If I have ever practiced alchemy, it was in the only way it can be done now, that is to say, without knowing it. — Marcel Duchamp

The Philosopher's stone is nothing more or less than that which was to enable man's imagination to take a stunning revenge on all things. — André Breton
Alchemy is a word that contains several notions, of which only the most common—and least important—is usually remembered. Most dictionaries encourage our laziness. For instance, the unabridged edition of the Random House Dictionary of the English Language defines alchemy as "an art practiced in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance concerned principally with discovering methods for transmuting baser metals into gold and with finding a universal solvent and an elixir of life."

Alchemy is one of the oldest arts of mankind. Its beginning coincides with the dawn of civilization. Egypt, India, and China were the most important centers of alchemical thought and practice in the ancient world. The Royal Art then spread to the Occident through Hellenistic Egypt—one of the earliest treatises on alchemy was written in Alexandria—at the beginning of the Christian era. However, we find records of what might very well be alchemical operations in Egyptian papyri that date back to at least a thousand years earlier.

Alchemy is an esoteric and exoteric adventure; it is a symbolic operation. The transmutation of metal into gold is only the top of the iceberg. The superficial observers who see only this part of the iceberg make their appearance in history at the same time as alchemy itself. An ancient Chinese text denounces such people: "They believe that [alchemy] means to transform stones into gold: isn't that crazy?"

The material liberation of philosophic gold from vulgar metal is a metaphor for the psychological processes concerned with the liberation of man from life's basic contradictions. Jung points out that "from its earliest days alchemy had a double face: on the one hand the practical chemical work in the laboratory, on the other a psychological process, in part consciously psychic, in part unconsciously projected and seen in the various transformations of matter." Elsewhere he draws our attention to the parallel between "the transmutation of metals and the simultaneous psychic transformation of the artifex."

These contradictions spring from a dualistic view of the universe that postulates the conflicting polarity of all natural phenomena; liberating man from these contradictions thus entails a monistic interpretation of nature. Such an interpretation takes the opposite stand and requires the conciliation, on a higher, transcending plane, of the contradictions that man encounters on the way toward higher self-development: in alchemical terms, on the way toward achieving the status of the homo maior endowed with eternal youth.

But, for the adept to achieve higher consciousness means, in the first place, acquiring "golden understanding" (aurae apprehensio) of his own microcosm and of the macrocosm in which it fits. It is in the course of his pursuit of the Philosopher's Stone that he acquires this new awareness. Thus the quest is more important than its reward; as a matter of fact, the quest is the reward. Alchemy is nothing other than an instrument of knowledge—of the total knowledge that aims to open the way toward total liberation.

Only by acquiring this "golden understanding" will the adept succeed in achieving the higher consciousness that is the first stage toward the reconstitution, at a higher level, of the unity of his divided self. Jung terms this psychological process "individuation," and he defines it as "the centralizing processes in the unconscious that go to form the personality." He then comments: "I hold the view that the alchemist's hope of conjuring out of matter the philosophical gold, or the panacea,
or the wonderful stone, was only in part an illusion, an effect of projection; for the rest it corresponded to certain psychic facts that are of great importance in the psychology of the unconscious. As is shown by the texts and their symbolism, the alchemist projected what I would call the process of individuation into the phenomena of chemical change."

Individuation, in the alchemical sense, entails abolishing the conflicting male-female duality within the integrated personality of the reconstituted Gnostic Anthropos, i.e., the original androgyne—the Homo Maior of mythical times, the Rebis (the double thing) of the alchemist. André Breton had already singled out the importance of this aspect of alchemical thought when he wrote: "It is essential, here more than anywhere else, to undertake the reconstruction of the primordial Androgyne that all traditions tell us of, and its supremely desirable, and tangible, incarnation within ourselves."7

The myth of the androgyne runs through our literature from Plato's Symposium to Balzac's Séraphita. The concept that everything having shape, quality, and individuation originated from an undifferentiated principle, superior and at the same time anterior to the opposition between Me and not-Me, the physical and the spiritual, inside and outside, not only contains the doctrinal premise of transmutation-creation—but also refers to the sacredness of the Rebis. Bisexuality has always been an attribute of divinity.

Absolute freedom is one of man's oldest aspirations, and Eliade has pointed out that "to be no longer conditioned by a pair of opposites results in absolute freedom."8 But to be able to enjoy this freedom man must first attain integration, become a self. "Only a unified personality can experience life, not that personality which is split up into partial aspects, that bundle of odds and ends which also calls itself 'man'."9

For the alchemist the Rebis was the fruit of the "chymical nuptials" between mercury (the female, lunar principle) and sulphur (the male, solar principle). These "chymical nuptials" are of a basically incestuous nature. What was divided on a lower level will reappear, united, on a higher one.

For Jung the chymical nuptials are a metaphor for the reconstitution of the integrity of the split personality through the unification of the anima (female principle in man) with the animus (male principle in woman). This integration is achieved through the reconciliation of opposites (coincidentia oppositorum), the prerequisite for individuation.

The main prototype of the alchemical marriage is the Brother-Sister incest, where "the Brother-Sister pair stands allegorically for the whole conception of opposites."10 Their union symbolizes "the return to a primordial unity, and this is why the artifex who seeks to realize this union is often helped by his soror mystica."11 Curious relationships between androgyny and incest between siblings are also to be found in many myths.12 The themes of the androgyne and the Brother-Sister incest have more in common than might at first be expected. The richness of their symbolism gives an esoteric dimension of universal significance to some of the basic patterns underlying Duchamp's oeuvre, and helps us to understand the importance of Duchamp's lack of dogmatism as expressed in his often-avowed preference for the suspension of judgment. The undifferentiated psychic and physical pattern
of the androgyne is the mythical model for Duchamp's ethics and aesthetics as seen at work in the Large Glass and in the Readymades. This pattern also throws a new light on works such as the bearded Mona Lisa of L.H.O.O.Q. and the Door: 11, rue Larrey, 1927, which contradicts the saying that a door must be either open or closed.

But more fundamentally still, bisexuality is the archetypal quality of the creator, while the alchemical incest is the ideal mythical model for the state in which, after all contradictions have been resolved, individuation is achieved and creation becomes possible.

In The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp I have maintained that the Large Glass is the mythical account of an unrealizable love affair between siblings. The work is understood as an esoteric projection of an unconscious, exoteric, train of thoughts—Marcel Duchamp's love for his sister Suzanne. Even the unconscious thought of the sexual consummation of the relationship is sufficient to bring about the most drastic of reprisals, death, and thus the Large Glass also reveals the undisguised pattern of one of the world's oldest and most widespread taboos—the taboo against incest.

It is necessary, however, to understand that the term "incest" is, as Korzybski would say, a typically over/under-defined term, and that it is to be understood "symbolically, not concretistically and sexually. Wherever the incest motif appears, it is always a prefiguration of the hieros gamos, of the sacred marriage consummation which attains its true form only with the hero."14

It should therefore be clear that these patterns were entirely unconscious. The extraordinarily poetic quality of the Large Glass resides precisely in the fact that its creator was led by forces and drives of which he was ignorant. In a lecture he delivered in 1957 on "The Creative Act," Duchamp declared, "We must then deny him [the artist] the state of consciousness on the aesthetic plane about what he is doing or why he is doing it."15 And Jung confirms that "one can paint very complicated pictures without having the least idea of their real meaning."16 Jung also observes that the alchemist's quest is again a "psychological projection at the unconscious level." Discussing the Gnostic philosophy of Zosimos, the Greek alchemist, Jung points out that his philosophy is the outcome of "an unconscious process that works only so long as it stays unconscious."17

If any single painting were to be pointed out in Duchamp's oeuvre as the one in which the manifest and latent alchemical connotations are most strikingly evident, the choice would no doubt fall upon Young Man and Girl in Spring, painted in 1911. It can only be mentioned here that this pivotal work was immediately preceded by a trilogy of allegorical portraits which suggest a sequence of mythic themes: The Bush (the presentation of the neophyte), Baptism (rites of initiation), and Draft on the Japanese Apple Tree (the attainment of enlightenment).

A discussion of the details of Young Man and Girl in Spring will lead to the realization that in complexity of theme this painting is second only to the Large Glass; but this is not surprising, since the painting is an anticipation of the Glass.

It might be helpful, before starting a detailed analysis, to point out that this theme is hinted at both in the double sense of the title—two young people in the "spring" of their life—and in the attitude that the
Hero-Virgin pair have assumed in the painting—the two youngsters are sexually attracted to each other. We might see in this attraction a sign of the psychological maturation that favors the development of the individuation process. This individuation process is enriched by the peculiar type of relationship between them as the real relationship of the Brother-Sister pair gradually replaces the mythical relationship of the Hero-Virgin pair. Incest is envisaged here as a means of resolving the contradictions of the male-female duality within the reconstituted androgynous unity of the primordial being, endowed with eternal youth and immortality. In this respect, the basic theme of Young Man and Girl in Spring is a metaphor of the struggle to produce the Philosopher's Stone.

In Young Man and Girl in Spring the Young Man (Marcel, the future Bachelor of the Large Glass) and the Young Girl (Suzanne, the future Bride) are barely differentiated sexually, and both have their arms lifted to the sky in a Y-shaped figure, a position indicative of their common aspiration—immortality—and of their basic androgynous psychic patterns—an aspiration and a pattern that are closely interdependent. Eliade tells us that when the shaman takes a similar position during rituals he exclaims, “I have reached the sky, I am immortal.” In the Hyperborean and North Atlantic traditions the Y-sign stands for the Cosmic-Man-with-Uplifted-Arms, and again it embodies the concept of immortality through resurrection as well as the concept of the “double” androgynous personality. (In Egyptian, the hieroglyph Kha, which stands for the “double,” is drawn in the Y-form of two uplifted arms, and in alchemy the Y-sign is again the symbol of the androgyne, as may be seen, for instance, in an illustration of Michael Maier’s Symbola aurea, where Albert the Great points to an androgyne holding a Y.)

In esoteric writings the Cosmic Man is androgynous since he also stands for the primordial man (the Gnostic Anthropos) who gives birth through a dichotomy to the duality of male and female.

The two young people stand on two separate worlds, implied by the two semicircles from which they strive toward each other. The semicircle on which the Young Man stands radiates a yellowish light; it may well symbolize the Sun. The semicircle on which the Young Girl stands is darker and has a patch of silver-white; the Moon. Similarly, in the alchemical tradition the incestuous Brother-Sister pair is symbolized by the Sun-Moon pair. Their union (coniunctio oppositorum) reconstitutes the original unity of the primordial being, the immortal Hermetic Androgyne (the Rebis). The Young Girl’s head, painted from an unusual angle, disappears behind her uplifted arms; her body looks headless. The dislocation of the head anticipates the position of the head in the Pendu femellehanging in the upper part of the Large Glass. The term Pendu femelle, i.e., the Female Hanged Body, is used repeatedly by Duchamp to indicate the Bride in the Large Glass.

Duchamp has also said that the theme of the Bride was suggested to him “by those booths at the fairs, which were so numerous then, where dummies, often representing the characters of a wedding, offered themselves for decapitation thanks to the skill of the ball-throwers.” The thrown-back head of the Young Girl is reminiscent of these dummies. A headless body is not only a symbol of castration; in the esoteric and alchemical tradition, it also stands for the concept of order in the creation of the cosmos as opposed to the disorder of chaos.
mann points out that "Mutilation—a theme which also occurs in
alchemy—is the condition of all creation."22

Furthermore, the meeting of the two young people appears to be both
hindered and furthered by a tree whose branches grow between them.
The tree both divides and unites them; they reach for its branches and
enter thus into indirect contact. The tree as symbol conveys a great
variety of meanings.23

Basically, the tree is a symbol of the drive toward cosmic totality,
of the totality of the cosmos in its genesis and its becoming. It is also
the prototype of the hermaphrodite, the synthesis of both sexes; and
as the axis mundi, it may act as a mediator between Earth (woman) and
the Sky (man). It suggests the prolongation of human life.24 The tree
may also stand for the Adamic Tree, the Tree of Knowledge, which
embodies the conflicting but complementary notions of the Tree of Life
(or Green Tree) sinking its roots into the sky and the Tree of Death
(or Dry Tree) that sinks its roots into the red terra adami.

In this painting these two aspects of the tree interchange freely. In
the alchemical tradition, the Tree of Life is the source of the Sun (on
which the Bachelor stands and with which he is identified) and its fruit
is the Living Water, the Fount of Youth. Even though the branches of
the tree in the painting are utterly dry (suggesting the Tree of Death),
they are also enveloped by a green cloud (suggesting the foliage of the
Tree of Life).

The tree in this painting grows from a circle, or rather from a trans-
parent glass sphere in which we might be tempted to recognize an
alchemic, the alchemical vessel, also called the spherical house of glass
(comparable to the Large Glass, which houses the Bride and Bachelor),
or again the Prison of the King. In this painting the sealed vessel of
Hermes imprisons a sexless personage who closely resembles the
Mercurius that is often present in the alchemic. Mercurius stood for "the
hermaphrodite that was in the beginning, that splits into the traditional
Brother-Sister duality and is reunited in the coniunctio, to appear once
again at the end in the radiant form of the lumen novum, the stone. He
is metallic yet liquid, matter yet spirit, cold yet fiery, poison and yet
healing draught—a symbol uniting all opposites.25 Here Mercurius
assumes a typical offering attitude, kneeling and tendering a piece of
cloth to the naked Young Man.

To understand the meaning of this offering one must consider the
symbolic significance of cloth. According to Durand, woven material
is what "opposes itself to discontinuity, to tearing as well as to breaking
... it is that which 'fastens' two parts which are separated, that which
'repairs' a hiatus."26 We recall that in this painting the Young Man
and Girl are separated by the tree. And this separation is emotional
as well as physical. Remarking that the cloth offered by the androgy-
nous personage is pink—a typical color for female garments—we may
recall that at Cos the husband wears women's garments to receive the
bride, while at Argos the bride wears a false beard the first night of
marriage.27 (In quite a few photos Duchamp is seen wearing women's
clothes; the best-known example is the photo on the label of the
perfume bottle, Belle Halezine, Eau de Voilette, of 1921. And the Mona Lisa
of L.H.O.O.Q., 1919, is given a beard by Duchamp.)

The exchange of garments, however, is also often associated with
an exploit—conquering a woman's heart, for instance.28 The invitation

of Mercurius could not be more welcome to the Bachelor, who is separated from his Bride. Obviously, the disguise also symbolizes bisexuality, which, in turn, is linked with the human aspiration toward eternity. Durand emphasizes this aspect of the cloth’s totalizing symbolism, standing as it does for the necessary fusion of the cosmic polarities, which takes us back to the solution envisaged to repair this hiatus—the alchemical incest. This coniunctio oppositorum—the union of the Brother-Sister pair—takes place in the alchemical vessel, and the fruit of the union is not only Mercurius but also the androgynous original man (the Gnostic Anthropos).

Finally, the circular shape of the “alchemical vessel” in the painting (such vessels are usually an irregular oval) again emphasizes the aspiration to reconstitute the original unity; the alchemical ideogram for the “One and All” is a circle—a line or movement that has in itself its beginning and end. In the hermetic tradition it designates both the Universe and the Great Work.

I have mentioned that the tree grows from this circle, and when the Tree of Death was discussed it was observed that the circle was the schematic representation of its branches. Since the androgynous figure appears in the midst of these branches, it may be identified as the tree’s fruit; we remember, in fact, that the Fount of Youth is the fruit of the Tree of Life and that it is also synonymous with the Great Work (the Opus). The function of the Tree of Life, which is to reanimate the Tree of Death, is thus seen to be fulfilled as, again, Eros defeats Thanatos.

Directly below the central transparent glass sphere, with eyes turned toward the personage it contains, there is another figure, who rests on both the Bachelor’s (Sun) world and the Bride’s (Moon) world. This figure participates in both and mediates between them, reconciling in itself their contradictions. The character is kneeling—halfway between Earth (woman) and Sky (man).

This central personage epitomizes the meaning of this painting, which is the accomplishment, on the artistic level, of three primordial and only apparently contradictory aspirations that find gratification within the frame of the alchemical incest: the urge to reconstitute the original unity, the drive toward individuation, and the wish for immortality. In fact, the coniunctio oppositorum of the Brother-Sister pair aims, here again, at resolving the contradictions of the male-female principle in the hermaphroditic, primordial entity which is endowed with eternal youth and immortality.

Let us consider the extraordinary similarities between Young Man and Girl in Spring and its mythical model—the traditional representation of the philosophical androgyne (the Rebis or Compositam de compositis) as may be seen, for instance, in one of the illustrations of Michael Maier’s Auriferae artes (Basel, 1572), where the incestuous Brother-Sister pair again stand on the Sun and the Moon.

In Maier’s illustration the Brother and Sister are united into the Philosophical Marriage by the Universal Spirit that descends upon them under the appearance of a Dove. Each of the three figures in the illustration (the King-Sun-Bachelor, the Queen-Moon-Bride, and the Dove) holds a rose. The roses occupy in the illustration the same position occupied in Duchamp’s painting by the rose-colored garment offered by the Young Man to the Girl. The stems of the three roses cross to form an X-shaped figure that symbolizes the Fire of the Philos-
ophers or the Fire of Love. We have recognized in the pink garment the same allegorical reference to the force of love. Finally, the Universal Spirit (the Dove) finds its allegorical representation in the green cloud that suggests the foliage of the Tree of Life. In the configuration of the tree's V-shaped diverging branches we can find a trace of the outlines of the Dove's wings (again both details occupy the same position in the painting and the illustration). Let us also note that, in the alchemical tradition, the Universal Spirit is the Living Water, i.e., the green cloud "dispenser of the beneficent dew" that crowns, in the painting, the Tree of Life, and that it also stands for the *aurea apprehensio*.

Quite fittingly, 1911, the year that witnessed the realization of the trilogy of allegorical portraits and of *Young Man and Girl in Spring*, ends with the painting of a grinder, which is a typical alchemical instrument. *Coffee Mill* is the first of a series of grinding machines; it was followed by *Chocolate Grinder, No. 1*, 1913, *Chocolate Grinder, No. 2*, 1914, and *Glider Containing a Water Mill in Neighboring Metals*, 1913–15.

A typical alchemic distilling apparatus, the alembic, is to be found in the glass sphere at the center of *Young Man and Girl in Spring*, and in the *Coffee Mill* we meet another typical alchemic instrument, the grinding mill. We may see in this the continuity of Duchamp's thought and the unitary organization of his symbols. "The mill and the apparatus of distillation are associated in hermetic thought with transformation symbolism in the tradition of alchemy, both as a physical quest for gold and in the psychic dimension of introversion and spiritual rebirth." Both instruments are refining instruments—the alembic acting chemically, the mill physically. They transmute raw materials into their sublimated form just as Duchamp sublimates his sexual drives into artistic drives.

A detail common to the two paintings executed during the summer of 1912 in Munich, *The Passage from the Virgin to the Bride* and *Bride*, reveals one of the most beautiful correspondences between Duchamp's and alchemical iconography. At the center of both these paintings we can recognize an alembic—the classical androgynous symbol in alchemy. The androgynous nature of the Bride is further confirmed by another fact; Duchamp writes that the spinal column of the Bride is arbor-type, and we may recall again that the tree is a typical symbol of bisexuality. The Bride in this painting thus embodies the realization of the wishes of the protagonists of *Young Man and Girl in Spring*. Another detail of this painting may lend even further support to this hypothesis: we may notice that a streamlet of liquid is entering the opening of the alembic. In the alchemic tradition, this operation stands for the alchemical marriage—the union of the Brother-Sister pair. The alchemical marriage is similarly represented in traditional alchemical iconography. For instance, in Hieronymus Bosch's famous painting *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, we may note, in a detail, a "hooded crow pouring out from a little phial in its beak a glimmering fluid that flows down into the ovary." Fränger comments that this is "a process that in Bosch's metaphorical language indicates the celebration of an alchemical marriage."

The *Bicycle Wheel* of 1913 is the first Readymade, and it introduces another aspect of Duchamp's relation to the art of the alchemist. What is of interest in this context is the correspondence between Duchamp's attitude concerning the Readymades in general, and the kernel of
alchemical thought concerning the work of art par excellence, the Philosopher's Stone. For the alchemist, the Stone “is familiar to all men, both young and old, is found in the country, in the village, in the town, in all things created by God; yet it is despised by all. Rich and poor handle it every day. It is cast into the street by servant maids. Children play with it. Yet no one prizes it.”

Similarly for Duchamp, art is to be found everywhere, in the most common objects. We only have to open our eyes and our minds to the beauty that surrounds us. Maybe it is this that Duchamp had in mind when, speaking of the Readymades, he declared that any manufactured object can be raised to the dignity of a work of art through the mere choice of the artist. Duchamp entirely rejects the traditional concept of a work of art. “A point that I want very much to establish is that the choice of these Readymades was never dictated by aesthetic delectation. The choice was based on a reaction of visual indifference with a total absence of good or bad taste.”

The difference between artist and layman thus ceases to exist. Lautréamont had already declared that poetry is not to be written only by “poets” but by everybody; and social thinkers have envisaged a golden age in which man will have resolved the problems of social and ideological alienation and in which he will be free to devote himself to ideological and artistic activities with the same proficiency that he will have in productive activities. Marx and Engels saw the advent of such an era as the result of the disappearance of the division of labor.

To fulfill Duchamp's vision of the disappearance of the distinction between the artist and the layman implies, naturally, a degree of freedom that is not even imaginable today—a kind of freedom that is both a prerequisite for and a consequence of the notion that all men are capable of creating art, a kind of freedom that can only exist in a situation in which there is a future completely open to unlimited adventures, and the creation of such a future is precisely the aspiration of the narcissistic-unitary drive and of the alchemist.

In this context, Duchamp's adventure with the Readymades heralds the nonalienated man of the future and the new dimensions that artistic activity will encompass. In alchemical terms, it epitomizes the end result of the successful quest for the Philosopher’s Stone.

The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even, 1915-23, known for short as the Large Glass, together with Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas, 1946-66, are Marcel Duchamp's two major works. The latter is in fact the figurative projection in space and time of the former. When one recalls that the Large Glass is the focal point of his oeuvre, the point at which all his more significant earlier works converge, and from which his outstanding later works diverge, one would expect to find in the Large Glass, as well as in its projection, Given: 1. The Waterfall . . . ., the greatest number of alchemical references. This is indeed the case. One would like to point out the numerous correspondences between classical alchemical iconography and the iconographical structure not only of both these works taken as a whole, but also of all the details that compose them. Here, however, we must content ourselves with an analysis of the underlying theme of the Large Glass.

André Breton defined the Large Glass as "a kind of great modern legend." On the secular plane, the theme of the Large Glass is the
unrealizable and unrealized love affair between a half-willing but inaccessible Bride (Suzanne, Duchamp’s sister) and an anxious Bachelor (Marcel). The French title of this work, *La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même*, contains a pun in which the whole theme of the work is hidden. One has only to substitute for *même* the homophone *m’aime*, and the title reads: The Bride stripped bare by her bachelors is in love with me.

The subtitle of the *Glass* that describes it as an “agricultural machine” is equally revealing, the reference clearly having to do with the mythical concept of agriculture as a symbolic wedding of Earth and Sky, and plowing being associated with semination and the sexual act.

Duchamp provided us with another clue to the meaning of the *Glass* when he drew our attention to the fact that it is “a world in yellow.” In the esoteric and alchemical tradition, yellow symbolizes both gold and the Sun; the Sun, in turn, is symbolic of Revelation. And in general, when Revelation is involved, gold and yellow characterize the state of the initiate—Buddhist priests wear robes of saffron. And, as is the nature of symbols, the significance of yellow is ambivalent. Sulphur is associated with both guilt and the devil. This is the color of both marriage and cuckoldry, wisdom and betrayal, the ambivalent couple and the hermaphrodite.

More important still, the notion of color in the alchemist’s system is of cardinal significance—transmutation of one metal into another often boiled down to finding a “tincture” that could change the original color of the baser metal into the yellow color of gold.

When Duchamp called the *Large Glass* “a world in yellow,” he unconsciously repeated a classical alchemical operation. However, in keeping with his philosophy of an art more mental than physical, instead of a chemical tincture he uses a mental tincture to transmute the transparent, neutral color of glass into the yellow color of the philosophical gold. Thus, the Bachelor is caught red-handed while using a standard alchemical technique!

The use of the pun in the title of the *Large Glass* is indicative not only of its theme, but also of its basically mythical nature. And, like all myths, this one too involves the use of an allegorical and symbolic language in which puns and metaphors disguise its real content, accessible only to the initiate. Duchamp emphasized another characteristic that it has in common with myth—its existence within a dual reality and its resulting ambivalence: “In general, the picture is the apparition of an appearance.”

When the painting *Young Man and Girl in Spring* was discussed, the full alchemical implications of the brother-sister incest were mentioned. We may now add that the basic pattern of the story that the *Large Glass* unravels is again a metaphor of the struggle to produce the Philosopher’s Stone. Let us briefly outline this story before seeking the correspondence with the alchemical archetype.

In the Bride’s domain (the upper half of the *Glass*) three main orders of events are described. First there is the stripping of the Bride, which culminates in a blossoming. This blossoming is “the last state of this nude Bride before the orgasm which may (might) bring about her fall.” Then comes the transmission of the Bride’s desires (also termed love gasoline by Duchamp) to the Bachelor through an extremely complex mechanism which involves the use of a “triple cipher” that
permits the messages to pass through the vigilant censorship of three Nets (also called Draft Pistons: squarish apertures seen in the Top Inscription or Milky Way).

Finally there is the unrealized meeting of the Bride’s and the Bachelor’s desires in an area of the Bride’s domain delimited by the chance configuration obtained by firing nine shots at the Glass.

The complex mechanism of the long-awaited meeting of the Bride and Bachelor ensures that no contact will take place between the Bride and the Bachelor—even though only their psychic expressions confront each other here.

In the Bachelor’s domain (the lower half of the Glass) a symmetrical pattern of three orders of events takes place. First the birth of the Bachelor’s desires—the Illuminating Gas—in the Nine Malic Molds that Duchamp appropriately calls Eros’s matrix. Then the long and tormented journey of the Bachelor’s desires on their way to the meeting with the Bride’s. In the case of the Bachelor’s the obstacles are even more formidable. His desires will first have to pass through the narrow nine Capillary Tubes, where they will lose their sexual identity—they will be castrated (“cut in bits”). Then they will be stopped by the seven Sieves, who have a dual conflicting role: on the one hand they filter, censor, and “straighten out” the Bachelor’s desires; on the other, after performing this first role, the Sieves help these desires to reacquire their sexual identity. But the Bachelor’s vicissitudes are still not over. His desires will be channeled into the Toboggan, crash (die) three times at its base before resurrecting and being allowed to rise triumphantly toward the Bride’s domain through the three Oculist Witnesses.

In the course of this journey the Bachelor’s desires will be constantly threatened by two imposing castrating machines that symbolize the Bachelor’s onanistic activity: the Water Mill, whose seesaw movement controls the aperture of the castrating Scissors, and the Chocolate Grinder, whose gyratory movement produces “milk chocolate.” Let us notice that the Scissors rest on the tip of the sharp Bayonet that rises threateningly from the heart of the Chocolate Grinder.

A beautiful poetical metaphor concludes the account of this perilous voyage. The mirror reflections of the Bachelor’s desires “coming from below” will harmoniously organize themselves “like some jets of water which weave forms in their transparency” to form the Picture of Cast Shadows in the upper half of the Glass. It is this immaterial work of art—which epitomizes the Bachelor’s longings as well as the very significance of his life—that our timid lover offers to the contemplation of the Bride.

True to its mythical character, and to the fact that the Large Glass exists within a dual reality, the saga has a dual ending. The unhappy end in the Large Glass is countered by the happy end that Duchamp envisaged for this story in his Notes and Projects for the Large Glass, where the expression of the Bride’s and of the Bachelor’s desires finally do meet.

Now that the story unraveled by the Large Glass has been outlined, we may verify the correspondences with its alchemical model.

The very layout of the Glass is revealing. The Glass is divided into two halves. The upper half, the Bride’s domain, is clearly identified with the Sky: the whole top of the Bride’s domain is occupied by a cloudlike formation known as the Top Inscription or Milky Way. The
In the alchemical pansexual tradition, the Sky and the Earth are the "vertical" alchemical couple corresponding to the "horizontal" Brother-Sister couple. Sky and Earth are linked by the same love principle, and the alchemist's task is again to provoke the *coniunctio oppositorum* in the alchemical microcosm. In the words of the eighteenth-century alchemist Le Breton, this is achieved "by the union of two sperms, fixed and volatile, in which the two spirits are enclosed ... the Sky becomes earth and the earth becomes sky, and the energies of one and the other are reunited.... This operation is called the reconciliation of contrary principles, the conversion of the elements, the regeneration of the mixture, and the manifestation of clarity and efficiency; or the real and perfect sublimation from the center to the circumference, the marriage of Sky and Earth, the nuptial couch of the Sun and the Moon, of Beya and of Gabertin, whence the Royal Child of the Philosophers [i.e., the Philosopher's Stone] will issue."47

The opening phrases of this quotation help us to understand the poetical metaphor through which Duchamp, in his Notes, describes the concluding event in the *Large Glass*. The Bride's desires, the "love gasoline, a secretion of the Bride's sexual glands"48 (which calls to mind the "astral sperm" or *Spiritus mundi* of the alchemical tradition), will mingle with the Bachelor's desires, the volatile sperm, the "Illuminating Gas"49 (similarly formed in the Bachelor's sexual glands—the "Eros matrix"),50 to form a "physical compound ... unanalysable by logic."51 This poetical metaphor for the union of the Bride and Bachelor is a transparent allusion to the alchemical *coniunctio oppositorum* that Le Breton, in the above quotation, described as the "union of two sperms, fixed and volatile."

We have seen how the Bride's "love gasoline" and the Bachelor's "Illuminating Gas" must overcome all sorts of obstacles before reaching the region where they will finally confront each other. Their long and tormented journey52 is again a metaphor of the quest for the Philosopher's Stone. "The road is arduous, fraught with perils, because it is, in fact, a rite of the passage from the profane to the sacred, from the ephemeral and illusory to reality and eternity, from death to life, from man to the divinity."53

Nor should it surprise us that the psyche's odyssey to reconquer its unity is so tortuous if we remember that "the right way to wholeness ... is a *longissima via* not straight but snakelike, a path that unites the opposites,"54 since "individuation, or becoming whole, is neither a *sumnum bonum* nor a *sumnum desideratum*, but the painful experience of the union of opposites."55

The goal of this union is the same as the alchemist's: the reconstruction of the splintered personality. And the way Duchamp succeeds in graphically expressing this goal is indeed remarkable. Duchamp uses for the last element represented in the Bachelor's domain one of the oldest esoterical symbols of humanity: the Dotted Circle. This Dotted Circle admirably epitomizes the twin psychological and alchemical concepts of the fundamental unitary drive of the Psyche and the quest for the Stone. In his studies concerning Mandala symbolism, Jung remarks that in the Tantric doctrine, Lamaism, and Chinese alchemy, the circle stands for "the union of all opposites ... the state of ever-

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Allegory of alchemy in a bas-relief of the central porch of Notre Dame Cathedral, Paris. Notice the head crowned by clouds—exactly like the Bride's in the *Large Glass*.
lasting balance and immutable duration." From the psychologist's standpoint, the periphery contains "everything that belongs to the self—the paired opposites that make up the total personality." Jung, however, adds a new dimension to the circle symbolism when he ascribes a therapeutic effect to it. "The protective circle then guards against possible disruption due to the tension of opposites," and the circle thus expresses "the idea of a safe refuge, of inner reconciliation and wholeness."

On the other hand, the Dotted Circle is also the alchemical symbol for both the Stone (or Philosopher's Gold) and the King (the active principle who possesses the power to fertilize the waters and form the Philosopher's Stone).

The three steps of the Bachelor's individuation process find an exact parallel in the three main stages of the alchemical process for the production of the Philosopher's Stone (lapis philosophorum).

This process can be expressed in the lapidary formula *solve et coagula*, corresponding, on the physical plane, to separation and reunion; on the physiological plane to catabolism and anabolism; on the psychological plane to analysis (meditatio) and transcendental synthesis (imaginatio). This operation is to be repeated as many times as may be necessary to achieve the desired result. The energy required to carry out the second part of this proposition is to be released by executing its first part.

This dual operation involves three main stages. The first stage, *calcinatio* or *melanosis* (calcination or blackening), sees the apparent death of the adept. It involves a complete loss of his identity; the adept returns to a state of primordial unconsciousness, of *agnosia*. "We notice a total and hallucinating scattering of the intellectual faculties, the unbridled psyche having lost all its points of contact invades the intellect. I am no longer 'I.' And I am also nothing else."

Duchamp describes in almost identical terms the first stage of the Bachelor's individuation process. The Bachelor's desires are "hallucinated rather onanistically"; they take the scattered form of a fog of solid spangles "...each spangle retaining in its smallest parts the malic tint" [malic tint: sexual identity]. The spangles are then "dazed...they lose their awareness...They can no longer retain their individuality." Finally "the spangles dissolve...into a liquid elemental scattering, seeking no direction, a scattered suspension."

This "elemental scattering" irresistibly evokes the primordial elemental state into which the alchemist's *prima materia* has been broken down during the first stage of the process for producing the Philosopher's Stone. This state derives its model from the original chaotic state of the cosmos before the beginning of the differentiating processes. The first stage of the *prima materia* is the empirical equivalent of the adept's state of *agnosia*.

Jung remarks that the alchemical description of this first stage "corresponds psychologically to a primitive consciousness which is constantly liable to break up into individual affective processes—to fall apart, as it were."

If the adept is to achieve the considerable increase of self-knowledge that is implied by the third stage—a prerequisite for the *unio mentalis*, the interior oneness that Jung calls individuation—it is necessary to reach a psychic equilibration of opposites. These opposites—in this case
mind and body—have to be separated if they are to be reunited at a higher level; Jung points out that this separation is equivalent to voluntary death.

The aim of this separation was to free the mind from the influence of the "bodily appetites and the heart's affections," and to establish a spiritual position which is supraordinate to the turbulent sphere of the body. This leads at first to a dissociation of the personality and a violation of the merely natural man.... The separation means withdrawing the soul and her projections from the bodily sphere and from all environmental conditions relating to the body. In modern terms it would be a turning away from sensuous reality...it means introversion, introspection, meditation, and the careful investigation of desires and their motives. Since, as Dorn says, the soul "stands between good and evil," the disciple will have every opportunity to discover the dark side of his personality, his inferior wishes and motives, childish fantasies and resentments, etc.; in short, all those traits he habitually hides from himself. He will be confronted with his shadow, but more rarely with the good qualities, of which he is accustomed to make a show anyway.69

Before proceeding to the second stage, I would like to mention that our discussion does not constitute a digression, since the discovery of the alchemical patterns of the Bachelor's motivation helps us grasp the fascinating complexity of his psyche. The mundane meaning of the Bachelor's love affair acquires in this context an archetypal dimension of universal significance.

The second stage, leukosis or albedo (whitening), sees the reacquisition, on a higher plane, of the adept's identity. A sifting of the scattered elements takes place. These elements are washed (ablotio or baptisma) and undergo a whole series of operations with a view to transforming the adept into the Alchemical King. "It is the silver or moon condition, which still has to be raised to the sun condition. The albedo is, so to speak, the daybreak, but not till the rubedo is it sunrise."70 Again, Duchamp's description of the processes that lead to the Bachelor's reacquired identity are strikingly similar. The spangles who have lost their identity—"provisionally, they will find it again later"71—are washed "in the operation of the liquefaction of the gas,"72 and sifted in passing through "the holes of the Sieve with elan."73 It then becomes possible for the spangles to "improve" and become "the apprentice in the sun."74

The reacquisition of the adept's identity is achieved in the second stage by reuniting, on a higher level, what has been separated in the first stage—spirit and body.

For this procedure there were many symbols. One of the most important was the chymical marriage, which took place in the retort. The older alchemists were still so unconscious of the psychological implications of the opus that they understood their own symbols as mere allegories.... Later this was to change, and already in the fourteenth century it began to dawn on them that the lapis was more than a chemical compound.... The second stage of conjunction, the reuniting of the unio mentalis with the body, is particularly important, as only from here can the complete conjunction be attained—union with the unus mundus. The reuniting of the spiritual position with the body obviously means that the insights gained should be made real. An insight might just as well remain in abeyance if it is simply not used. The second stage of conjunction therefore consists
in making a reality of the man who has acquired some knowledge of his paradoxical wholeness. The great difficulty here, however, is that no one knows how the paradoxical wholeness of man can ever be realized... because the realization of the wholeness that has been made conscious is an apparently insoluble task.75

These last words of Jung's comment may provide an additional explanation for the fact that the Large Glass was abandoned by Duchamp in a state of incompleteness. Since it was impossible for the unconscious drives to find a satisfactory graphic materialization, Duchamp lost all interest in pursuing an "insoluble task."

The third stage, iosis or rubedo (reddening), sees the celebration of the nuptials between the (red, solar) King and the (white, lunar) Queen. The King stands for the adept who, in this second stage, has achieved individuation through the unio mentalis just described. The Queen stands for the original unus mundus—the potential world still at the stage of the undifferentiated cosmos, the res simplex (the simple thing), literally the "one world." Jung explains:

. . . the idea of the unus mundus is founded on the assumption that the multiplicity of the empirical world rests on an underlying unity, and that not two or more fundamentally different worlds exist side by side or are mingled with one another. Rather, everything divided and different belongs to one and the same world, which is not the world of sense but a postulate whose probability is vouched for by the fact that until now no one has been able to discover a world in which the known laws of nature are invalid. That even the psychic world, which is so extraordinarily different from the physical world, does not have its roots outside the one cosmos is evident from the undeniable fact that causal connections exist between the psyche and the body which point to their underlying unitary nature.76

The monistic outlook of the alchemist reflects itself in the strictly holistic nature of the partners in this marriage. Their union, the conjunctio oppositorum, finds its model in the hieros gamos, the sacred wedding feast, whose original incestuous nature is decisive.

For the alchemist, man's salvation is the outcome of the union or relationship of the adept's reconquered unified self with the primordial world. In psychological terms, it is the transcendental merging of the conscious with the unconscious.

Commenting on this aspect of alchemical thought as expressed by Gerhard Dorn, Jung writes:

The thought Dorn expresses by the third degree of conjunction is universal: it is the relation or identity of the personal with the suprapersonal atman, and of the individual tao with the universal tao. To the Westerner this view appears not at all realistic and all too mystic; above all he cannot see why a self should become a reality when it enters into relationship with the world of the first day of creation. He has no knowledge of any world other than the empirical one. Strictly speaking, his puzzlement does not begin here; it began already with the production of the caelum, the inner unity. . . . The psychological interpretation (foreshadowed by the alchemists) points to the concept of human wholeness. This concept has primarily a therapeutic significance in that it attempts to portray the psychic state which results from bridging over a dissociation between conscious and unconscious. The alchemical compensation corresponds to the integration of the unconscious with consciousness, whereby both are altered.77
It is this complex psychic process that Duchamp expresses in the *Large Glass* when he implies that the Bride’s domain (the upper half of the *Glass*, the Sky, the unconscious) is the “mirorical return” of the Bachelor domain (the lower half of the *Glass*, the Earth, the conscious). In so doing Duchamp actually bridges the gap between conscious and unconscious. He draws our attention to the fundamental monistic structure of the *Glass*; the duality that derives from the physical division of the *Glass* in two halves, each of which bears a different name, is abolished.

Let us return to Duchamp’s description of the third stage of the Bachelor’s odyssey. We remember that the Bachelor “coming from below” (Earth) finally meets the Bride “coming from above” (Sky) in the upper half of the *Large Glass*. The Bachelor-King, at the end of his long journey, has conquered the *unio mentalis*; he is therefore ready to meet the Bride-Queen who symbolizes the *unus mundus*.

We may now notice another beautiful correspondence. Duchamp’s projection of the horizontal Bride/Bachelor couple into the vertical Earth/Sky couple finds its isomorphic equivalent in the alchemical projection of the horizontal King-Queen couple into the vertical Earth-Sky couple that has been mentioned before. Duchamp gives graphic expression to this projection from the horizontal to the vertical plane when he shows us, in the sketches that accompany Notes 82 and 83 for instance, the projection of the Bride’s and the Bachelor’s desires, respectively, from the horizontal level to the vertical one. It is expressed in words when he describes the mechanism that governs this projection. In the case of the Bride, her desires will be deviated from one plane to the other through the orientation of the three nets (Note 81); in the case of the Bachelor, through the prisms that were to have been “stuck behind the glass” (Note 119).

This identification of the Bride/Bachelor couple with the Earth/Sky couple extinguishes the motivations for the moral conflict that derives from the unconscious incestuous trend and bridges over the apparently irremediable Bride/Bachelor separation.

The basic goal of alchemy is not different. Jung observes:

> It was a work of reconciliation between apparently incompatible opposites, which, characteristically, were understood not merely as the natural hostility of the physical elements but at the same time as a moral conflict. Since the object of this endeavor was seen outside as well as inside, as both physical and psychic, the work extended as it were through the whole of nature, and its goal consisted in a symbol which had an empirical and at the same time a transcendental aspect.78

One last remark: we may have noticed the constant recurrence of the number three in the processes described by Duchamp. This is not astonishing if we remember that, in the alchemical tradition, this number is the symbol of Hermes, who, in turn, is the prototype of the Son, the hermaphrodite, the radiant *lumen novum*.

Duchamp’s mythopoetic ability, which finds its highest achievement in the *Glass*, has given us one of the most useful works of Occidental thought. “We like to imagine that something which we do not understand does not help us in any way,” observes Jung, “but that is not always so. . . . Because of its numinosity the myth has a direct effect on the unconscious, no matter whether it is understood or not.”79
I still have in my ears the sound of Bachelard’s voice when, years ago, he explained that “alchemy is a science only for men, for bachelors, for men without women, for initiates isolated from the community, working in favor of a masculine society,” and I remember that I immediately thought of Duchamp. When I read Jung’s remark that “‘true’ alchemy was never a business or a career, but a genuine opus to be achieved by quiet, self-sacrificing work,” I could not help thinking again about Duchamp. In a world as rationalist, prosaic, and fragmented as ours, only Duchamp had attempted an irrational, poetic, and humanistic adventure of alchemical dimensions. No work but the Large Glass has embodied the unattainable transparency of the Philosopher’s Stone. The story of the quest of the Philosopher’s Stone is a story of failures. But the men who bravely fail teach us more than those who briefly succeed.

NOTES


7. Breton, Prolegomena to a Third Surrealist Manifesto or Not (1942), in Manifestes of Surrealism, pp. 301-2.


10. Ibid., p. 317.


12. Ibid., p. 10.


20. Michael Maier, Symbola aurea (Frankfort: Luc Jenn, 1617).


27. Plutarch, The Greek Question (58th) and the Virtues of Women; quoted by Delcourt, Hermaphrodite, p. 7.


29. Ibid., p. 64.


31. Evola, La tradizione ermetica . . . ., p. 32.


35. The first draft of this talk has been published in Marcel Duchamp, "Apropos of Readymades," *Art and Artists* (London), vol. I, no. 4 (July 1966), p. 47. My quotations are taken from the final, unpublished text given to me by Duchamp.


38. Ibid., Note 36.

39. Ibid., Note 1.

40. Ibid., Note 81.

41. Ibid., Note 100.

42. Ibid., Note 100.

43. Ibid., Note 140.

44. Ibid., Note 85.

45. Ibid., Note 1.


49. Ibid., Note 92.

50. Ibid.

51. *Notes and Projects*, Note 1.


56. Ibid., p. 358.

57. Ibid., p. 357.

58. Ibid., p. 367.

59. Ibid., p. 384.


63. *Notes and Projects*, Note 92.

64. Ibid., Note 98.

65. Ibid., Note 100.

66. Ibid.


69. Ibid., pp. 471, 472-73.


71. *Notes and Projects*, Note 100.

72. Ibid., Note 98.

73. Ibid.

74. *Notes and Projects*, Note 110.


76. Ibid., pp. 537-38.

77. Ibid., pp. 535, 536.

78. Ibid., p. 554.

