

CRYPTOGRAPHY AND ALCHEMY IN THE WORK OF MARCEL DUCHAMP AND WALTER ARENSBERG

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Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) was/is, according to the title belonging to one of the recent (1989) scholarly testaments to his legendary postmodernist fame, 'MARCEL DUCHAMP: ARTIST OF THE CENTURY'¹. Anything but a true believer, and perhaps more like a postmodernist iconoclast, for some time I have been preparing a monographic study examining in considerable detail just how the now endlessly discussed art of Marcel Duchamp was consistently based on traditional esoteric systems which were themselves scarcely "modern" for being largely, and very conventionally, "hermetic" in nature, often directly so². In order to make my case credible—for the occultist-alchemical issue is *very* controversial in Duchamp scholarship³—in a recent publication I went even further, listing any number of esoteric publications, including many specifically hermetic-alchemical texts, which were directly accessible to Duchamp during his two-year, 1913-1915, tenure as a librarian at the Bibliothèque Sainte-Genviève in Paris⁴. Now I would like to consider a related issue, which (oddly) is never sufficiently emphasized in the copiously published Duchamp scholarship, namely the generally occult, and often specifically hermetic, interests of Duchamp's foremost American patron, Walter

¹ In this case, the reference is to Kuenzli and Naumann, *Marcel Duchamp: Artist of the Century*; see also Shipe, 'Marcel Duchamp: A Selective Bibliography'. For something like the documentary history of a nearly unprecedented art-historical apotheosis of MD, ca. 1960—ca. 1995, see Jones, *Postmodernism and the En-Gendering of Marcel Duchamp*, see esp. chapters 2, 3: 'Duchamp as Generative Patriarch of American Postmodernists'; 'The Living Author-Function: Duchamp's Authority'.

² See Moffitt, 'An Emblematic Alchemical Source for Duchamp's "Large Glass"'; 'Hermeticism in the Art of the Fourth Dimension'; 'Marcel Duchamp: Alchemist of the Avant-Garde'; 'Marcel Duchamp, la emblemática alquímica, y el *Atalanta Fugiens*'; 'Marcel Duchamp's *Étant donné*: How Walter Arensberg Explained its Alchemical Iconography'; 'Hermeticism in Jules Laforgue's *Encore à cet astre*: A Symbolist Alchemical Scenario for Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*'.

³ Most notable (or notorious) among the *other* students of Duchamp's alchemical scenarios are (besides Moffitt, as in n. 2): Burham, *Great Western Saltworks*; Calvesi, *Duchamp Invisible*; Golding, *Marcel Duchamp*; Linde, 'L'ésotérique'; Schwarz, *Complete Works*; for an overview of the earlier alchemical interpretations (listing even more entries), see also Clair, 'La fortune critique de Marcel Duchamp'.

⁴ Moffitt, 'Fin-de-Siècle Parisian Hermeticism'.

Conrad Arensberg (1878-1954), so showing another convergence of their ideas in esoteric pursuits⁵.

I

Fleeing from a war-torn European continent, Marcel Duchamp arrived in the port of New York on Tuesday, August 11, 1915. In a properly symbolic manner, in sweltering heat, Duchamp had landed on Columbus Day, celebrating the invention of primitive America by another great European discoverer-conqueror⁶. Duchamp was greeted on the pier by Walter Pach, who immediately brought the twenty-eight year-old émigré artist to the apartment of Louise and Walter Arensberg⁷. The Arensbergs, who then lived at 33 West 67th Street, were to become Duchamp's most devoted patrons during his early years in America, which, in retrospect, turns out to have been by far the most significant period in his entire career. The unique oeuvre Duchamp produced for his enlightened New World patrons now enhances the unsurpassed Arensberg collection in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The most important individual "commission" among all these diverse works is, of course, the *Large Glass* (*La Mariée mise à nu par les célibataires, même*), which, in fact, Duchamp had been working on—in the form of notes and drawings—since around 1912. The Arensbergs created around themselves a coterie of artists that included some already major figures of the European avant-garde who had wisely sought refuge in neutral America. Besides Duchamp, there was Francis Picabia, Albert Gleizes (an early Cubist theoretician), the author Henri-Pierre

⁵ For another of these revelations, see Moffitt, 'Marcel Duchamp's *Étant donnés*...'. For crucial details regarding the actual contents of Arensberg's esoteric library, I am in great debt to Dr. Naomi Sawelson-Gorse (formerly consulting archivist of the Arensberg Archives in the Francis Bacon Library) and Alan Jutzi (Rare Book Dept., Huntington Library). Even though a complete catalogue of Arensberg's books, most of which have only recently been transferred to the Huntington Library (San Marino, Calif.), is far from complete, Mr. Jutzi informs me that his initial survey reveals that Arensberg certainly did own an 'extensive' collection of publications specifically dealing with alchemy and hermeticism; besides modern *divulgations*, he had also acquired many original editions from the 17th century, among others, including Fludd and Kirchner. Prof. Sawelson-Gorse emphasizes however one's difficulty in fixing the date for these acquisitions, and our only solid clues are citations in Arensberg's publications, but these only provide a *terminus ante quem*.

⁶ For much further information regarding the mythic 'inventions' of America by numerous European visitors, welcome or otherwise and beginning late in 1492, see Moffitt and Sebastián, *O Brave New People: The European Invention of the American Indian*.

⁷ Some of this biographical data has been drawn from Gough-Cooper and Caumont, *Ephemerides*; and *Plan pour écrire une vie de Marcel Duchamp*, for nearly everything else pertinent to the Arensberg connection, see also Sawelson-Gorse, 'Marcel Duchamp's "Silent Guard"'.

Roché, and a composer of primitivist-anarchist music, Edgar Varèse. Numerous Americans susceptible to European avant-garde ideas were also attracted to the Arensberg Circle, including the painters Charles Sheeler, Man Ray (Emmanuel Radetsky), and John Covert, Arensberg's cousin and also a fan of cryptographic art. Also in attendance was another future art patron of Marcel Duchamp, Katherine Sophie Dreier (1877-1952)—and she possessed her own esoteric agenda⁸.

Walter Arensberg possessed two important features: considerable inherited (or married) wealth and an enthusiastic interest in the arts. Due to these factors, he was to become a most generous and charismatic supporter of New York Dada⁹. At the same time, Arensberg was notorious for his odd intellectual pursuits, and it is these which, as we may believe, will throw some much needed light upon some equally odd, new directions Duchamp's art was to take in America, beginning nearly immediately after his arrival in 1915¹⁰. Long before he moved to California, in 1921, Arensberg had been preparing markedly esoteric works of pseudo-scientific scholarship. The published results included *The Cryptography of Dante* (1921), *The Cryptography of Shakespeare* (1922), and *The Shakespearean Mystery* (1928). This pseudo-scholar-cum-art-patron obviously fancied himself a code-breaker. According to Arensberg, the "real meanings" of Dante's *Divina Commedia* and of several of Shakespeare's plays could be extrapolated by means of the decipherment of cryptic messages. Since these hidden (or occult) significances had been deliberately concealed within the famous texts by their devious authors, it obviously required a very ingenious intellect to bring them to light. Ever since Arensberg had graduated in English literature, "*cum laude*" from Harvard in 1900, he searched through the collected works of his targeted subjects for their hidden codes.

In the case of the Bard of Avon, the purpose was to prove that Sir Francis Bacon was the "real" author of what less ingenious intellects naïvely thought

⁸ For documentation of Dreier's lifelong interest in Theosophy and Anthroposophy (which would require another paper to relate to Duchamp), see Bohan, *The Société Anonyme's Brooklyn Exhibition*, especially chapter 2, 'Dreier's Artistic Philosophy'.

⁹ For New York Dada in general, see Tashjian, *Skyscraper Primitives*, also his 'New York Dada and Primitivism'; Naumann, *New York Dada 1915-1923*; see also Martin Green's excellent contextual study on *New York 1913*. Unfortunately, Arensberg never seems to have written anything substantial about his adventures in the New York art world, nor, for that matter, anything specific about his "philosophy of art".

¹⁰ The intellectual and esoteric pursuits of Walter Arensberg have received little scholarly attention; for a welcome exception to the rule, see Naumann, 'Cryptography and the Arensberg Circle'; see also his study of 'Walter Conrad Arensberg: Poet, Patron, and Participant in the New York Avant-Garde, 1915-20'; more recently, see also Sawelson-Gorse, 'Marcel Duchamp's 'Silent Guard', esp. 54-60, 81-83, 143-148, 159-161, 162-178.

to a product of the mind of William Shakespeare. Besides that revelation, Arensberg also sought to demonstrate that Bacon was himself the mysterious founder of the “Rosicrucian Brotherhood”, themselves enthusiastic authors of alchemical allegories during the Baroque era¹¹. In the case of Dante however, Arensberg’s proposal was a bit more original. As he meant to reveal to a startled world, the *Divine Comedy* symbolically re-enacts various aspects of birth, reincarnation and the primitive Mother-Goddess Cult. This stratagem allowed for modernist and, therefore, wholly anachronistic, Freudian interpretations of a previously unsuspected sexual symbolism. According to the indefatigable American literary cryptographer, the three stages of Dante’s “Hell”, “Purgatory”, and “Paradise” were really representations of different physical aspects of the reproductive organs of the distinguished Tuscan poet’s mother, Bella—whom Arensberg also dramatically reveals to be Dante’s metaphorical lover, Beatrice. If one correctly knows how to read the great medieval epic, Arensberg claimed, Dante is first born through vaginal passage and then, by means of incestuous love-making, Dante is again destined to be re-born—as Christ. A decision on the real merits of these neo-Freudian interpretations is probably better left to a suitably informed scholar of high medieval culture.

In much later interviews with Pierre Cabanne, Duchamp recalled, and not surprisingly, that Arensberg ‘had a difficult character, poor man. He was a little older than I, although not much, and he wasn’t recognized very quickly or very completely as a poet—so he became disgusted with poetry and soon stopped writing’. Frustrated, Arensberg turned to a very different literary enterprise; according to Duchamp,

he had a fantastic hobby, cryptography. ... His system was to find in the text, in every three lines, allusions to all sorts of things. It was a game for him, like chess, which he [like Duchamp] enjoyed immensely. He had two or three secretaries working for him. ... [His research] was mostly the conviction of a man at play. Arensberg twisted words to make them say what he wanted, like every one who does that kind of work.

Then Duchamp mentioned how the would-be cryptographer became his patron: ‘When I arrived, he began buying my things. ... Arensberg had known that I was coming to America, and, without knowing anything about me, he

¹¹ For one citation of this Rosicrucian connection (among many others), see Arensberg, *The Burial of Francis Bacon*, 8 (and current throughout this, and other self-published *opuscula*). For this pursuit, A. E. Waite’s *Secret History of the Rosicrucians* (London 1887) proved especially useful to Arensberg (and to anyone else interested in hermetic allegory); this title appears among the many books on alchemy owned by Arensberg, and now being catalogued at the Huntington Library. My thanks again go to Mr. Jutzi for making *The Burial of Francis Bacon*, and various other rare publications by Arensberg, available to me for close scrutiny.

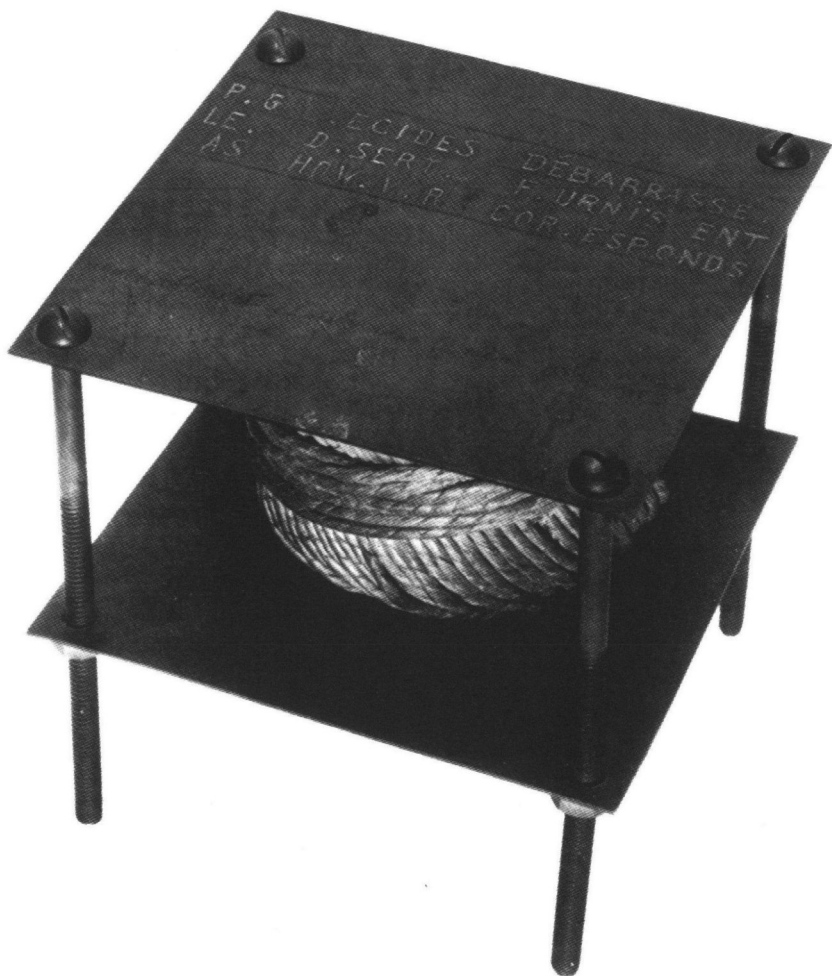


Fig. 1. Marcel Duchamp (and Walter Arensberg), *À bruit secret*, (mixed media), 1916.

wanted to meet me. I stayed at his place for a month, during which time our friendship was born, a friendship which lasted all my life'¹². As the artist further acknowledged, Arensberg directly contributed to Duchamp's material support, particularly by paying his rent.

II

Despite the somewhat disparaging tone of Duchamp's comments about his generous patron's cryptographic obsessions, it is unquestionable that Duchamp himself enthusiastically participated in the very same esoteric activities. A blatant example of an interest in "secret writing" that was equally shared by Arensberg and Duchamp is the art-object called *À bruit secret*¹³ (Fig. 1). The piece was called "With Secret Sound"—or a "Secret Shelter" (*Abri secret*)—after its construction by Duchamp on Easter Sunday, April 23, 1916. This curious artifact consists of a ball of twine held between two brass plates that are joined together with four long bolts. This was truly a work of collaboration. Just before its completion, Arensberg put something "secret" into the ball of twine. Today, that still unknown metallic device still makes the object mysteriously rattle when shaken. Not even Duchamp was let into the secret of Arensberg's hidden bruitist addition. On the top and the bottom plates of *À bruit secret*, there are inscribed three lines of jumbled French and English words, many of which are incomplete. Each letter was placed into its own square of a uniform size. The results of the inscribed sequences look like this—with a period to signify a missing letter and a double slash to indicate the spaces deliberately left blank:

I. TOP PLATE:

P . G . // . E C I D E S // D E B A R R A S S E .
L E // D . S E R T . // F . U R N I S E N T
A S // H O W . V . R // C O R . E S P O N D S

¹² Cabanne, *Dialogues*, 51-52; for the original French text of these interviews, see *Entretiens*, 87-88.

¹³ For this odd work, unquestionably incorporating an overtly cryptographic exercise, see Clair, *MD: Catalogue raisonné*, cat. no. 107, 86-87, '*À bruit secret*'. The linguistic aspects of the Duchamp-Arensberg collaboration are now examined by Sawelson-Gorse and Nesbit, 'Marcel Duchamp and Walter Arensberg', who describe its ultimate meaning as 'more nothing'. For cogent observations about the Symbolists' earlier obsession with 'hermetic languages', and very much of the sort found in this co-authored 'Secret Shelter/Noise', see Staller, 'Babel: Hermetic Languages, Universal Languages, and Anti-Languages in Fin de Siècle Parisian Culture'.

2. BOTTOM PLATE:

IR.//CAR.E//LONGSEA
 F.NE, //.HEA., //O.SQUE
 TE.U//S.ARP//BAR.AIN

The idea was that the dots indicated missing letters, which are to be found somewhere in the same vertical column or even in adjacent lines. The “sentences” apparently begin on the bottom (or upper?) plate and are supposedly completed, or brought to completion, above, in the top (or lower?) plate. One possible “solution” would be as follows—but, of course, one really does not know exactly *which* new letters (as tentatively indicated here in lower-case) should have been substituted for the original dots:

PaGe//dECIDES//DEBARRASSEr
 LE//DeSERTs//FoURNISSENT
 AS//HOWeVeR//CORRESPONDS

aIR//CARéE//LONGSEA
 FiNE, //HEAt, //OrSQUE
 TE nU//ShARP//BARGAIN

As one sees here, English words have been mixed together with French ones (their equivalents?) in a fashion that (perhaps) suggests a greater logic, but that is one which still eludes me (or anyone else). Given the Gallic orientation, one may assume that the “text” was entirely the work of Marcel Duchamp and, further, that it was presented as a ‘hommage à Arensberg’. Otherwise, after spending (or wasting) considerable time on the problem, for this investigator the results still remain, unfortunately, nearly total non-sense. Still, one comprehensive “interpretation” of the Arensberg-Duchamp “text” is the following, in which I have translated the likely French words into a probable English “correspondence” (in *italics*), and indicated the breaks from one plate to another, meaning from below to above, and beginning (it seems) in the center line of each terzine: “*The—desert[s]—furnish[es]—/ Fine,—heat,—when—/ Page [boy?]*—*decides—to clear up—/ Kept—sharp—bargain—/ As—however—corresponds—/ air—square—alongsea—*“. Although these “sentences” admittedly do not yield much coherent meaning, I have found what appear to be two instances of letter sequences of the sort Arensberg called an “anagrammatic acrostic”, which, he explained, ‘is not read consecutively; and, using as it does initial and contiguous letters, is not read exclusively on ini-

tials'. In this case, what seems revealed are the names of the two collaborators; nonetheless, again according to Arensberg, 'the reading, however it may be confirmed, cannot be absolutely *proved* as intentional' (his emphasis)¹⁴. In the first instance we have "Arensberg", as derived from this hidden sequence (with the pertinent letters underlined):

a I R // C A R é E // L O N G S E A
 F i N E, // H E A t, // O r S Q U E
 T E n U // S h A R P // B A R g A I N

The second instance, rather more obliquely—due to an alphabetical displacement of one letter, but just as with the preceding example—seems to yield "Duchamp":

L E // D e S E R T s // F o U R N I S s E N T
 A S // H O W e V e R // C O R r E S P O N D S
 F i N E, // H E A t, // O r S Q U E
 T E n U // S h A R P // B A R g A I N

III

Although the results of my attempts to translate the whole "text" remain otherwise tenaciously devoid of any apparent sense, the format overall (as "format") appears to be derived from a traditional esoteric scheme unquestionably familiar to Arensberg, namely "magic squares". A number of these *Carrés magiques* were recorded in the *grimoires*, the old French books of magic. A notable example was translated ('from an old and rare French manuscript in the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal at Paris') into English, and first published in London in 1898 by a noted British occultist, S. L. MacGregor-Mathers¹⁵. The typically ponderous title of this rampantly esoteric publication is: *The Book of the Sacred Magic of Abra-Melin, the Mage as Delivered by Abraham the Jew Unto His Son Lamech. A Grimoire of the Fifteenth Century*. As seems not hitherto recognized, Arensberg probably had access to this publication, or at least to another very similar one, and these were of a sort that were then rather common; in fact, Arensberg did actually cite MacGregor-Mathers's Kabbalis-

¹⁴ Arensberg, *The Cryptography of Dante*, 400-401; for some other tactical definitions, see ch. 2, 'Acrostics', 23 ff.

¹⁵ I will quote from a slightly revised edition appearing two years later: MacGregor-Mathers, *The Book of the Sacred Magic*.

tic studies in his own published works¹⁶. In this case, Duchamp's patron was, of course, completely *au courant* with such standard occultist practice, the *grimoires*, themselves easily taken to represent an offshoot of kabbalistic endeavor, given the emphasis on letter symbolism.

Clearly, Arensberg certainly read a great deal of the likes of MacGregor-Mathers's apparently erudite evaluation of such occultist cryptographical materials, directed, the Briton says, to both 'English and American students of Occultism'. MacGregor-Mathers, the scholar-editor, also stated his purely "Occult" intentions in his Introduction to *The Book of the Sacred Magic of Abra-Melin* as follows: 'In giving it now to the Public, I feel, therefore, that I am conferring a real benefit upon English and American students of Occultism, by placing within their reach for the first time a Magical work of such importance from the Occult standpoint'¹⁷. MacGregor-Mathers also neatly explains the attractions of this kind of literally lettered combinatory art to the likes of an Arensberg, 'for the Third Book of this work is crowded with Qabalistic Squares of Letters, which are simply so many Pentacles, and in which the Names employed are the very factors which make them of value'¹⁸.

The inscribed plates of the Duchamp-Arensberg cryptographic effort have sixty squares below and seventy-five above. According to MacGregor-Mathers, the granddaddy of all such 'Qabalistic Squares of Letters' is the "Key of Solomon", and this arcanum to be found 'inscribed within a double circle'; in this case, the hidden message corresponds to Psalm 77:8 in the Bible. Nevertheless, the prototypical occultist magic-square transforms the text; as was explained by the British Occultist,

in the Hebrew, this versicle consists of exactly twenty-five letters, the number of the letters of the square. It will be at once noticed that both this form and that given by Abraham the Jew [a legendary alchemist] are *perfect examples of double acrostics*, that is, that they read in every direction, whether horizontal or perpendicular, whether backwards or forwards. ... It is also to be observed, that while many of the Symbolic Squares of Letters of the Third Book present the nature of the double Acrostic, there are also many which do not, and in the case of a great number the letters do not fill up the square entirely, but are arranged somewhat in the form of a gnomon. Others again leave the center part of the square blank¹⁹.

Further on, MacGregor-Mathers describes one of these cryptographic con-

¹⁶ See for instance, Arensberg, *The Shakespearean Mystery*, 148, specifically citing 'The Kabbalah Unveiled by S.I. MacGregor-Mathers'.

¹⁷ MacGregor-Mathers *The Book of the Sacred Magic*, xvii.

¹⁸ MacGregor-Mathers *The Book of the Sacred Magic*, xxix.

¹⁹ MacGregor-Mathers *The Book of the Sacred Magic*, xxxi; for further explanations, the author refers to his *Kabbalah Unveiled*, which we saw Arensberg had cited in another of his own publications.

figurations, and this largely impenetrable explanation can stand for all the rest of the impenetrable arcana included in his folio volume:

No. 1 is a Square of 25 Squares, and is a complete specimen of double Acrostic arrangement. *MILON*, though Greek-sounding, has here hardly a meaning if derived from either *MILOS*, a fruit or other tree; or from *MEILON*, a precious thing, or article of value. It seems rather derived from the Hebrew *MLVN* = a diversity of things, or matter. *IRAGO* is perhaps from Greek *EIRA*, a question or inquiry, and *AGO*, to conduct or decide. Hebrew *RGO* = to disrupt or analyze. *LAMAL*, probably from Chaldaic *MLA* = fulness, entirety. *OGARI* from Hebrew *OGR* = a swallow or swiftly-flying thing. *NOLIM* from Hebrew, *NOLIM* = hidden or covered things. Whence we may extract the following as the formula of this Square: "Various questions fully examined and analyzed, and that quickly, and even things carefully hidden and concealed". This rule we can apply to discover the formulas of other Squares²⁰.

As we may now observe, besides appearing to have the composition of a *grimoire*-derived, 'symbolic square of letters', Duchamp's *À bruit secret*—evidently standing for what the English Occultist calls 'things carefully hidden and concealed'—is *bilingual*. MacGregor-Mathers, a convenient spokesman for a whole school of modern, strictly occultist, cryptography, again provides the most likely explanation for the Duchamp-Arensberg "secret" art object.

I yet wish to state some reasons in favour of the employment of a language other than one's own [states MacGregor-Mathers], chief, and first, is that it aids the mind to conceive the higher aspect of the Operation; when a different language, and one looked upon as sacred, is employed, and when the phrases in which do not therefore suggest matters of ordinary life. ... If properly pronounced [other languages] are more sonorous in vibration...and from that circumstance they can suggest greater solemnity. Also know that the farther a Magical Operation is removed from the commonplace, the better. ... Furthermore, the words in the ancient languages imply "formulas of correspondences" with more ease than those of the modern ones²¹.

The thoughtful British Occultist concludes with a timely warning regarding potential mis-usages of these incredibly potent and wonder-working diagrams:

Pentacles and Symbols are valuable as an equilibrated and fitting basis for the reception of Magical force: but unless the Operator can *really* attract that force to them, they are nothing but so many dead, and to him worthless, diagrams. But used by the Initiate, who fully comprehends their meaning, they become to him a powerful protection and aid, seconding and focusing the workings of his Will.

He also observes a potential risk in such endeavors, *obsession*. 'At the risk of repeating myself I will once more earnestly caution the Student against the

²⁰ MacGregor-Mathers *The Book of the Sacred Magic*, 169.

²¹ MacGregor-Mathers *The Book of the Sacred Magic*, xxxvi.

dangerous automatic nature of certain of the Magical Squares of the Third Book; for, if left carelessly about, they are very liable to *obsess* sensitive persons, children, or even animals'. Arensberg should have paid heed to this warning ... The British author also identifies his targeted audience, someone like Arensberg: 'In conclusion I will only say that I have written this explanatory Introduction purely and solely as a help to genuine Occult students; and that for the opinion of the ordinary literary critic, who neither understands nor believes in Occultism, I care nothing'²². So spoke MacGregor-Mathers, an occultist author cited with approval by Walter Arensberg in his own obsessively cryptographic publications.

IV

One other markedly "cryptographic" exercise mutually executed by Marcel Duchamp and Walter Arensberg still exists²³. In February 1916, Duchamp acquired—and named—a steel *Comb*²⁴ (Fig. 2). This object is also inscribed, but the motto is even more puzzling than before: "*3 ou 4 gouttes de hauteur n'ont rien à faire avec la sauvagerie*" (three or four drops [falling] from above have nothing to do with savagery or barbarism). Much later, Duchamp provided for Arturo Schwarz an equally bizarre explanation for this *pièce-de-resistance risible*:

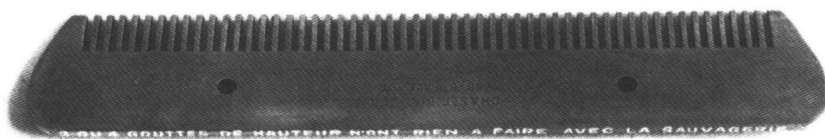


Fig. 2. Marcel Duchamp (and Walter Arensberg), *Peigne* (inscribed Ready-Made), 1916.

²² MacGregor-Mathers *The Book of the Sacred Magic*, xxxvii-xxxviii.

²³ For the background on this piece, also adding an interpretation slightly at variance with mine, see Savelson-Gorse, 'Duchamp's Silent Guard', 144-148; see also Savelson-Gorse and Nesbit, 'Marcel Duchamp and Walter Arensberg', 151-152.

²⁴ Clair, *Catalogue raisonné*, 86, cat. no. 106: 'Peigne'. It specifically appears to be a steel comb of the sort used to groom dogs (*peigne à chien*), and the Arensbergs had wire-haired terriers, of which they were uniquely fond.

The teeth of a comb are not really a very important item in life. Nobody ever cared to consider a comb from such an angle. ... It could also be compared to a golden section, when you have a different [proportionate] relation of length to lines. That's very farfetched, but I am always attracted by the farfetched. ... The comb becomes [a metaphor of] the generation of space, space generated by [the number and width of] the teeth. ... There is a possibility, as I said, of generating space from a flat surface. You can do it with any surface²⁵.

As Naomi Sawelson-Gorse explains, one result, as specifically due to the meticulously lettered inscription, was 'an alpha-numeric string cipher, so called by cryptographers'²⁶.

Given the fact that Duchamp himself admitted his attraction to the 'farfetched', oddly enough I do not find mention of the most obvious homophone for this piece, *Peigne*, being cited in the interpretive literature; in standard French, *péne* sounds just like *peigne*, and the former means "penis". In any event, that kind of eroticized, sometimes 'savage', male member also notoriously makes 'drops'. This conclusion might seem only farfetched, or *outré*—but I have proof that Arensberg himself made much out of the word-play potentially generated by *pene*. In his *Cryptography of Dante*, upon which he was deeply engaged as early as 1916, he claimed that Dante was referring (*Inferno* 34: 91-93) to 'the *pene* of Lucifer', particularly as 'his genitals are exactly at the center of the earth'. If you think that observation is just a trifle farfetched, try this one (as presumably worked out by Arensberg by 1916): 'Dante, who, at the sight of Lucifer, became FETO [foetus], must now have become SPERMA [sperm] again in order to pass through the *pene* [penis] of Lucifer into the cavity below'. Moreover, 'the verb for *gente grossa* is *pensi*, line 92, which is an anagram for *penis*, and which is in addition the word on which terminate three interior sequences spelling PENE', and he proceeds to show us these *pene* sequences, very (very) much buried in Dante's Italian text²⁷. Elsewhere, discussing *Inferno* 12: 34-45, Arensberg works out a sequence (arranged vertically) of PAPE SATAN PAPE SATAN ALEPPE, and from this babble we are instructed to: 'Read down on the first three words: PENE. Read up on the last three words: PENE. The two readings key on E of the third word. Just as in the first telestic reading, Dante and Christ are associated, so Dante is here associated with PENE. Phallic symbolism for Christ appears in his well-known sym-

²⁵ Duchamp, as quoted in Schwarz, *Complete Works*, 461.

²⁶ Savelson-Gorse, 'Duchamp's Silent Guard', 146, providing further details on p. 148. Her interpretation seems sound, but she does not mention the 'pun' (*peigne-péne*) that seems actually to underlie the cryptographic 'system' she elucidates so well.

²⁷ Arensberg, *Cryptography of Dante*, 237.

bol, the fish and the key"²⁸. After that iconographic revelation, we are perhaps not surprised to find that Arensberg repeatedly finds Dante referring to himself as SPERMA (sperm)²⁹.

To amplify further this certainly novel interpretation, I may now add to the argument exactly what Arensberg had specifically to say later about the specifically "alchemical" interpretation of "sperm", for that is the liquid which I (and not at all perversely) assume to have been specifically represented in 1916 by these *penis-pène-pene-peigne* generated "drops". In short, for Arensberg, and following conventional Rosicrucian wisdom, alchemy largely represents *sexual* allegory:

In order to understand the attempt that appears in Alchemy to adapt the symbolism of the mysteries to a scientific procedure [Arensberg announces], it is necessary to recognize the sense in which the process of sexual generation was equated in the mysteries both with the logical process of thought and with the physical process of nature considered as a mechanism. ... And since the form of putrefaction was the form in which the metal united with the *materia prima*, as maternal, for the purpose of rebirth, the putrefied form was equated with semen [or "sperm"]; the entrance of the semen into the alchemical retort or furnace was equated with the divine marriage; the retort or furnace itself was equated with the maternal womb; and the cooking of the metal in the retort or furnace was equated with gestation [and] the symbolism of a divine and incestuous marriage. ... That Alchemy involves a divine marriage (as of the sun and moon) which is analogous to a human marriage is illustrated in [for instance] the plates reproduced [by Arensberg] from the *Rosarium Philosophorum* by Arnoldus de Villanova. Analogous symbolism appears in the plates from the works of Michael Maier [including his *Atalanta Fugiens*, also reproduced by Arensberg]. Characteristic expressions of sexual procreation and incest in reference to the alchemical procedure appear in the following quotations from the *New Light of Alchemy*, published under the name of Michael Sendivogius: 'The next instruction however is: "Take the living male and the living female and join them in order that they may project a sperm [!] for the procreation of a fruit according to their kind"'. Again: 'You must produce one thing out of two by natural generation...gold emits its seed [or "sperm"] into steel, the latter conceives and brings forth a son much nobler than the father; that if this son fertilizes his own mother, her womb becomes a thousand times better fitted to produce excellent fruit [etc.]'³⁰.

²⁸ Arensberg, *Cryptography of Dante*, 306; for other, similarly egregious, PENE discoveries by Arensberg, see 250, 291.

²⁹ Arensberg, *Cryptography of Dante*, 226-227, 229-230, 237-239, 252-253.

³⁰ Arensberg, *Shakespearean Mystery*, 126-128; for his Sendivogius quotations, Arensberg here cites as his textual source: 'Arthur Edward Waite, *The Secret Tradition in Alchemy* [London 1926], 248-249'. Alan Jutzi informs me that Waite's treatise has (again) turned up in the Huntington Library. In passing, I may mention the obvious (to me at least) connection to a much discussed "erotic" element found throughout Duchamp's oeuvre, and perhaps most blatant in the 'Notes' to an endlessly discussed *Large Glass*; for more on that connection, see Moffitt, 'Alchemist of the Avant-Garde'.

V

We may now present the *physical proof* for the unparalleled (and probably unwelcome) revelation that Marcel Duchamp had literally linked his relentlessly cryptic art-making with “sperm”. In this case, our major exhibit is a much later work by Duchamp, the *Paysage fautif* of 1946 (Fig. 3). In fact, laboratory analysis of the material substance of Duchamp’s *Paysage fautif*—work performed by none other than the ever-resourceful FBI!—has scientifically determined—*physical proof*, for once!—that the artist really once ejaculated upon his very own work³¹! Accordingly, we now know for a fact that on (at least) one occasion Duchamp certainly performed as a masturbator-artist, in this case for the execution of a certain “Faulty Landscape”, itself nought but a spermatic splatter. With informed hindsight, it literally appears to be the drippy result of ‘3 ou 4 gouttes de hauteur’ produced by none other than Marcel Duchamp’s persistent *pêne*. My Spanish colleague, Juan Antonio

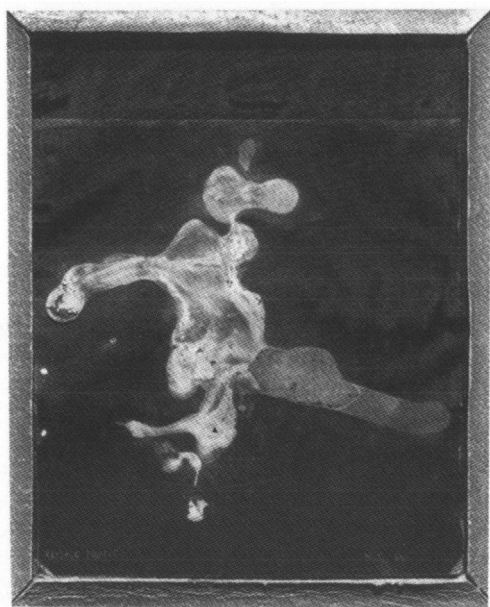


Fig. 3. Marcel Duchamp, *Paysage fautif*, 1946 (21 x 17 cm.: an ‘original’ inserted into Edition XII of the *Boîte en Valise*). Museum of Modern Art, Toyama, Japan.

³¹ On this art-historically unique work, and also the results of its unique scientific analysis performed by the FBI stalwarts on its spermatic contents, see Bonk, *The Box in a Valise*, 282-283. The ‘Faulty Landscape’ was inserted into a later edition (no. XII) of the *Boîte en valise*; in another edition (no. XIII) of that same conglomerate, Duchamp added another ‘original’, *Tifs*, which are hair-clippings stuck to paper.

Ramírez, dryly notes that, once again, we are confronted by ‘una obra pintada mediante un orgasmo (literal) masturbatorio’³². In which case, that is should he bring his autonomous amorous labors to a proper conclusion, then of course our artist-masturbator will soon produce a great splatter of sperm, or “seed”. If so, then here is another, really weird, kind of evidence for Duchamp’s specifically alchemical activities.

Another telling bit of evidence is the communality of “sperm” in standard alchemical treatises, meaning the ones not written by Walter Arensberg. In an earlier publication³³, I cited any number of important hermetic publications to which Duchamp had easy access while he was working as a librarian at the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève in Paris immediately before he came to New York and met Arensberg. Among these, one of the best known, at least to French Occultists, is Antoine-Joseph Pernety’s *Dictionnaire Mytho-Hermétique, dans lequel on trouve les allégories fabuleuses des poètes, les métaphores, les énigmes, et les termes barbares des philosophes hermétiques expliqués* (Paris 1787, with various later reprintings). Since Pernety wrote in straightforward modern French, Duchamp would find his ‘Hermetic Dictionary’ a most handy reference work, just as I have. Like various other hermetic experts discussing at length the bizarre motif, Pernety often mentioned this particular spermy entry, *semence*, and he eventually got around to treating it at some length:

SEMEN [*Semence*]. Most simply said, according to alchemical terminology this word signifies the Sulphur of the Philosophers. But while they may speak about a “semen of metals”, what they really understand by this term is their Mercury, and sometimes even the part of the Magisterium when the sulphur is brought to the [intermediate] white stage. When Alchemical Adepts speak in general terms about a kind of semen belonging to common metals, this is a material they intuit to have been formed within the very bowels of the earth. Then the semen to which they refer represents a vapor formed due to a union of elements dragged down into the earth by the actions of air and water, and there to be sublimated, and then brought back again to the surface by the action of the internal fire. This vapor acquires a kind of corporeal form, turning unctuous or viscous, and as it sublimates this viscous [spermy] stuff sticks to the sulphur it brings up with it, and so the [spermy] vapor forms more or less perfect metals, depending upon the degree of purity belonging to the sulphur and of its matrix. For more on this subject, see the *Twelve Treatises* by Cosmopolitus and the section on “General Physics” found at the beginning of my *Revelations from the Greek and Egyptian Fables*³⁴.

³² J. A. Ramírez, *Duchamp*, 233.

³³ See Moffitt, ‘Parisian Hermeticism’.

³⁴ Pernety, *Dictionnaire Mytho-Hermétique*, 331: ‘SEMENCE. Dit simplement, signifie, en termes d’Alchymie, le soufre des Philosophes. Mais lorsqu’ils disent *Semence des métaux*, ils entendent leur mercure, et quelquefois leur magistère parvenu à la couleur blanche. Quand les

In order to wrinkle out further the real significance of Duchamp's *Paysage fautif* (1946), which the doughty FBI has since *proven* an onanistic daub, we should know that Pernety also emphatically notes that '*semen* must not be confused with *sperm*'. According to Pernety,

SPERM [*Sperme*] is the semen produced by individuals belonging to the three kingdoms: animal, vegetable and mineral. As produced in the first, by animals, it is a white, wet and sticky composition made from the purest parts of the blood. ... One should not confuse sperm with semen, for one is merely the vehicle for the other. Sperm is the generative seed-particle and so it represents the [theoretical] principle lying behind things [*le grain génératif et le principe des choses*]. Because of this revelation, the Hermetic Philosophers gave the name of "metallic sperm" [*sperme des métaux*] to [masculine] sulphur, and they call [feminine] mercury "semen". FEMALE SPERM [*Sperme féminin*] is the Philosopher's Quicksilver. MASCULINE SPERM [*Sperme masculin*] is the Sulphur of the Wise, the fixed particle maturing within the female sperm and which in turn works upon it in order to produce the Philosophical Child, he who is more vigorous and excellent than are his parents³⁵.

Actually, something like further contextual proof for our seemingly egregious "masturbation-thesis" may now be presented, actually reiterated. As we will recall, Walter Arensberg, the putative American patron of Duchamp's *Large Glass*, had himself also expounded upon the *outré* topic of alchemical "semen", and he did so long before Duchamp actually got around to "painting" with his own sperm in 1946, an erotic eruption however to which we may believe he had already alluded to thirty years before in his *Peigne-Péne* of 1916.

Adeptes parlent en générale de la semence des métaux vulgaires, et qu'ils instruisent de la manière dont ils se forment dans les entrailles de la terre, la semence de laquelle ils parlent, est une vapeur formée par l'union des éléments, portée dans la terre avec l'air et l'eau, sublimée ensuite par le feu central jusqu'à la superficie. Cette vapeur se corporifie et deveient onctueuse ou visqueuse, s'accroche, en se sublimant, au soufre qu'elle entraîne avec elle, et forme les métaux plus ou moins parfaits, suivant le plus ou moins de pureté du soufre et de la matrice. Voyez les *Douze Traités* du Cosmopolite, et la physique générale qui est au commencement du *Traité des Fables Egyptiennes et Grecques Dévoilées*.

³⁵ Pernety, *Dictionnaire Mytho-Hermétique*, 331: 'SPERME. Semence des individus dans les trois règnes, animal, végétal et minéral. Dans le premier [l'animal], c'est une substance blanche, humide, onctueuse, composée des parties les plus pures du sang. ... Il ne faut pas confondre le sperme avec la semence, l'un est le véhicule de l'autre. Le sperme est le grain génératif et le principe des choses; c'est pourquoi les Philosophes ont donné le nom de sperme des métaux au soufre [masculin], et celui de semence au mercure [féminin]. Le germe dans les semences des végétaux est le sperme. SPERME FÉMININ. Argent-vif des Philosophes. SPERME MASCULIN. Soufre des Sages, ou le grain fixe, que se développe dans le sperme féminin, et agit sur lui, pour produire l'enfant philosophique, plus vigoureux et plus excellent que ses parents'. The reader familiar with traditional alchemical texts will recognize that I could have quoted several *more* historical materials dealing with this, particularly by means of Paracelsus's 'spermat-ic fluid'—*genug noch aber!*

VI

Now the larger question arises (as it often has): What evidence is there that Duchamp actually dabbled in alchemy? Although the alchemical interpretation may have surfaced verbally as early as the 1930s, it was initially pursued in print by Robert Lebel, who published the first biography of Marcel Duchamp in 1959. Lebel's query about a generalized alchemical orientation in the master's work drew a now-famous rebuttal from Duchamp. Lebel framed his question as follows:

Signs are not lacking, from the incontestably initiatory character of his thought and works, based on the consistent use of a secret language, a symbolism of forms and a system of numbers. . . . Given a man who surrounds himself with secrecy, who obviously follows a rule, who sets for himself exhausting tasks, which he makes certain shall bring him neither glory nor profit and which he suddenly abandons for no apparent reason, would we not be justified in looking for some connection with alchemy?

The artist replied, 'If I have practised Alchemy, it has been so in the only way that it might be allowed in our times, that is, *sans le savoir*'³⁶.

In 1959, just after he issued his supposedly airtight denial to Lebel, Duchamp was again questioned (by mail) about his putative alchemical endeavors by yet another admiring inquisitor. In his written reply (August 19, 1959) to Serge Stauffer, Duchamp appears to declare that he had never read any 'treatises on alchemy', which 'must prove quite inadequate'. Then he argues that 'one cannot "do alchemy" as one can, with an appropriate language, "practise law or medicine"'. But one cannot "practise alchemy"', he concludes, 'by throwing words around, or on the surface in full consciousness'³⁷. This, too, seems an ambiguous reply. In fact, the only straightforward declaration contained here is that one concerning 'les traités d'alchimie que je n'ai lus jamais', and this was evidently because those, the ones which he had never bothered to read, 'doivent être bien inadéquats'. But which ones, and 'quite inadequate' for what purposes? Accordingly, a major burden for the investigator is to show this particular statement to be, at best, equivocal, and probably mendacious. In order to do so, one must present evidence demonstrating that

³⁶ Lebel, *Marcel Duchamp*, 73. While *sans le savoir* means 'unknowingly', 'unawares' in normal idiomatic French, one might speculate whether Duchamp – who was completely bilingual—could have had a *double entendre* in mind, suggesting a translation as 'without the knowledge' (i.e., *gnosis*). If so, his apparent denial would call forth another question: *sans le savoir* of whom, the operator, Duchamp, or, instead, his audience?

³⁷ Stauffer letter, as in Gough-Cooper and Caumont, *Ephemerides*, unpaginated, under the entry for August 19, 1959.

the accused surely read those kinds of publications—but that must be done elsewhere³⁸. As a comparative reading of Duchamp's scripts and certain alchemical treatises should eventually demonstrate, perhaps Duchamp really was truthful in declaring that those particular 'treatises on alchemy [which he] had *never* read' must have indeed been those that he clearly, and knowledgeably, recognized to be 'bien inadéquats'.

We do, however, have some other peripheral, but pertinent, evidence to show the jury in order to argue the case for Duchamp's apparently life-long involvement with the Esoteric Tradition. Another piece of evidence is the recollection by Pierre Cabanne, who published an extended series of *Dialogues* with the artist, testifying that 'there *were* books on the occult in Marcel Duchamp's New York studio' in 1967, the year before his death³⁹. Unfortunately, when Cabanne was later questioned by me about this observation (by letter, in 1985), he could recall no specific titles. Pursuing other fugitive clues, one may call forth various statements by Duchamp describing the painter as a "medium". His kind of artistic "medium" functions like those once officiating at a Victorian-era spiritualist séance: he appears as an emblem of creative "automatism", a passive instrument for otherworldly voices and superior inspirations received from On High. One of these acknowledgments was made by Duchamp in 1958: 'Rational intelligence is dangerous and leads to ratiocination. The painter is a medium who doesn't realize what he is doing. No translation can express the mystery of sensibility, a word, still unreliable, which is nevertheless the basis of painting or poetry, like a kind of alchemy'⁴⁰.

On the other hand, when asked by an American reporter in 1966 whether a retrospective exhibition of his art perhaps represented a 'gigantic leg-pull', Duchamp laughed and suggested, 'Yes, perhaps it *is* just one big joke'⁴¹. Admittedly, Duchamp rarely disagreed with his inquisitors, accepting tacitly whatever anyone had to say about his work. Paul Matisse recalled that, 'for him, agreement was the way he kept his freedom[:]' 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'⁴². His wife Teeny (now deceased) later recalled that not only did Duchamp fail to enlighten his interviewers, but that 'he would rather have them be put off in the wrong directions'⁴³. Dieter Daniels cited a major exam-

³⁸ Hopefully, as will be done in my forthcoming monograph, *Alchemist of the Avant-Garde*.

³⁹ Cabanne, *The Brothers Duchamp*, 101.

⁴⁰ *Ephemerides*, October 2, 1958.

⁴¹ *Ephemerides*, June 16, 1966.

⁴² *Marcel Duchamp, Notes*, 6-82.

⁴³ Teeny Duchamp, as in Daniels, *Duchamp und die anderen*, 269.

ple of his various deceptions, even mendacity: his denial in his last decade of his life of the existence of any further caches of “Notes” pertaining to the central *Large Glass* project; one batch, “The White Box”, was actually published in 1966, two years before his earthly demise⁴⁴.

One of Duchamp’s own artworks may now be regarded both as an example of a ‘gigantic leg-pull’ and as a kind of covert self-confession of intentional duplicity. His last American “ready-made”, evidently *à pièce d’occasion*, appeared in 1923, just before he returned to France. He created a “Wanted” poster, to which he affixed his own passport photos (MD-134)⁴⁵. The reward was \$2000—exactly the amount just paid by his patron Katherine Dreier for his acknowledged central masterpiece, the *Large Glass* (MD-133: 1915-23), a work which Duchamp left officially ‘unfinished’ (*inachevé*) in 1923. In this ready-made poster, including his self-portraits (profile and full-face), Duchamp affected an alias, one less well known than the infamous “Rose Sélavy”. In this instance, the reward was posted for ‘Information leading to the arrest of George W. Welch’, who had ‘Operated Bucket Shop in New York under the name HOOKE, LYON, and CINQUER’. Following a physical description, it is stated that the culprit was ‘Known also under the name RROSE SELAVY’. As defined by Mr. Noah Webster, the distinguished American lexicographer, a *Bucket Shop* is an illicit ‘place for making bets on current prices of stocks, grain, etc., by going through the form of a purchase or sale with no actual buying or selling’; accordingly, *bucket* signifies ‘to cheat; swindle’. According to Calvin Tomkins, ‘there is a sad sort of irony in this farewell appearance as a petty crook’⁴⁶. It is more than irony: one who ‘welches’ is ‘a petty crook’, one who slyly takes in his duped client-victims, *hook*, *line*, and *sinker*, which, says Richard Brilliant, ‘describes the sucker’s [Dreier?] complete acceptance of the confidence man’s line’, that is, Duchamp’s bucket-shop swindle⁴⁷.

If Duchamp did knowingly practice Alchemy, but only did so as ‘just one big joke’, what kind of Alchemist might he have been? Again, the evidence is oblique. Several times Duchamp said that, rather than actively pursuing paint-

⁴⁴ See Daniels, *Duchamp und die anderen*, 271, 347 (n. 105); for the ‘White Box,’ see Duchamp, *L’Infinif*.

⁴⁵ All such citations, à la ‘(MD-134)’, refer to the standard 1977 catalogue raisonné compiled by Jean Clair.

⁴⁶ Tomkins, *Duchamp*, 249 (with illustration).

⁴⁷ These confessional features—otherwise avoided in the standard Duchamp literature—are exposed in Brilliant, *Portraiture*, 171-174 (fig. 85; also illustrated in color on his book cover). Brilliant does not, however, expose the specific connection to be drawn between the ‘\$2,000 REWARD’ motto and Dreier’s recent purchase of the *Large Glass*.

ing, all he did was 'breathe'. On one such occasion, in 1954, Duchamp was pressed by Michel Sanouillet to state his profession. His evidently exasperated reply was, 'Why are you all for classifying people? What am I? Do I know? I am a man, quite simply a "breather"'⁴⁸. In French, besides *respirateur*, a "breather" is a *souffleur*, and one out of breath (or out of luck) is '*à bout de souffle*'. But *souffleur*—"puffer" in English—was a commonplace term of opprobrium in traditional alchemical literature. In short, this kind of puffer-chemist is one who makes 'one big joke' out of Hermetic Science. This point was explained by Albert Poisson in his *Théories et Symboles des Alchimistes* (1891). According to Poisson,

In effect, there are two kinds of Alchemists. The *souffleurs* are people deprived of theory, and so they operate randomly. While it is true that they too are looking for the Philosopher's Stone, they do so in an empirical manner. At other times they work for industry, making soap, faking precious gems, and producing acids, alloys, colors; this is the group that gave birth to the chemists. These are the ones who sold for money [perhaps \$2,000] the secrets of making gold. Charlatans and swindlers, they have made counterfeit coinage, and there's been more than one *souffleur* who was hung from the golden scaffold, which is the punishment reserved for this sort of imposter⁴⁹.

The next exhibits are much more to the specific point. The American conceptual artist Robert Smithson recalled: 'I met Duchamp once, in 1963, at the Cordier Ekstrom Gallery [in New York]. I said just one thing to him; I said, "I see you are into Alchemy". And he said, "Yes"'⁵⁰. A bit later, a young artist, Lanier Graham, presented a chess set he designed to the master; flattered by Graham's sympathetic interest, early in 1968 Duchamp allowed him to record a series of conversations, which Graham later transcribed and published as a pamphlet. In the course of these, Graham posed a provocative question: 'May we call your own perspective Alchemical?' For once, the elusive artist's answer was (more or less) to the point:

We may. It is an Alchemical understanding. But don't stop there! [Laughing.] If we do, some will think I'm trying to turn lead into gold back in the kitchen. Alchemy is a kind of philosophy, a kind of thinking that leads to a way of understanding. We also may call this perspective "Tantric" (as Brancusi would say), or (as you like to say) "Perennial". The Androgyne ... [for example] ... is universal. The Androgyne is above philosophy. If one has become the Androgyne [for in-

⁴⁸ *Ephemerides*, December 16, 1954.

⁴⁹ Poisson, *Théories & Symboles des Alchimistes*, 3. In my forthcoming monograph (*Alchemist of the Avant-Garde*), I show many concrete linkages between Duchamp's writings and Poisson's hermetic manual.

⁵⁰ Smithson, as quoted in Roth, 'Robert Smithson on Duchamp,' 47.

stance, as figured in Duchamp's notorious alter ego "Rose Sélavy"], one no longer has a need for philosophy⁵¹.

Unfortunately, those two remarks, made only in passing, are as close as one is ever likely to get to a frustrated prosecutor-scholar's elusive "smoking gun". No further explanations will be forthcoming from Duchamp himself one way or the other, because he is dead. Now speculations regarding his actual intentions belong to the disinterested scholar. And, after working on the problem for over two decades, my conclusion is that—most likely—Duchamp employed occultist materials, including alchemy, as an inexhaustible, and fittingly enigmatic, source for his eternally puzzling works, which become considerably less "puzzling" once one employs traditional hermetic cryptography to unlock many of their secrets. Another surmise, for which some evidence exists, is that he was consistently cracking jokes with his audience—"Yes, perhaps it *is* just one big joke"—and that, most likely, he delighted in the fact that his captive audience consistently failed to "get" the punch-lines covertly attached to his elaborate pictorial *jeux d'esprit*.

Returning to our initial point of departure, and as one concludes, perhaps those two "cryptographic" collaborations mutually performed by Duchamp and Arensberg together in 1916 (Figs. 1, 2) were not quite so "meaningless" as we have always been led to believe. If so, the real contributions of a certain "Artist of the Century" to our postmodernist notions of just what constitutes worthy art-making endeavor seem now to require some serious re-evaluation.

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⁵¹ Graham, MD: *Conversations*, 3 (and I thank the author for sending me this incunabulum).

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Cryptographie et Alchimie dans l'oeuvre de Marcel Duchamp et Walter Arensberg

Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) a passé, et passe encore, pour "l'artiste du (XX^e) siècle" (pour reprendre un écrit académique consacré à sa gloire légendaire et postmoderne). Depuis quelque temps l'auteur prépare une monographie détaillée, consacrée notamment à montrer comment l'art de Duchamp, qui maintenant fait l'objet de tant d'études, fut durablement fondé sur des systèmes ésotériques traditionnels, lesquels eux-mêmes n'étaient guère "modernes" mais bien plutôt, de façon assez conventionnelle – mais souvent, très directement –, de nature "hermétique". Bien que la question de l'occultisme et de l'alchimie fasse encore l'objet de controverses dans les travaux consacrés à Duchamp, l'auteur a eu l'occasion, ailleurs, de dresser une liste de nombreux textes ésotériques à caractère spécifiquement hermético-alchimique, accessibles à Duchamp au cours des deux années (1913 à 1915) qu'il passa à la Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève de Paris. Ici, il aborde une question voisine, sur laquelle, curieusement, on ne met jamais assez l'accent dans les études pourtant si nombreuses consacrées à Duchamp. A savoir, l'intérêt du principal client américain de Duchamp, Walter Conrad Arensberg (1878-1954), pour l'occulte en général et l'hermétisme en particulier. Arensberg se consacrait à la cryptographie ésotérique, comme l'attestent de nombreux écrits de lui publiés à titre privé. Ici, l'accent est mis sur le goût qu'Arensberg et Duchamp partageaient pour l'"écriture secrète". En 1916, ils produisirent un objet artistique muni d'une inscription, baptisé "A bruit secret", ou aussi "Abri secret". Lu de manière cryptographique, notamment selon la manière propre à S. L. McGregor Mathers (auteur ésotérique souvent cité par Arensberg), il apparaît que cette inscription donne les noms des co-auteurs. Un autre exercice à l'aspect "cryptographique" très marqué, réalisé conjointement par Duchamp et Arensberg en 1916, existe encore. Il s'agit d'un "peigne" d'acier portant l'inscription suivante: "3 ou 4 gouttes de hauteur n'ont rien à faire avec la sauvagerie". Or, en français

“peigne” rime avec “pène”, et selon l’interprétation de l’auteur (laquelle tient compte de la fascination, bien de l’époque, d’Arensberg pour l’alchimie ainsi que pour les termes “PENE” et “SPERMA”) cette légende constitue un message voilé faisant référence au symbolisme sexuel de l’alchimie. En citant ensuite les commentaires d’Arensberg sur le “sperme” spécifiquement alchimique, l’auteur montre l’existence d’une connaissance, partagée par les deux hommes, de la terminologie alchimique. Après avoir traité d’une œuvre de 1946, “Paysage fautif”, œuvre qui serait réellement enjolivée par le “sperma” de Duchamp, cette étude se termine sur une vue d’ensemble des références verbales de Duchamp concernant son engagement alchimique putatif.