FRITZ HABER

invented a catalyst to mine cubic miles

of nitrogen from air. He fixed the gas

with iron chips; German factories coming

on stream, pouring out tons of ammonia,

fertilizers, months before the sea-lines

to Chilean saltpeter and guano were cut,

just in time to stock powder, explosives

for the Great War. Haber knew how catalysts

work, that a catalyst is not innocent, but

joins in, to carve off the top or undermine

some critical hill, or, reaching molecular

arms for the partners in the most difficult

stage of reaction, brings them near, eases

the desired making and breaking of bonds.

The catalyst, reborn, rises to its match-

making again; a cheap pound of Haber's

primped iron could make a million pounds

of ammonia. Geheimrat Haber of the Kaiser

Wilhelm Institute thought himself a catalyst

for ending the War; his chemical weapons

would bring victory in the trenches; burns

and lung cankers were better than a dum-dum

bullet, shrapnel. When his men unscrewed

the chlorine tank caps and green gas spilled

over the dawn field at Ypres he carefully

took notes, forgot his wife's sad letters.

After the War Fritz Haber dreamed in Berlin

of mercury and sulfur, the alchemists' work

hastening the world, changing themselves.

He wondered how he could extract the millions

of atoms of gold in every liter of water,

transmuting the sea to the stacked bullion

of the German war debt. And the world, well,

it was changing; in Munich one could hear

the boots of brown-shirted troopers, one paid

a billiard marks for lunch. A catalyst again,

(Continued, stanza break)

that's what he would find, and found - himself,

in Basel, the foreign town on the banks of his

Rhine, there he found himself, the Protestant

Geheimrat Haber, now the Jew Haber, in the city

of wily Paracelsus, a changed and dying man.