“In Patientia Sauvitas,” or, The Invisible Fortress Departs

Thus I stand yet as an anxious woman in travel, and seek perfect refreshing, but find only the scent or smell or savour in its rising up, wherein, the Spirit examineth, what power sticketh in the true Cordial; and in the mean while refresheth it self in its sicknesse with that perfect smell or savour, till the true Samaratan doth come, who would dresse and bind up its wounds and heal it, and bring it to the eternal Inne or Lodging, then it shall enjoy the perfect Taste.

—Jakob Böhme, Aurora

When Palissy’s Saintongeais followers were firing their hermetic receptacles, the discourse of Rosicrucianism and the subterranean language of artisanal security also converged in a representation of the siege of La Rochelle. The iconography of the Society of the Rosy Cross harnesses the martyrdom of La Rochelle’s material body to the rebirth of its invisible soul in the fertile waters of the Atlantic world in a print entitled *In patientia sauvitas* (Sweetness in Patience) (fig. 9.1). After this moment of convergence, in which iconography allowed visualization of the hidden soul of southwestern Huguenot culture during its migration from violence and corruption to the west, this public, if obscure, symbolic language became disengaged from the refugees’ multitude of private concerns. Explicitness was no longer necessary. The invisible fortress had departed in the artisans of its region to create new material forms in new worlds.

La Rochelle’s earliest heretics understood “subterranean” in the literal sense. The fortress became the dominant symbol of open Huguenot defiance in Catholic France, and the decades before its great Protestant revolution in 1568 saw many episodes of the violent persecution of heresy. Following publication of Luther’s theses in 1517, more
than a generation of Rochelais Protestants experienced oppression under the state religion before the tables were turned on the Catholics, and there is much archeological evidence of clandestine activity in La Rochelle, although it was very short-lived. 2

Inconspicuous doorways, hidden in shadows cast by the city’s covered arcades and porches, still open to houses with stone staircases that descend under the rues Saint-Sauveur, des Gentilshommes, and Bletterie. These former merchant houses, mostly tall and narrow, spiral around the church of Saint-Sauveur, a towering medieval cathedral that gives the quarter its name. Just below the second oldest church in La Rochelle, then, lies an underground network of limestone cellars, tunnels, and crawl spaces where Protestant conventicles assembled by night and heretical books were hidden. Depending on political circumstances, this secret labyrinth of forbidden scriptoria and printing presses, walled-in libraries, and closeted reading rooms was maintained and expanded or left to fall into disrepair from lack of use. After 1568, subterranean La Rochelle was forgotten by the victorious Huguenots. The underground was revived by the city’s secret Protestants after 1628, but by then there were too few for it to matter.

The chamber of commerce and city hall of this prosperous community seem content with the town’s spruced-up archeological survivals. The façade of the old port has

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**Figure 9.1. In patientia sauavitas.** Print. Germany, ca. 1627–28. Courtesy Archives départementales de la Charente-Maritime. Photo, Neil Kamil. A whipsaw of the type shown ripping through “the rock” called for two sawyers laboring “against” each other at opposite ends, one pushing and the other pulling. 
been remarkably well maintained for the benefit of the tourists who spend summers windsurfing off the Île de Ré and Les Minimes. But disliking the dark, dirty Renaissance revival façade of the late-nineteenth-century building that used to house the region’s archives, situated across the place Foch from the prefect’s office (an appropriately Palladian hôtel), La Rochelle’s city fathers decided in the 1980 to replace it with a new building north of town.

Formerly, however, after negotiating the shadows of the old archives building’s ill-lit hall and damp stairwell, visitors were surprised to enter the dry, bright intimacy of its reading room, a cabinet of curiosities collected for display by earlier archivists, whose portraits line the walls. The tiny engraving In patientia sauvitas (fig. 9.1) was once discreetly hung in one corner of this room. It had no provenance—no history outside the reading room—and had occupied the same spot for longer than anyone could remember. Most of the learned habitués doubtless found its Latin and German epigrams and hermetic references obscure—the work of irrational minds—and so thought the engraving unworthy of being taken down for serious inspection. Notwithstanding this, and although it was printed nearly forty years after Bernard Palissy’s death, In patientia sauvitas remains a compelling epitaph for the passing of the Palissian moment from southwestern France to colonial America.

Translation and Inventory

The In patientia sauvitas print was clearly pulled from a German Protestant press. It is captioned “The Rock” in French below the title, and below the image we read, in Latin: “Those who endure adversity with impatience find the time interminable and the anguish twice as painful, but those who hold fast will carry off the victory.” And below that, in German: “He who carries misfortune with great impatience / For him it will become twice as heavy. / He however who carries it with patience / Overcomes in the end and receives the Grace of God.”

This grim yet playful representation of patience by a mournful Protestant artist contemplating the death throws of La Rochelle from the perspective of Germany articulates the same double meanings as Palissy does in “On the Art of the Earth.” The relation between patience and adversity for Huguenots under siege in the fortress was clearly analogous to the misfortunes and finally the experience of pregnancy and soulish rebirth that Palissy endured in his quest for the white enamel. The triple repetition of the verb “carry” connotes the pain and risk of carrying a child to term in the fullness of time. Thus, if personal “misfortune,” which was at the core of the Germanic sectarian conception of receiving grace, was carried with “great impatience,” then the weight of the child, “for him,” would “become twice as heavy.” Patience allowed the de-
siring soul to “overcome the end and receive the grace of God.” “The end” and “the time” was the loaded language of final things associated with both Revelation and the chemical millennium. As Palissy admonished, “the end” would only arrive “over the succession of time.”

Let us take an inventory of the image itself. The eastern perspective from behind the walls and through the towers implies that the eyes of Europe, and especially Germany, were focused on the great events as they transpired. Also from the direction of Germany, an intense light shines on and apparently right through the apocalyptic mountain. In John Winthrop the Elder’s diary of inner religious “Experiencia” of 1616–18, written while he still lived in England, the future governor of Massachusetts reveals a bodily assault similar to La Rochelle’s trials. His resolve—and that of international Protestantism—was to remain steadfast like “the rock” of Mount Zion, laboring to mortify the flesh to create spiritual purity. And, like the narrow aperture opened up by the space between the towers of La Rochelle, such pious labor was “the narrowe waye that leads to heaven” (and, for Winthrop, to the New World as well):

But God being mercifull to me, forced me (even against my will) to lay more load upon it [the flesh], and to sett it a greater taske, for he lett in such discomforts, of anguish, feare, unquietnesse, etc, upon my soule, as made me forgett the grones of the fleshe and take care to helpe my pore soule, and so was the fleshe forced to be more stronge and lively, when it was putt to greater labour. . . . Through Christ Jesus the world is crucified into me, and I to the world; I owe nothing to it, nor to the fleshe, but have hidden defiance to them with my whole heart . . . I am in the right course, even the narrowe waye that leads to heaven . . . all experience tells me, that in this way there is least companie, and that those which doe walke openly in this way shall be despised . . . yet all this is nothing to that which many of thine excellent servants have been tried with. . . . Teach me, O Lord to putt my trust in thee, then I shall be like mount Sion that cannot be removed.3

On the right of this mountain, the light strikes the image of La Rochelle’s Huguenot Temple, casting the church of Saint-Sauveur into shadow. On the left of the mountain, diametrically opposed to the temple, stands what is probably the image of the church of Notre Dame de Cougnes, obscured except for its roof and steeple, where Richelieu himself chose to celebrate the victory mass after La Rochelle finally capitulated. Hence, the fortress was divided into a binary structure of confessional opposition and strife.

The situation of the mountain, with La Rochelle spread out at its base and the waters of the Bay of Biscay seeming to percolate gently outward, giving life to the stagnant flats beyond, calls to mind the design of Palissy’s *A Delectable Garden*. The mountain itself is a remarkable image, taken along with the title *In patientia suavitas*, from Jacobus Typotius’s *Symbola divina & humana* (Prague, 1601–3; Frankfurt, 1652) (fig.
9.2). The whipsaw of a woodworker cuts a deep gash across the peak of the mountain, exposing the interior, out of which has emerged a rosy cross that projects up and through the famous towers of Saint-Nicolas and the Chain to inseminate the transparent elements of the Atlantic ocean and the air to the west. As such, the rosy cross, growing out of the earth scorched by fire (cannon are deployed everywhere), and into the remaining elements of water and air, is a sort of elemental tree. The whipsaw (or pit saw), unlike most other saws, is a tool that must be manipulated by two artisans laboring together. One pushes, the other pulls. It is not by coincidence, that the saw
handles are placed in the vicinity of the two opposing churches whose strife engendered the violence of the siege.

The geometric planes encompassed by the saw, and the saw and rosy cross together, are meaningful. The superficial equilibrium suggested by the saw stretched between Catholics and Protestants refers to “the scale” of good and evil, a convention in Huguenot apocalyptic iconography. Here, all the wealth and possessions of the pope and Roman Catholicism are outweighed by the Word, even when the weight of the devil is added to the balance in favor of the Catholics. But when the triangle formed by the planes of saw and cross is taken into consideration, a Trinitarian and elemental pyramid is formed, like the one seen on the hermetic vessel from La Chapelle-des-Pots. References to Rosicrucianism also extend to the five petals of the alchemic rose, which are repeated in the five main battlements of the fort’s enceinte, which suggests Robert Fludd’s (and Palissy’s) preoccupation with “perfect” fortifications that joined the macrocosm and microcosm together.4

Palissy, as we know, understood the growth of mountains to be a logical extension upward of the obstetric and alchemic processes by which stones were “given birth” deep inside the matrix of the earth:

Just as the exterior of the earth labors to give birth to something, so too the interior and matrix of the earth labors to bring forth. . . . [In certain places] fire nourishes itself, and is kept going under the earth: and [it] happens often that over a long period of time, some mountains will become valleys because of an earthquake, or a violent movement created by the fire, or that the metallic stones and other minerals that held up the mountaintop burned, and as they were consumed by fire, this mountain would possibly decline and be brought low little by little: also other mountains could erupt and grow, through the joining together of the rocks and minerals that grow in them; or else it would happen that a region will be swallowed up or lowered by an earthquake, and then what is left will be mountainous: and so the earth will always find something with which to labor [travailler], internally or externally.5

For Palissy, as for Winthrop the Elder, mountains grew slowly “over a long period of time” inside the earth’s matrix and womb. They also declined over time. Sometimes mountains were devoured quickly by fire or in an earthquake, or were reduced by a hidden inner history of death and rebirth. At other times, they were flattened out by the equally incremental process of telluric putrefaction. But as Palissy’s discourse on geodes clearly demonstrated, the process of exterior putrefaction was also one of crystallization of the astral light hidden inside the rotting exterior shell of growing stones. Just as the transparent “sparks and flashes” of the interior of geodes could be revealed by cracking them open with a sharp instrument, it followed that the interior light hidden beneath the gnarled surface of a mountain of growing stones was revealed in the
same way. This was the logical extension of the Paracelsian mineralogy of the conciliation of opposites in the “extreme violence” of the kiln to induce separation and ultimately purified animate matter.

Separation was effected by the whipsaw’s ripping action on the peak of the growing mountain of light. Here again, the tool itself is the focal point. The cutting sword in figure 8.17 was the ubiquitous signifier of alchemical separation. But the sword was wielded by one person (the solitary philosopher) alone. It had only one hilt. The whipsaw, however, required two participants, one on either side. Therefore, the two opposing Churches became the artisans of their own millennium, Huguenot purification, and the astral insemination of souls migrating to new worlds.

Like all Paracelsian cosmologies, this one too must be imagined in constant motion, above and below the surface. Above the ground, the whipsaw ripped steadily back and forth across the rock, tearing down into the surface of earthen materials. The physical effect was of an intense heat. Heat was generated in the metal of the saw as well as the cutting area in the earth. Thus the subterranean heat generated in the earth’s matrix, which labored to grow transparent stones, was paralleled and abetted by the action of an artisan’s tool, laboring to cut through the surface. The “extreme violence” of the heat of the subterranean matrix was thereby paralleled by, and made interchangeable with, the heat and “extreme violence” “nourished” by warring factions inside the matrix contained by the fortress walls (or enceinte).

Böhme’s elucidation of this oppositional sawing action and the generating heat it effected formed his core of insights about the birth of the divine spirit within the earth at that precise point where it was touched or stirred. Oppositional violence, and the emotional and physical “heat” it created, was another way of describing separation and the deeply sexualized, Neoplatonic attraction and marriage of opposites; that is, the conjunction of macrocosm and microcosm in the alchemical matrix of nature:

And the hot quality also loveth all the other qualities, and the love is so great therein toward, and in the other, that it cannot be likened to any thing, for it is generated from and out of the other. . . .

. . . First there is the astringent quality, then the sweet, next, the bitter: the Sweet is in the midst between the astringent and Bitter. Now the Astringent causeth things to be hard, cold, and dark, and the bitter teareth, driveth, rageth, and divideth or distinguisheth. These two Qualities rub and drive one another so hard, and move so eagerly, that they generate the Heat, which now in these two Qualities is dark, even as Heat in a Stone is: . . .

. . . And when a man taketh a stone, or any hard thing, and rubbeth it against wood, these two things are heated. . . .

. . . Now further into the Depth . . .

. . . When the astringent and bitter quality rub themselves so hard one upon the other,
that they generate Heat, and so now the sweet quality, the sweet fountain-water, is therein in the midst or center between the astringent and bitter quality, and the heat becometh generated between the astringent and bitter quality, in the sweet fountain-water, through the astringent and bitter Quality. . . .

. . . And there the Light kindleth . . . the beginning of Life: for the astringent and Bitter Qualities, are the beginning and cause of the heat and of the Light, and thus the sweet fountain water becometh a shining light, like the Blew or Azure Light of heaven . . . and shineth into, and through all the Angelical Gates. . . .

. . . Now these . . . Qualities would be Dark and Dead, if the Heat were not therein: but as soon as the Spring time cometh, that the Sun with its Beams (supplieth) and warmeth the earth, the spirit becometh living by the Heat in the Tree, and the spirits of the Tree begin to grow green, flourish and Blossom . . . for that Quality of spirit . . . riseth up in the Body as a flower springeth up out of the Earth.7

In patientia sauvitas, in the Boehmian sense, portrayed a distant father’s consoling perspective on the labor and deep suffering that attended the birth of his child. The father was the sixteenth-century Germanic sectarian enthusiasm that had inseminated Saintonge through the disguised “mouths” of three heretical monks and their artisan followers, including Palissy. The inseminating light emanated from Germany and was absorbed into and through the androgynous mountain—both pregnant and phallic simultaneously—as “sweet water,” until it emerged on the other side to illuminate and impregnate the Huguenot Temple. The “tearing” motion of the saw held between the “bitter” and “astringent” qualities of the two implacable enemies performed a cesarean section and a circumcision on the rock to release its inseminating “sweet waters” and light into the matrix “at the base.” Circumcision is, of course, the ritual of separation and purification of male Jews, a mark of the chosen people sent into exile. This imagery was made available by northern artists such as Lucas Cranach the Younger (1515–86), who began to associate circumcision with the experience of Christian martyrs in the sixteenth century; as in the German Cranach’s engraving of St. Simon, who suffered a gruesome martyrdom when his body was ripped in two from groin to head with a whipsaw (fig. 9.3).

The rosy cross, here in the guise of the elemental tree, grew upward with the sweet waters of the subterranean matrix ascending inside of the mountain into the matrix of La Rochelle and through the narrow door formed by the famous towers. This second androgynous insemination, so reminiscent of the hermaphrodite vessels of La-Chapelle-des-Pots, thus occurred through the port’s vaginal opening (which modern Rochelais sailors still call La Rochelle’s “mother”) and out into the seminal sea of separation and renewal surmounting a “bleu” astral sky, which was absorbed back into the tree again through the rose. A conduit between the macrocosm and microcosm was
completed and stood in direct formal and historical relation to the Saintongeais molded pottery and Huguenot chairs made by artisans dispersed to New York. In this, La Rochelle’s final moment of autonomous heretical life, the walls were leveled to invisibility and the subterranean artisan’s clandestine fortress of patience emerged from beneath the great regional *place de sûreté* onto the surface at precisely the same time.

**Figure 9.3.** Lucas Cranach the Elder, *The Martyrdom of St. Simon*. Woodcut, 1512. H: 16.2 cm × W: 12.5 cm. Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1917.
that it disappeared again in a flash of light. The Huguenots were launched into the Atlantic world as tiny seeds of light dispersed from the elemental tree.

In his essay “On Trees” from the Recepte, Palissy elucidated a science in which apparently unfeeling things having “vegetative and insensible natures,” nevertheless, under the surface, “suffer to produce,” experiencing the pain and labor of alchemical self-sacrifice to diffuse “seeds and fruits prematurely” in response to “accidents” in nature, or attack or catastrophe. In this way, their young would survive and perhaps flower elsewhere on earth. Just such a tree emerged from inside “The Rock” that “endure[d] adversity” with patience to become the transatlantic mountain of In patientia suavititas:

Nothing in Nature produces fruit without extreme labor [travail], indeed pain [douleur]. This is the case with vegetative natures as well as the ones with sensibility. If the hen becomes faint to push out her chicks, and the bitch suffers to give birth to her young, consequently all species and genus, even the snake, which dies to produce its own kind, then I can assure you that [things] with vegetative and insensible natures suffer to produce the fruits of the earth. . . . Many times I have contemplated trees and plants, which in draught, or other accident . . . before they die, they hasten to flower in order to produce seeds and fruits prematurely.8

On this sea of Atlantic renewal sailed the ship of “grand peregrination” to carry the children of the light on their pilgrimage in search of unity (fig. 9.4). The ship symbolized migration to new worlds; but alchemists knew that ships also meant international commerce, as well as the relationship between distant travel and experience, craftsmen carrying skills in their memories and on their backs to faraway places, and the exchange of words and things.9 Yet as in Practice’s heroic quest for the white glaze, this journey too was incomplete, and so it would remain until end times. No final rebirth had taken place in the Huguenot diaspora, only another opportunity for insemination. As Böhme lamented, the suavitas of his rose of patientia offered “only the scent or smell or savour in its rising up . . . and in the mean while refresheth . . . in its sickness with that perfect smell or savour, till the true Samaratan doth come.”10 Until the true transparency of perfect unity finally arrived, southwestern Huguenot artisans reinvented themselves in different guises wherever the ship dropped anchor, making security out of the “sparks and flashes” of salvation and profit. This covert process created powerful hybrid forms such as the New York leather chair, overcoming “strife” by combining silently with dominant structures made to symbolize their hosts.

The iconographic relation between unhewn rock and chiliastic patience had been established in the siege of La Rochelle. This relation began with Dirck Coornhert’s definitive engraving of Maarten van Heemskerck’s Patientia triumphus (ca. 1555)
Van Heemskerck had depicted a figure of Patience seated, waiting on a rock, holding an animated heart. This was adapted in 1565 for La Rochelle’s civic gift to Charles IX and revived in the seventeenth century in Jeremias Drexel’s *Heliotropium seu conformatio* (1634). Drexel depicts the patience of Moses during Exodus, using as in figure 9.6 alchemical images, including growing rocks, a heliotropic sunflower for which an angel pours water, which it absorbs while growing up toward the sun’s astral rays, and finally another angelic figure holding the conjoined astral heart containing both macrocosm and microcosm.

Moses’ position of waiting is kneeling, a bodily attitude quite close to sitting (with knees up), and his arms are supported by the twin rocks of Patience and Constancy.
The implication here is that Moses is carrying the growing astral spirit inside his illuminated body, like a maturing child. Just as the sunflower grew to complete its conduit between macrocosm and microcosm, so too Moses patiently awaited the growth and conjunction of the astral spirit inside his own suffering body. Just decades later, a New York Huguenot joiner and carver crafted an armchair fit for an American Moses (see fig. 15.40).
“In Patientia Sauvitas”

Adiumenta, from Jeremias Drexel, *Heliotropium, seu, Conformatio humanae voluntatis cum divina* (1628, 1634). Courtesy Department of Special Collections, Sheridan Libraries, Johns Hopkins University. Just as the faith of Moses was both supported and augmented by the weathered rocks of patience and constancy, so too purified “holy” water (distilled like a kind of eau-de-vie?), is poured by an angel, helping the heliotropic sunflower fulfill its natural potential and rise toward the sacred light of the sun. The representation of heliotropism was a constant in the iconography of Huguenot refugee artisans.
Elias Neau in the Dungeon

The eschatology and bodily attitude of waiting depicted in *In patientia suavitas* suffuses the image of *Elias Neau in the Dungeon* (fig. 9.7), a scene taken from the Huguenot Neau’s account of his imprisonment as a galley slave in Marseille. Neau’s immense importance for understanding the intense period of piety and revival among Huguenots in New York’s French Church in the 1690s and the great significance of his work to influence the spiritual and material condition of the city’s African slaves in the violent context of rebellion and reprisal in the early eighteenth century are well known.¹²

Born in Saintonge in 1662, Neau was trained as a mariner, as were many coastal Protestants. “Because the Gospel commanded me,” Neau wrote, “when I was persecuted in one Kingdom, to fly into another Country,” he fled to Saint-Domingue in 1679.¹³ Neau left the Caribbean and married Susanne Paré in Boston, in 1686. He finally settled in New York City permanently by 1691, where he became a merchant. While sailing to London on business in 1692, he was captured by a French privateer. As an escaped Protestant who refused to abjure the Reformed faith for the state religion, Neau was sentenced to life as a slave on Louis XIV’s galleys in the Mediterranean. The experience of galley slavery influenced his subsequent decision to open a school for enslaved Africans when he returned to New York. After he converted a fellow prisoner to Protestantism, Neau was imprisoned on the islet of If, near Marseille, where he endured a period of isolation, physical torture, and quietist contemplation that recalled sixteenth-century Saintongeais experiences.¹⁴

The image of Neau in the dungeon depicted his cell on If, whence he wrote a remarkable series of letters back to his wife in New York, as well as to several other correspondents in New York and on the Continent. In 1696, Neau’s prison letters were published by New York’s Quaker printer William Bradford, in the original French, titled: *A Treasury of consolations, divine and human, or a treatise in which the Christian can learn how to vanquish and surmount the afflictions and miseries of this life.* In 1698, Cotton Mather reached for a broader Protestant audience and published, in Boston, a single lengthy letter to Neau’s wife, which he translated into English and called *A Present from a Farr Country.* The framework of this particular letter served as the basis for the publication, the following year in London, of the influential first-person *Account of the Sufferings of the French Protestants, Slaves on board the French Kings Galleys. By Elias Neau, one of their fellow sufferers.* Subsequent editions of the *Account* followed in Rotterdam (1701), and in London (1749). This final version contained the engraving of Neau in the dungeon and appears to support the revamped millennial program of the so-called French Prophets (tongues-speaking Camisard refugees in England to whom
some Quakers trace their origin), which had been converted to the quietistic eschatology of waiting in the decade of the 1740s.

The effect of Neau’s prison writings from France on the New York Huguenot population was galvanizing, precisely because they had reactivated the old tradition and discourse of southwestern Huguenot artisanal piety begun by the martyred monks and Palissy in the primitive Church of the 1540s. Though such discourse was submerged in artifacts of commerce, Neau’s local voice brought it back to the surface again through vivid descriptions of religious persecution and imprisonment in France, where absolutism still reigned under Louis XIV. The context of Neau’s imprisonment played a pivotal role in the visibility of Palissian language in New York in two important ways. First, the Glorious Revolution of 1688 hardened the position of New York’s refugee population against Louis XIV and encouraged the political authority of Protestant factions in the city. More than any time since the fall of La Rochelle, New York Huguenots dreamed of a victorious return to France under English protection. Second, in 1689, rumors of Louis’s plans to invade New York City from New France were being spread, which terrified most residents of Manhattan and Long Island, where the thrust of the attack was to be directed. New York’s refugee population was particularly threatened, inasmuch as Louis instructed the comte de Frontenac to make prisoners of all “fugitive Frenchmen whom he may find there, and particularly those of the religion prétendue reformée.” In the late seventeenth century, it was not difficult for New York’s Huguenot refugees to imagine themselves galley slaves, or perhaps one of Elias Neau’s “fellow Sufferers” in a Marseille prison.

The engraving depicts Neau sitting on the rock of patientia, which has grown up from the earth’s underground matrix, in his masonry prison cell, which is simultaneously a fortress tower and a kiln. He is wearing a costume of humiliation, complete with devil’s cap (a sort of heretic’s mitre imposed on the victims of autos-da-fé), and his hair and beard have grown wild. The cell floor is littered with debris and excrement. But the trash at Neau’s feet is also good evidence of alchemic putrefaction, and the astral light pierces through a trinity of wooden slats on the door to his inner light and falls on his open body, spiritually penetrating and inseminating it. Neau accepts his insemination with arms held up in prayer, a Mosaic gesture of patience, constancy, and stillness. “The Birth or Geniture of God is thus,” Böhme had written (in language particularly resonant with his many Quaker readers); the natural body “doth not reach back into its Father, which generateth it.” It may receive light when it “holdeth still and is quiet as a Body, and letteth the Father’s Will . . . to form and image in it, how they please.”

Neau’s Account illuminated the discourse of the image, inventoried his experiences of external affliction paralleled by the inner growth of secret impregnation after “about a year”:
in the year 1694, orders came from Court to transfer me to the Prison of the Cittadel. . . . I was forced to lye upon the Stones, for I could not obtain for a year together any Bed, not even Straw to lye upon. There was a strict order to suffer no body to speak to me, nor me to write to anybody, and the Aid Major came every night to search my Pockets. . . . I remain’d there about a year without seeing anybody; but about that time the Director of Conscience came to see me . . . he cry’d out, Lord, in what condition are you, Sir! I reply’d, Sir, don’t pity me, for could you but see the secret pleasures my heart experiences, you would think me too happy. . . . The priest . . . sent me a Straw-bed to lie upon. . . . I continued 22 months in that Prison, without changing any Cloaths, my Beard being as long as the hair of my head, and my face as pale as Plaster.17

At the end of this period of time, Neau was caught having a forbidden conversation with another prisoner, “just under me, . . . so much tormented, that they had turned his brains.” Because of this transgression, Neau was banished to a “subterraneous Hole,” where he underwent further bodily decay for over a year. Finally, he was removed to the fortress on the island of If, where we see him sitting in a dungeon reached through yet another underground hole:

I was immediately removed into another Prison. . . . I was put on the 20th of May 1696 in a subterraneous Hole, wherein I remained till the first of July next following, [then] I was sent . . . to the Castle of If. . . . I and the poor Gentleman I have spoken of, were put in a Hole. . . . The place was so disposed, that we were obliged to go down a Ladder into a dry Ditch, and then go up by the same Ladder into an old Tower through a Canon hole. The Vault or Arch wherein we were put was as dark, as if there had been no manner of light in Heaven, stinking, and so miserable dirty, that I verily believe there is no more dismal place in the world . . . all our senses were attacked at once; sight by darkness, taste by hunger, smell by the stench of the place, feeling by Lice and other vermin, and hearing by the horrid blasphemies and cursing.

After being removed to two other such “pits,” Neau went “for some time, without seeing any light at all.” Before Neau was finally “reclaimed” from this crucible by the earl of Portland, like Practice in Palissy’s “On the Art of the Earth,” whose shirt was perpetually wet from putrefaction and distillation, Neau reported “the place being very damp, our Cloaths were rotten by this time.”18

It was in the letter to his wife published by Mather as A Present from a farr country, where Neau revealed the passionate textures of his prison experience, saying that God had given him “the Grace, to suffer, the Breaking of my Bones, the Roasting of my Flesh at the Fire, and my Marrow on the Live-Coals, and to be cast into a Burning Furnace.” Deprived of the physical closeness he desires with his wife, Neau tells her
his strategies to augment soulish intercourse in the face of a kind of rape (or blockage) of the pious body in the pit:

the Devil and men are so animated against me, that they employ all their power and industry to hinder me from receiving any External Consolations; and to speak the truth, experience shows me that herein they succeed; and if they could oblige God to deprive me of Internal Consolation they would do it with pleasure . . . [yet] as he sees me deprived of all humane relief, he gives in unto me of Divine . . . in vain they try to destroy the work of the Holy Ghost. The Almighty Power of God is too much interested therein to suffer them to attain the end which they propose; they labor more and more to surmount my patience . . . the hope of Love, despises generously the assault which they make upon it. Nay, My Dear Wife, they at present attack me more ardently than ever.19

The Miracle of Protection

Neau’s growing internal power in conjunction with the Holy Ghost is revealed in the only miracle recounted in “the Story of my Persecution,” how all of his forbidden writing implements were saved, hidden in plain sight from his enemies. During one of Neau’s many moves, “The commander ordered them to fetch my poor Straw Bed,” where his things were cached:

They did it, but without success, for the [Eternal] hid all that was therein, namely an English Bible, a Quire of Large paper, whereof this is some, a Bag, wherein was my Pocket Book, an Inkborn, and now, my Dear Wife, will you not praise the King of our Souls, who does such strange things?

Neau’s problems were not over, however. The bed was too small to put into the hole leading to his next prison cell; it would have to be taken apart and then shoved through in pieces. His secret stash was certain to be revealed:

Now comes a Second Alarm for me: my Straw Bed could not come in at the hole; the Straw was fain to be taken out by little and little . . . I address’d my self to the Officer who Led me; I declared to him all that was in my Straw Bed; I Pray’d him to save all that was there; promising to recompense him; he accepted the offer: he himself empty’d the bed . . . and caused it to be carried up to me by little and little; but he kept a little of the Straw, with all my concerns, in my Straw Bed, and brought them to me himself. Admire the Protection of the King of Kings!20

Signs “that cannot be comprehended unless experienced,” were becoming more “frequent and sensible.” Neau would finally have a second birth in the last “Burning Furnace” of a dungeon. Indeed, Neau narrated his entrance through the crucible’s nar-
row opening as if it were a physical reversal of his life course, an alchemical return to concealment and rebirth in the earth’s womb. In every sense of the word, the Huguenot refugee had returned through the towers of La Rochelle to experience its “tragedy” again: “the spectators of this Tragedy, told me that I must go in, my feet foremost; so that I was fain to crawl in at the hole, the Wall being about eight foot thick. I entered into that . . . habitation; I found my self envelop’d with profound Darkness; but the Eternal created that, as well as the Light.” Once inside, “without Light, in a place full of stinking ordure,” Neau was forced to “undergo a double Martyrdom” in this fortress of patience.21

Neau experienced his rebirth as a chance to communicate in a deeper, more intimate way with his wife in New York. Uncertain that his letters had gotten through to her, and receiving none in return, he admitted that “the Distance and Difficulties are so great, that we can have no mutual Communications by Writing.” 22 So he experimented with other forms of transatlantic communication, though the motions of the universal soul. In the hope that this letter would find her, and although he expected no response, Neau asked after their children:

I pray you to let me know the State of my dear Children, if they be yet alive, and what Dispositions to vertue are found in them . . . neglect not this; labour to be their mother a second time, by endeavoring with all your might that they may be Born again by grace: All the world talk of Regeneration, but there are only a few that know it by experience. Men know how to say that Nicodemus was gross in his conception of it . . . but it often happens that those who thus speak, feel the efficacy thereof no better than he. Know then, that it is not the corporal or animal life which is renewed, but that of the Soul; the affections, desires & thoughts are sanctified. When a person is Regenerate . . . the sentiments of the heart are conformed to the light of the Spirit, that is to say, the love of our heart conformed to the Law of God in Spite of all the reminders of our Corruption, which abide in the inferior part of our soul, which the Scripture calls the Flesh: Endeavor then to obtain this New-Birth for your self, and your Children, without which you can never see God.23

After having described the “secret pleasures” that accompanied the horrors of his own “labour,” Neau counseled patience and wrote his wife that she too must labor to become a mother “a second time.” Neau’s soul was freed by fire from his dungeon and “conformed with the light of the spirit” at precisely the same moment that it was released from the prison of “the Flesh.” He was inspired by his desire and the power of his new birth to project his astral spirit west, flying free from his imprisoned body, and was thus rejoined with his wife, despite “the distance and difficulties,” by “the love of our heart conformed to the Law of God.” In New York, Neau’s wife and children were inseminated again, “that they may be Born again by grace.” Neau also disseminated
his metamorphic moment of labor and astral conjunction to other refugee New Yorkers when he wrote to express gratitude for his torment. He asked God to “Endow me with a soul, that I may be thy Spouse, and worthy of that name, and that has its true voice and language.” The elders of the New York Huguenot community empathized deeply: “How can we be insensible of your affliction,” they replied, “since you are a member of our body?”

Neau’s experience of slavery and imprisonment taught him that the “true voice and language” of the soul was silent and hidden. The “exquisite pain” of life meant that Huguenots must not judge Nicodemus harshly, but must follow the soul’s own invisible path to make it “frequent and sensible” in New York. By the time Neau returned to the city at the end of the seventeenth century, its Huguenot artisans were experiencing the full effects of anglicization. Neau’s response to English cultural absolutism was to become a member of the Church of England under false pretenses of adherence to its principles to acquire legitimacy and funding for his school for African slaves. His deception was revealed to the English authorities in 1712, when he was charged with being the alleged secret moving force behind New York’s violent slave rebellion, when some of his students were executed.

Inspired by the revival of primitive Palissian discourse and the eschatology of waiting, New York Huguenot craftsmen responded just as their artisanal culture had done habitually for over two centuries when confronted with the demands of absolute power. This time the structure of patience would emerge in the form of a chair. After all, is not siège but another word for seat?