

How Poets Think

The way we refine crude oil into gasoline and road tar is not pretty, and I hesitate using the word refine out of fear that a listener will know how nasty the process really is, or be reminded of how filthy we are making our air and water with the “refined” product. I considered trying to shift the emphasis to refining gold – all the obvious stuff about the more you refine it the purer it becomes, the more like itself.

But truth keeps interfering with my poetry. You can't refine gold without some pretty bad chemicals; even a simple fire assay is going to need nitric acid before the end, even if the total process is not as dirty. Not to mention the tiny amounts of gold this is used for, when Wohlwill can handle a brick or more, although to less purity.

So I decided I wouldn't talk much about refining anything, because in the back of my mind I would be aware of how polluting to the rest of the world it is to refine any significant gold, or basically any amount of petroleum. When I let that happen, it always shows in how people respond. Instead, I have been thinking that distillation might be more palatable.

Problem here is the significant prejudices listeners may bring to a metaphor that touches on how alcohol is produced. Not the process, you understand, but the folklore of alcohol itself. If I lead off with a warning not to concentrate too much on the product being alcohol, I can't come up with how I can lead the listener where I'm hoping he'll go. He'll already be dismissing any power the metaphor has because I told him to myself.

The distillation process has its points though. I start with a mixture in my Florence flask, but I only want a specific part of that mixture. I heat the mixture, it changes phases from liquid to vapor, and if I differentially cool that vapor so that the multiple constituents undergo a phase change back to a liquid and collect the distillates from different points in the column, I can end up with amazingly pure distillates. So alcohol has that going for it.

I thought about this some more over the holiday and I'm coming closer to how I might make it work. Even though few of these folks truly know how to work a moonshine still, I bet every one of them knows they exist, and several know who to buy moonshine from. That might let me slide distillation in through a back door. I can speak knowledgeably on running a still – I'd give a wink and a nod while insisting I'm just talking from what I've heard around these parts. I'd make it correct enough and in just enough detail that they couldn't run out and make some brew but they would believe that I could if I wanted. I'd bring this around to stress the removal of the bad stuff in the foreshots and the feints, make a metaphor out of how when we begin to work on ourselves we uncover some ugly stuff first. Make mention that the major killer is methanol, and how we get rid of that by letting go of it, not holding onto it, because we know it isn't good for anybody. Have to temper being accurate with going too deep in the mundane. Have to avoid overworking the metaphor – it's a good one, but For example, I could say that even the purest of whiskey still has some compounds other than ethanol, and the unique combination of those, in the right proportions, separates Scotch from rum, and good bourbon from bad. But not in a single day; might be a good run to make in three or four Chautauquas.