MODES OF REPRESENTATION

If you look in old chemistry books
you see
all those line cuts
of laboratory experiments
in cross-section.
The sign for water
is a containing line, the meniscus
(which rarely curls up the walls of the beaker),
and below it
a sea
of straight horizontal dashes
carefully unaligned vertically.
Every cork or rubber stopper
is cutaway.
You can see inside
every vessel
without reflections, without getting wet,
and explore every kink
in a copper condenser.
Flames are outlined cypresses
or a tulip at dawn,
and some Klee arrows
help to move gases and liquids the right way.
Sometimes a disembodied hand
holds up a flask.
Sometimes there is an unblinking observer's eye.
Around 1920
photoengraving
became economically feasible
and took over.
Seven-story distillation columns
(polished up for the occasion),
like giant clarinets,
rose in every text, along
with heaps of chemicals, eventually in color.
Suddenly
water and glass, all reflection
became difficult.
One had to worry about light,
about the sex
and length of dress or cut of suit
of the person sitting at the controls of this impressive instrument.
Car models and hairstyles

dated the books more
than the chemistry in them.
Around that time
teachers noted a deterioration
in the students' ability to follow
a simple experimental procedure.