old Testament type with which désert Huguenots identified in the seventeenth century, and perhaps the wild man as well?

Figure 8.16. Detail of figure 8.6. Reproduced by permission of The Musée national céramique de Sèvres. © Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, New York.
If the conjoined crested volutes signifying the conciliation of opposites in the artisan’s cosmology are suggestive of the seventeenth-century shift towards linear abstraction where impulse diagrams demonstrated the physics of the Paracelsian chemical millennium, then the hermetic vessel in figure 8.7 is a fully articulated and self-contained artifactual equation of the metaphysical movement of astral conjunction in matter. Unlike the cosmology, the vessel is ambitiously constructed in several parts, which are either turned, built with coils of clay, applied or molded, and then connected just before firing.

The vessel is sealed hermetically with the exception of two openings hidden up underneath the foot, which serve as the only access to the inner hollow body of the oval. These two holes served both practical and metaphysical functions. The practical function was simply to prevent the main body of the pot from exploding in the kiln, the victim of expanding interior gases with no opening for escape. The metaphysical function is far more arcane and implicitly Neoplatonic. James Nohrnberg performs an intriguing reading of the hilarious moment in Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso* when Astolfo flies to the moon to recover Orlando’s lost wits. There he discovers that everything lost on earth goes to the moon where it is kept in jars. Of course, there are more jars of lost brains than anything else.97

Nohrnberg chooses, however, to read these passages from *Orlando Furioso* as a serious joke. He suggests that Ariosto was interested in exploring the “loss and recovery of self,” wherein the jars “function as repositories for potential being.”98 That Orlando’s wits were kept in a jar on the moon recalls Plato’s well-known pun linking the shifting movement of the desiring soul with a jar, because it can be swayed and easily persuaded. But Porphyry, whose treatise *On the Cave of the Nymphs* from the Odyssey was widely read in the Renaissance, chose to explain Plato’s pun in solemn Neoplatonic terms:

Plato also says that there are two openings, one of which affords a passage to souls ascending to the heavens, but the other to souls descending to the earth. And according to the theologian, the Sun and Moon are the gates of souls, which ascend through the Sun and descend through the Moon. With Homer, likewise, there are two tubs,

From which the lots of every one he fills, / Blessings to these, to those distributes ills. *(Iliad 24.528 f.)*

But Plato, in the *Gorgias*, by tubs intends to signify souls, some of which are malefic, but others beneficent, and some of which are rational, but others irrational. Souls, however, are tubs, because they contain in themselves energies and habits, as in a vessel.99

Yet it was the *Timaeus*, Plato’s natural-philosophical treatise on the operation of the soul in the creation of the universe, that, directly or indirectly, was the most influen-
tial of Plato’s texts for Neoplatonic artisans as regards the forms taken by the soul’s containers. Sections 16–18 of the Timaeus speak specifically to concerns displayed by the Saintongeais potters who made both the circular cosmology and hermetic vessel. The sections are titled: “The receptacle of becoming”; “The names fire, air, water, earth really indicate differences of quality not of substance”; and, most germane, “The receptacle compared to a mass of plastic material upon which differing impressions are stamped. As such it has no definite character of its own.”

In section 16, Plato says the universe “is the receptacle and, as it were, the nurse of all becoming and change.” In section 17, we are told, as by Palissy, that elemental change is permanent in the universe. Everything is merely a container for something else in process, therefore all things must be mutable by definition, both more and less than they appear:

There is in fact a process of cyclical transformation. Since . . . none of them [the elements] ever appears constantly in the same form, it would be embarrassing to maintain that any of them is certainly one rather than the other. . . . Whenever we see anything in process of change, for example fire, we should speak of it not as being a thing but as having a quality . . . the things we suppose we can indicate by pointing and using the expressions “this thing” or “that thing” . . . have no stability and elude . . . permanence. . . . We should only use the expressions “this thing” or “that thing” when speaking of that in which this process takes place and in which these qualities appear for a time and then vanish.

And in section 18, Plato explains that molds are impressions of these inner processes taking place in the receptacles. From an artisan’s point of view, this also represented a craftsman’s projection onto elemental matter that went into making the receptacle. Hence, clay was a perfect “plastic material upon which differing impressions are stamped” by the souls of natural artisans, as well as their patrons or spectators. Like the pious body, this material too must be void to receive the soul’s impressions:

The same argument applies to the natural receptacle of all bodies. . . . it continues to receive all things, and never itself takes a permanent impress of any of the things that enter it; it is a kind of neutral plastic material on which changing impressions are stamped by the things which enter it, making it appear different at different times. And the things which pass in and out of it are copies of the eternal realities. . . . We may use the metaphor of birth and compare the receptacle to the mother, the model to the father, and what they produce between them to their offspring; and we may notice that, if an imprint is to present a very complex appearance, the material on which it is to be stamped will not have been properly prepared unless it is devoid of all the characters which it is to receive. For if it were like any of the things that enter it, it would badly distort any impression of a contrary or entirely different nature when it received it, as its own features would shine
through . . . those who set about making impressions in some soft substance make its surface as smooth as possible and allow no impression at all to remain visible in it.\textsuperscript{102}

In the hands of the Saintongeais artisan, the “energies and habits” desiring souls “contain[ed] in themselves” assumed specific patterns of movement, and that movement “in which this process takes place,” occurred in a hermetic “tub,” “vessel,” or “receptacle” of very specific form. The oval shape set on a single turned foot had a long tradition in alchemical work and discourse. Its most basic, organic referent was the philosophical egg illustrated as emblem 8 (fig. 8.17) in Michael Maier’s book of Rosicrucian emblemata, \emph{Atalanta fugiens} (Oppenheim, 1618). Here the alchemist uses the ubiquitous sword of separation in an allegory of alchemic purification, death, and rebirth, which includes references to fire and the metaphysics of deep spatial perspective in yet another door open to the light.\textsuperscript{103}

But perhaps the most explicit images of alchemic separation, distillation, and rebirth that use eggs or wombs as substitutes for the alchemist’s matrix are to be found
Plate 9 of the *Mutus liber* (La Rochelle, 1677). Courtesy Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Embryonic mercury created inside an egg in the alchemist’s fortress/crucible. Compare with figure 2.6.
in the *Mutas liber*, an edition of which was published in La Rochelle in 1677. Plate 9 of the La Rochelle edition depicts the process that occurs in the alchemist's fortresslike matrix (fig. 8.18). The upper level portrays an image of Mercury distilled in the philosopher's droplike egg (or vial), standing on the “gates” of sun and moon—represented on the central round of the present hermetic vessel—which signifies both his dual nature and the astral conjunction. The egg is held aloft next to the scorching rays of the sun (which sweats, ripens, and fills the distilling Mercury with the astral spirit), by two cherubs on the wings of doves whose function it is to occupy the transitional space as a moving bridge up and down between macrocosm and microcosm. The lower level of the image (male quality versus female quality) is another referent to the duality of matter, which has the potential for androgynous unity in the matrix signified here by the distillation of the egg as it drips, like seminal fluid, into an open funnel.

This form of the Neoplatonic concept of duality and conciliation of opposites is repeated in both the construction and molded and glazed surface decoration of the Saintongeais hermetic vessel in figure 8.7, beginning with the Janus-faced masks on the handles, surmounted by voluted returns to the center of the crest. While the inside of the vessel is absolutely hollow and hidden, the central roundel functions as a sort of eye, a window opening into the inner workings of the soul in its synthesis with its material vessel in the alchemists quest for the philosopher's stone. In short, the vessel becomes a trope for the animated astral spirit at work hidden inside the empty vessel of the desiring Paracelsist artisan. But while the inside signifies dark, empty, and hidden internal space, the outside glows and sparkles with the green glaze of generation, as the light, represented moving inside out, is manipulated by surface hatching and fluting to emit the effect of “sparks and flashes.”

The centripetal flow diagram of soulish impulses in matter as the processes of separation, purification, and reunification occur circulates around a Trinitarian shield consisting of a pyramid form dominated by an ascending triangle signifying fire and air (which is also a compass in perfect position to draw arcs to form the body of the vessel), encompassing an astral heart, which is itself half-enclosed by the arc of the half-moon—recall Porphyry on Plato—of the microcosm. The placement of the heart inside the arc of the moon is a figure for the astral animation of the half-dead (half-dark) matter of the microcosm that also works in the generation of the ceramic vessel itself. The two heliotropic flowers bend toward the light along the upright planes of the equilateral triangle recall the bouquet brought up from the center of the earth by the androgynous child-figure in the artisan's cosmology.

An engraving (fig. 8.19) from Samuel Norton’s *Alchymiae complementum* (Frankfurt, 1630)—which proceeds upward from the mouth of a Palissian frog—reveals that the roundel from the vessel signifies the stages of hermetic transformation of the Mercurius *homo philosophicus*. The elemental tree with anastomosing roots supplies the
A Palissian frog consumes the fruit of the vine while rooted in the earth and its subterranean regions at the base of an elemental tree. Philosophical mercury connects all the elements. The frog is flanked by two alchemical lions reminiscent of those in figs. 8.3 and 8.20.
animate heart of the philosopher at center (in a gnostic square inside a triangle inside
the third of three cosmic revolutions, as on Winthrop’s chair) with seminal water from
the microcosm earth (recalling J. B. van Helmont’s famous and influential Paracelsian
willow tree experiment of 1648, which concluded that “all Vegetables do materially arise
wholly out of the Element of water”) even as the sun complements this action and
feeds the waters of the earth in return with astral rays from the macrocosm. Indeed,
all the elements converge at the heart of the philosophical man.¹⁰⁴

In the image from Norton’s Alchymiae (as in the Saintongeais vessel) the flowers
representing “corpus” and “anima” are the five-petaled rose or blue and white “golden
flower” of alchemical conjunction. This conjunction begins with the root of the flower
in the seminal waters of the microcosm, and travels up the stem to the open flowers,
which receive astral rays from the sun, thus completing a bridge or connection between
the two. Closer to the context in which the hermetic vessel was made, however, is em-
blem 2 of Basil Valentine’s Azoth, published in French translation in 1660 (fig. 8.20).
Yet this emblem had appeared in France much earlier in the century, when it was in-
corporated into the frontispiece of Salomon Trismosin’s La Toison d’or (The Golden
Fleece), published in Paris in 1612.¹⁰⁵ Here, the figure of the philosophical mercury is
represented by Jon Dee’s monas sign for the philosopher’s stone, taken from Dee’s
Monas hieroglyphica of 1564; a symbol that also served as John Winthrop Jr.’s ex libris.
Valentine’s occult motto, which can be roughly translated to read “GO VISIT THE IN-
TERIOR OF THE EARTH AND YOU WILL PERFECT YOUR ART AND DISCOVER THE
PHILOSOPHER’S STONE,” might have been written by Palissy himself. To be sure, this
command encapsulated perfectly the elemental ideology of Palissy’s seventeenth-
century artisan followers, as well as of the master himself.

The hermetic vessel thus functioned as a conduit between macrocosm and micro-
cosm through the material-holiness synthesis of Paracelsian artisanry. In this context,
the Neoplatonic function of the vessel’s two openings becomes even more specific.
This vessel is connected to the microcosm in the earth’s matrix through the two open-
ings in its foot, where the seminal “water”—the source of its brilliant sparkling “gree-
nesse”—passes up into the inside. Simultaneously, astral rays from the macrocosm are
absorbed into the vessel through the alchemic rose (or is it a sunflower) at its crest, and
enter the vessel as well, where they “intermingle” with the seminal waters. The ani-
mated internal motion of intermingling is represented in the eye or window of the pot.
As the two flowers grow together toward the light at the triangle’s uppermost point of
intersection inside, they are unified outside at the vessel’s “crown” by a single flower,
which opens back down, returning the light to the inside. Hence, there is reciprocity
between the macrocosm and microcosm—the “ascending” and “descending” souls—
through the material elements inside and outside the vessel.

Most important, however, the movement of the process of material-holiness syn-
thesis—what Porphyry calls the “energies and habits” of the Platonic soul—was conceptualized as linear movement around and below the perimeter of the crests of Mercurius.

Listen again to Jacob Böhme describe the generation of light in the Trinity between macrocosm and microcosm. At the same time, continue to follow the impulses of soulish movement “inside” the vessel:

**Figure 8.20.** *Visita interiora terra rectificando invenies occultum lapidem*, emblem 2 from Basilius Valentinus, *Les Douze Clefs de philosophie de... Basile Valentin... traitant de la vraye medecine metalique. Plus L’Azoth; ou, Le Moyen de faire l’or caché des philosophes* (Paris: Pierre Moët, 1660). Courtesy Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. A monas sign representing philosophical mercury and the philosopher’s stone appears to grow out of a Grail-like vessel with gates for souls opened by the sun and moon found at the center-top of this emblem of the chemical wedding of elemental earth and its subterranean regions. Ultimately from Paracelsus’s *Das Buch azoth*, it was published in Paris as early as 1612, when it was incorporated into the frontispiece of Salomon Trismosin’s *La Toison d’or* (The Golden Fleece).
the Sonne is always generated continually from eternity unto eternity, and restoreth always continually from eternity, unto the powers of the Father again, whereby the powers of the Father are always from Eternity to Eternity continually impregnated with the Sonne, and generated him continually. . . . Out of which, the Holy Ghost continually Existeth from eternity to eternity, and so continually from eternity to eternity goeth forth from the Father and the Sonne, and both neither Beginning nor End.106

Hence, the Saintongeais hermetic vessel was the materialization, not only of a seventeenth-century artisanal conception of Paracelsist optics, but of millennial history as well. But the movement of the soul inside the vessel was also evidence as well of the primacy of its own artisanal role:

For the Soul comprehendeth the highest sense, it beholdeth what God its Father acteth or maketh, also it Co-operateth in the heavenly Imagining or framing: And therefore it maketh a description draught platform, or modell, for the Nature-spirit, shewing how a thing should be Imaged or framed. . . . And according to this delineation or prefiguration of the Soul, all things in this world are made; for the corrupted soul worketh or endeavoreth continually, to bring forth or frame heavenly Ideas shapes or figures . . . [and that is why] when a Carpenter will build a curious house or Artificial piece of Architecture, or any other Artist goeth about the making of some artificial work, the Hands which signifie Nature, cannot be the first that begin the work; but the seven [Nature] spirits [fig. 8.5] are the first Workmasters about it, and the animated or soulish spirit sheweth the form figure or shape of it to the seven spirits. . . . And then the seven spirits Image or frame it, and make it comprehensible, and then the hands first begin to fall to work.107

Plate 15 of the Mutus liber (fig. 8.21) reinforces the central window as a soulish inner “eye” with its title: Oculatus abis (“Second Sight”). It represents the completion of the process of linear movement in the material of a rope knotted together with the arms of angels and man in the motion of joint double infinity—the conjunction of macrocosm and microcosm—which nonetheless continues to pulsate in animate matter throughout eternity. On the ceramic vessel, the “rope” is knotted at the bottom, “inside” the earth, to signify that the material of conjunction (green-glazed pottery) is of the earth. But while the material with which the pulsating animation of matter is described may be ceramic or rope, these are still essentially tropes for the elemental tree, the material of which is wood.

This was made plain by Dialogue Between Nature and the Alchemist (fig. 8.22), a miniature painted by Jean Perréal (ca. 1455–1530) in 1516 to illustrate his alchemical poem La Complainte de nature à l’alchimiste errant.108 Here, androgynous Nature uses a signifier of astral conjunction, in this case a wooden tree, as a chair surmounted by an inverted flower to turn the light inside (like the one in fig. 8.7), from which the "homme
Plate 15 of the *Mutus liber* (La Rochelle, 1677). Courtesy Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. The adept at bottom has captured the Golden Fleece, which he wears, inspiring “second sight.” This eye of the imagination, signaled by both the text and the adept’s hand (touching his mind behind the eye), allows mystical perception (see fig. 14.17) to pierce the deception of the senses and unify the macrocosm and microcosm.
et femme” debates with the alchemist, who has one foot in Nature’s domain and the other at the door to his matrix. Thus, while the chair of Nature is a conduit between macrocosm and microcosm, the alchemist draws impulses from its conjunction to his matrix, which, as we have seen in the Saintongeais vessel, was analogous.

When read together with Saintongeais Huguenot pottery, this little painting has
great implications for a new understanding of seating furniture constructed by southwestern Huguenot artisans dispersed to colonial America in the seventeenth century. Perhaps we might now better understand the genesis of the London caned and New York leather chairs with the elaborately carved crest rail? Though they are by no means identical, it can be suggested that these chairs emerged from the same conceptual framework of Paracelsian artisanry that produced the Saintongeais hermetic vessel. The carved crests (figs. 15.26 and 15.40) follow similar ideas of the perpetual motion of binary separation, intermingling, and return seen, albeit in a different form and context, at the upper corners of the shields of the pot.

By the time the New York chair was turned and joined, the Palissian paradigm of the interiority of animate matter had emerged from the camouflage of tiny industrious creatures to the explicit—but short-lived—symbolism of the Rosicrucians. Ultimately, it took final form in the refugee Huguenot artisans’ linear mapping of the centripetal journey of astral bodies, now mostly located in chairs. What was explicit in the early seventeenth century was internalized by the time of the Revocation and therefore became explicit in the hands and commodities of New York Huguenot artisans. These concepts were later expressed in the chairs themselves. As meaning was finally absorbed into the material itself, creating a new materialism, so too the subterranean culture came home in artifacts and was diffused within the colonial system. Chairs became the perfect furniture to uphold and maintain the patient body.

All this was predicted already in *A Delectable Garden*, which forms our earliest understanding of the historical and material connection between the Saintongeais “art of the earth” and wooden seats. Wherever the feet of the New York chair touched the earth, and depending upon who was sitting there, an astral conjunction between the macrocosm and microcosm was made, as if completing an electrical circuit.

Palissy concluded, therefore, that no matter what form it took, iconography stood in an a posteriori relationship to the discourse of materials and optics. Following Ficino, Palissy’s artisanal practice presumed that the power to transform existed not in the magic of imagery but inside the materials themselves, which at most may be compressed or warmed into greater animation by molds and other tools. In the final analysis, the discourse of molded pottery may only have amplified what had already been communicated about process and history by the plain, green-glazed pottery with which it was produced simultaneously. The difference remains that the plain pottery was produced for export, while the molded pottery remained “experimental” and, as such, at home. Perhaps, after all, some southwestern Huguenot artisans exported a hidden “second body” to the New World before their first was ready to go.