

## *Ethan Allen Hitchcock*

*Soldier—Humanitarian—Scholar*

*Discoverer of the "True Subject" of the Hermetic Art*

BY I. BERNARD COHEN

IN seeking for a subject for this paper, it had seemed to me that it might prove valuable to discuss certain aspects of our American culture from the vantage point of my own speciality as historian of science and to illustrate for you the way in which the study of the history of science may provide new emphases in American cultural history—sometimes considerably at variance with established interpretations.

American cultural history has, thus far, been written largely with the history of science left out. I shall not go into the reasons for that omission—they are fairly obvious in the light of the youth of the history of science as a serious, independent discipline. This subject enables us to form new ideas about the state of our culture at various periods, it casts light on the effects of American creativity upon Europeans, and it focuses attention on neglected figures whose value is appreciated abroad but not at home.

For example, our opinion of American higher education in the early nineteenth century is altered when we discover that at Harvard and elsewhere the amount of required science and mathematics was exactly three times as great as it is today in an "age of science."<sup>1</sup> In the eighteenth century when, according to Barrett Wendell, Harvard gave its

<sup>1</sup> See "Harvard and the Scientific Spirit," *Harvard Alumni Bull.*, 7 Feb. 1948.

students only "a fair training in Latin and Greek, a little mathematics, and a touch of theology if they so inclined," the college curriculum included a superb scientific instruction easily on a par with that being offered in any university in the world—and it provided in its collection of apparatus the instruments for the students to use in learning and for the professors to use in their research.<sup>2</sup> In a definite sense it was the spirit of research, in the sciences at any rate, that gave to Harvard in the closing decades of the eighteenth century, and opening decades of the nineteenth, the spirit of the modern university.

A figure such as Cotton Mather takes on a wholly new dimension when we study his scientific activity. His association with Zabdiel Boylston in introducing the new process of smallpox inoculation is well known. But it is not generally appreciated that his extraordinarily interesting *Christian Philosopher* was the first general book on science to be written in the New World. Nor do any, save a few students of the history of genetics and a number of plant-breeders, realize that Cotton Mather wrote the earliest account of plant hybridization yet to be discovered—an observation of great importance confirming the then newly announced doctrine that flowering plants reproduce sexually, the basis of the Linnaean system of classifying plants. Mather also noted, for what seems to have been the first time, in 1716, the fact or phenomenon of dominance, later to be of crucial importance in Mendel's theory of heredity.<sup>3</sup> The importance of Mather's observations was not appreciated until recently, when Conway Zirkle drew attention to them and published

<sup>2</sup> See I. Bernard Cohen, *Some Early Tools of American Science*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1950, pp. 8-9, 15-23.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Conway Zirkle, "Gregor Mendel and His Predecessors," *Isis*, XLII (1951), 97-104.

them *in extenso* for the first time.<sup>4</sup> Although not mentioned in any work on American cultural history with which I am acquainted, Mather's work is known to scientists in America and even in the Soviet Union. So prominently was Mather's work displayed in a recent publication of the United States Department of Agriculture that a well-known applied geneticist felt it necessary to protest that more space had been devoted to Cotton Mather than to Donald F. Jones, one of the important figures in the development of modern hybrid corn.<sup>5</sup>

I must own to having become particularly fascinated at encountering Americans of great ability in scientific fields who are known in Europe but not in this country. There is, to take a minor example, the Reverend John Prince of Salem who, at the end of the eighteenth century and in the early years of the nineteenth, made scientific apparatus for many colleges and academies in the United States and whose improvements of the microscope, the air pump, and other instruments, were widely adopted by British instrument-makers. In the Harvard collection we have a number of examples of his work showing a superb craftsmanship. Yet no account of Prince is included in any modern work, not even in a book on eighteenth-century Salem; his library has been dispersed and his scientific journals and account books are nowhere to be found.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Conway Zirkle, "Some Forgotten Records of Hybridization and Sex Determination in Plants, 1716-1739," *Journal of Heredity*, XXIII (1932), 432-48; "More Records of Plant Hybridization before Koelreuter," *Journal of Heredity*, XXV (1934), 2-18; *The Beginnings of Plant Hybridization*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1935.

<sup>5</sup> Merle T. Jenkins, "Corn Improvement," *Yearbook of Agriculture* (1936), ["Better Plants and Animals," vol. I], 455-522. Cf. P. C. Mangelsdorf, in *Journal of Heredity*, XXXIX (1948), 177.

<sup>6</sup> For a description of some apparatus made by Prince, see *Some Early Tools of American Science* (ref. 2), pp. 63-5, 114, 160, 162-3, 185. The most complete biographical account of Prince is C. W. Upham, "Memoir of Rev. John Prince," *Amer. Journal of Science and Arts*, XXXI (1837), 201-19, with a note on Prince by Silliman on pp. 220-2.

Another such figure is Judge J. B. Stallo of St. Louis. His book on the philosophy of physical science<sup>7</sup> is referred to by Henry Adams in the "Education" but no American work on cultural history fully describes or evaluates it, nor does any of the dozen or so tomes on the history of American philosophy.<sup>8</sup> Yet Stallo's book has been widely read in the German and French translations<sup>9</sup> and is considered to be one of the primitiae of the most original school of modern philosophy: the so-called logical empiricists or positivists—whose views derive from those of Ernst Mach and others, and also from Stallo. The importance and originality of Stallo's ideas are made manifest in the preface which Ernst Mach wrote for the German translation. Mach had first become interested in Stallo through a citation in a book by Bertrand Russell.<sup>10</sup> Through Professor (later Sir) Arthur Schuster, in Manchester, Mach got the idea that Stallo might be an American and, through the aid of Paul Carus of La Salle, Illinois, Mach learned of Stallo's address and obtained from him an autobiographical letter which was published as part of the foreword. Abroad Stallo is a rather important author of one of the more interesting works on modern scientific philosophy; at home he is unknown.

<sup>7</sup> John Bernhard Stallo, *The Concepts of Modern Physics*, New York, D. Appleton and Company, 1882; second ed. 1885; third ed. 1888. Harvard owns an annotated copy from the library of William James.

<sup>8</sup> Many refer to the book by name, however, although without giving an adequate account (i.e., more than a phrase or sentence *en passant*) and wholly neglecting its influence.

<sup>9</sup> The title of the German edition is: *Die Begriffe und Theorien der Modernen Physik*. Nach der 3. Auflage d. englischen Originals übers. u. herausg. v. Dr. Hans Kleinpeter. Mit einem Vorwort von Ernst Mach. Mit einem Porträt d. Verfassers. Leipzig, Verlag von Johann Ambrosius Barth, 1901. The French edition is entitled: *La Matière et la Physique Moderne*. Avec une préface sur la théorie atomique par C. Friedel. Paris, Félix Alcan, Editeur, 1884.

<sup>10</sup> B. Russell, *An Essay on the Foundations of Geometry*, Cambridge: At the University Press, 1897. Stallo is mentioned on pp. 13-7. In the French edition, *Essai sur les Fondements de la Géométrie*, traduction par Albert Cadenat, revue et annotée par l'auteur et par Louis Couturat, Paris, Gauthier-Villars, 1901, the references to Stallo (pp. 17, 19) direct the reader to the French translation of Stallo's book (see ref. 9, *supra*).

Another American whose contribution to knowledge is little known to his countrymen is the subject of this paper; General Ethan Allen Hitchcock—grandson of Ethan Allen, the Revolutionary hero of Ticonderoga and Crown Point and author of the philosophical work *Reason the Only Oracle of Man*. Our subject was uncle to the Ethan Allen Hitchcock who became Secretary of the Interior under President Theodore Roosevelt and whose name is somewhat better known than that of the General. So little known in America in the twentieth century is the life and career of General Hitchcock that he has been described merely as “a Captain Hitchcock” in a life of Edgar Allen Poe.<sup>11</sup> The lack of interest in Hitchcock by students of Poe is all the more remarkable in view of Hitchcock’s intense interest in esoteric and occult subjects in which Poe also delighted. As we shall see in a moment, Hitchcock’s penetrating studies on the borderland between science, philosophy, and mysticism have gained him his reputation in Europe, if not America, and his original conception of the subject of alchemy, in particular, has had in recent decades a profound influence on our understanding of this baffling and difficult-to-understand topic that engrossed so many minds over a period of centuries.

The aim of this essay is to place on record some of the facts of Hitchcock’s career, his writings, his ideas, and his influence. What follows is suggestive rather than exhaustive and it is my sincere hope that some reader may become interested enough in Hitchcock to do the full-length study

<sup>11</sup> Hervey Allen, *Israfel: the Life and Times of Edgar Allen Poe*, New York, George H. Doran Company, 1926, I, 269: “Upon arrival [at West Point], in the last week of June, 1830, he [i.e., Poe] seems to have passed the entrance examinations without difficulty, and to have been received by a Captain Hitchcock and a Mr. Ross. . . .” In John Ward Ostrom, *The Letters of Edgar Allen Poe*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1948, I, 37, a letter may be found written by Poe to his father from West Point on 28 June 1830: “. . . Upon arriving here I delivered my letters of recomm[endatio]n I was very politely received by Cap[ta]in Hitchcock. . . .” Neither Allen nor Ostrom knew, nor took the pains to discover, who Hitchcock was.

on him that he deserves. Toward that end, I have indicated in footnotes and in the appendices the nature of source materials available for further research.

A graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point in 1817, Hitchcock had a distinguished army career.<sup>12</sup> Following initial garrison and recruiting service, he returned to West Point, first as Assistant Instructor of Infantry Tactics (1 February 1824—20 April 1827), and again as Commandant of Cadets and Instructor of Infantry Tactics (13 March 1829—24 June 1833). He served as an officer of the line during the Florida War against the Seminole Indians in 1836, was disbursing Indian Agent (1837—1839), was in command of the Western District of Florida (1842—1843), and served in the Military Occupation of Texas (1845—1846). During the War with Mexico, he was breveted Colonel for “Gallant and Meritorious Conduct in the Battles of Contreras and Churubusco” and Brigadier-General for “Gallant and Meritorious Conduct in the Battle of Molino del Rey.” During the campaign of 1847—48, he was Acting Inspector General of the Army commanded by Major-General Scott. Hitchcock was in Command of the Pacific Division from 1851 to 1854 and resigned from the Army on 18 October 1855. During the Civil War, he served as Major-General, United States Volunteers, as a staff officer and personal military adviser to President Lincoln and Secretary of War Stanton, after having refused the offer, first of McClellan’s, and then of Grant’s, commands. He was, also, Commissioner for the Exchange of Prisoners of War from 15 November 1862 until finally mustered out of

<sup>12</sup> A detailed chronological table of Hitchcock’s military career, and an excellent biography and account of his writings, may be found in Bvt. Maj.-Gen. George W. Cullum, *Biographical Register of the Officers and Graduates of the U. S. Military Academy at West Point, N. Y., from its Establishment, in 1802, to 1890, with the Early History of the United States Military Academy*, third edition, revised and extended, Boston and New York, Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1891, I, 167—79.

Volunteer Service on 1 October 1867. Hitchcock's exemplary military record stands plainly for all to see and I shall say no more about it.<sup>13</sup>

Hitchcock had a strong sense of the right and the wrong and was, throughout his whole life, an outspoken champion of the truth—in whose behalf he wielded an active pen just as he wielded his sword for his country. We are told that he “wrote often vigorously for publication on passing events and matters of professional importance, his style being so trenchant that he was known as ‘the Pen of the Army.’”<sup>14</sup> Knowing that his uncompromising honesty and outspokenness often produced animosity toward him, he nevertheless continued to present his convictions straightforwardly, incurring the hostility of Generals and Secretaries. In the case of Scott, he had the satisfaction of later winning his respect and becoming his Inspector General despite an earlier enmity; this arose from Hitchcock's testimony before a court of inquiry that the blunders of the campaign against the Seminole Indians arose from the lack of concert between Generals Scott and Gaines, and from Hitchcock's public protest in the “Buell Court-Martial” that Scott had no right “to revive a dissolved tribunal to try Buell a second time.”<sup>15</sup> Hitchcock's sterling qualities of character were recognized in 1833 when the American Colonization

<sup>13</sup> After his service during the Civil War, Hitchcock married Miss Martha Rind Nicholls when he was 70 years of age. His manuscripts came into the hands of his widow's niece, Mrs. W. A. Croffut, and are now in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress. These manuscripts include correspondence and voluminous diaries which Hitchcock kept with scrupulous detail during most of his active life. Selections from the diaries and letters, with commentary and editorial continuity, have been published by W. A. Croffut as *Fifty Years in Camp and Field: Diary of Major-General Ethan Allen Hitchcock, U. S. A.*, New York and London, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1909. This book contains a full account of Hitchcock's military service. In the Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Hitchcock's writings (both published and unpublished, books and manuscripts) are in the “W. A. Croffut Papers.” For some account of them, see Appendix Five, *infra*.

<sup>14</sup> W. A. Croffut, preface to *Fifty Years* (ref. 13), p. v.

<sup>15</sup> G. W. Cullum, *Biographical Register* (ref. 12), p. 171. See also *Fifty Years* (ref. 13), *passim*.

Society offered him the Governorship of Liberia, which he declined then and when it was offered to him again in 1837.

Hitchcock's humanitarian side is shown most clearly in his relations with the Indians. From 1837 to 1839, while he was stationed in St. Louis, he was disbursing officer to the Indians and "was instrumental in discovering and arresting frauds by Indian agents at stations on the upper Mississippi." This service was terminated by Congressional legislation requiring his post to be filled by a civilian rather than a military man, since Hitchcock had no intention of resigning from the Army. In 1841, he was asked by President Tyler to investigate frauds against the Cherokee and Creek Indians in Arkansas, resulting chiefly from the effects of the Indian Removal Act. Evidently, this was a congenial assignment, in that it provided an opportunity to expose dishonesty; but of even more importance to Hitchcock was the fact that this assignment would enable him to help the Indians. Hitchcock's diaries give ample evidence of his intense interest in Indian beliefs and customs and of his feeling that our treatment of the Indians had been unjust. He sought always to befriend them and guard their interests and to ameliorate their conditions of living.

Hitchcock's description of his experiences living with the Indians during his investigation should be a classic, taking its place alongside William Bartram's more famous account. He unmasked the gross corruptions and fraudulent practises of the "contractors" and expostulated against the violations we had made of the treaties with the Indians. Hitchcock's story of his experiences was not published until 1930, when these writings were edited from the manuscripts by Grant Foreman, who tells us:

Bribery, perjury and forgery were the chief instruments employed in the infamous transactions investigated by Hitchcock. Due bills were issued by contractors to the Indians, and then bought back at a fraction



of their value. Short weights, issues of spoiled meat and grain, every conceivable subterfuge was employed by designing white men on ignorant Indians. After the investigation was made, Colonel Hitchcock prepared a report with one hundred exhibits attached, which he filed with the Secretary of War; committees of Congress tried vainly to have it submitted to them, so that appropriate action could be taken; but it was stated that too many friends of the administration were involved to permit the report to become public. It disappeared from the files and no trace of it is to be found in the voluminous correspondence on this subject now in the files of the Office of Indian Affairs.<sup>16</sup>

Hitchcock may, therefore, be found described as a military man, as an observer and friend of the Indians, and as the man who greeted Edgar Allen Poe when he arrived in West Point. The activities of his life are summarily described in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, with the added note that during the period 1824-1827, "he had plunged into the study of philosophy in an effort to answer various doubts that troubled him on the subject of religion. He reached the satisfactory conclusion that 'The great Whole is one, and all the parts agree with all the parts'—a conclusion which he was to reaffirm, much later, in volume after volume." The above conclusion does not seem very profound as stated, nor does it indicate any great value to Hitchcock's writings, which are then described in the following comment: "All these laborious efforts are today only literary curiosities, while Hitchcock's one really valuable literary work, his vivid autobiographical *Fifty Years in Camp and Field* (1909), he left unpublished."<sup>17</sup> W. A. Croffut ends the preface to *Fifty Years* . . .<sup>18</sup> with the sentence: "He was also a student and writer on recondit

<sup>16</sup> Grant Foreman, *A Traveler in Indian Territory: the Journal of Ethan Allen Hitchcock, Late Major-General in the United States Army*, with a foreword by John R. Swanton, Cedar Rapids, Iowa, The Torch Press, 1930. Further information may be found in *Fifty Years* (ref. 13).

<sup>17</sup> The author of the article in the *D.A.B.* is E[rnest] S[utherland,] B[ate]s.

<sup>18</sup> *Ed. cit.* (ref. 13), p. v.

philosophy, and in the intervals of an active career gave to the world eight volumes on abstruse and esoteric subjects." In the introduction to *A Traveler in Indian Territory*, G. Foreman repeats this judgment verbatim with the addition of one word, so that Hitchcock becomes a "profound student and writer. . . ." <sup>19</sup>

The burden of this article is to examine these "volumes on abstruse and esoteric subjects." Not mentioned in any work on American thought with which I am acquainted, dismissed as "only literary curiosities," they contain a most interesting doctrine that, so far as our understanding of the history of culture is concerned, is probably the most original creation to arise in the nineteenth-century America. Hitchcock's central idea is, in a variant form, being widely discussed today—though often, I am sorry to say, without explicit reference to its progenitor.

Throughout an active military career, General Hitchcock devoted himself to the study of philosophy, theology, mysticism, and, eventually, alchemy. Under the most adverse conditions imaginable, in the barracks or in his tent at some encampment, he studied the writings of the Far and Near East, of antiquity and the middle ages, of the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, insofar as they bore on questions of human existence or the nature of man. The result of his scholarly studies and meditations led him, eventually, to a radical interpretation of the subject of alchemy—one that may help to clear up a mystery that is still puzzling to those who are unacquainted with Hitchcock's ideas. In order that the reader may appreciate the nature and magnitude of Hitchcock's contribution, I will delineate first the character of the problem and Hitchcock's solution; next, the stages by which Hitchcock's ideas developed; and, finally, the reception and effect of those ideas.

<sup>19</sup> *Ed. cit.* (ref. 16), p. 10. Concerning the "eight volumes," see Appendix Two, *infra*.

Many historians, secure in the belief that science represents a kind of positive or accumulative knowledge, have attempted to read its history as a series of ladders and platforms—for them science marches steadily up the ladders of continuous progress, save for a few regretted periods in which knowledge remains stationary on the platforms. Generally, for them, the progress of science (save for the “dark” middle ages) is an orderly sequence of better and better knowledge and the history of science becomes a development as logical as the theories by means of which we explain the phenomena of the external world. From such a point of view, astrology can be dismissed as an unfortunate aberration of the human mind, since it seems to be true that ancient astrology was an offspring of serious astronomy and that astrology was not the “mother” of astronomy as was often supposed.<sup>20</sup> Yet the study of astrology today reveals to us the state of astronomical knowledge of its practitioners at times for which there is no other documentary evidence, and it also tells us much about the transmission of astronomical ideas along with the astrological.<sup>21</sup>

In the case of alchemy, however, the situation is markedly different. In ancient times, there was a highly developed astronomy as such and a theory based on that astronomy to enable initiates to make predictions about events supposedly in much the same manner as the astronomer would predict the position of a planet at some future time. We can, if we wish, dismiss the astrology and write a history of positive astronomy in antiquity. But there is no ancient chemical theory from which an alchemy might have been a later and degenerate form. There were performed, to be sure, practical operations which we would today call “chemical,”

<sup>20</sup> The view that “calendarial problems directed the first steps of astronomy” is to be found in O. Neugebauer, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, IV (1945), 14-6.

<sup>21</sup> See O. Neugebauer, “The Study of Wretched Subjects,” *Isis*, XLII (1951), 111.

including dyeing, metallurgy, glassmaking, and the like,<sup>22</sup> but one would seek wholly in vain for an ancient chemical treatise to place alongside a purely astronomical work such as Ptolemy's *Almagest*. Not only is alchemy, therefore, much more ancient than chemistry, but it had a continuous independent existence even after a science of chemistry as such developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Astrology and alchemy seem firmly linked in the public mind as parents, respectively, of astronomy and chemistry. So far as astronomy is concerned, no evidence can be found to serve to document this theory of descent, while "all well-documented facts are in sharp contradiction to it," according to one of the great historians of science in our day, who has devoted a life-time exclusively to the study of ancient mathematics and astronomy, O. Neugebauer. He also warns us of the peril of confusing ancient and modern astrology. "The modern reader usually thinks in terms of that concept of astrology which consists in the prediction of the fate of a person determined by the constellation of the planets, the sun, and the moon at the moment of his birth. It is well known, however, that this form of astrology is comparatively late and was preceded by another form of much more general character (frequently called 'judicial' astrology in contrast to the 'genethliological' or 'horoscopic' astrology just described). In judicial astrology, celestial phenomena are used to predict the imminent future of the country or its government, particularly the king. From halos of the moon, the approach of invisibility of planets, eclipses, etc., conclusions are drawn as to the invasion of an enemy from the east or west, the condition of the coming harvest, floods and storms, etc.; but we never find anything like the 'horoscope' based on the constellation at the moment of birth of an

<sup>22</sup> Cf. J. R. Partington, *Origins and Development of Applied Chemistry*, London, Longmans, Green and Co., 1935.

individual. In other words, Mesopotamian 'astrology' can be much better compared with weather prediction from phenomena observed in the skies than with astrology in the modern sense of the word."<sup>23</sup>

To be sure, the predictions must often have been wrong; yet they were sometimes right and, if made vague enough, they could be interpreted as having been right no matter what kind of events occurred. Even today, when we are disappointed at the cold, rainy day occurring when the prediction was "fair, sunny, and warmer," we continue to read (or to listen to) the weather forecasts. But whereas the astrologer might often be right, the alchemist was always wrong:—nobody could ever succeed in producing gold from other metals! While the hope of making unlimited quantities of gold in the crucible is as strong a driving force as the hope of accurately predicting the future, we can but wonder at the number of individuals who studied alchemy for more than a millennium when none of them ever achieved an iota of success, however partial, to sustain the hopes of the rest of them.

The history of alchemy is not only baffling to the positive historian, but also to anyone who tries to make sense out of many of the major documents. Thus a number of students have concluded that alchemy was nought but the history of error, while others tell us that "we do not know all that the alchemists believed and did, owing to their deliberate and avowed concealment of the parts of their work that they considered most important."<sup>24</sup>

Most of us are aware that an alchemist was a man who tried to transmute baser metals, e.g., lead or mercury, into gold. It is at once plain that such would-be gold-makers should be acquainted with the metallurgical arts and that,

<sup>23</sup> O. Neugebauer, "The History of Ancient Astronomy: Problems and Methods," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, IV (1945), 14-5.

<sup>24</sup> F. Sherwood Taylor, *The Alchemists: Founders of Modern Chemistry*, New York, Henry Schuman, 1949, preface, p. ix.

in the course of their investigations, they should have developed much chemical knowledge, comprising new forms of laboratory equipment, new chemical compounds and mixtures, and reactions between them. Hence alchemists unquestionably provided foundations for the science of chemistry. Thus the "first laboratories we know of were alchemical laboratories. The alchemists were the first whom we know to have practiced distillation and sublimation, and they invented almost all the chemical apparatus that was in use up to the middle of the seventeenth century. If we had to assess their position in the history of science, we might best call them the Fathers of Laboratory Technique."<sup>25</sup>

Any such profession naturally embraced sincere students who hoped to achieve the transmutation and also charlatans who would pretend to manufacture gold in order to obtain money fraudulently from those who were sufficiently gullible. The tricks of the latter are on record; they include the use of a hollow iron rod filled with powdered gold and stoppered with wax; when the material in the crucible was stirred, the wax would melt and the gold pour into the mixture. Or, a nail would be made half of iron and half of gold and covered with black ink; when dipped in a liquid and stirred, the black ink would wash away and it would seem as if an iron nail had been partially transmuted into gold. Still another trick was to prepare a coin of a white alloy of silver and gold, dip it into nitric acid which would dissolve the silver and leave half of the coin—apparently converted into gold. Some of these coins are preserved in our museums and have been analyzed.

These fraudulent practices were all too common in late mediaeval and Renaissance Europe.<sup>26</sup> But we are more con-

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>26</sup> One of the first alchemical treatises to be translated into Latin from the Arabic was prepared by Robert of Chester (*Robertus Anglicus*) and completed on 11 February 1144. Cf. George Sarton, *Introduction to the History of Science*, II, pt. I, Baltimore, The Williams & Wilkins Company, 1931, p. 176.

cerned with the sincere alchemists. Why did they continue the search for the "philosopher's stone" for so many centuries? We must remember that there were alchemists still "practising" or prosecuting the art in the seventeenth<sup>27</sup> and eighteenth centuries in Europe and in America.<sup>28</sup> One famous English alchemist of the seventeenth century, George Starkey, began his chemical education at Harvard.<sup>29</sup>

A further problem of even greater importance is the apparent obscurity and downright incomprehensibility of so much of the alchemical language, and the meaning to be assigned to the symbolism and the curious illustrations. Many historians admit to being completely baffled and bewildered and they either dismiss most of the alchemical literature as obscure, enigmatic, and incomprehensible, or as downright nonsense save for a genuine chemical nugget here and there. The most recent history of alchemy, by F. Sherwood Taylor, Director of the Science Museum, South Kensington, London, tells us that "if we turn to an alchemical treatise in the hope of appraising their achievement we find ourselves in a chaos. No literature is so maddeningly and deliberately obscure. The authors tell us that their books were written in such a way as deliberately to conceal the practice from all who had not been initiated into a certain secret which enabled them to understand. The apparatus is usually fairly clearly described but the nature of the substance to be treated is concealed under cover-names. Thus Sol (the sun, the King) represents gold. But

<sup>27</sup> The names of Boyle, Newton, and Leibniz usually are included.

<sup>28</sup> A collection of all the materials relating to alchemy in Colonial America would be an extremely useful endeavour. Some Harvard alchemists of the Colonial period are discussed in I. B. Cohen, "The Beginning of Chemical Instruction in America," *Chymia*, III (1950), 17-44, esp. 20-1.

<sup>29</sup> For Starkey, see S. E. Morison, *Harvard College in the Seventeenth Century*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1936, pp. 130-1. The late G. L. Kittredge's views on Starkey are to be found discussed in A. E. Waite, *The Secret Tradition in Alchemy* (ref. 121, *infra*), pp. 292-95.

does it represent the metal that we call gold or some unknown entity the alchemists call 'our gold'? Take the word 'magnesia.' Modern science gives this name to a well-known and definite substance, magnesium oxide, but the alchemists give the name to something that we cannot identify; nor were their contemporaries sure that they themselves could do so. . . .<sup>30</sup>

"This concealment of the nature of materials is so general that only a very small minority of alchemical recipes can be interpreted in such a way that they could be repeated. Here is the foremost problem of alchemy. . . ."<sup>31</sup> Yet this foremost problem finds a solution in that company of historians—mostly British, Austrian, and Swiss—who have read Hitchcock's book at first hand or later writings that, directly or indirectly, derive from Hitchcock's idea.

Once we have seen the fundamental difficulties in understanding alchemy, we can appreciate Hitchcock's main thesis. It is simply that most (if not all) of alchemy never had anything at all to do with chemistry and that the aim of the alchemists was never to produce material gold, such as might serve to make "coin of the realm." This thesis is made apparent in the full title of his book which reads: *Remarks upon alchemy and the alchemists, indicating a method of discovering the true nature of hermetic philosophy; and showing that the search after The Philosopher's Stone had not for its object the discovery of an agent for the transmuta-*

<sup>30</sup> To prove the last point, Taylor quotes from Chaucer "who was well acquainted with alchemy," Chanouns Yemannes Tale, W. W. Skeat, *The Complete Works*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1894, lines 1448-71.

<sup>31</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 3-5. On pp. 113-5, Taylor gives the details of an experiment from a work attributed to Lull and dated 1330, first in a translation of the text made in 1558, then in Taylor's translation into the "language of modern chemistry." He concludes with these comments: "To such an anticlimax come all attempts to give a chemical interpretation to recipes for transmutation. The above is a recipe much more intelligible than most, describing chemical processes that can be identified, but ending up with the assertion of a transmutation that could not possibly result from the use of this material."



tion of metals. *Being also an attempt to rescue from undeserved opprobrium the reputation of a class of extraordinary thinkers in past ages* (Boston: Crosby, Nichols, and Company, 111 Washington Street. 1857). Hitchcock took "for his thesis the proposition that *Man* was the *subject* of Alchemy; and that the *object* of the Art was the perfection, or at least the improvement, of Man."<sup>32</sup> Under "the figure of the transmutation of metals," there was represented symbolically the salvation of man, "his transformation from evil to good, or his passage from a state of nature to a state of grace." Hence, "the works of the Alchemists may be regarded as treatises upon religious education . . . and under the words gold, silver, lead, salt, sulphur, mercury, antimony, arsenic, orpiment, sol, luna, wine, acid, alkali, and a thousand other words and expressions, infinitely varied, may be found the opinions of the several writers upon the great questions of God, nature, and man, all brought into or developed from one central point, which is Man, as the image of God."<sup>33</sup> Of course, many readers thought that the alchemical writings might provide a map of the road to wealth. Says Hitchcock: "Such men were said, by the Alchemists, to have 'the gold fever, which had darkened their senses.'" Over and over again, the alchemists repeat the phrase *Aurum nostrum non est aurum vulgi*, "Our gold is not the common gold."

In Hitchcock's view the subject of alchemy was man. The alchemists' "furnace, cucurbit, retort, philosophical egg, etc., etc., in which the work of fermentation, distillation, extraction of essences and spirits, and the preparation of salts is said to have taken place, was *Man*—yourself, friendly reader, and if you will take yourself into your study, and be candid and honest, acknowledging no other

<sup>32</sup> Preface, p. iv.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. v.

guide or authority but Truth, you may easily discover something of Hermetic Philosophy; and if at the beginning there should be 'fear and trembling,' the end may be a more than compensating peace."<sup>34</sup>

Since the subject of alchemy was *Man* rather than the chemistry of metals, no true alchemist was ever disappointed by any supposed failure to produce metallic gold, since the latter was largely not even attempted. According to Hitchcock, those who made alchemical experiments with worldly metals were actually misled by the language of the alchemists which they but imperfectly understood. "That chemistry is indirectly indebted to the Alchemists for its introduction among the sciences, is certainly true," Hitchcock admitted, "at least I have no disposition to question it; but not to the immediate labors of the Alchemists themselves, whose peculiar work was one of contemplation, and not a work of the hands. . . ."

It is a plain case, that, for the most part, the experiments which led the way to chemistry were made by men who were misled by the language of the Alchemists, and sought gold instead of truth; but this class of men wrote no books upon Alchemy. Many of them died over their furnaces, "*uttering no voice,*" and none of them wrote books upon the Philosopher's Stone, for the simple reason that they never discovered anything to write about, and were incapable of indicating in the remotest manner any method for its discovery.

It is true . . . that many books were written by men who really imagined they had discovered the secret, and were nevertheless mistaken. But this imaginary success could never have had place where *gold* was the object; because in the *bald fact* no man was ever deceived: no man ever believed that he had discovered a method of making gold out of inferior metals. The thing speaks for itself. It is impossible that any man can ever be deluded upon this bare fact; but it is quite otherwise with respect to the real object of Alchemy, in which men have been deceived

<sup>34</sup> Hitchcock, *Alchemy*, p. 117. "Hermetic," in this usage, refers to thrice-great Hermes (Hermes Trismegistus), the mythical or supposed founder of the alchemical art. The term survives in the expression "hermetically sealed."

in all ages, either under the name of Alchemy, or under some other name;—for the *subject* is always in the world, and hence the antiquity claimed for the art by the Alchemists.<sup>35</sup>

Hitchcock cites various aphorisms of Geber, such as “The Artist should be intent on the true *End* only, because our Art is reserved in the *Divine Will of God*, and is given to, or withheld from, whom he will; who is glorious, sublime, and full of justice and goodness.” For Geber the Philosopher’s Stone is “a medicine, rejoicing and preserving the Body in youth,” and to students he gives this counsel, “Dispose yourself by exercise to the study with great industry and labor, and a *continued deep meditation*; for *by these you may find it and not otherwise*.” Upon this, Hitchcock comments: “What can meditation do with actual metals? It cannot blow the coals under an alembic; but it may bring a man into a right state for hearing the still, small voice, whose potency, like that of the *Alcahest*—for it is the *Alcahest*,<sup>36</sup> is able to dissolve the stoniest hearts.”<sup>37</sup>

Man is, then, the subject of alchemy and the object of the art was the perfection—or, at least, the improvement—of Man.<sup>38</sup> “I therefore say, after much study and deliberation, that the works of the *genuine* Alchemists, excluding those of ignorant imitators and mischievous impostors, are all essentially religious, and that the best external assistance for their interpretation may be found in a study of the Holy Scriptures. . . . [The] genuine Alchemists were religious men, who passed their time in legitimate pursuits, earning an

<sup>35</sup> Hitchcock, *Alchemy*, 118.

<sup>36</sup> The “universal solvent.”

<sup>37</sup> Hitchcock, *Alchemy*, pp. 120–1.

<sup>38</sup> The “books for the initiated” treat of “a light from Heaven” “as the Elixir of Life, the Water of Life, the Universal Medicine, and the Philosopher’s Stone” (p. ix); according to Hitchcock, when, for instance, Geber speaks of the Philosopher’s Stone as a “medicine, rejoicing and preserving the Body in youth,” he is merely using “alchemical language for expressing immortality” (p. 121). From medicine to improve the state of man’s body to a recipe for the improvement of the soul—that is, for Hitchcock, a small jump.

honest subsistence, and in religious contemplations, studying how to realize in themselves the union of the divine and human nature, expressed in man by an enlightened submission to God's will; and they thought out and published, after a manner of their own, a method of attaining or entering upon this state, as the only rest of the soul."<sup>39</sup>

When the alchemist discusses various forms of matter or different material substances, he does so in a symbolic sense. Man is the image of God and is referred to under such terms as gold, silver, lead, mercury, sulphur, salt, and so on, "a multitude of names" since "the writers represent Man by an endless variety of names . . . [although they] most commonly speak of him as a *Metal* or *Mineral*. . . ." Salvation is represented as a process of purification and the stages of that process lend themselves to a representation in terms of a change from one kind of metal into another. The alchemist writes, "Our Mercury is aerial"<sup>40</sup>—of the spirit and not of the earth—or that "minerals made of *living* mercury and *living* sulphur [Soul and Body] are to be chosen. . . ."<sup>41</sup> Indeed it is often said that "the only difficulty in preparing the Philosopher's Stone consists of obtaining the philosopher's mercury."<sup>42</sup>

The uninitiated reader may be astonished to find the alchemists declaring that their *subjectum*—i.e., the material to be worked upon—is identical with the vessel, i.e., the still, alembic, crucible, philosopher's egg, and so on. But both are man: his soul and spirit. To this effect Hitchcock quotes from an alchemical work (*Centrum Naturae Concentratum, or the Salt of Nature Regenerated*) as follows: "The highest wisdom consists in this, for Man to know

<sup>39</sup> Hitchcock, *Alchemy*, p. x.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44, quoting from L. Figuier.

Himself, because in him God has placed his eternal World, by which all things were made and upheld. Therefore let the high inquirers and searchers into the deep mysteries of nature learn first to know what they have in themselves, before they seek in foreign matters without them; and by the divine power within them, let them first heal themselves and *transmute* their own souls; then they may go on prosperously, and seek with good success the mysteries and wonders of God in all natural things."<sup>48</sup>

Here, then, are the main points of Hitchcock's thesis. I shall not, within this short space, attempt to reproduce the details of Hitchcock's analysis of alchemical terms and operations. But, so that the reader may see how Hitchcock's analysis proceeded, I will point out the role of one substance—mercury or quicksilver.

All the alchemical operations described make use of mercury as a fundamental ingredient. Hitchcock finds that mercury is conscience. Conscience is not equally pure with all men, and not equally developed. The difficulty in discovering live mercury, of which all Alchemists write, is nothing more than the difficulty in arousing conscience in men's hearts for their improvement and elevation. The starting point in man's education is to waken within him an enduring permanent sense of what is absolutely right and the consistent purpose of adhering to this sense. This is the great task of the educator—once accomplished the work of improvement is easy and can be likened to child's play; the Alchemists sometimes described the later phases of the "great work" as child's play.

A man whose conscience is not sensitive or developed is described under the names of arsenic, vitriol, vipers, etc. In these substances, as in antimony, lead, and many others, the alchemist seeks for a true mercury, or conscience. When

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 34-5.

first awakened, it is a common mercury, in a "crude" state, and the great aim of the alchemists is then to transform "common mercury" into "our mercury"—the preliminary act to the purification of the soul—a "commencement of that internal reformation of character which will endure, and flame up all the brighter, under trials."<sup>44</sup> We can, in such terms, appreciate the comparison with "an incombustible sulphur, because in whomsoever the conscience is properly awakened, a fire is raised which burns and consumes everything opposed to its own nature."<sup>45</sup>

"Now, when the *conscience*, wherein the sense of right and justice has existence, becomes active under the *idea of God*, it is endowed with supernatural force, and is then, as I understand it, the Alchemist's philosophical mercury: it is also his salt of mercury: it is no less his sovereign *Treacle*, of which much may be read in their books, though of a kind quite unlike that of a justly celebrated novelist of the day. . . ."<sup>46</sup>

Such is Hitchcock's doctrine concerning alchemy. We may as well admit at once that it has a number of puzzling features. Why, we must ask at the outset, did the alchemists write in such a curious, symbolic language, rather than state their views openly for all to understand? Hitchcock replies: "This was the language by which men communicated with each other all over Europe, and encouraged each other to live honestly, when, in the public estimation, it was necessary rather to say a 'certain' number of masses, and contribute largely to an ignorant, debauched, and wicked priesthood, armed with the civil power to crush all opposition to the tyranny by which they enslaved the whole

<sup>44</sup> Hitchcock, *Alchemy*, p. 51.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

population of Europe." The alchemists "were the wise men of their times, who couched their wisdom in 'dark sayings,' calculated purposely to mystify and deceive those who needed the 'hangman's whip' to hold them in order, and no less to delude and elude the hangman too, who knew not how to discriminate between the true man and the false."<sup>47</sup> For Hitchcock, "the Alchemists were Protestants, when Protestantism could not speak openly."<sup>48</sup> If his main thesis be correct, then the above explanation may be satisfactory.

But we would then enquire of Hitchcock what value there was to his study. What meaning did he believe his book to hold? In the first place, his book is made up, to a large degree, "of extracts from the writings of the Alchemists—to let them speak for themselves, and has nothing of my own in it but suggestions with a view to the interpretation of those writings. . . ."<sup>49</sup> His aim was to place samples of the alchemical *corpus* before the modern reader so that he might learn what the alchemists had intended to say. "Has it no interest," asks Hitchcock, "for this age to look back a few hundred years, and see the shifts to which men were obliged to resort for the privilege of living with simple honesty?"<sup>50</sup> Noting the statement of a reviewer that "Alchemy has passed away . . . never to return," Hitchcock comments that "this may be so: but the questions about which the Alchemists employed themselves have not passed away, and never shall pass away while man wanders upon the surface of the earth."<sup>51</sup> Hitchcock appears not to have believed that alchemy as such had any direct relevance to his own age, even though the philo-

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 202-3.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 224.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 266.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 202-3.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

sophical and theological ideas of the alchemists were central to man in all ages. The preface to his work states plainly: "It may seem superfluous in the author of the following remarks to disclaim the purpose of reviving the study of Alchemy, or the method of teaching adopted by the Alchemists. Alchemical works stand related to moral and intellectual geography, somewhat as the skeletons of ichthyosauri and plesiosauri are related to geology. They are skeletons of thought in past ages."<sup>62</sup>

Hitchcock was thus drawn to the study of alchemists and the alchemistic doctrine (not, properly speaking, the study of alchemy) because of a driving intellectual curiosity. Soon he found a key that revealed to him that the doctrine of the alchemists was a kind of pure theology without sacerdotal dogma, very close in spirit to his own notions. Thus, while he was expounding the true doctrine of the alchemists—as he saw it—he was at the same time delineating a personal philosophy of human existence. Once he discovered that the alchemical treatises did not treat of chemistry, he appreciated that the alchemists were a much maligned group of thinkers since their writings were disparaged from the viewpoint of chemical theory rather than praised for their hidden metaphysical or theological standpoint. In the light of Hitchcock's character as we know it, his pen was drawn into the service of truth and he was led to fight against the injustice of historical judgment just as he had been led to fight against injustice with regard to military matters and Indian affairs.

How did Hitchcock ever come to formulate his theories about alchemy? Anyone who reads Hitchcock's writings finds a unity of conception that reaches its peak in *Alchemy and the Alchemists* and that is forced to do service in the

<sup>62</sup> Hitchcock, *Alchemy*, p. iii.



works on Swedenborg, Spinoza, Spencer, and Dante. A Platonist, or more properly neo-Platonist, strain is discernible in his notes from early manhood and is a part of his speculative frame.

He was, in his youth, a student at an academy in Randolph, Vermont, but could not stay long owing to the death of his father in 1813 (when the youth was but 15 years of age) and the apparent ensuing financial problems. He had the good fortune, however, to obtain an appointment to the Military Academy at West Point within a year, when his qualifications were described, in part, as follows: "He is about sixteen years of age, has a good English education, and understands the Latin language—is well bred, extremely correct in his moral habits, possesses strict ideas of honor and integrity and a sufficient degree of talent and enterprise to render him useful and respectable in the service of his country."<sup>53</sup> At the Military Academy, Hitchcock distinguished himself in mathematics and engineering and taught both while still a cadet, acting "as an Assistant Professor of Engineering." He was always a great reader, as a cadet, as a young officer, as an instructor and Commandant of Cadets at West Point, and throughout his later life. His diary as a young officer shows concern with metaphysical problems and doubt concerning the literal interpretation of Scripture, coupled with what he called a desire "to know what a certain class of men called philosophers thought of God and man and life."<sup>54</sup> He read Paley, Reid, Hume, and the British poets.

His fellow officers he found to be largely "dissipated men without education. They had no refinement of any sort and no taste for study. . . . Many a time have I taken a small

<sup>53</sup> *Fifty Years* (ref. 13), p. 40: letter from Asst. Adjt. General George P. Peters to Secretary of War James Monroe, Boston, Sept. 1814. Peters was the husband of Ethan Allen Hitchcock's sister Lorrain.

<sup>54</sup> *Fifty Years*, p. 46.

volume in my pocket, started into the woods and remained a whole day, for no other purpose than to be out of hearing of profanity, ribaldry, and blustering braggadocio.”<sup>55</sup> He read literature as well as philosophy, Moore, Gray, Doctor Johnson, Young’s *Night Thoughts*, Shakespeare, and others. As an Instructor at West Point, he “had no fancy for formal dinners” and read voraciously and in solitude in preference to the normal social whirl. His reading included Bacon, Hume’s essays, Scott’s novels, Montesquieu, Lord Kames, Burke, Hegel, Percival, Sir Thomas Browne, Dugald Stewart, Tacitus, Montholon’s *Memoirs of Napoleon*, Hobbes, Colton, Lucretius, and the works of Benjamin Franklin.<sup>56</sup> He met John Quincy Adams, and Washington Irving as he later sought out Theodore Parker, James Russell Lowell, Bronson Alcott, Horace Mann, Hawthorne, and Emerson.

Over and over again, Hitchcock recorded his feeling of loneliness and complete separation from his brother officers. Thus, under the date 16 February 1835, “I am in a peculiar situation here. I do not wish to depreciate the merits of my brother officers, but it is certain that their habits if not their tastes are different from mine, and, while a majority of them congregate and either play cards or smoke or drink or all three together, I am left in solitude or compelled to choose between those resorts and the company of the few ladies there are at the Prairie. . . . I am certainly out of place here. My life is calculated to make me an object of envy and hate to most of those around me. In the first place, I do not join in any of the vices of the garrison—not me. I neither drink, play cards, nor even indulge in the smallest license of language. Next, I am disposed to literature and

<sup>55</sup> *Fifty Years*, p. 47.

<sup>56</sup> The statement about the “great Whole” being “one,” and the agreement of “all the parts” with “all the parts” [see page 37, *supra*] comes from Hitchcock’s diary of this period of young manhood, *Fifty Years*, p. 51.

sometimes indicate that I read or think, and it is mostly in a field unexplored by the others."<sup>57</sup> But, while studying theology and philosophy and reflecting on these subjects occupied his every spare hour, he did not neglect his military duties and studied deeply military history and strategy and tactics and was an accomplished officer. Very often the contrast between his scholarly pursuits and profession of arms found expression in his diaries. Thus, on 23 March 1841: "It may seem singular to me some time hence, if I refer to this diary, that, in the midst of Indian councils, in the centre of Florida, in a state of war, I should so frequently make theological notes which are commonly the fruit of leisure and ease."<sup>58</sup> And in June of that year, when in Washington "amid the whirl and tumult of society," Hitchcock could not but be impressed that his mind was "engaged in reveries upon strange questions and abstruse speculations concerning the mysteries of nature."

In 1842, during the dispute concerning whether his report on the conduct of Indian affairs should be made public, he was engrossed in philosophical meditation and remarked: "I find so little to interest me in the military profession that I had rather study or read books of philosophy. I fear I am not in my proper vocation—that is, I have read and studied myself out of it. The study of philosophy and my general reading have subdued all spirit for action and induced a wish to retire from the world into some solitude."<sup>59</sup> Thus his diary began to embody a sentiment expressed earlier, "My mind has undergone changes. I feel stronger than I did. What appeared great has diminished. Generals and great men are pygmies. Principles, laws of nature, truth—these alone seem grand."<sup>60</sup>

<sup>57</sup> *Fifty Years*, p. 72.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

I shall not attempt to list here the many authors read by Hitchcock—a mere enumeration of those who are mentioned in the published diaries would occupy many pages. But it should be pointed out that wherever he went, whether on a military expedition, a trip of any sort, or a mission, he was never without a library and carried books with him on all occasions. Unfortunately, we do not know too much about Hitchcock's studies and meditations, since the editor of *Fifty Years in Camp and Field* merely gives an occasional extract concerning such matters and, from time to time, mentions some of the authors Hitchcock read and the kind of problem that occupied his mind. The editor was more impressed by the fact that an active military man should have such interests at all, than by the quality or contents of his speculative writings and the nature and extent of his reading. He excuses himself with the note: "But this book is a biography and not a compendium of philosophy." Rather than tell us what Hitchcock actually wrote, he is content to state, "And he made ample record of his thoughts in his diary."<sup>61</sup> On one occasion the editor relates, "More than five hundred pages in these closely packed diaries of 1850 and 1851 are taken up with philosophical arguments and speculations," and expresses the regret that Hitchcock is so "absorbed in metaphysical monologue [that], he gives us few details of his important public acts and few particulars concerning the distinguished people with whom he dines."<sup>62</sup>

On New Year's day 1845 Hitchcock noted that he "came home and amused myself with the flute, playing the opera of *Oberon* and one or two others. Then I took a fancy to count my books and found 761, besides numerous pamphlets, magazines, and tracts, and also not including my music, of which I have over 60 volumes bound and enough music in

<sup>61</sup> *Fifty Years*, pp. 182, 185.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 374.

sheets for 20 volumes more."<sup>63</sup> This was in "Camp Wilkins, the name I gave to the camp of the Third Regiment of Infantry, adjacent to Fort Jessup"; the main library he kept in St. Louis, where he had established his permanent residence.

When illness forced Hitchcock to return from the Mexican campaign, he stopped in New Orleans on his way home to St. Louis and "ordered sixteen boxes of books to St. Louis ahead of me."<sup>64</sup> He received bookseller's catalogues from England and ordered many "rare old tomes" from London. In 1848, he noted, "Have been looking into my interminable boxes. I have absolutely too much baggage. . . . For years I have added to my stock of books until I have quite too many for a traveller."<sup>65</sup> In every city he visited, he managed to visit the bookstores and his library grew and grew. So large was his collection of books that when he went to California in 1851 to assume command of the Pacific Division his library of some 2500 volumes, packed in "30 boxes in all," cost him \$200 for carriage, whereas it had only cost him \$400 to transport himself to California.<sup>66</sup>

While in California, he sold (on 3 February 1853) the greater part of his library to San Francisco. We are told that these books became "the basis of the present Mercantile Library Association of that city and enriched it with a large number of works of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which could not have been duplicated in America."<sup>67</sup> Hitchcock, describing the sale of his books, remarks: "The most of them have performed their office as far as I am concerned. They are exceedingly valuable. There is, properly speaking, no 'light reading' in the modern sense, such as

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 189.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 224.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 347.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 382, 394.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 398; Croffut's comment.

common novels, but generally books requiring thought, and reflection in the reader. One of the inducements I have had to this step has been a desire to avoid the chance of becoming what is called a bookworm. As far back as 1825, at West Point, I remember resolutely setting my face against reading books without an express object. I had a great horror of a certain species of idle dissipation—taking up a book merely as a means of passing the time. I have read books only because I wished to know something. Pleasure, as such, has never been my object. The end, thus far, has been to put me into the most friendly relations with Plato, and I find that the more I know of him, the less I care to know about other writers. I have yet a great deal to learn in Plato. Still I have never thought of becoming a learned or a literary man.”<sup>68</sup> So, too, later in life, did Hitchcock sell his alchemical library in 1862, once his writings on the subject of alchemy had been published.<sup>69</sup> Having read the books, having copied out long extracts from them, having made abstracts of the portions he did not copy out, and having committed to his diaries the thoughts that the books had evoked, Hitchcock had no further need for the volumes themselves. His interest was in the doctrines the books contained and as to the books themselves—well, “All books are chaff of the human intellect.”<sup>70</sup>

I would not like to give the impression that Hitchcock never shared his ideas with any one. A select few participated in the intellectual adventure. Two of these were fellow

<sup>68</sup> *Fifty Years*, pp. 398-9.

<sup>69</sup> See Appendix One, *infra*. Hitchcock's sentiments on this subject are best expressed in a diary note of 19 Feb. 1856: “The ship *Mary Green* from Liverpool has been lost with (just) twenty separate works on alchemy which I ordered from London some months ago. I am extremely sorry to lose these works, though I can do without them, and almost think I could bear the loss of all of my alchemical works, having appropriated all that I shall ever learn from them. True alchemy, like geometry, is independent of the books that teach it. They are aids, not ends.”

<sup>70</sup> *Fifty Years*, p. 403.

officers in the Army. There was W. W. S. Bliss, described by W. A. Croffut as "the assiduous student and scholar who married the daughter of General Taylor and became his chief of staff. Bliss was about the only companion of high literary attainments that Hitchcock could claim, if he could claim as a companion in any sense one who was generally far away on the frontier. Together or apart they sympathetically discussed Hegel and Kant, Iamblichus, Goethe, and Carlyle, Locke, Glanville, and the philosophy of modern thinkers, especially of Germany—a philosophy, he says, which teaches 'a faith freed, I hope, from the gross superstitions which give so many religions of the world a forbidding aspect.' And then he illustrated with a quotation from a sermon by Jonathan Edwards."<sup>71</sup>

Another philosophical companion was Charles H. Larnard,<sup>72</sup> who served with Hitchcock and Bliss in the military occupation of Texas in 1845-46. At the Corpus Christi encampment the three friends "read much and commented more—their chief authors being Spinoza, Swedenborg, Schiller, Kant, Toland, Hobbes, Socinus—all earnestly struggling after what they reverently called Truth."<sup>73</sup>

William T. Harris of St. Louis became an intimate only in the sixties. Hitchcock described him as "thoroughly imbued with what Socrates would undoubtedly have been

<sup>71</sup> *Fifty Years*, p. 159. An account of Bliss may be found in Cullum's *Biographical Register* (ref. 12, *supra*), pp. 542-4. See also, *Fifty Years*, pp. 147, 187, 192, 196, 204, 219, 367, 486. Bliss was a thoughtful and well-read man with whom Hitchcock could discuss Kant, Lessing and the other modern and ancient philosophers on equal terms.

<sup>72</sup> For whom see Cullum's *Biographical Register*, p. 484; *Fifty Years*, pp. 187, 204, 210, 222, 407, 427.

<sup>73</sup> Hitchcock wrote a notice of Larnard after the latter's death by drowning in Puget Sound in 1854: "Major Larnard never knew the burden of ennui. Engaged in the discharge of his duties he was prompt, active and efficient, leaving nothing for his superiors to desire, but the moment his duties left him leisure, he busied himself with literature, with art and with philosophy. With a competent knowledge of the ancient classical languages and of French and German, he added to the most extensive literary acquirements a profound insight into the various problems of religion, philosophy and government, which no scholar can evade without surrendering his convictions to blind authority." From *Fifty Years*, p. 407.

delighted with—the philosophic spirit, a true love of philosophy. He is a young man, but looks at principles without disregarding facts. He is more in love with Hegel than would be altogether to my taste, but he will outgrow this as his own mind reveals itself to itself.”<sup>74</sup> The two maintained a “continuous and voluminous correspondence, General Hitchcock occasionally writing him a letter of twenty compact pages upon those metaphysical researches which equally occupied the minds of both. Once, while pondering some abstruse problem, he exclaimed to himself, ‘I need Harris more than anybody else.’”<sup>75</sup>

Finally, there was his brother Samuel, who especially shared with him a passionate interest in Spinoza. Hitchcock declared that his brother had made the first complete translation of Spinoza’s works into English and he himself also translated and retranslated the writings of Spinoza.<sup>76</sup> Samuel Hitchcock died at sea in 1851 while on his way from Holland to California to join his brother. “For him he had translated several important works from the Latin and other languages, and in their views of the mysteries of life, the here and hereafter, the whence and whither, they were closely in sympathy.”<sup>77</sup>

The views that characterize Hitchcock’s writings about alchemy and the hermetic tradition were, apparently, first aroused in 1844, while he was at Fort Jessup. “Hitchcock read Gabriel Rossetti’s works on the esoteric meaning of the Middle Age writers, and got the first glimpse of that new and mystical interpretation of celebrated authors which

<sup>74</sup> *Fifty Years*, p. 427.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*; see also p. 455.

<sup>76</sup> Spinoza is the philosopher whose name occurs most frequently in *Fifty Years*. (See *Fifty Years*, pp. 238, 368, 375, 390, 409, and *passim*). In 1846 Hitchcock notes, “I can read Spinoza’s *Ethics* when nothing else interests me.”

<sup>77</sup> Croffut in *Fifty Years*, p. 390.



later so characterized his own writings. He imagines that Cervantes, in creating Don Quixote and ridiculing the extravagant romances of chivalry, may have been outside of the secret sect and so have misunderstood the books which were only ostensibly romances; and he conjectures that Amadis de Gaul and the mythical heroes who succeeded him may merely have been types and symbols of Wisdom and Truth."<sup>78</sup> In 1851, we are told, "It was while dreaming and meditating at Benicia, and incidentally governing the California-Oregon Military Division and attending to its multitudinous requirements, that General Hitchcock got hold of a remarkable booklet, *The Story of Reynard the Fox*. This allegory or fable he read as containing a pretty complete outline of the esoteric method by which the writers of the Middle Ages concealed the true meaning of their assaults on the Church. It impressed him much, and seemed to him a confirmation of the Rossetti theory of the metaphoric jargon under which Dante masked his religious opinions."<sup>79</sup>

In 1854 Hitchcock returned to the East from California and, while "superintending recruiting for his second regiment [in New York] . . . frequents the Nassau Street bookstores in June and finds therein tomes that greatly excite his interest and even lead his thoughts into new channels. Of these he gives us a hundred pages of comment and reflection. He does not forget Comte and Cousin, Spinoza, Kant, Porphyry, and the great neo-Platonists; but he finds there another class of books of which he has before seen little and these move him strangely. He finds several antique alchemical works on magic—works more than two centuries old, and not much in request in this bustling land of industrial progress."<sup>80</sup>

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 186.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 393. For Rossetti, see Appendix One, *infra*.

<sup>80</sup> Croffut in *Fifty Years*, p. 412. A more detailed account of how Hitchcock became acquainted with the literature of alchemy may be found in his own account in Appendix Four, *infra*.

These books Hitchcock took with him to Carlisle, Pennsylvania, where he had been ordered "by the Secretary of War to assume command of the barracks, where my regiment (six companies of it) is to be assembled."<sup>81</sup> He added further alchemical books to his library while visiting Philadelphia. He noted, as his ideas on alchemy took form, that "The prosecution of my studies ought to be carried on in a sort of serious silence. I must expect no sympathy or countenance from without, and no reward of any sort except such as may grow internally from the possession of the truth. But there is no higher satisfaction than in thus living. It is free from enthusiasm, and being a present possession it is not dependent on hope, while it is free from fear no less. The hermetic philosophers are the true philosophers. They are a solemn class of writers, for a glimpse of a true eternity abolishes all selfishness and fills the soul with an amiable tenderness towards mankind."<sup>82</sup> And again: "The Colonel has been my guest here for a month. Passing whole evenings in his company I have often spoken of my hobby, avoiding it, however, as much as civility required, and have been struck with the entire blank in his mind upon the whole subject of man, his origin and destiny. I have two large cases of books extending from floor to ceiling written by earnest and learned men in ages past concerning the nature he carries about with him wherever he goes, and he is dead to their influence! This may show me how little sympathy I may look for from what is called 'the world' in my alchemical studies. So be it!"<sup>83</sup>

Hitchcock bought so many works on alchemy that every few weeks the entry may be found in his diary, "Received to-day another box of books from London." On 6 June 1855

<sup>81</sup> *Fifty Years*, p. 413.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 415.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

he returned to St. Louis on leave of absence and, later in the year, he retired from the Army.

The year 1855 witnessed Hitchcock's first publication on alchemy, a paper-bound pamphlet of forty pages, issued from Carlisle, Pennsylvania, *Remarks upon Alchymists, and the Supposed Object of Their Pursuit; Showing that the Philosopher's Stone is a mere Symbol, Signifying Something Which Could not be Expressed openly, without Incurring the Danger of an Auto de Fé*, "By an Officer of the United States Army."<sup>84</sup> This work was reviewed in *The Westminster and Foreign Quarterly Review* for 1 October 1856,<sup>85</sup> along with two other works on alchemy by Louis Figuier and Hermann Kopp.<sup>86</sup> Practically the entire review deals with the works of Figuier and Kopp; Hitchcock's views are described briefly in a footnote.

When, two years later, Hitchcock produced his book-length study, *Remarks upon Alchemy and the Alchemists, etc.*, the title resembled that of the review article in which the pamphlet had been discussed, "Alchemy and Alchemists," which in turn derived from the title of Figuier's book, *L'Alchimie et les Alchimistes*, etc. Hitchcock notes, in the book, the discussion of his pamphlet in the *Westminster Review* and devotes the opening pages to a refutation, not alone of that article, but also of the positions taken by Figuier and Kopp. Here Hitchcock also tells us that the "pamphlet was intended for the eyes of my friends, and was not published or put on sale, though I was not unwilling to have it circulated among the curious who might be likely to look into the propositions I announced. . . .

"When I printed the pamphlet, I had read but a few, some half a dozen, works on alchemy, and my opinions were

<sup>84</sup> See Appendix Two, *infra*; the work was marked "Printed for private circulation." An extract from it is printed in Appendix Four, *infra*.

<sup>85</sup> New Series, X, London, John Chapman, pp. 279-95.

<sup>86</sup> See Appendix Three, *infra*, for the works of Figuier and Kopp.

necessarily of a negative kind. . . . I was positive, however, that they [the alchemists] were not in pursuit of gold or of worldly honors; and I am still of this opinion. I thought their object was religious, in which I am also fully confirmed by a further examination of alchemical works, of which I have obtained many since my pamphlet was printed."

Having seen something of the nature of Hitchcock's ideas and their development, let us turn next to the problem of how they have been received and the effect that they have had on the interpretation of alchemy in recent years.

A most important work on the interpretations of mysticism and mystic symbolism, written by the eminent Viennese psychoanalyst, Herbert Silberer, contains a considerable discussion of alchemy and the hermetic art.<sup>87</sup> Silberer wrote: "The service of having rediscovered the intrinsic value of alchemy over and above its chemical phase, is to be ascribed to the American, Ethan Allen Hitchcock, who published his views on the alchemists in his book, 'Remarks upon Alchemy and the Alchemists,' that appeared in Boston in 1857. . . ."<sup>88</sup> The discoveries made by the acute Hitchcock are so important for our analysis, that a complete exposition of them cannot be dispensed with. I should like better to refer to Hitchcock's book if it were not practically inaccessible."<sup>89</sup>

Silberer gladly acknowledged his indebtedness to Hitchcock; and not only does the chapter on "The hermetic art" derive from Hitchcock's discussion of alchemy, but the whole thesis of Silberer's book derives from Hitchcock's

<sup>87</sup> *Problems of Mysticism and its Symbolism*, translated by Smith Ely Jelliffe, New York, Moffat, Yard and Company, 1917.

<sup>88</sup> Silberer also referred "to the Frenchman, N. Landur, a writer in the scientific periodical 'L'Institut,' who wrote in 1868 in similar vein [in the organ 'L'Institut,' 1st Section, XXXVI, pp. 273 ff.—addition of translator], though I do not know whether he wrote with knowledge of the American work."

<sup>89</sup> *Problems of Mysticism*, pp. 151-2.

writings.<sup>90</sup> Silberer quotes extensively from Hitchcock and the sources cited by Hitchcock, and his summary or condensation of *Alchemy and the Alchemists* is in every way admirable.

Silberer was not, however, content to limit himself to Hitchcock's views; he felt the need of enlarging upon them. "Section V" of his book on mysticism presents "The problem of multiple interpretation." What Silberer does here is to present a number of examples from Hitchcock, together with Hitchcock's "anagogic" interpretation, chiefly taken from his *Red Book of Appin*, and then presents an "analytic" (in the sense of psychoanalytic) interpretation in which Hitchcock's formulation serves as both key and point of departure.<sup>91</sup>

"We have heard," writes Silberer, "that the greatest stumbling block for the uninitiated into the hermetic art lay in the determination of the true subject, the *prima materia*. The authors mentioned it by a hundred names; and the gold seeking toilers were therefore misled in a hundred ways. Hitchcock with a single word furnishes us the key to the understanding of the hermetic masters, when he says: 'The subject is man.' We can also avail ourselves of a play on words and say that the subject or substance is the subject."<sup>92</sup>

The problem of alchemy has held fascination for many psychologists in our day—foremost amongst them Carl G. Jung, the Swiss analytical psychologist. One of Jung's discussions of this topic was published in *Eranos-Jahrbuch* (1935) and, in translation, forms chapter five, "The Idea of Redemption in Alchemy," of his book, *The Integration*

<sup>90</sup> Silberer knew, in addition to *Alchemy and the Alchemists*, Hitchcock's *Red Book of Appin* and *Swedenborg, a Hermetic Philosopher*. His bibliography lists these works in their original American editions of the mid-nineteenth century, and the *Red Book of Appin* also in a German translation ("Übertr. von Sir Galahad, Leipzig, 1910").

<sup>91</sup> For some curious reason, only one page reference to Hitchcock is to be found in the index to the English edition of Silberer's book, despite the fact that Hitchcock's work is discussed throughout the book and his name is frequently to be found in the text pages.

<sup>92</sup> Silberer, *Mysticism*, p. 152.

of the *Personality*.<sup>93</sup> Here the effect of Hitchcock, through the agency of Silberer (a former pupil of Jung) is clear. Indeed, at the outset, after declaring that "once psychology has sharpened our insight [it is easy for us] to recognize the psychic nature of alchemistic symbols and processes," Jung makes it plain that, "It is well known that Herbert Silberer, also, at an earlier date, succeeded in throwing some light upon the psychological content of alchemy. So as not to repeat unnecessarily what has been said before, I will call to mind only the essential points of the process."<sup>94</sup>

In a more recent work, Jung has devoted himself exclusively to this topic. Entitled *Psychologie und Alchemie*,<sup>95</sup> this book, too, makes acknowledgment of Silberer's fundamental contribution<sup>96</sup> which, as we have seen, was in turn based on the ideas of Hitchcock. The reception given to this book gives us some measure of the place of Hitchcock's ideas (in their contemporary psychological variant form) in the modern world of learning.

A review in *Ambix* ("The journal of the Society for the Study of Alchemy and Early Chemistry")<sup>97</sup> by G. Heym begins: "Modern scholarship has thrown much light upon the history of Alchemy; books written by competent scholars have appeared in different countries and have given us new insight into the formation of ideas which today have crystallized into a system of scientific experiment unique in the history of mankind. But the student of the alchemical texts is forced to acknowledge their utter remoteness from the

<sup>93</sup> Translated by Stanley Dell, New York, Farrar & Rinehart, 1939. The *Eranos-Jahrbücher* are published by Rhein-Verlag in Zürich.

<sup>94</sup> Jung, *Integration of the Personality*, p. 208. A convenient account of Jung's views is offered in M. Esther Harding, *Psychic Energy, its Source and Goal* [New York], Pantheon Books, The Bollingen Series X, 1947; for alchemy, see pp. 417 ff.

<sup>95</sup> Published in 1944 by Rascher Verlag in Zürich, a book of 696 pages with 270 diagrams.

<sup>96</sup> *Psychologie u. Alchemie*, p. 315.

<sup>97</sup> Published by Taylor and Francis, London, III (May, 1948), nos. 1 and 2, pp. 64-7.

modern way of thought, and if he wants to know what it's all about he does not know where to turn. There are, in fact, only three books written since the seventeenth century which can serve as an introduction to a speculative interpretation of the ideas underlying what is called Alchemy; these books are written by scholars and give the student a sincere, even though highly subjective, view of the methods of work of the alchemists. The first book is Michael Maier's *Symbola Aurea Mensae Duodecim Nationum*, Frankfurt, 1617; the second is Mrs. Atwood's *Suggestive Inquiry into The Hermetic Mystery*, first published in London 1850; the third is Dr. Jung's book, which we shall discuss." Although the reviewer takes issue, as reviewers most always do, with a point here and a point there, he praises Jung for "contributing more than any other modern scholar towards an understanding of what was in the mind of the alchemist," and for having "definitely broken new ground by showing the immense importance of thinking in symbolical terms—terms not merely applicable to psychological states of the self, but especially valuable when we come to investigate the origins of scientific ideas."

Another important review of Jung's *Psychologie und Alchemie* appeared in *Isis: An International Review Devoted to the History of Science*<sup>98</sup> (official Quarterly Journal of the History of Science Society); it was written by Walter Pagel, an eminent historian of the medical and scientific thought of the Renaissance. Pagel asks: "But can scientific sense be made of the labour of the alchemists, most of which was symbolism and definitely *not* chemical experiment? The ancients knew what chemical processes were, and therefore could not overlook that most of what they did was not

<sup>98</sup> Vol. XXXIX (1948) part 1 and 2, pp. 44-8. Entitled "Jung's Views on Alchemy," Pagel's article reviewed *Psychologie u. Alchemie* and also Jung's *Paracelsica*, Zürich u. Leipzig, Rascher Verlag, 1944.

chemistry. Their 'experiments' were admittedly bound up with a symbolic meaning. If, on the other hand, as the alchemists persistently maintained, their descriptions represented chemical processes, these were at least made unrecognizable by the elaborate symbolic language in which they were couched.

"In Jung's opinion, these apparent contradictions can be removed, and the true nature of alchemy discovered, certain processes of 'projection' which take place in the 'psyche' of the individual alchemist. These psychical processes appear to the adept as a peculiar behaviour of chemical substances. '*Er erlebte seine Projektion als Eigenschaft des Stoffes.*' What he witnessed in reality, however, was his own unconscious self. Hence the admonition to look into oneself, i.e., the internal light which God has kindled, in order to 'invent' ('*Quaeris multum et non invenies. Fortasse invenies cum non quaeris.*'). Hence the emphasis laid on the purity of the mind ('mens' in contrast to reason) and the congruity of the latter with the 'work.'"

"A vast literature on alchemy has been accumulated and a number of books produced. They all leave a feeling of frustration in the reader, none of them achieving more than a well illustrated catalogue of what appears to be yet another human folly. Jung's is the first (and largely successful) attempt at understanding it. It obviously succeeds: (1) in placing alchemy into an entirely new perspective in the history of science, medicine, theology and general human culture, (2) in explaining alchemical symbolism, hitherto a complete puzzle, by utilizing modern psychological analysis for the elucidation of an historical problem and—vice versa—making use of the latter for the advancement of modern psychology; and all this in a scholarly, well documented and scientifically unimpeachable exposition. If not the whole story of alchemy, he has tackled its 'mystery,' its '*Nachtseite,*' i.e., the problem most urgent and vexing to the historian. Engaged in this enormous task, he is prone to



belittle the role of alchemy as a precursor to science and its actual foundations in serious philosophical, notably neo-Platonic, speculation. Everything seems to be psychology and symbolism. Yet, however much these explain, they fail to explain everything. They may, if overemphasized, lead to a lopsided and un-historical interpretation of what remains after all one of the essential chapters in the history of science. With regard to Paracelsus, a glance into the memorable work of Darmstaedter who repeated the experiments of his hero, and also a consideration of the position of Van Helmont, will provide the necessary corrective. The latter dropped most of alchemical symbolism; he believed he had witnessed an instance of transmutation and extolled the virtues of the universal solvent, the 'Liquor Alcahest.'"

Silberer appears to be the most recent writer who relied mainly on Hitchcock. Yet Silberer was far from having been the first who knew and treasured *Alchemy and the Alchemists*. The Reverend J. B. Craven in 1910 published a study of Count Michael Maier, who was, as we saw above, the author of one of the three most important books (according to G. Heym) dealing with the "speculative interpretation" of the basic ideas of alchemy.<sup>99</sup> Craven relied chiefly on the interpretation given alchemy in A. E. Waite's *Hidden Church of the Holy Grail*, but also mentions the book of Hitchcock, along with another work, *A Suggestive Inquiry into the Hermetic Mystery*, of which I shall have more to say in a moment, since it is often placed in company with *Alchemy and the Alchemists*. The latter is described by Craven as a work which in "the year 1857 (second edition, 1865) was published in America . . . stated to be the production of General Ethan Allen Hitchcock. . . . This smaller work, though interesting and convincing, is much less ambi-

<sup>99</sup> J. B. Craven, *Count Michael Maier, Doctor of Philosophy and of Medicine, Alchemist, Rosicrucian, Mystic, 1568-1622, Life and Writings*, Kirkwall, William Peace & Son, 1910.

tious and able than the 'Suggestive Inquiry.' Its author shows diligence, not learning. It is not the work of a scholar, but of a mind pretty much taken up with one idea."<sup>100</sup>

Following an excellent summary of Hitchcock's ideas, Craven asks, "Why all this elaborated imagery?" He finds that "the answer seems not to be so clear. Hints are thrown out that the alchemists were a sort of men who, regarding the official religion of the Middle Ages with semi-contempt, desired to hand on a purer tradition, and for that purpose employed their chemical formulae. But this is not very satisfactorily established. It is certain enough of most of the alchemists of whom we have authentic life particulars, that they did waste time and money in the attempt which they certainly made for the discovery of material gold. That in these experiments they made many chemical discoveries is undoubted. The progress of the world is a warfare, and they had their part in it." Yet while Craven voiced some doubts, he also affirmed the central thesis of Hitchcock, declaring, "On the other hand, there is certainly good evidence to show that they had also an esoteric teaching to give to their more apt pupils. That from early ages secret colleges and societies existed in which this teaching was given is, it seems to me, an incontestable fact, and that many of the so-called sceptics of Italy, France, and Germany derived their views from such sources. The Hermetic Science had a secret moral teaching. . . ."<sup>101</sup>

A word must be said now concerning the *Suggestive Inquiry*, with which Hitchcock's book has often been associated. It was written by Mary Anne South (who later became Mrs. Alban Thomas Atwood) and was published anonymously in 1850 by the house of Trelawney Saunders in

<sup>100</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 15.

<sup>101</sup> *Idem*, p. 16. Two pages of well-chosen excerpts from Hitchcock serve to support his position.

London. The author's father, Thomas South, was a private scholar interested in "physical, psychologic and psychical science" and who, with his daughter, "experimented in mesmerism, spiritistic and psycho-physical phenomena."<sup>102</sup>

One difference between the views of Hitchcock and Mrs. Atwood is clear. Hitchcock approached the task much in the manner of the historian of ideas and, as we have seen, openly disclaimed any intention of reviving alchemy in any form. Mrs. Atwood, on the other hand, believed in alchemy as such and even invented a *modus operandi* for the alchemical process. An early twentieth-century reprint of Hitchcock's book attempted to transform it into an initiation into "alchemical science," but in order to accomplish this end, the editor had to interpolate more text matter than was in Hitchcock's original work.<sup>103</sup>

The writer who has discussed Hitchcock more than anyone else is Arthur Edward Waite, who wrote many works on alchemy, Christian mysticism, Rosicrucianism, etc., and who edited many texts of great importance in the history of alchemy. Again and again in his books, Waite refers at length to Hitchcock and, while recognizing the value of his work, he always finds it necessary to refute, in part, Hitchcock's thesis. This, in itself, is a measure of the importance of Hitchcock's ideas—for importance may be measured as much by the frequency and violence of attacks as by words of praise.

An extensive account of Hitchcock is to be found in a work published by Waite in 1888.<sup>104</sup> This work opens with

<sup>102</sup> From the introduction written by Walter L. Wilmshurst to the reprint edition, *A Suggestive Inquiry into the Hermetic Mystery, with a Dissertation on the More Celebrated of the Alchemical Philosophers, Being an Attempt towards the Recovery of the Ancient Experiment of Nature, a new Edition*, Belfast, William Tait, 1918. See further p. 79, *infra*.

<sup>103</sup> See the reprint by Clymer, described in Appendix Two, below.

<sup>104</sup> *Lives of Alchemystical Philosophers, Based on Materials Collected in 1815 and Supplemented by Recent Researches, with a Philosophical Demonstration of the True Principles of the Magnum Opus, or Great Work of Alchemical Re-construction, and some Account of the Spiritual Chemistry*, London, George Redway, 1888.

an introductory essay, beginning: "Those unfamiliar with modern alchemical criticism . . . will probably learn with astonishment that the opinions of competent judges are divided not only upon the methods of the mysterious Hermetic science, but upon the object of alchemy itself. That it is concerned with transmutation is granted, but with the transmutation of metals, or of any physical substance, into material gold, is strenuously denied by a select section of reputable students of occultism. The transcendental theory of alchemy which they expound is steadily gaining favour, though the two text-books which at present represent it are both out of print and both exceedingly scarce."<sup>105</sup> The "two text-books" are, of course, Mrs. Atwood's *Suggestive Inquiry* and Hitchcock's *Alchemy and the Alchemists*. The latter is described as "a small octavo volume of very considerable interest." Whereas Mrs. Atwood had placed a "psychic interpretation" on the "arcana of Hermetic typology . . . Mr. Hitchcock, by adopting a moral one, brought the general subject within the reach of the most ordinary readers, and attracted considerable attention in consequence. . . ."<sup>106</sup>

"The supreme and avowed object of every hierophant, as well as of every postulant and pretender, in the *ars magna* discovered by Hermes Trismegistus, has been commonly supposed to be the chemical manufacture of material gold from commercially inferior substances. On the other hand, Hitchcock, marshalling an impressive series of verbatim citation from writers of all ages and all nationalities undertakes to demonstrate that the concealed subject of every veritable adept is one only—namely, Man. . . ."<sup>107</sup>

Like others who have discussed Hitchcock, Waite quotes paragraph upon paragraph from *Alchemy and the Alchemists*,

<sup>105</sup> *Lives*, p. 9.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

since Hitchcock expressed himself so clearly, so well, and so succinctly that any attempted paraphrase would pale upon comparison with the original. Following the presentation of Hitchcock's views, Waite remarks: "As this interpretation [of Hitchcock's] is concerned chiefly with the conscience, I have called it the moral theory of alchemy. . . ." <sup>108</sup>

Waite, however, raises two arguments against Hitchcock's view, to show that it is inferior to his own: ". . . after careful researches, I believe myself to have discovered a true alchemical theory which will be equally acceptable to all schools of interpretation." <sup>109</sup> First, Waite calls attention to the fact that "Hitchcock, as a man of spiritual insight, could not fail to perceive that his explanatory method treated of the way only, and the formless light of an 'End,' which he could not or would not treat of, is, upon his own admission, continually glimmering before him." <sup>110</sup> Again: "In conclusion, Hitchcock states once more that his object is to point out the *subject* of alchemy. He does not attempt to make its practical treatment plain to the *end* of the sublime operation. It is, therefore, evident that he, at any rate, suspected the existence of more transcendent secrets which he distrusted his ability to discuss, and declined to speak of inadequately." <sup>111</sup>

In *Alchemy and the Alchemists*, Hitchcock admitted that he had doubts as to the *end* of the alchemical pursuit. "I have endeavoured," he wrote, "as the reader will please notice, to point out chiefly the *base*, or introduction to Alchemy; and have not been disposed to say much of the *end*, which, it is easy to see, must be developed in the experience of those who put themselves in a condition for it. If any man would realize the blessings of goodness, he must become

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

good; or if he would enjoy the advantages of truth, he must be true. There is no mystery in this, and yet this is good alchemy, so far as it goes."<sup>112</sup> But we also know that Hitchcock later believed he had a more exact view of the *end* of "moral" alchemy than merely the general purification of the soul in order to achieve immortal bliss. On 12 November 1866, he recorded in his diary: "I wish to say that I saw, a moment since, what the Philosopher's Stone signifies. I do not omit a statement of it from any desire to make it a mystery. My relation to it is still to be determined. A great number of passages in books of alchemy seem perfectly clear now. I have nowhere told what it is or even what I think it is. It is a kind of revelation, but, when seen, has an effect something like looking at the sun. Personally I have much to fear from it, before I can look forward to its benefits. I have nothing to unsay in my books, and have but this to add: that they are studies to reach the One Thing."<sup>113</sup> That he had, finally, become somewhat of a mystic himself is made clear from his last diary at a time when he wrote, "I am sick and almost unable to hold my pen." At this time, 1868, "His friends come in during these months and read to him his favorite books, and sometimes they join him in studying with the Rosicrucians and searching for the clews of alchemy with Eirenius Philalethes. And he often declares that the 'secret' is revealed to him more clearly than ever before."<sup>114</sup>

The second argument raised by Waite has to do with the relations between alchemy and practical chemistry. On this point, the truth or fallacy of either Hitchcock's moral theory or Mrs. Atwood's psychic theory must depend. Waite's

<sup>112</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 125.

<sup>113</sup> *Fifty Years* (ref. 13), pp. 482-3.

<sup>114</sup> Croffut, in *Fifty Years*, p. 484.

point is that the lives of the adepts bear witness against both. Hence, "My object in publishing this book is to establish the true nature of the Hermetic experiment by an account of those men who have undertaken it, and who are shewn by the plain facts of their histories to have been in search of the transmutation of metals. There is no need for argument; the facts speak sufficiently. It is not to the blind followers of the alchemists that we owe the foundation of chemistry; it is to the adepts themselves, to the illustrious Geber, to that grand master Basilius Valentinus, to Raymond Lully, the supreme hierophant. What they discovered will be found in the following pages."<sup>115</sup>

It must be admitted that Waite does actually make out a case for the fact that there was a physical aspect to "the Hermetic aim and *opus*," in a great many of the leading authors. He then, quite naturally asks "how a psychical or moral interpretation could be reasonably set upon the symbols and the ambitions of all the adepts," and replies that while such "interpretations can never be wholly exonerated from the charge of extravagance," yet "they may be to some extent justified by a consideration of the allegorical methods of the alchemists and by the nature of the Hermetic theory."<sup>116</sup>

"If the authors of the 'Suggestive Inquiry' and of 'Remarks on Alchemy and the Alchemists' had considered the lives of the symbolists, as well as the nature of the symbols, their views would have been very much modified; they would have found that the true method of Hermetic interpretation lies in a middle course; but the errors which originated with merely typological investigations were intensified by a consideration of the great alchemical theorem, which, *par excellence*, is one of universal development, which

<sup>115</sup> *Lives*, pp. 26-7.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

acknowledges that every substance contains undeveloped resources and potentialities, and can be brought outward and forward into perfection. They applied their theory only to the development of metallic substances from a lower to a higher order, but we see by their writings that the grand hierophants of Oriental and Western alchemy alike were continually haunted by brief and imperfect glimpses of glorious possibilities for man, if the evolution of his nature were accomplished along the lines of their theory.

“Eugenius Philalethes enlarges on the infinite capacity of our spiritual nature and on the power of our soul’s imagination. ‘She has an absolute power in miraculous and more than natural transmutations,’ and he clothes his doctrine of human evolution in the terminology of alchemical adepts.”<sup>117</sup>

Waite, therefore, preferred a kind of middle ground between the physical and the non-physical interpretations of alchemy. There are alchemical works of a “most transcendental” sort and others that “have exhausted language in emphatic declarations that their subject and their object are actual metallic gold.”<sup>118</sup> In other cases, there are plain references “to the possibilities which their theory revealed for other than the mineral kingdoms, a theory the truth of which they believed themselves to have demonstrated by accomplishing metallic transmutation. In this connection, it should be noticed that the philosophical stone was generally considered a universal medicine—a medicine for metals and man, the latter, of course, by inference.”<sup>119</sup>

If I have devoted so much space to Waite’s commentary on Hitchcock, the reason is that Waite was one of the most prolific writers of recent times on the subject of alchemy in

<sup>117</sup> *Lives*, pp. 30-1.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.



particular and mysticism in general. In addition to a host of historical and interpretive studies, he edited and translated a large number of important texts. Hence, there has been no writer of any worth on the subject of alchemy in the twentieth century who has not used Waite's books and thus been introduced to Hitchcock, even though he may not mention the latter by name.<sup>120</sup>

In a later work, Waite returned to a full-length discussion of Hitchcock's views.<sup>121</sup> Whereas in the previous book, he had set forth unambiguously his belief that transmutations of metals had actually occurred, he now states merely: "If we separate lying texts, like that which passes under the name of Artephius, those who accomplish the *Magnum Opus* can prolong their life, if they choose, to the fullest limit permitted by God and Nature, because the Medicine of Metals is a Medicine also of Man. There is no question, moreover, that the successful alchemist had the key of wealth in his hands, by the hypothesis of the Art, though the only supposed adept who left great treasures behind him was Pope John XXII, and his legend is fraudulent—like the tract ascribed to him. Now, natural longevity—not that there is evidence of its attainment by the aid of any elixir—and as much or as little of precious metal as Alchemy could produce in crucibles, according to its own shewing, are no adequate ground for postulating signal virtues as a prime condition in those who would attain the Art.

"On considerations like these the surface claim of the literature has an air of colossal pretence or alternatively conveys the suggestion that it is talking about one thing in

<sup>120</sup> For example, H. Stanley Redgrove, *Alchemy: Ancient and Modern*, London, William Rider & Son, 1911, discusses the non-physical interpretation of alchemy and Waite's refutation of it, referring to Waite, but not mentioning Hitchcock by name.

<sup>121</sup> *The Secret Tradition in Alchemy, its Development and Records*, London, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1926.

the terms of another and this is precisely what has been advanced concerning it. Out of this possibility also the present work arises. The transmutation of metals *per se* is no concern of mine; but it has been said that great secrets of the soul are hidden under veils of *Chemia*; that they are of a kind which called for concealment in those persecuting days when the literature came into being; and that even now—when things are proclaimed on the housetops which used to be whispered in crypts—it is impermissible to speak of them openly because they are liable to abuse. There is nothing in the last suggestion to inspire a moment's confidence, but it can be left to stand at its value because of the major claim, which is not of today altogether, of this or the last century. And when a question of the soul arises—whatever the issue may prove—it is not of my concern only but my part of life and its province. I have set myself therefore to collect and estimate such evidence—if any—as it may be possible to ascertain of that which lies behind the surface sense of alchemical literature through the ages of Christendom."<sup>122</sup>

Almost the whole of the third chapter of this book is devoted to an explication of Hitchcock's ideas, and further discussion of his writings occur throughout the work.<sup>123</sup> Hitchcock's interpretation is now called "mainly ethical in character," while it had earlier been called "moral." Although Waite still does not believe that Hitchcock's theory is valid, he notes that it is an "original contemplation," that Hitchcock's books "have become as excessively rare as they are sought by those who know," that Hitchcock produced "a not inconsiderable series of verbatim citations," and presented his conclusions with great "clearness and simplicity."<sup>124</sup> We may also note that Waite not only dis-

<sup>122</sup> *Secret Tradition*, pp. xx-i.

<sup>123</sup> See *Ibid.*, pp. 35-47, 70, 79, 85, 121, 208, 254, 338, 339, 352, 353.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 35-6, 41.

cusses *Alchemy and the Alchemists* but now adds an account of the "sequel" to it, *Swedenborg, a Hermetic Philosopher*,<sup>125</sup> a somewhat more mystical work than its predecessor.

Mrs. Atwood's curious book has had an equally curious history. When it was first issued in 1850, only a little less than a hundred copies had been sold when her father, Thomas South, who had underwritten the cost of publication, halted the sale of the book. The remainder of the edition was purchased by South for £250 and burned by him, in a bonfire on the lawn of his house, along with some poetry manuscripts. We are told, "The return of the outstanding copies of the book was gradually secured as far as possible, the authoress continuing for years afterwards to buy in any copy that came upon the market and often paying as much as ten guineas for it. Of those so bought in some were destroyed; a few she retained for her private use or that of her most intimate and understanding friends."<sup>126</sup> The *Suggestive Inquiry* was re-issued in 1918 and a second reprint was called for in 1920.<sup>127</sup> The editor of these two reprints, Walter Leslie Wilmshurst, tells us that Mrs. Atwood owned Hitchcock's book on alchemy and that her comment upon it "(inscribed by her in a copy of it) is that it is 'a moral theory of interpretation, leading to a religious conclusion; true and forcible, but without discernment of the Hermetic method or process of Divine assimilation.'"<sup>128</sup>

From the above account, it is plain that Hitchcock has been read by a number of writers who have, in turn, passed

<sup>125</sup> See Appendix Two, *infra*.

<sup>126</sup> *Suggestive Inquiry* (ref. 102, *supra*), W. L. Wilmshurst's introduction, p. 6.

<sup>127</sup> The 1920 edition, also published by William Tait in Belfast is described as a "revised edition," whereas that of 1918 was described as a "new edition." Both are discussed at length in Appendix III (pp. 395-7) of Waite's *Secret Tradition* (ref. 121, *supra*).

<sup>128</sup> Wilmshurst in *Suggestive Inquiry*, 1918 ed., p. [58].

his ideas along to their readers. Those who have been interested in Hitchcock's ideas on alchemy have ignored his military career and his relation to the conduct of Indian affairs, while those (Americans) who have been interested in the latter have dismissed his interest in alchemy as being a "curious" aspect of his personal make-up. Nowhere can one find the public career and private studies of Hitchcock described together. Waite, for example, who commented on Hitchcock at greater length than any other author, was unaware in 1926 of the partial publication of Hitchcock's diaries by Croffut in 1909; nor did he know any of Hitchcock's writings save *Alchemy and the Alchemists* and *Swedenborg, a Hermetic Philosopher*. Unaware that the former work had been twice reprinted, he stated erroneously, "To this day the two publications of Hitchcock have not been reprinted . . .," and even gave reasons to account for this lack of interest.<sup>129</sup>

Looking over the interpretive accounts of Hitchcock and the references to him,<sup>130</sup> one cannot but wonder how the writers upon alchemy came upon his works and how they learned the name of the anonymous author as so many seem to have done. The record shows clearly that Hitchcock has—directly and indirectly—influenced the writing concerning alchemy. Hence, the judgments concerning him by the Americans quoted above<sup>131</sup> are erroneous, because they knew nothing whatever of the literature of the history of science.

But, granting that the literature on the history of alchemy reflects concern over Hitchcock's views, so that his recognition by fellow students may be considered an accepted

<sup>129</sup> *Secret Tradition* (ref. 121, *supra*), p. 36.

<sup>130</sup> It should be borne in mind that this article is suggestive rather than exhaustive. I have included information about some who knew Hitchcock, but I have not attempted a systematic search of the literature for references to him.

<sup>131</sup> Croffut, Foreman, Bates; see pp. 36-8, *supra*.

historical fact, we must still face the question I have avoided until now, viz.—is there any truth to Hitchcock's "moral" or "ethical" theory of alchemy?

Hitchcock's theory is easy to understand and it would be pleasant to be able to report that the whole subject of alchemy is as understandable as that theory. I do not pretend to understand the whole subject of alchemy, nor even to be able to comprehend fully all of the recent interpretive studies on this subject. Many of the books on alchemy degenerate into obfuscatory mysticism that reminds us of nothing so much as the alchemical attempt to explain things on the principle of *obscurum per obscurius, ignotum per ignotius*.<sup>132</sup> Waite, who rejected Hitchcock's theory, believed that alchemical transmutations of metals had actually been produced. "I am of opinion, from the evidence in hand," he wrote, "that metallic transmutations did occur in the past. They were phenomena as rare as a genuine 'materialisation' of so-called spirits is generally considered at the present day among those believers in physical mediumship who have not been besotted by credulity and the glamour of a world of wonders. Like modern spiritualism, the isolated facts of veritable alchemy are enveloped in a crowd of discreditable trickery, and the trade of an adept in the past was as profitable, and as patronised by princes, as that of modern dealers with familiar spirits.

"But the fact of an occasional transmutation gives little reason to suppose that the *praxis alchemiae* in metallic subjects is ever likely to succeed with modern students of the *turba philosophorum*. The enigmas of the alchemists admit, as I have said, of manifold interpretations. Their

<sup>132</sup> I.e., "what is dark by what is darker still, what is unknown by what is still more unknown." Cf. Jung, *Integration* (ref. 94, *supra*), p. 205.

recipes are too vague and confused to be followed. They insist themselves that their art can only be learned by a direct revelation from God, or by the tuition of a master. Their fundamental secrets have not only been never revealed in their multitudinous treatises, but they scarcely pretend to reveal them, despite the magnificent assurances which are sometimes contained in their titles."<sup>133</sup> As a physical scientist, I must confess to a feeling of utter frustration at such a sentiment, but that is as nought compared to the conclusion: "The dream of the psycho-chemistry is a grand and sublime scheme of absolute reconstruction by means of the Paracelsian *Orizon Aeternitatis*, or super-celestial virtue of things, the divinisation, or deification, in the narrower sense, of man the triune by an influx from above. It supposes that the transmutation or transfiguration of man can be accomplished while he is on this earth and in this body, which then would be magically draped in *splendoribus sanctorum*. The Morning Star is the inheritance of every man, and the woman of the future will be clothed with the sun, and Luna shall be set beneath her feet. The blue mantle typifies the mystical sea, her heritage of illimitable vastness. These marvels may be really accomplished by the cleansing of the two-fold human tabernacle, the holy house of life, and by the progressive evolution into outward and visible manifestation of the infinite potencies within it.

"In the facts and possibilities of mesmerism and in the phenomena of ecstatic clairvoyance, in ancient magic and modern spiritualism, in the doctrines and experiences of religious regeneration, we must seek the *raison d'être* of the sublime dream of psycho-chemistry—that, namely, there is a change, a transmutation, or a new birth, possible to embodied man which shall manifestly develop the esoteric potencies of his spiritual being, so that the flesh itself shall

<sup>133</sup> *Lives* (ref. 104), p. 34.

be purged, clarified, glorified, and clothed upon by the essential light of the divine pneuma."<sup>134</sup>

We know much more about alchemy at present than was known in Hitchcock's day; especially, we know many more alchemical texts, and we also know somewhat more of the alchemists' lives. I do not believe that Hitchcock's thesis can stand in its original sense, because of the evidence accumulated that so many of the authors of the treatises on alchemy did actually make experiments. Silberer, who accepted the basic notions of Hitchcock, refers to alchemical experimenters as "sloppers" and indicated "that there was a higher alchemy—it was furthermore regarded as the true alchemy—which has the same relation to practical chemistry that freemasonry has to practical masonry."<sup>135</sup> There is no question, however, but what alchemists did make experiments, so that Hitchcock's thesis as expounded by Silberer cannot be universally applied with success. On the other hand, there is equally no doubt whatever that a considerable portion of the alchemical corpus—even when most physical—deals with non-physical matters. Hitchcock's theory that all alchemy was moral must, therefore, be modified to a theory that a considerable part of alchemy was moral, if his theory is to be at all consistent with the facts. As a partial, then, if not a complete theory of alchemy, it is certainly plausible.

If we accept Hitchcock's view, we can then explain why it is that alchemical writings present non-chemical as well as chemical content. As Jung points out, "The ancients knew what chemical processes were; therefore, they [the alchemists] knew that what they practised was at least no ordinary chemistry." Furthermore, throughout most of history, "every insight into the nature of chemistry and its

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 36-7.

<sup>135</sup> *Problems of Mysticism* (ref. 87), p. 173.

limitations was still barred to them, so that they were as much entitled to hope as those who dreamt of flying—and whose late followers achieved it after all. We must not underestimate the satisfaction of the undertaking, of the adventure, of the *quaerere* (search) and of the *invenire* (discovery). It could last as long as the alchemist's methods appeared significant to him. Now, there was nothing at that time that could have persuaded him of the senselessness of his chemical operations; and, besides, he could look back upon a long tradition that bore not a few testimonies from those who claimed to have arrived at the wonderful result. Nor was the matter entirely without promise, since here and there, on the side, a few useful inventions did emerge from the labours in the chemical laboratory. As a precursor of chemistry, alchemy had a sufficient reason for existence. Even if alchemy had consisted of an endless series of—let us say—meaningless and fruitless chemical experiments, we should still have no more cause to wonder at the perseverance of the alchemists than at the quixotic attempts of mediaeval doctors and pharmacologists. The decisive point is, however, that we are called upon to deal, not with chemical experimentations as such, but with something resembling psychic processes expressed in pseudo-chemical language.”<sup>136</sup>

A balanced judgment is provided by Sherwood Taylor, who writes, “To treat alchemy as no more than plain material chemistry is undoubtedly an error; to treat it as no more than an interior mental process is no less.”<sup>137</sup> While we “must, in fact, allow a primary practical tradition, but there is no reason to deny the existence of a school of mystical alchemists whose purpose was self-regeneration. It is, indeed, quite evident that the alchemical terminology was

<sup>136</sup> *Integration* (ref. 94), p. 210.

<sup>137</sup> *The Alchemists* (ref. 24), p. 229.



used in purely mystical writings as early as the sixteenth century. Jacob Boehme's works, for example, are certainly mystical, and they use the words nitre, sulphur, mercury, salt, etc., to denote spiritual entities existent in man as well as in the great world; and anyone who regards Thurneysser's symbols for the three last named can easily understand the possibility of so doing. No one, however, could mistake Boehme's work for alchemy; he is obviously wholly sundered from the laboratory."<sup>138</sup>

Hitchcock was, to a considerable degree, influenced by Jacob Boehme (or "Behmen" as he was often called), and noted that "Schelling declared, in his old age, that he found more life in the writings of Jacob Behmen, than in those of all the (so-called) Philosophers."<sup>139</sup> Boehme was a latter-day alchemist; he made no experiments and his writings are plainly and purely mystical. There is no question, therefore, that Boehme used the language of alchemy in a purely figurative or symbolic or Hitchcockian sense. In the time of Boehme, however, the "inner decay of alchemy" had fully begun and "many alchemists deserted their retorts and crucibles to devote themselves exclusively to Hermetic philosophy. It was then that the chemist parted company with the follower of Hermes. Chemistry became a natural science, while Hermetic philosophy lost its contact with the firm ground of empiricism and climbed beyond itself to allegories and speculations that were as bombastic as they were empty of content, and that were kept alive only by memories of a better age."<sup>140</sup> Of course, the decay was not

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 227-8.

<sup>139</sup> Hitchcock's note in the sale of the catalogue of his library, Appendix One, *infra*, p. 7. 51. In *Alchemy and the Alchemists*, p. 124, Hitchcock wrote, "After this great German philosopher had exhausted all sorts of recognized treatises upon philosophy, he confessed that he found more 'fulness and great heart-language' in Jacob Behmen, than in all of them put together; and Jacob Behmen was an alchemist. . . ."

<sup>140</sup> Jung, *Integration* (ref. 94), p. 205.

immediate. The alchemical beliefs of Newton and Boyle in the seventeenth century could still embody a physical doctrine that had a definite appeal to mystical or deeply religious sentiment. And even in the eighteenth century, as practical a chemist as Hermann Boerhaave could extol the merits of alchemy in a nostalgic manner as follows: "To speak my mind freely, I have not met any writers on natural philosophy, who treat of the nature of bodies, and the manner of changing them, so profoundly, or explain'd them so clearly, as those called alchemists. To be convinc'd of this, read carefully . . . Raymond Lully . . . [&] you will find him with the utmost clearness and simplicity, relating experiments, which explain the nature and action of animals, vegetables and fossils. . . . We are exceedingly obliged to them for the immense pains they have been at, in discovering and handing to us, so many difficult physical truths."<sup>141</sup>

The pre-Boehme alchemists certainly produced a considerable mass of practical chemistry, even if we cannot make sense of all their procedures or recipes. This being the case, we must ask how it was possible for Hitchcock to be misled as to the practical nature of the labors of the alchemists.

The answer is twofold. In the first place, Hitchcock was, as we have seen, of a theological or metaphysical turn of mind and he quite naturally, therefore, sought the answer to the "big questions" of human existence and destiny, of the soul and the spirit of man, everywhere. When he got the idea that questions of this sort were part of the corpus of alchemical writing, he ignored all else. He was not particularly interested in the history of science as such, nor did he have any special concern with the rise of chemistry. What attracted him, therefore, was the non-chemical side of

<sup>141</sup> *Elementa Chymiae*, translated by Peter Shaw, 3rd edition, London, 1753, I, 200, quoted by Pagel, *Isis*, XXXIX (1948), 44.

alchemy and he found, in his extensive reading, signs aplenty that the alchemical works dealt with much more than chemistry. With a singleness of mind that characterizes most men who have strong insights, he saw traces of the true hermetic tradition, as he saw it, in everything he read. His reading and studies, and his writings, became a vast hermeneutic exercise as he found traces of a secret hermetic fraternity, much like the Freemasons, stretching from distant antiquity to the present. Dante, Shakespeare, Spencer, Spinoza, and Swedenborg were "adepts," and he even believed that Bishop Berkeley's voluminous writings on the medicinal "virtues of tar water" were produced "in the character of a Hermetic philosopher. By "Tar Water," Hitchcock pointed out, "understand the darkened spirit of man, which is to be cleansed."<sup>142</sup> That this enthusiastic reading of the hermetic tradition into too vast a gamut of literature (even including the "Thousand and One Nights") greatly weakens Hitchcock's position, no one can deny.

Another factor in conditioning Hitchcock's views was the character of the age in which he lived. Man, it was supposed, is a rational animal and had been classified as such by Linnaeus: *Homo sapiens*. It was the voice of reason that was the final arbiter of judgment and the improvement of the world lay in the extension of reason to all domains of human activity. This was the inheritance from the "Age of the Enlightenment," and it had found expression in the very title of the book written by Hitchcock's grandfather, *Reason the Only Oracle of Man*. From the point of view of "reasonableness," the baffling experience of reading alchemical treatises can be resolved in one of only two ways:

<sup>142</sup> See the sale catalogue of Hitchcock's library, Appendix One, *infra*, p. 98. See also, Hitchcock's *Alchemy and the Alchemists*, p. 106.

either the authors were frauds and impostors or they were not writing about chemistry. Hitchcock found a quality of sincerity in the works he read that precluded the first alternative. Hence, the only possibility that remained was that the subject of alchemy was not really the chemistry of metals or the art of medicine, but rather something totally different that it was his privilege to uncover.

Today, however, we are in better circumstances for understanding alchemy than would have been possible in Hitchcock's day. Psycho-analysis and academic psychology have revealed the irrational component of the human mind and the idea that man guided exclusively by his reason and experience seems hopelessly naive. We are, therefore, not so puzzled to find an Isaac Newton simultaneously exploring alchemy and the prophetic books of the Bible and setting forth the rationalized mechanism of the heavens and the earth. So, too, we may recognize that the alchemists were working at a kind of chemical problem and at the same time exploring in a mystical fashion the characteristics of the human soul. The dual nature of alchemy is revealed by the illustrations even more than the text. We find depicted the actual instruments used in chemical operations, such as distillation, and also symbolic figures of the most fantastic sort: a king on his throne about to eat the head off his son's shoulder; or a two-headed hermaphroditic corpse, with a single crown on both heads, placed in an open stone coffin (sometimes with a cloud, and the rain just beginning to fall); a green lion about to devour the sun, and the like. The symbolic representation of alchemy is often so frankly sexual as to be "unacceptable in a modern published work."<sup>143</sup> One of the frequently encountered symbols is a "marriage"—Sol ("our gold") impregnating Luna ("our

<sup>143</sup> Sherwood Taylor, *The Alchemists*, p. 148.

silver") in order to generate the Philosopher's Stone—and so on. The extensive use of sexual symbols and images, as well as those of birth and death, explains why the alchemical works are today of such great psychiatric interest, since the very same symbols and images seem to appear in the dreams and fantasies of neurotic patients.

Probably, therefore, we can see why in antiquity, the middle ages, and the Renaissance, the unity of alchemy could be maintained. No one knew the limits of physical science and, largely, the separation of physical science from other aspects of the creative human experience had not yet occurred. Alchemy could still have at once a psychological or theological content and a physical content. Thus, the alchemist was performing his laboratory manipulations under the assumption that the changes in matter "are analogous [at least symbolically] to the changes in living beings and especially in man. It is, in fact, an understanding of nature in terms of life. And this is the reason why the symbols of alchemy are so widely applicable that certain authors have considered them to be merely a cover for the description of some mystical system by means of which, not the metals, but man was to be perfected."<sup>144</sup>

In short, most writers seem to agree today that the classical alchemists were actually gold-seekers who hoped to develop a chemistry of metals that, while inconsistent with the principles of chemistry of the past two centuries, was not outside the bounds of possibility in terms of the knowledge of antiquity, the middle ages, or the Renaissance. At the same time, the alchemists hoped to apply in a symbolic way the kind of process used in the laboratory as a means for improving man, for purifying his soul, for bringing him into a closer harmony with Nature and with

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

God. Any explanation of alchemy based wholly on the chemical part is incomplete and, similarly, a neglect of the chemical part is misleading. Hitchcock, who called attention to the non-chemical aspect of the subject was, therefore, guilty of one-sidedness and presented as a complete picture what can be, at most, one of the two complementary aspects of the subject. Yet, to him is due an important place for having appreciated that alchemy was not concerned with metals only, but also with man himself.

Rather than dismissing Hitchcock's alchemical and hermetic investigations as curious "volumes on abstruse and esoteric subjects" or "literary curiosities," we should begin to realize their importance in revealing a side of alchemy that has proved baffling to many investigators. Hitchcock was not the only one, as we have seen, who in the mid-nineteenth century recognized that alchemy was not alone a form of practical chemistry. Yet all who have examined the subject appear to agree that Hitchcock's ideas were original with him, rather than being derivative.

That Hitchcock's works were read, and that they influenced—directly or indirectly—recent students of the subject, cannot be denied. It is difficult to think of many mid-nineteenth century Americans who produced so original an historical conception and, surely, in the realm of speculative thought there was no other military man to match him. He deserves a more complete treatment than this essay affords. In particular, his concern with alchemy needs to be explored against the background of interest in alchemy and magic in America at the time. We would like to know more of his relations with Hawthorne,<sup>145</sup> who was also interested in such topics, and with Edgar Allen Poe.<sup>146</sup> It is proper

<sup>145</sup> See page 54, *supra*.

<sup>146</sup> For instance, did Hitchcock have any influence on Poe, or was the concern of both with esoteric subjects merely a reflection of the times?

that Hitchcock should be at least mentioned in compendia of American thought. Surely, it is not too much to hope for a further exploration of Hitchcock's ideas, their genesis, growth, effect, and relation to the intellectual interests of the day, and the eventual production of a book-length study on Hitchcock in which his ideas may be stressed rather than slighted.

## APPENDIX ONE

*Hitchcock's Alchemical Library*

The following facsimile reprint of the sale catalogue of Hitchcock's library is of interest for a variety of reasons. In the first place, of course, it indicates the nature and extent of his acquaintance with the primary sources. It will be noted that the catalogue contains manuscripts as well as books, including works in English, French, Latin, and German. In the second place, although ostensibly a sale catalogue, this pamphlet contains, in the many comments placed under books, an introduction to Hitchcock's theory of alchemy. Thus: "By gold, understand Truth," "By salt, understand Spirit," "By Wealth, understand Wisdom," and so on. Hitchcock also inserted comments about modern writers, e.g., under Figuier (see *infra*, Appendix Three) he wrote, "This work, by Figuier, may serve to show how an incompetent man may write on this subject, with the principles of which he was unacquainted."

The facsimile has been made from the copy in the Harvard Library (call number: 24211.10\*), which was received in "1862, Dec. 31, gratis." This catalogue is listed in George L. McKay, *American Book Auction Catalogues 1713-1934* (New York, The New York Public Library, 1937) as no. 964 (p. 100) and is dated 24 November 1862; it is described by McKay, from the copy in the New York Public Library, as "Hitchcock, General Ethan Allen. Library. Bangs. 32 p. 928 lots," and no hint is given that the books to be sold dealt with alchemy.

The choice of Bangs, Merwin & Co. as sellers was most appropriate, since an auction at Bangs provided Hitchcock with his first book on alchemy. (See Appendix Four, *infra*.) It would be interesting to know who bought Hitchcock's library on alchemy and where it is at the present time, supposing that it has been kept together as a unit according to Hitchcock's desire.



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