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Marcel Duchamp:
A Reconciliation of Opposites

Any attempt to establish a formula, a key, or some other type of guiding principle by which to assess or in other ways interpret the artistic production of Marcel Duchamp would be—in the humble opinion of the present author—an entirely futile endeavor. Of course, this is due largely to the fact that by the time he had reached his twenty-fifth birthday, after a few years of experimenting in a variety of prevailing artistic styles—from Intimism and Fauvism to Futurism and Cubism—Duchamp adopted a highly individualistic approach to the art-making process, one wherein each creative effort was conceived with the intention of consciously defying convenient categorization. “It was always the idea of changing,” he later explained, of “not repeating myself.” “Repeat the same thing long enough,” he told an interviewer, “and it becomes taste,” a qualitative judgment he had repeatedly identified as “the enemy of Art,” that is, as he put it, art with a capital A.

Although Duchamp generally accepted whatever anyone had to say about his work—in accordance with his belief that the artist played only a “mediumistic” role between the art object and the public—we cannot help but suspect that he would not willingly have lent his approval to the more arcane and convoluted interpretations of his work. When asked once for his opinion about the various analyses that had been suggested for the Large Glass, for example, he responded that each writer “gives his particular note to his interpretation, which is interesting,” he added, “but only interesting when you consider the man who wrote the interpretation.”

If Duchamp felt this way about the interpretation of a single work, we can only assume that he would not have lent his enthusiastic support to any artist, critic, or art historian who wished to establish a systematic approach to an understanding of his complete oeuvre. Indeed, a few years before his death, he told Pierre Cabanne that his approach differed from that of his contemporaries because he steadfastly refused to accept any form of systematization. “I’ve never been able to contain myself enough,” he said, “to accept established formulas, to copy, or to be influenced.” Yet for those
background, and searched for a Jewish name, but found none that tempted him sufficiently. Then, he claims, the idea suddenly came to him: “Why not change sex? It was much simpler.” So, he took on the name “Rose,” which, he explained, was a particularly awful name in 1920, to which he added the punning surname “Sélay,” and had himself, or, rather, herself, photographed by Man Ray on several occasions, posed in a rather affected manner, sporting samples of the fashionable, though perhaps somewhat conservative clothing of the day (fig. 2.1).

Although it has not been previously noted in the vast literature on Duchamp, Rose's appearance may have been styled after that of a character played by his favorite film personality in these years, Charlie Chaplin. I am here specifically referring to Chaplin's A Woman, a film Duchamp may very well have seen shortly after his arrival in America in the summer of 1915. In the most famous scene of the film (fig. 2.2), Chaplin impersonates a woman in order to gain entrance to the boardinghouse where his girlfriend lives, and most of the comic routines that follow are based on the predicaments that arise as a result of his male-female identity. Of course the idea of men dressing up as women in order to set up comic situations had been explored in the theater on many earlier occasions, from Shakespearean times to the Comédie Française. While these sources may help to explain Rose's affected manner and poorly disguised identity, they do not really help to reveal why Duchamp chose to adopt a female persona in the first place. If we should wish to explore the possible psychological motivations behind this role-playing identity—as many already have for Duchamp—we could readily base our studies on a number of complicated Freudian and Jungian theories, from an unconscious expression of bisexuality to man's primordial desire to combine and unify the sexes. Rather than investigate the possible significance of such universal principles, however, let us for the moment look briefly to Duchamp's earlier work, where, to a certain extent, themes of sexual identity and opposition had already been explored.

Long before the concept of opposition can be understood as a factor that may have contributed to the theoretical foundation of Duchamp's unique modus operandi, it can be seen to have emerged from its more literal employment in his early work. Themes of sexual opposition, for example, are sharply juxtaposed in a number of drawings he prepared in his early

who feel they still need some kind of formula to unlock the mysterious message underlying the enigmatic productions of this highly provocative and influential artist, Duchamp provided a few comforting words of advice: “There is no solution,” he has often been quoted as saying, “because there is no problem.”

As often as I have personally sought solace in those very words, I cannot help but regard Duchamp's systematic avoidance of repetition as a system in and of itself, an ideological commitment to the art-making process that inevitably results in certain philosophical contradictions, or another way of putting it, a system that by its very nature creates problems with no apparent need for solutions. It may have been Duchamp's instinctive quest for an alternative method of expression that led him to develop a body of work that can be seen to parallel a series of essentially opposing themesthes- that, when carefully analyzed, reveal a consistent duality of compatible opposition. Whether consciously or unconsciously, by the early 1920s he had already established the major tenets of this working method, exploring and reexploring themes of opposition that would prevail in his work for the rest of his life. Before investigating the possible philosophical origins of this approach, let us examine a few selected examples from Duchamp's work and determine, if possible, exactly when and why this method became so thoroughly entrenched at the very root of his artistic sensibilities.

The most outstanding example from Duchamp's work is the creation of Rose Sélay, a compatible fusion, or, to employ the term used in the title of this essay, a reconciliation of opposing sexual identities. Rose or Rose, as Duchamp would soon begin calling her, was born fully mature in New York in 1920. She was not created by Duchamp's hands, in the fashion that an academic sculptor might carve an Olympian goddess. Rather, like Athena, who sprang forth fully formed from the head of Zeus, Rose came from Duchamp's forehead, or, to be more accurate, she emerged directly from his cerebral facilities. Unlike the Greek deity, however, Duchamp's creation was not designed to exhibit her beauty (although perhaps it is no coincidence that Athena served as the ancient patroness of learning and the arts). But this, of course, was not the reason why Duchamp invented a female alter ego. "I wanted to change my identity," he told an interviewer. Initially, as he later explained, he simply wanted to change his religious
Duchamp as Rose


Chaplin, A Woman, 1915. (Francis M. Naumann.)
twentyes to serve as humorous illustrations for popular French journals. In several of these drawings, men and women are cast in stereotypical roles, guises that are meant to emphasize their opposing sexual and sociological identities. The man appearing in a drawing entitled Conversation (fig. 2.3), for example, is shown leaning longingly over a partition, in quest of the woman seated at the table, while she (even though we cannot see her face) maintains an erect posture, indicating, perhaps, that her pretense to dignity prevents her from warmly accepting the man’s advances. In another drawing from this period (fig. 2.4), a deserted husband pushes a baby carriage in the company of his melancholic, bored, and somewhat disheveled wife, who is quite obviously pregnant for at least a second time. The inscription Dimanches [Sundays] was likely derived from a series of poems by Jules Laforgue bearing the same title, wherein Sunday is a day of the week characterized by its monotony and boredom.7

These stereotypical models of male and female behavior are provided with even more specific, symbolic identities in a painting of 1910 entitled Paradise (fig. 2.5), where, judging from the title, the nude figures of a man and woman were meant to represent Adam and Eve, the archetypical models of male and female identity. In the following year, this nude couple reappears, forming the prominent figurative motif in a painting entitled Young Man and Girl in Spring (fig. 2.6), a highly provocative image that has been the subject of numerous speculative interpretations. The work was painted in the spring of 1911, at a time when Duchamp’s favorite sister, Suzanne, was preparing to marry a Rouen pharmacist, Charles Desmares. When the couple married that year, Duchamp presented this small canvas as a wedding gift. Since the painting was given to the couple but dedicated only to Suzanne, Arturo Schwarz sees the painting as an affirmation of Duchamp’s "unconscious incestuous love," an interpretation he then extends to the hidden symbolism of the Large Glass.8

Schwarz’s interpretation relies on the assumption that Suzanne’s marriage was an unconscious betrayal of her brother’s incestuous affection. Duchamp, on the other hand, may very well have regarded the marriage of his sister as a welcome event. In this light, the two outstretched nude figures could have been intended to represent Suzanne and her future husband, seen in nothing less than the guise of the world’s first lovers, Adam and Eve, who in the painting appear to be frolicking in the Garden of Eden, leaping upward toward the lower branches of a tree located in the center of the composition, which, in this context, would represent the newlyweds reaching for the forbidden fruit. Once this interpretation has been accepted, a far less esoteric symbolism can be seen to emerge from the abstract forms in the painting’s complex landscape; the form of a child encased in a circular orb in the center of the composition, for example, may have been intended as a reference to successful procreation, while the pink tonality given to the various circular forms in the background may refer to the cherry blossoms of spring—the traditional season of lovers—a subject suggested by the painting’s title and explored by Duchamp in an earlier landscape. Moreover, this tonality may have been designed in order to invoke an association with the most conventional and age-old symbol of love: a large, geometrically simplified human heart, its upper lobes defined by the outspread branches of the centrally placed tree and its lower portion formed by the two semicircular arching black lines that converge at the base of the picture.

During the fall and winter of 1911-1912, Duchamp appears to have fully absorbed the stylistic dictates of Cubism, the emergent artistic movement he later claims to have accepted more "as a form of experiment, than conviction."9 With some variation, however, the complex fragmentation and indeterminate spatial structure common to Analytic Cubism dominates the general appearance of the majority of paintings from this period, a stylistic progression that culminates in the production of his most famous painting, Nude Descending a Staircase (fig. 5.9). As important as this particular work may have been in helping to establish Duchamp’s reputation on both sides of the Atlantic, it was not the painting itself but rather its subsequent history that can now be seen to have had the most significant impact on the future development of his work, a development that would not only represent a radical departure from his own earlier work, but would also represent a definitive break from the previously established and accepted conventions of the art-making process.

It should be noted, of course, that I am not the first to notice that a major transition took place in Duchamp’s work during this period. Walter Arensberg, for example, the poet and wealthy collector who befriended Duchamp during his first trip to America and went on to assemble the single largest
2.3 Conversation, 1909. Pen and ink and wash on paper, 12 x 9 3/4 in. (The Museum of Modern Art, New York; gift of Mary Sisler; photo Geoffrey Clements.)

2.4 Dimanches [Sundays], 1909. Conte pencil, brush, and “splatter” on paper, 24 x 19 1/2 in. (The Museum of Modern Art, New York; gift of Mary Sisler; photo Geoffrey Clements.)

2.5 Paradis [Paradise], 1910-1911. Oil on canvas, 46 1/16 x 60 9/16 in. (Philadelphia Museum of Art; The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection.)
...from having to conform to the accepted styles of the day, allowing him to pursue his individual interests, in whatever direction they might take him.

Duchamp withdrew his *Nude* in April of 1912, the very month when, from the Independents Exhibition, that he completed two drawings featuring a king and queen surrounded by animated movement of its pieces. The principal components of a chess game and the production of a major work painted during the drawings culminated in the course of the next month, *The King and Queen Surrounded by Swift Nudes*.

In July, Duchamp traveled to Munich, where subject and there happened to a theme, *The Bride Stripped Bare by the Bachelors*, a moving iconographic sequence, a work whose movements the complete title acknowledges is devoted to a bachelor in quest of his disrobing bride. It was during the summer of 1912, then, in Munich, that Duchamp domesticated a chess "king" and "queen" with their counterparts, an alluring "Bride" and her "Sexual" bachelor, these like the black and white pieces in a chess game, a theme that he had already investigated in an earlier series of drawings and paintings. More than simply concentrating on subjects of thematic opposition, however, the works produced in Munich mark the beginning of a systematic effort to develop an iconographic content unique to his own work, one that harbored meaning only with Duchamp himself, and self-reflexive.

Whereas it may be relatively easy to rationalize the artist developing a rejection of completely new attitude toward his work immediately after the *Nude*, it has been more difficult to explain that transition took place three months later in Munich. It may have been the physical separation from his brothers and Parisian colleges that provided the necessary detachment required for the freedom of mind to develop his own ideas. It may also have been, as some have centered as they were then in Munich, influenced Duchamp’s thought by the Bavarian capital seems to have provided the ideal atmosphere in which Duchamp succeeded in severing all artistic ties, not only with concurrent stylistic trends but also with his own earlier work. “My stay in Munich,” he later reported, “was the scene of my complete liberation.”

This statement, combined with the fact that he had immersed himself in the center of a German-speaking environment, may be enough to suggest that it was during the time of his stay in Munich that Duchamp first discovered the writings of Max Stirner (1806-1856), an obscure nineteenth-century German philosopher whose anarchistic theories may have provided the most extensive theoretical basis for Duchamp’s newfound artistic freedom. When he was asked later in life to identify a specific philosopher or philosophical theory that was of special significance to his work, he cited Stirner’s only major book—*Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*—which was originally published in 1845 but appeared in a French edition in 1900 under the title *L’unique et sa propriété*, and later in English as *The Individual and His Own*. In this highly provocative book, Stirner outlined a controversial treatise in defense of philosophic egoism, wherein, based on his observation that all people possess unique qualities unto themselves, he championed the right of the individual to assume a superior position in society. To this end, he rejected all systematic philosophies and launched a bitter attack on all levels of social and political authority. Stirner regarded the state as the supreme enemy of the individual, and he supported its destruction by rebellion rather than revolution, a position that has linked his philosophical beliefs to existentialism and nihilism.

The one work Duchamp produced that he said was specifically influenced by Stirner’s philosophy was his *Three Standard Stoppages of 1913-1914* (fig. 2.7), a box containing three separate measuring devices that were individually formed by identical systems of chance operation: held horizontally from the height of one meter, a meter-long length of string was allowed to fall freely onto a canvas surface. The resultant impressions were then more permanently affixed to glass plates, from which were prepared three wood templates, duplicating the subtle twists and curves of their chance configuration. Duchamp later explained that this work was made as a “joke about the meter,” making it clear that his central aim was to
collection of his work, was often puzzled by this abrupt departure and at least on one occasion addressed the question directly to his old friend. “I have been meaning for a long time,” he queried in a letter to Duchamp written from his California home in 1937, “to write you about those early paintings. To me, in view of your later work, they remain your greatest mystery. In the whole history of painting I know of no such complete and abrupt transition as these paintings show in relation to the work with which you immediately follow them. Can you remember at all,” he asked, “anything that happened that would account for the change? Some autobiographical record of that period would be invaluable to the understanding of your work.”

Unfortunately, Duchamp’s response to Arensberg—if there ever was one—does not survive. But on several subsequent occasions he responded to essentially the same inquiry, asked, as it frequently was, by a host of inquisitive well-wishers, who, in the late 1950s and ’60s, flocked to Duchamp’s side during the last decade of his life, in a period of renewed interest in his work. When Cabanne asked Duchamp why he quit painting—which the critic considered the “key event” in the artist’s life—Duchamp explained that it was due primarily to the rejection of his *Nude Descending a Staircase* from the Independents Exhibition of 1912. The very people Duchamp had regarded as his friends and fellow painters, including his very own brothers, found the painting objectionable, out of line with their established notions of what Cubism should be. Duchamp immediately thought their attitude abhorrent; later he called it “naively foolish.” The event “gave him a turn,” as he put it, and from that time onward he would consider such conservative and overtly dogmatic behavior an aberration, particularly for artists who purport to be more open-minded than the general public. Rather than allow himself to be subjected to any compromising situations in the future, Duchamp’s “solution” to this “problem”—to turn his own words around—came in the form of employment he accepted at the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève in Paris. “I wanted to be free of any material obligation,” he explained, “so I began a career as a librarian, which was a sort of excuse for not being obliged to show up socially [as an artist].” Moreover, with the modest income provided by this job, Duchamp would no longer be under pressure to produce paintings and other works of art for the sole purpose of exhibition and sale. This situation liberated
grow into question the accepted authority of the meter, the standard unit of measurement adopted by Europeans and officially established as precisely the distance between two scratches on a platinum-iridium bar housed in a temperature-controlled chamber in the Academy of Science just outside Paris (fig. 2.8). Thus, just as Stirrer rejected all systems of authority and championed the supreme rights of the individual, Duchamp conceived of the *Three Standard Stoppages* as a unique system of measurement that was determined by the chance of a given individual, and which was to be utilized exclusively within the framework of his own personal requirements.

In this context, it is important to emphasize that Duchamp chose to repeat this operation three separate times. "For me the number three is important," he later explained: "one is unity, two is double, duality, and three is the rest." Or, as he put it on another occasion: "1 a unit / 2 opposition / 3 a series." In other words, creating a single new “meter” would only result in producing an entirely new system of measurement, with no more (or less) claim to authority than the old. Creating two new meters would only compound the problem by setting up polarities of opposition (one “meter” vs. the other). Creating three meters results in a self-sustaining system, one that does not present a simple alternative, nor a choice between two variants, but a complete system that must be comprehended and utilized in its entirety. Three, then, introduces a factor of reconciliation, serving to unite the two elements of opposition while simultaneously producing a compatible and comprehensive fusion of all three.

Although Duchamp may not have been aware of it at the time, this system of reconciliation very closely duplicates a philosophical system that is nearly as old as philosophy itself. Heraclitus, for example, the fifth-century BC Greek philosopher, believed that unity in the world was only formed through the combination of opposing extremes. With some variation, this same idea is used to help explain theories of immortality by a number of other Greek philosophers, including Socrates and Plato. But as far as I have been able to determine, it was not until the writings of Bishop Nicholas Cusanus, the fifteenth-century German scientist, statesman, and philosopher, that these theories of opposition would begin to approach an organized system of logical discourse. Cusanus criticized previous philosophical systems where contradictions were not allowed, maintaining that a “coincidence of opposites,” or what he called the *coincidentia oppositorum*, clearly
him from having to conform to the accepted styles of the day, allowing him to pursue his individual interests, in whatever direction they might take him.

It was in April of 1912, the very month when Duchamp withdrew his Nude from the Independents Exhibition, that he completed two drawings featuring a king and queen surrounded by animated nudes, a theme drawn from the principal components of a chess game and the movement of its pieces. The drawings culminated in the production of a major work painted during the course of the next month, The King and Queen Surrounded by Swift Nudes. In July, Duchamp traveled to Munich, where he developed the theme of The Bride Stripped Bare by the Bachelors, a subject that would be retained in the Large Glass (frontispiece), a work whose central iconographic motif—as the complete title acknowledges—is devoted to the mechanical movements of a bachelor in quest of his disrobing bride. It was during the summer of 1912, then, in Munich, that Duchamp had replaced the identity of a chess “king” and “queen” with their more familiar and domestic counterparts: an alluring “Bride” and her sexually aroused “bachelors.” But whether Adam or Eve, king or queen, Bride or bachelor, these exclusively male and female identities represent established polarities of opposition, like the black and white pieces in a chess game, a theme Duchamp had already investigated in an earlier series of drawings and paintings. More than simply concentrating on subjects of thematic opposition, however, the works produced in Munich mark the beginning of Duchamp’s first systematic efforts to develop an iconographic content unique to his own work, one that harbored meaning only within the narrowly established confines of an extremely personal, highly individualistic and self-reflexive narrative context.

Whereas it may be relatively easy to rationalize the artist developing a completely new attitude toward his work immediately after the rejection of his Nude, it has been more difficult to explain exactly why this important transition took place three months later in Munich. It may have been that the physical separation from his brothers and Parisian colleagues provided the necessary detachment required for the freedom of mind to develop his own ideas. It may also have been, as some have suggested, that the paintings and aesthetic theories of Kandinsky and the Blaue Reiter group, centered as they were then in Munich, influenced Duchamp’s thoughts about the potential of abstraction as both a thematic and stylistic component in his work. Whatever his sources, the Bavarian capital seems to have provided the ideal atmosphere in which Duchamp succeeded in severing all artistic ties, not only with concurrent stylistic trends but also with his own earlier work. “My stay in Munich,” he later reported, “was the scene of my complete liberation.”

This statement, combined with the fact that he had immersed himself in the center of a German-speaking environment, may be enough to suggest that it was during the time of his stay in Munich that Duchamp first discovered the writings of Max Stirner (1806–1856), an obscure nineteenth-century German philosopher whose anarchistic theories may have provided the most extensive theoretical basis for Duchamp’s newfound artistic freedom. When he was asked later in life to identify a specific philosopher or philosophical theory that was of special significance to his work, he cited Stirner’s only major book—Der Einzige und sein Eigentum—which was originally published in 1845 but appeared in a French edition in 1900 under the title L’unique et sa propriété, and later in English as The Individual and His Own. In this highly provocative book, Stirner outlined a controversial treatise in defense of philosophic egoism, wherein, based on his observation that all people possess unique qualities unto themselves, he championed the right of the individual to assume a superior position in society. To this end, he rejected all systematic philosophies and launched a bitter attack on all levels of social and political authority. Stirner regarded the state as the supreme enemy of the individual, and he supported its destruction by rebellion rather than revolution, a position that has linked his philosophical beliefs to existentialism and nihilism.

The one work Duchamp produced that he said was specifically influenced by Stirner’s philosophy was his Three Standard Stoppages of 1913–1914 (fig. 2.7), a box containing three separate measuring devices that were individually formed by identical systems of chance operation: held horizontally from the height of one meter, a meter-long length of string was allowed to fall freely onto a canvas surface. The resultant impressions were then more permanently affixed to glass plates, from which were prepared three wood templates, duplicating the subtle twists and curves of their chance configuration. Duchamp later explained that this work was made as “a joke about the meter,” making it clear that his central aim was to
was traditionally understood to be a craft devoted exclusively to
transforming a universal elixir of life, and to the transmutation of base metals
to silver or gold (in this respect, it is generally considered the historical
forerunner of the science of chemistry). More recently, the practice of
alchemy has been studied for its symbolic significance, or, as Carl Jung
utilized it, as a metaphor for various psychological processes that form the
basis of life's inherent contradictions. Jung's thorough study of this subject
resulted in a massive compilation of material in a book entitled Mysterium
Connexionis: An Inquiry into the Separation and Synthesis of Psychic
Opposites in Alchemy.23 Here, as the title suggests, Jung traces the duality
of opposites and their reconciliation (the conniunctio oppositorum),
identifying Mercurius as the unifying agent in alchemical texts, while the process
of what he calls "individuation" accomplishes this reunion in the realm of
psychotherapy. As compelling as the comparisons might be with specific
works by Duchamp, or with his working method—as I have outlined it
here—it is doubtful that alchemy had anything to do with the formation of
his approach to art. "If I have ever practiced alchemy," Duchamp told
the French critic Robert Lebel, "it was in the only way it can be done now,
that is to say, without knowing it."24

It is my feeling that Duchamp's disclaimer should not be treated lightly.
No matter what his sources may have been—if any—his exploration of
opposites and their reconciliation seems to have been motivated more by
his unwillingness to repeat himself than by any possible willingness to
conform to the dictates of a previously established system—philosophical,
literary, alchemical, or otherwise. His working method involved a constant
search for alternatives—alternatives not only to accepted artistic practice,
but also to his own earlier work. It was perhaps with this in mind that in
1913 he asked himself the provocative question: "Can one make works
which are not works of 'art'?"—a question he answered within a year by
his invention of the Readymade, "a work of art," as he later described it,
"without an artist to make it."25 In strictly Hegelian terms, a work of art
could be seen to represent the thesis; an object that is not a work of art,
its opposite or antithesis; while the Readymade succinctly combines these
ideas in a single artifact, bringing about their reconciliation, or synthesis.

The most literal and abstract manifestation of this approach in Duchamp's
work can be found in his lifelong devotion to chess, a game that in itself
has often been compared to Hegel’s dialectical triad. In 1932, Duchamp published a book on pawn and king endings entitled *Opposition and Sister Squares Are Reconciled*, which he wrote in collaboration with the German chess master Vitaly Halberstadt (figs. 2.9 and 2.10). Accompanying a series of parallel texts in French, German, and English, the authors included an abundance of carefully designed diagrams, many of which were printed on both sides of translucent paper in order to fully explicate the various nuances of their complex treatise. “But the end games in which it works,” Duchamp later explained, “would interest no chess player . . . . Even the chess champions don’t read the book,” he said, “since the problems it poses really only come up once in a lifetime.” In agreement with its author, most of the individuals who have bothered to assess this book have repeated these very aspects of its impracticality, but none (so far as I know) have noted the significance of its central treatise, clearly announced by its title: to reconcile the alleged differences that had developed over the years between positions of opposition and the concept of sister squares. The opening sentences of this study make its purpose abundantly clear (emphasis added):

Curiosity has impelled us to elucidate a question which, for twenty years, has periodically given rise to bitter articles in chess literature.

**Opposition or “sister squares.”**

Let us simplify: *Opposition* and “sister squares.”

In other words, Duchamp and his coauthor have set about to prove that theories of opposition and theories of “sister squares” (usually referred to as “related squares” in modern chess terminology) are actually one and the same, and that they represent only variant methods by which to achieve essentially the same end game situation.

Perhaps the purest example from Duchamp’s artistic production to illustrate the reconciliation of contradictory or opposing entities is a work known as *Door, 11 rue Larrey*, a construction that was nothing more than a door he had designed for the main room of a small apartment he rented into in 1927 on the rue Larrey in Paris (fig. 2.11). This door was located in a corner of the main living area, positioned in such a way as to provide the entrance either to the bedroom or to the bathroom, but not to f
the same time. In opposition to the axiom implicit in the common French adage—"Il faut qu'une porte soit ouverte ou fermée" ["A door must be either open or closed"]—Duchamp has ingeniously managed to defy the assumption of mutual exclusivity, uniting these contradictory themes into a compatible totality, or as he might have preferred to describe it, "a reconciliation of opposites."

In conclusion, it should be acknowledged that my remarks about Duchamp's work and working method are not made with the intention of establishing yet another method by which to view or interpret his artistic production. Rather, my comments are submitted with the intention of simply pointing out a recurrent theme, a casual observation about the artist and his work, about which he himself may very well have been aware. Indeed, it has been convincingly demonstrated that various concepts of polarity and their ultimate unity—light/darkness; life/death; good/evil—form the basis of virtually all myths and folkloric traditions: from the Taoist, Buddhist, and Hindu religions in the East to the dualism of Heaven and Hell in the Christianized West. If we should wish to believe that Jung was correct, and we have all somehow managed to inherit a storehouse of archaic images and ideas from the past (as part of what he called our "collective unconscious"), then we can just as easily assume that in his exploration of opposing identities, Duchamp was simply echoing a basic human concern: to unify or in other ways reconcile the conflicting dualities of life.

Yet, we might ask ourselves, just exactly how aware—or unaware—was Duchamp of the operation of this psychic phenomenon in his work? Was he not aware of the fact that the construction of puns and other word games—literary activities that delighted him, and at which he excelled—involved the formation of intentionally alternate readings, their precise meaning or humorous content understood (reconciled in the mind) only when both their literal and suggested meanings were fully comprehended? Moreover, when he conceived of the realistic, near-trompe l'oeil figure in the Etant Donnés, was he not immediately aware of the fact that, in stylistic terms, this figure represented the virtual antithesis of the abstract elements in the Large Glass? And by implication, with the important role he realized for the spectator, was he not also aware of the fact that any viewer who tried to comprehend the totality of his work would be placed in the position of having to reconcile these differences? It would seem implausible that
such a profound thinker as Duchamp did not—at least momentarily—reflect upon the possible sources and operational motivations for his work.

We know that at least once—in conversation with the French existentialist philosopher and critic Denis de Rougemont—Duchamp discussed the notion of cause and effect, emphasizing the inevitable contradictions that result when one attempts to apply such a tautological system of reasoning in a proof for the existence of God:


*Their supposed demonstrations depend on their conventions.* All this is tautologies! One returns consequently to myths. I anticipated it. Take the notion of cause: cause and effect, different and opposite. It’s indefensible. It’s a myth from which one has drawn the idea of God, considered as the model for all causes. If one doesn’t believe in God, the idea of cause has no meaning. Excuse me, I think that you believe in God . . . . Note the ambiguity of the word believe, in this sentence.\(^{31}\)

So far as I have been able to determine, Duchamp specifically addressed a theory of opposition on only one occasion: in a note he wrote in 1914 entitled “Principle of Contradiction,” wherein he hints that any such formulation would, by its very process, invalidate itself. But through a series of wonderfully illogical though remarkably convincing suppositions, he goes on to develop a theory of “literal nominalism,” wherein the conceptual content of words is to be discarded, replaced only by an understanding of their plastic and abstract qualities.\(^{32}\) Even though in this very note, Duchamp reminds himself that this theory should be developed, he never really carries it beyond this point. Outside of chess—which he took quite seriously—the only ideological construct he might have considered a possible metaphor for his work was his own concept of “Infra-thin,” a detailed investigation he began in the late 1930s that concerned itself with the nearly imperceptible nuances that exist between things: from the warmth
left by a recently occupied seat, to the sound made by velvet trouser legs rubbing together.33 Even though this theory involves a study of many of the same concerns Duchamp investigated in his earlier work—the differences between objects and their shadows, mirrors and their reflection, originals and copies, etc.—the reasons for his preoccupation with such tenuous, nearly immeasurable factors can, I suspect, be more accurately traced to his quiet, unaggressive, and comforting personality.

It may have been these very aspects of Duchamp’s persona that once led the composer John Cage to compare his old friend to a Zen master. And the sculptor Arman, who saw quite a bit of Duchamp in the 1960s, characterized the artist as a King Arthur presiding over the Round Table: “above all the fights,” he recalled, “nobody ever had the smallest chance to have a fight with Marcel.” In fact, among the people who knew him well, no one seems to be able to recall having quarreled with Duchamp. Beatrice Wood, a lifelong friend and admirer who knew the artist for over fifty years, recalls that his very presence was a calming force. “We had wonderful moments of silence,” she remembers. “There are times when we would spend the entire evening together, exchanging only a few words. I just assumed we were on the same wavelength. Marcel was not the kind of person you would argue with. Whenever an issue came up, he would simply say ‘Cela n’a pas d’importance.’” And Paul Matisse, the artist’s stepson, explained that Duchamp rarely disagreed with whatever you had to say: “For him,” he recalled, “agreement was the way he kept his freedom. He felt arguing was just falling into a trap, and for him to argue against another’s idea was to get caught up in it just as surely as if he had promoted it himself.”34 In short, it would appear that throughout his life, Duchamp successfully avoided situations that might have resulted in the possibility of a confrontation—reconciling, one could say, polarities of opposition even before they were given the opportunity to establish themselves.