

# Marcel Duchamp: Chess Aesthete and Anartist Unreconciled

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It is a matter of historical record that Marcel Duchamp regarded chess as an art form in its own right.<sup>1</sup> It is also well known that he excelled at the game and played it at the highest levels, devoting the greater part of his life and intellectual energies to it. Despite this, comparatively little has been written about Duchamp's chess as a form of artistic activity, how it relates to his other artistic interests, and what it reveals about his attitude to art in general. A few writers have commented on these matters, but their views tend to be underdeveloped and are often highly speculative. Roger Cardinal summed it up when he remarked that "nobody has entirely assessed the significance of chess in Duchamp's career."<sup>2</sup> The reasons for this omission are not hard to find. The principal and most stubborn difficulty is that it is not clear whether chess ought to be treated as an art form. Even chess players themselves are confused as to whether chess is to be thought of as a game, a sport, a science, or a minor art, and the literature on chess reflects this fundamental divergence of opinion. There is another difficulty, namely, the tendency to mythologize Duchamp, for which chess provides a perfect pretext.

If we are to make any progress in the face of these difficulties, then we need to determine whether (a) chess does have an aesthetic character and (b) whether it constitutes an art form in its own right. Strictly speaking, it would suffice to show (a), for if it could be shown that Duchamp was right to think of chess and beauty as being inextricably linked, then this would shed new light on his aesthetic tastes. In particular, it would reveal how chess represented an alternative, more cerebral aesthetic to a visual, "culinary" one of the kind he deplored. However, as I have argued elsewhere,<sup>3</sup> there are good grounds for classifying chess as an art form, and it would be an unpardonable omission not to discuss them here. But rather than represent those arguments in their original form, I think it would be more

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interesting and instructive to begin by quoting Duchamp's own views on the matter. There is much to be learned from his firsthand insights into the aesthetic pleasures of chess, but it has to be admitted that his remarks do not fully clarify the nature of the beauty to which chess is susceptible. Nor does he present an argument as such for classifying chess as an art form. To make good the first omission, I turn to the little-known writings of François le Lionnais, sometime friend of Duchamp, which analyze the criteria to be used in judging a game's aesthetic merit or *intellectual beauty*. In addition, I draw upon the writings of Grandmaster David Bronstein on the nature of chess creativity and attempt to show, in a nontechnical way, how both over-the-board chess and the composed chess problem can be said to satisfy the essential conditions of art.

John Locke had a useful phrase for what I am trying to do here. He spoke of the philosopher as an "under-labourer" whose task it was to clear away the undergrowth so that others might seek out empirical knowledge unencumbered by conceptual difficulties. In effect, I am trying to clear the ground for the art historian and the art critic so that they may be able to appreciate the aesthetic nature of chess and assess this artistic project of Duchamp's in relation to his body of work as a whole. I am concerned also to draw the philosopher's attention to Duchamp's chess and its underlying aestheticism, for there is a tendency to think of Duchamp exclusively in terms of the Readymades and greatly oversimplify his importance for art theory.

So much for the essay's aims. But what of its methodology? It is mixed, reflecting the interdisciplinary approach that has been adopted. Although the essay draws most heavily upon philosophy—both phenomenology and the analytic tradition—it is addressed as much to the art historian and art critic as it is to the aesthetician and frequently cites Duchamp's views. Perhaps, then, I should say something about how the biographical material is used.

To begin with, it should be stressed that it is not claimed that chess should be classified as an art form because Duchamp willed that it should be so, in the way that he, *purportedly*, willed that certain commonplace objects—the Readymades<sup>4</sup>—should forevermore be known as works of art. Logic cannot be twisted nor abused in such ways. What is argued, however, is that since there are good grounds for recognizing chess as an art form, Duchamp was not being mischievous, innovative, or the least bit idiosyncratic in treating it as such. Despite the many references to Duchamp's views and practice, then, the first two sections of the essay are not based upon a biographical model; they provide a theoretical or philosophical underpinning of the general claim that chess is a minor art. Hence the essay attempts to theorize, as well as elucidate, Duchamp's views. The third and final section, however, is rather more problematic, for many of its claims do

presuppose a biographical model. It would be appropriate, therefore, to deal with methodological issues arising out of this in that section.

### Cerebral Choreography

Duchamp made his views about chess very clear to Truman Capote when he posed the rhetorical question, "Why isn't my chess playing an art activity?" and answered it by saying that "a chess game is very plastic. You construct it. It's mechanical sculpture and with chess one creates beautiful problems and that beauty is made with the head and hands."<sup>5</sup> I shall return to the important but obscure notion of mechanical sculpture when I attempt a phenomenological analysis of chess; but let us first consider Duchamp's more general comments about the game's aesthetic nature.

In a much-quoted speech<sup>6</sup> made to the New York State Chess Association in 1952, Duchamp remarked:

Beauty in chess does not seem to be a visual experience as in painting. Beauty in chess is closer to beauty in poetry; the chess pieces are the block alphabet which shapes thoughts; and these thoughts, although making a visual design on the chessboard, express their beauty *abstractly*, like a poem . . . every chess player experiences a mixture of two aesthetic pleasures, first the abstract image akin to the poetic idea of writing, second the sensuous pleasure of the ideographic execution of that image on the chessboards.

Rounding off his speech with a fine flourish, Duchamp observed that "while all artists are not chess players, all chess players are artists." No doubt his audience was suitably flattered, if somewhat mystified, by this comparison. Although Duchamp rightly emphasizes that the aesthetic value of chess cannot be analyzed in visual terms, he is none too specific about how we should understand it. What he says about the pieces being manipulated to "shape" thoughts, though promising, does not come to much, perhaps because he lacks a concept of intellectual beauty and, therefore, cannot explain the crucial notion of an "abstract" beauty.

Duchamp returned to the question of the game's aesthetic appeal on a number of occasions. Chess, he said in 1966, "is a visual and plastic thing, and if it isn't geometric in the static sense of the word, it is mechanical, since it moves; it's a drawing, it's mechanical reality . . . it is mechanical in the way, for example, a Calder [mobile] is mechanical. In chess there are some extremely beautiful things in the domain of movement, but not in the visual domain. It's the *imagining of the movement* or of the gesture that makes the beauty, in this case. It's completely in one's gray matter" (my italics).<sup>7</sup> It is this notion of the player tracing out the dynamic combination of moves in his or her imagination before ever touching the chess pieces that so fascinated Duchamp.

This act of cerebral choreography is the subject of many drawings and paintings Duchamp executed between 1911 and 1913, including a major work, *The King and Queen Surrounded by Swift Nudes* (1912). They evoke, as it were, the mental processes of the player as he or she conceives and explores different combinations of moves in an attempt to weave a mating net in which to trap the enemy King. At this point it may be useful to quote a vivid description of Grandmaster Nigel Short's chess skills. Three-times world champion Mikhail Botvinnik said of Short: "He makes the pieces dance across the board." If we transpose this to a mental plane, then perhaps we can understand what Duchamp means. The grandmaster first makes the pieces dance in his mind before he can make them dance across the board, and it is this act of creating an intellectual object (if that's the right word) that Duchamp sought to explain by means of words and images. "Chess is a mechanistic sculpture that presents exciting plastic values," he remarked. "If you know the game you can feel that the Bishop is like a lever. It incites a whole new pattern when moved."<sup>8</sup> A player of Duchamp's ability could visualize the new pattern that would result when the lever was thrown before ever moving the Bishop. And such a player is able to move in his imagination through different phases of the game, forever seeking a beautiful, aesthetically satisfying pattern in which the dynamic possibilities inherent in the pieces can be fully realized. Only then can the pieces be set free to dance across the board. And it is this pattern, this *energized* intellectual structure, which the player fashions in his or her mind, that Duchamp speaks of as "mechanistic sculpture."

Let me emphasize one of the important themes of this essay, namely, that despite Duchamp's rather odd metaphor, his view of chess is not in the least eccentric. Consider what Grandmaster Bronstein, one of the game's most creative and inventive players, wrote about the importance of chess aesthetics:

But in chess, as in mathematics, there is harmony of form, geometric beauty and expressiveness, and free play of the imagination. And there is a multitude of examples of how the choice of the best plan or move in chess is guided by beauty. A harmonious idea is almost always correct. Without exaggerating greatly, it can be said that it is *aesthetic feeling* which attunes the intellect towards searching, and leads it there.<sup>9</sup>

What Bronstein is claiming is that a player with acute aesthetic judgment can see what the requirements of a given position are. He or she can devise a plan exhibiting logical unity, or home in on the correct move, or spot the dynamic combination latent in a position. These are the exciting plastic values to which Duchamp refers. A chess master does not, for example, carry out long, complex calculations of *every* possible line in a position (which may require computing hundreds of moves) and arrive at a winning combination

by elimination; he or she sees a pattern. That is to say, the master sees how the individual elements can be fitted together in the right way, that is, a beautiful way. And what Bronstein rightly insists on is that to do this requires aesthetic judgment.

Bronstein's and Duchamp's remarks are valuable for the insights they give us into how creative and imaginative chess can be, and especially from a player's point of view. We need, however, a more detailed explanation of the peculiar beauty of chess. We need, in short, an account of intellectual beauty with particular reference to chess. For such an account, we can turn to one of Duchamp's friends and chess opponents, François le Lionnais.

In his book *Les Prix de Beauté aux Echecs* (second edition, 1951), le Lionnais gives seven criteria to be used when awarding prizes for a tournament's most beautiful game. (Duchamp, incidentally, won such a prize at the 1928 Hyères tournament.) The criteria are *correctness* of play (analyzed under two headings); the game's *intrinsic difficulty*; *vivacity* of individual moves and combination of moves; *originality*; *richness* of combinations; and the *logical unity* of the game viewed as a whole.<sup>10</sup> We can illustrate how these criteria might apply by considering a combination of moves, involving several pieces and culminating in checkmate. For White's combination to be judged beautiful, it must first satisfy the criterion of correctness. The combination must be the most economical way of delivering checkmate, and Black must defend correctly, that is, Black must find the best possible counter moves available to him in the position in question. This has the force of a necessary condition. The combination's aesthetic merit will be enhanced by vivid moves. It might include, for instance, a spectacular sacrifice of a piece. Capablanca once sacrificed his queen, the most powerful attacking piece on the board, by moving it to an *empty square*—a sacrifice of electrifying beauty that enabled him to checkmate his stunned opponent in a much more elegant and economical manner. Capablanca's combination with its dramatic positional sacrifice would rate extremely highly in terms of originality. We might also consider whether the combination forms part of a larger conception of the game as a whole. A game rich in elegant combinations would not be as aesthetically satisfying, all other things being equal, as a game with similarly praiseworthy individual combinations but which exhibited a greater degree of logical unity when viewed as part of an overall strategy.

Let us review the progress we have made. We have seen how chess may be aesthetically rewarding both from the player's point of view and from the spectator's, and we have briefly touched upon some of the criteria that might be used in order to judge a game's aesthetic merit. Although this may have clarified why Duchamp thought of chess as an art form, it does not provide a firm enough basis for that claim. There are, plainly, many things, including other games and sports, that can be appreciated from an aesthetic

point of view, but we do not wish to claim that they ought to be treated as art. In other words, it cannot be a sufficient condition of being a work of art that X has aesthetic value, no matter how aesthetically rewarding X may be. Similarly, there are many instances of creativity, including scientific discoveries and theories,<sup>11</sup> that we would not normally treat as art. If we are to endorse Duchamp's claim and classify chess as an art form, then we require something more by way of an argument.

### Chess as an Art Form

Grandmaster Bronstein and his coauthor, G. Smolyan, have provided the basis of such an argument in their book *Chess in the Eighties*. They argue that chess is a deeply creative and highly individual art and make an impassioned plea for it to be presented—staged—in a more dramatic and entertaining manner. However, it is their analysis of chess creativity that particularly concerns us here, for they draw important parallels between chess and other art forms. There are four main headings under which they analyze creativity.

First, there is the joy the player takes in creating “artistic riches” that are imperishable (being works of art that are recorded in permanent form, using standard chess notation).

Second, there is the pleasure the audience—the chess public—gets from watching an entertaining game of chess. It is the master's responsibility to ensure that the game is truly entertaining. Our authors write: “Just as the musician extracts for the public the sounds of a charming melody, so the artistic chess player uses his skill to extract from the material at his disposal the beauty of a chess idea.” The audience, however, must play its part too by creating a sense of occasion (rather like an audience at the theater). As Bronstein and Smolyan remark: “Without an audience there is no creative intensity . . . on a deserted stage, alone with himself, the master loses his creative potential, and his torpid soul becomes the prisoner of countless variations from which he no longer has the strength to escape.”<sup>12</sup>

We can extract from these remarks the all-important notion of an audience, of a spectator. Via this notion we can link chess with the major arts, where we speak of the artist as acting with the intention to reward the spectator's aesthetic contemplation. Similarly, we can speak of the chess master as playing a game with this intention.

Third, there is the “powerful attractive factor” of the game's “mysterious beauty.” Our authors refer to the views of le Lionnais, which we noted above, and regret that these are not more widely known. They suggest alternative ways of evaluating games and attach a far greater importance to qualities of daring, imagination, and fantasy than did le Lionnais. They quote, approvingly, Francis Bacon's observation that “there is no complete

beauty in existence which does not contain a certain portion of strangeness." And they agree wholeheartedly with Richard Réti, moving spirit of the Hypermodern school of chess, who remarked: "That which basically delights us in chess . . . is the triumph of a deep, brilliant idea over dull mediocrity, the victory of the individual over the trivial."<sup>13</sup>

Even though originality may be the distinguishing mark of chess genius, inventive powers, no matter how extraordinary, are not sufficient in themselves. This brings us to the fourth and final factor Bronstein and Smolyan mention, namely, that of chess as a medium in which ideas may be tested and refined. Here they speak of "the deep intellectual pleasure of working in a fantastically varied and flexible medium" that enables players to test the strength of their ideas and their imagination. Unlike the artistic avant-garde, the chess avant-garde (such as the Hypermoderns) have to submit their prized innovations to the most rigorous scrutiny in over-the-board play and theoretical analysis, a scrutiny they do not always survive.

I hope that having examined the views above we are now better placed to understand how chess may be justifiably treated as an art. We may freely summarize those views as follows: chess offers a medium in which players can produce objects of intellectual beauty for their own and others' aesthetic pleasure. We may, on the basis of this, classify games of chess and composed chess problems as art, if they were (a) produced primarily with the intention of rewarding aesthetic contemplation, (b) exhibit aesthetic qualities, and (c) are unique. I shall comment on each condition<sup>14</sup> in reverse order.

Neither over-the-board chess nor the composed chess problem would have any difficulty in satisfying the third condition. It has been calculated,<sup>15</sup> for example, that the number of different 40-move games is in the order of  $25 \times 10^{15}$ . In addition to the standard chess problem, which conforms to the rules of over-the-board chess and shows no sign of being exhausted, there are other more artificial kinds of problems, known as "fairy chess," which are governed by their own specially devised and sometimes bizarre rules.

As regards the second condition, the term *aesthetic qualities* is used in Frank Sibley's sense.<sup>16</sup> Unlike the criteria specified by le Lionnais, which deal exclusively with intellectual beauty, the aesthetic features to which Sibley refers can imply merits or demerits, depending both on the quality in question and the particular context. Hence we might say of a very poor game that it was intellectually ugly rather than beautiful and castigate it for its unimaginative, fumbling, stereotyped play.

It is the first condition that raises the greatest difficulties, and especially in the case of over-the-board chess. Although it may not be denied that chess possesses an aesthetic dimension, it may be objected that aesthetic considerations must, invariably, yield to the imperatives of the *contest*—which provides the game with its true rationale. I have discussed elsewhere<sup>17</sup>

how this objection might be satisfactorily answered. Rather than rehash that debate here, I would draw attention to how Duchamp seems to have viewed the matter.

There is no doubt that Duchamp found the game's competitive nature troubling and had difficulty in coming to terms with it. He spoke of chess as a "violent sport," describing it as "the movement of pieces eating one another."<sup>18</sup> And he believed that the aesthetic qualities of chess may have been, to some degree, compromised, or at least inflected, by the game's competitive nature. He remarked that chess was "a sad expression . . . somewhat like religious art—it is not very gay. If it is anything, it is a struggle."<sup>19</sup> Despite this, he asserted on another occasion that "when you play a game of chess, it is like designing something or constructing some kind of mechanism of some kind by which you win or lose. *The competitive side of it has no importance.* The thing itself is very plastic. That is probably what attracted me to the game" (my italics).<sup>20</sup>

What I think Duchamp is struggling, none too successfully, to come to terms with is the hybrid nature of chess, which uniquely combines the characteristics of a game and an art form. He correctly remarks that the beauty to which it is susceptible is colored by the competitive element—it is a "sad expression," pitiless in its objectivity. But he does not manage to explain how the competitive and aesthetic elements of chess are to be reconciled in such a way as to preserve the overriding importance of the aesthetic. What he needs to say is that though the game takes the form of a struggle in which the outcome is decided by one side checkmating the other, the reason why it is worth playing is not to be found in the clocking up of wins as such. Rather, its *raison d'être* is to be found in the scope chess offers for the creation of objects of outstanding intellectual beauty. In declaring the pursuit of beauty to be his main aim, Duchamp, I would argue, was simply being true to the game as it should be played.<sup>21</sup>

### Aestheticism and the Aesthete

Once it is conceded that chess has a fundamentally aesthetic character and is, moreover, an art form in its own right, Duchamp's career as an artist takes on a rather different aspect. The fact that Duchamp abandoned the visual arts in the early 1920s, whether voluntarily or involuntarily,<sup>22</sup> and devoted himself to the aesthetic project represented by chess is highly significant and gives the lie to the myth that he somehow transcended art by the simple expedient of giving it up. He may have given up painting, but he never gave up art, since he continued to play chess. Indeed, there are good grounds for thinking that Duchamp tried to turn art making itself into a kind of chess. Instead of being a transcendental activity, art would become an elaborate game in which the outcome would be determined, to a greater or lesser extent, by a set of arbitrary rules of the artist's own devising.



I want to suggest, then, that Duchamp's chess shows the artist in a new light. In particular, it gives us an insight into how Duchamp was influenced in his thinking by aestheticism. This aestheticism has often been overlooked by art historians and critics alike, partly because it finds full, unconstrained expression only in Duchamp's chess whose precise status has hitherto not been clear. Recent interpretations of Duchamp have tended to portray him as being—to use his own word—an “anartist” and as such indifferent to aesthetics. Moira Roth,<sup>23</sup> for instance, traced the development of a so-called “aesthetic of indifference” (a cherishable oxymoron) back to Duchamp and suggested that he had greatly influenced Jasper Johns and Rauschenberg in this respect. By far the most radical and closely argued interpretation of this kind was put forward by the art critic Thomas McEvelley,<sup>24</sup> who claimed with a good deal of plausibility that Duchamp's indifference to visual taste was heavily influenced by the sceptical philosophy of Pyrrho of Elis (c. 365-275 B.C.), and less plausibly that Duchamp repudiated the modern tradition of aesthetics originating with Kant. As a corrective to such partial and ultimately misleading interpretations of Duchamp, I want to tease out the implications of his chess aestheticism and suggest that he never completely shed a nineteenth-century Romantic view of art. Since I shall be making extensive use of biographical material and particularly verbal testimony, I ought to say something about the limitations to which such things are subject.

There are two closely connected questions that should be distinguished here. The first concerns the legitimacy and usefulness of a biographical model *per se*, while the second concerns the appropriateness of such a model in the case of Duchamp. The first question has acquired a greater urgency in recent years owing to the influence of such notions as the “de-centering of the subject” and the much-advertised death of the author. Without rehearsing the larger philosophical questions these notions raise, I shall assume that a biographical approach is legitimate where the aim is to produce a more comprehensive and coherent interpretation of an artist's work and practice. This is not to say that the artist's intentions,<sup>25</sup> life events, and utterances should be privileged; it is say that they constitute one source, among others, that we may draw upon in order to illuminate the meaning of the artist's work.

As regards the second question, I would begin by making the general observation that in the case of Duchamp we are dealing not merely with an artist but rather a phenomenon, so to speak. As Picasso was before him, Duchamp is a phenomenon in the sense that he is treated as being as important as, or more important than, the art he produced. Such an exceptional individual is more than a celebrity, for he or she becomes, in Pontus Hulten's phrase, a “cultural hero”<sup>26</sup> and is seen as *epitomizing* what it is to be an artist. It is as though, in an age of mechanical reproductions,<sup>27</sup> the aura once belonging to the unique work of art has passed to the artist and

creator. Rather than the artist deriving his or her authority from a body of work, the work owes its authority to the artist, in a reversal of the normal relationship. Hence a Picasso or a Duchamp is seen as embodying in his own person the possibilities of art and even as enlarging and multiplying them. It is difficult, therefore, to separate out the man and the work or dispense with a biographical model. This, of course, makes it all the more important to be clear about the risks involved in attempting to interpret Duchamp.

It has become a commonplace that Duchamp was an enigma, rivaling only the *Giaconda's* smile.<sup>28</sup> The particular difficulty I wish to discuss concerns how much weight can be given to Duchamp's statements about his artistic activities and attitude to art and aesthetics. Many of his statements were made long after the events in question, and some of them were made in a rather mischievous spirit. In spite of this, he seems to have been very defensive about his controversial decision to give up painting. Although Duchamp's remarks about painting—Art with a capital "A"—are problematic and inconsistent, I would suggest that this is not true of what he said about chess, which is what concerns us here.

However much Duchamp may have struggled to explain the peculiar beauty of chess or reconcile its competitive and aesthetic elements at a theoretical level, he always emphasized the artistic rewards to be had from playing the game. Faithful to his vision of chess as art, he continued to play to the end of his days and took an active part in the game's administration. Hence when he speaks of chess, he does so with the authority and conviction of the practitioner whose words are matched by deeds—an important consideration. His views on chess, then, should be admitted as testimony and are of special interest for the insight they provide into how a more relaxed and less defensive Duchamp thinks of art and the importance of aesthetics.

Arturo Schwarz once remarked that for Duchamp chess may well have been "the best example of [a] free and disinterested form of mental art."<sup>29</sup> This is an insightful observation and ties in with the distinction Duchamp made between the "retinal" and the conceptual, the latter being very much the favored term. (We should not allow this to blind us to the fact that Duchamp had a deep and abiding interest in the optical or retinal.<sup>30</sup> Even one of his most conceptual artworks, the *Large Glass* [1912-1923], is visually striking, and though the writings contained in the *Green Box* may form an integral part of the work, the artifact's craftsmanship is everywhere evident.) Although chess may be cerebral, it differs from much Conceptual art of the late sixties and seventies in having a pronounced aesthetic character, as we have seen. This is a point worth emphasizing, since some artists and writers, including the conceptualist Joseph Kosuth<sup>31</sup> and the philosopher Timothy Binkley,<sup>32</sup> have wrongly thought that an interest in the conceptual somehow precludes an interest in the aesthetic, as if the aesthetic and the

conceptual were separate, inviolable domains. But, as we have also seen, in the case of chess the two are inextricably linked by means of a concept of intellectual beauty. Although this concept was familiar enough to English empiricist philosophers of the eighteenth century,<sup>33</sup> it seems to have been largely ignored by modern aestheticians and other thinkers. In view of this, it is hardly surprising that Duchamp's aestheticism has been overlooked, since it took a predominantly cerebral form.

If Duchamp's frequent use of the word "beauty" to characterize chess might seem rather quaint to those steeped in the ways of semiology, post-structuralism, and Lacanian post-Freudian psychoanalysis, then his attitude to art must seem positively anachronistic. As his remarks about chess reveal, if only indirectly, Duchamp harbored a Romantic view of art. In the fascinating conversations he had with Pierre Cabanne in the 1960s, Duchamp praised chess for its sheer, unadulterated, undisguised uselessness. He remarked approvingly that chess was "purer, socially, than painting, for you can't make money out of chess." "There is no social purpose," he added by way of a clincher. "That above all is important."<sup>34</sup>

Thus chess is purer than painting both from a conceptual and a social point of view. It is easy to understand why Duchamp should have deplored the pressures of the marketplace to which all painters were subject. His biographer, Alice Goldfarb Marquis, observed that the "number of individuals who aspired to be artists grew dramatically" in France during the nineteenth century and that most bourgeois parents, with notable exceptions, "considered an artist in the family as a felicitous symbol of affluence and cultivation."<sup>35</sup> As the very much younger brother of two professional artists, Duchamp would have been keenly aware of how a painter or a sculptor, even of the most avant-garde persuasion, must in the end come to terms with the art world in the form of dealers, art gallery owners, and critics. Chess would have provided a welcome contrast, for outside of the USSR, the nineteenth-century tradition of the amateur<sup>36</sup> remained intact and did not change greatly during Duchamp's most active years as a tournament player, approximately 1923 to 1933. In that sense, chess rather than painting might have been said to embody Theophile Gautier's ideal of "l'art pour l'art."

Duchamp certainly thought that chess players were more idealistic and unworldly than professional artists. The former, he remarked to Cabanne, were "completely cloudy, completely blind, wearing blinkers. . . . Madmen of a certain quality, the way an artist is supposed to be, and isn't in general." Revealingly, he added, "That's what probably attracted me most."<sup>37</sup> The grandmaster, then, more closely conforms to the stereotype of the artist than the old master!

These remarks suggest that Duchamp regarded chess as being, in many respects, a paradigm art form. It was highly cerebral (no danger here of being thought as stupid as a painter); it was autonomous, serving no social or

commercial ends; and it was dedicated to the disinterested pursuit of beauty. In short, Duchamp appears here in the guise of a nineteenth-century aesthete, though one translated to an intellectual sphere.

It might be argued, of course, that in choosing to devote himself to chess, Duchamp had to sacrifice any larger artistic ambitions he might have had. In later life, he spoke frequently of having wanted to "put painting once again at the service of the mind," and he routinely condemned art since Courbet for its allegedly excessive attachment to the purely retinal. He saw it as his task, he said, to give painting a more "philosophical outlook" and thereby reestablish it as a valid means of "intellectual expression."<sup>38</sup> But in abandoning painting and later devoting himself to chess, Duchamp reveals himself to have been an unreconstructed formalist, for chess is the most formal of arts, more formal and remote than the most courtly and well-mannered minuet. It is, in short, an extremely narrow, minor art in which the only ideas that can be expressed are chess ideas, such as a new opening gambit or an innovation in the endgame. This prompts the question why Duchamp, given his grand ambitions, made the choices he did.

That is a question for the art historian to answer, however. What I have tried to do is to show how, when we have clarified the status of chess and justified its claim to be art, we have to ask new questions of Duchamp and reexamine his achievements and failures. I hope to have shown that it is both a sensible and an illuminating question to ask how Duchamp's chess is related to his painting and to the Readymades, and so on. If what I have said about Duchamp's views on chess is correct, then we would need an account of his passage from the Readymade to chess in much the same way that Thierry de Duve<sup>39</sup> has provided an account of Duchamp's earlier passage from painting to the Readymade. Only then would we be in a position to attempt a comprehensive explanation of this most complex and ambivalent of artists.

Perhaps it is Duchamp's ambivalence to art that provides the art historian, critic, and aesthete alike with the greatest challenge, for what has to be explained, finally, is why Duchamp was so powerfully drawn to aestheticism while also being repelled by it. Owing to this ambivalence, he underwent extreme changes of identity, changing from an anartist to an aesthete and back again, almost before our eyes, never at rest, never quite certain of what he was himself. These violent oscillations can be traced in the work he left behind, and his confused state of mind can be found mirrored in those who hail him as a "cultural hero." But which Duchamp is it they seek to emulate, we may wonder, the artist or the anartist, the creator or the annihilator? These are polar opposites, mutually incompatible *modi operandi*, and the aesthete and the anartist are destined, as they were in Duchamp's own case, to remain forever unreconciled.

## NOTES

1. The first edition of the *Oxford Companion to Chess* sums up Duchamp's chess career thus: "A competitor in the world amateur championship of 1924, four French championships from 1924 to 1928, and four Olympiads from 1928 to 1933, Duchamp also played in a number of minor tournaments, notably sharing first prize with Halberstadt and J. O'Hanlon at Hyères 1928." It omits to mention that Duchamp won the brilliancy prize at the latter tournament and was later placed first in the Paris tournament of 1932. It should be recorded also that Duchamp captained the French team in the first International Chess by Correspondence Olympiad (1935-1939) and distinguished himself by achieving the highest individual score in the competition. In addition, he and Halberstadt made a lasting contribution to chess theory. Their book, *Opposition and Sister Squares Are Reconciled*, provides a comprehensive account of the endgame where only King and pawns remain on the board, and it does so by drawing upon and synthesizing principles previously considered quite distinct and separate—hence the "reconciliation" of the title. These and other achievements led Harry Golombek to describe Duchamp as being of "near-master class" (*Penguin Encyclopedia of Chess* [1977], p. 122). To avoid confusion, the high-ranking title of International Master, which is what Golombek had in mind, should be distinguished from that of National Master. Duchamp was awarded the lesser, latter title by the French Chess Federation as early as 1925.
2. Roger Cardinal, "Mutt or Magus," *Times Literary Supplement* 19 (November 1993). Those who have written on Duchamp's chess include: Arturo Schwarz, *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1969); A. Cockburn, *Idle Passion: Chess and the Dance of Death* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974), chap. 7, pt. 2; H. Damish, "The Duchamp Defense," *October*, no. 10 (Fall 1979); Kynaston McShine, "La Vie en Rrose," in *Marcel Duchamp*, ed. Anne d'Harnoncourt and Kynaston McShine (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1973); Ralph Rumney, "Marcel Duchamp as a Chess Player: François le Lionnais Interviewed by Ralph Rumney," *Studio International* 189, no. 973 (January-February 1975); Raymond Keene, "Marcel Duchamp: The Chess Mind," *Modern Painters* 2, no. 4 (Winter 1989-89). In addition, Alice Goldfarb Marquis's biography, *Marcel Duchamp: Eros, c'est la vie* (New York: Whitson Publishing, 1981), contains a chapter on Duchamp's chess. However, this should be treated with caution owing to its dependence on a wholly discredited Freudian interpretation of chess.
3. See P. N. Humble, "Chess as an Art Form," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 33, no. 1 (1993).
4. For a discussion of the Readymades and their ambivalent status, see P. N. Humble, "Duchamp's Readymades: Art and Anti-Art," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 22, no. 1 (1982).
5. Quoted in Schwarz, *Complete Works*, p. 68.
6. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 68.
7. Quoted in Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, trans. R. Padgett (New York: Viking Press, 1971), pp. 18-19.
8. Quoted in Schwarz, *Complete Works*, p. 68, unnumbered footnote.
9. D. Bronstein and G. Smolyan, *Chess in the Eighties*, trans. K. P. Neat (Elmsford, N.Y.: Pergamon Press, 1982), pp. 27-28.
10. For a fuller discussion of these criteria, see Harold Osborne, "Notes on the Aesthetics of Chess and the Concept of Intellectual Beauty," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 4, no. 2 (1964).
11. For a discussion of the aesthetic dimension of mathematical proofs and scientific theories, see Gideon Engler, "Aesthetics in Science and in Art," *British Journal of Art* 30, no. 1 (1990); and Harold Osborne, "Mathematical Beauty and Physical Science," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 24, no. 4 (1984).

12. For both remarks, see Bronstein and Smolyan, *Chess in the Eighties*, p. 29.
13. For both quotations, see *ibid*, p. 31. As I remark below, the Hypermodern school saw itself as an avant-garde. Besides Réti himself, members included Breyer, Grünfeld, Nimzowitsch, and Tartakower. Not only did they see themselves in a quite self-conscious manner as artists, they set out to subvert and revolutionize established principles of play. The *Penguin Encyclopedia of Chess* puts it thus: They "reacted strongly against the influence of Tarrasch and his severely classical school which they regarded as over-dogmatic and tending to produce routine play" (p. 214). If classical theory, for example, advocated the importance of occupying and controlling the center of the board in the opening, (e.g., P - K4), then they would devise new openings that flagrantly contravened this principle. It is interesting to note that Duchamp took up tournament chess in the 1920s when the Hypermodern school flourished and preached that chess was an art form. There is disagreement, however, as to whether Duchamp's style of play was influenced by the Hypermoderns' contribution to chess theory. For sharply differing views, see Ralph Rumney, "Marcel Duchamp as a Chess Player," and Raymond Keene, "Marcel Duchamp: The Chess Mind." Grandmaster Keene, an expert on the Hypermodern school, has analyzed one of Duchamp's sparkling wins and shown in convincing detail how much it owes to an Hypermodern approach. However, a single game cannot settle the matter; further research is required. It would be interesting to compare Duchamp's respective approaches as visual artist and chess artist in order to establish whether he was avant-garde in both spheres.
14. For more on these conditions and a justification of them, see P. N. Humble, "The Philosophical Challenge of Avant-Garde Art," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 24, no. 2 (1984).
15. See Mike Fox and Richard James, *The Complete Chess Addict* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), p. 166.
16. See Frank Sibley's classic paper "Aesthetic Concepts," *The Philosophical Review* 68, no. 4. (1959).
17. See my "Chess as an Art Form." My views are criticized by C. P. Ravilious in "The Aesthetics of Chess and the Chess Problem," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 34, no. 3 (1994). For a final word on the objection, see my "The Aesthetics of Chess: A Reply to Ravilious," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 5, no. 4 (1995).
18. Both remarks are quoted in Fox and James, *Complete Chess Addict*, pp. 29-30.
19. Quoted in Schwarz, *Complete Works*, p. 70.
20. Quoted in Fox and James, *Complete Chess Addict*, pp. 29-30.
21. It would seem that Duchamp, true to his principles, put aesthetic considerations before competitive ones in match play. The American chess player and writer Edward Lasker described him as a "marvellous opponent" who "would always take risks in order to play a beautiful game, rather than be cautious and brutal to win" (quoted in Schwarz, *Complete Works*, p. 68). It should be noted, however, that Duchamp played more cautiously when representing his country in over-the-board chess, for he was usually playing stronger, more experienced players. There is no doubt that he could be a tough competitor when he chose, and he managed to draw with some outstanding players, including the great American champion Frank Marshall, who was noted for his attacking play.
22. Commenting on his "retirement" as a painter, Duchamp said that he "was really defrocked, in the religious sense of the word. But without doing it voluntarily. All that disgusted me." Quoted in Cabanne, *Dialogues*, p. 67.
23. Moira Roth, "The Aesthetics of Indifference," *Artforum* 16, (November 1977).
24. Thomas McEvilley, "Empyrrical Thinking," *Artforum* (October 1988).
25. This is consistent with what is said above regarding the condition that an artist should act with the intention to reward aesthetic contemplation. This does not mean that such an intention must be historically prior to starting or completing the work. However, it must, at the very least, be possible for the artist to see the work as fulfilling an aesthetic function. It is worth pointing out that Monroe

- Beardsley, coauthor of the famous essay "The Intentional Fallacy," who emphasized that a work of art belonged to the public domain and should be judged by intersubjective criteria, took a similar position to that adopted here.
26. See Pontus Hulten, *Marcel Duchamp* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1993), p. 16.
  27. See Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproductions," in *Art in Theory*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (London: Blackwell, 1992).
  28. Duchamp turns the *Mona Lisa* into an image of sexual ambivalence by giving her a goatee and moustache (*L.O.O.Q.*), while he himself adopts the female persona of Rose Sélavy, coiner and perpetrator of puns and spoonerisms.
  29. Schwarz, *Complete Works*, p. 69.
  30. For a discussion of Duchamp's interest in the optical, see Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991). I would suggest that Duchamp's retinal/conceptual distinction is rather vague and not nearly as neat as it sounds. It should not be thought of as a dichotomy, for the terms are not mutually exclusive, though Duchamp may have given the impression that they were. It may be helpful to think of the conceptual partly in terms of intellectual beauty. For more on the distinction, see Thierry de Duve, *Pictorial Nominalism: On Marcel Duchamp's Passage from Painting to the Readymade*, trans. Dana Polan with the author (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).
  31. Consider, for example, Kossuth's remark that "it is necessary to separate aesthetics from art because aesthetics deal with opinions on perception of the world in general" ("Art after Philosophy," *Studio International* 178 [November 1969]: 134). This implies that aesthetics is wholly concerned with perception of the sensible world—a common though mistaken view.
  32. See Timothy Binkley, "Deciding about Art: A Polemic against Aesthetics," in *Culture and Art*, ed. Lars Aagaard-Mogensen (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1976), and his "Piece: Contra Aesthetics," in *Philosophy Looks at the Arts*, ed. Joseph Margolis (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978). Binkley's writings are heavily influenced by conceptual art and, to a lesser extent, by Duchamp's Readymades.
  33. Harold Osborne observed that "the idea of intellectual beauty was familiar to the English empirical writers on aesthetics in the eighteenth century. Henry Home, Thomas Reid, Dugald Stewart and most of their contemporaries took it for granted that a mathematical theorem may as properly be called beautiful as a picture or a landscape" ("Notes on the Aesthetics of Chess," p. 160). He added that nowadays the concept of intellectual beauty has not been "repudiated so much as neglected."
  34. The first remark is quoted in Schwarz, *Complete Works*, p. 69, and the second in Cabanne, *Dialogues*, p. 19.
  35. Goldfarb Marquès, *Marcel Duchamp*, p. 103.
  36. For a recent account of the history of chess that sets it in a social context, see Richard Eales, *Chess: The History of a Game* (London: Batsford, 1985), esp. chaps. 5 and 6. Eales perceptively identifies the need for research into the Surrealists' interest in chess. A surprising number of their works have a chess motif, and Man Ray, Dali, and Duchamp himself (among others) designed chess sets.
  37. Quoted in Cabanne, *Dialogues*, p. 19.
  38. Interview with James Johnson Sweeney in 1946, reprinted in H. B. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), pp. 394-95.
  39. de Duve, *Pictorial Nominalism*.

The research for this paper was carried out with the support of the Leverhulme Trust to which grateful acknowledgement is made. I am indebted also to my colleague Steve Baker for helpful comments on an earlier draft. Material from P. N. Humble, "Chess as an Art Form," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 33, No. 1, 1993, pp. 59-66, is quoted by permission of Oxford University Press.