

an esoteric French
adolescence for Duchamp:
symbolist culture and occultism

Born in 1887, by the time a twenty-eight-year-old Marcel Duchamp left France for America in mid-1915, his career as an artist was already distinctively shaped. Before describing culturally pertinent specifics of his biography in chapter 3, we need to examine the distinctive cultural environment in which he absorbed his first perceptions of reality and art. The period-term for this milieu is *Symbolism*, designating the avant-garde culture reigning in France between 1880 and 1905. This is the true cradle of Modernism. As such, it requires serious consideration, especially since Symbolist thought, as we shall see, was itself profoundly influenced by Occultism in general and (as treated in chapter 2) Alchemy in particular. Such terms, given their quasi-religious status, were then often capitalized—so was “Art.”

A general appraisal of the evolution of modern culture after the French Revolution would have it that after the “Age of Reason” came the “Age of the Irrational.” The Age of the Irrational is still very much with us, and even though the current appellation refers to a “New Age”—but there is nothing at all new in the Occultists’ “Ancient Wisdom.” In a more specific sense, after the Age of Reason (which probably was only reasonable in certain, aristocratic quarters) came the Industrial Revolution, presenting its own painful paradoxes. As man advanced to greater mastery of the physical world, his always precarious hold upon the more intangible aspects of his relationship with the universe begin to slip. Security—mental, physical, financial and, especially, spiritual—seemed menaced on every side by analytical positivism and the social unrest brought about by the new economic systems. Romanticism, the cultural matrix of the period after 1800, aggravated the situation further. On the one hand, there was a widespread taste for the dramatic and

unreal *vie des rêves*, or dream-life. On the other, there was an obsessive concentration upon the self. This emotional individualism typically manifested a heightened, even hysterical insistence upon the overwhelming importance of the individual's every action. Historians and anthropologists universally accept that in circumstances of anxiety and uncertainty, superstition is likely to make a prominent showing. Its modern advocates, however, will not (or cannot) call it that; rather it is referred to as "esoteric knowledge," even "metaphysics."

Nineteenth-century France also produced the idea of the *avant-garde*. It is appropriate that the term, now standard in English and German, was originally French. It was borrowed from military usage, where it designated a sort of cavalry action, an armed reconnaissance, a perilous and fugitive sweep behind the front lines directly into enemy territory. In the first known statement using "avant-garde" to specifically refer to an advanced, contemporary art, the term designated radical activity operating concurrently in both the social and the artistic realms. This utopian association, to which a clear messianic connection was added, was to become a commonplace in twentieth-century art theory. According to Henri de Saint-Simon (*Opinions littéraires*, 1825), "It is we artists who will serve you as an *avant-garde*. . . . The power of the arts is in fact most immediate and most rapid: when we wish to spread new ideas among men, we inscribe them on marble or on canvas. . . . What a magnificent destiny for the arts is that of exercising a positive power over society, a true priestly function, and of marching forcefully in the van of all intellectual faculties."¹ *Nomen est omen*: the larger program impelling the militant-esoteric front of the *avant-garde* is at once pseudo-militaristic, revolutionary, utopian—and mystical.

In 1845, a little-known Fourieriste, Gabriel-Desiré Laverdant, published an equally little-known treatise, *De la mission de l'art et du rôle des artistes*. Laverdant's is a precocious proclamation of the initiatory function of art, so transforming it into a prognostic instrument for radical social action leading to moral reform for society at large. According to Laverdant,

Art, the expression of society, manifests, in its highest soaring, the most advanced social tendencies: it is the forerunner and the revealer. Therefore, to know whether art worthily fulfills its proper mission as initiator, where the artist becomes truly of the *avant-garde*, one must know where Humanity is itself going, know what the destiny of the human race actually is. . . . Along with the hymn to happiness [the advanced artist pictures] the dolorous and despairing ode. . . . To lay bare with a brutal brush all the brutalities, all the filth, which are the base of our society, this is the mission of the *avant-garde* artist.²

In a related development, the nineteenth-century *fin de siècle* was the epoch in which self-styled modern art was first vigorously and successfully marketed

by savvy entrepreneurs. These venturesome art dealers typically described themselves as “enlightened” and “visionary.” Theirs was a self-appointed altruistic mission of displaying contemporary artistic expression for the public good, and their notions of spiritual enlightenment became central to the emerging dogma of avant-gardism.³

For art historians, the major interest of the Symbolist period lies in the fact that it was the first time that modernist principles of abstraction in the plastic arts became solidly entrenched in published theoretical treatises. Although a bias towards modernist abstraction remains largely unquestioned even now, a century later, the situation was quite different before 1890. Before the last decades of the nineteenth century, the traditional functions of Art, defined broadly as being true to life and faithful to nature, had not been questioned in their fundamental assumptions since the close of the Middle Ages. Retrospectively viewed, Impressionism represented a climax of the reigning naturalistic tradition and, immediately following, Symbolism changed all that in a most decisive fashion. This is the age referred to in a book that Duchamp is now known to have studied assiduously: Wassily Kandinsky’s *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (1911).⁴ The Russian mystic artist said he was writing at a post-Symbolist threshold of “the great epoch of the Spiritual, which is already beginning, or, in embryonic form, had already begun yesterday.” The Symbolist period says Kandinsky, “provides and will provide the soil in which a kind of monumental work of art must come to fruition.” For Kandinsky and his fellow believers, truly spiritual art would necessarily be abstract, with abstraction being the visible sign of an artist’s ethical retreat from the material world. Kandinsky did not invent this dematerialized art: he was merely one of its more verbal spokesmen. He was also not the first to pursue nonobjective imagery: one historical precedent was set by pioneering, now mostly forgotten, automatic paintings created by Victorian-era spiritualists (discussed in chapter 4).

According to recent scholarship,⁵ the critical shift in the appearance of the plastic arts, beginning around 1875, was signalled by a decisive movement from naturalism to abstraction. This crucial shift was as much a matter of intrinsic content as it was of extrinsic form. After 1875 artistic content more often than not paralleled the verbal content of treatises belonging to the Esoteric Tradition. The strictly physical significance of abstraction for the Symbolist/modernist painter was made unmistakable in a famous dictum expressed by Maurice Denis in 1890. According to this often-repeated protomodernist slogan, “It is well to remember that a picture—before being a battle horse, a nude woman, or some anecdote—is essentially a plane surface covered with colors, assembled in a certain order.”⁶ For the Symbolists, besides representing a certain assemblage of autonomous motifs, abstraction also embodied a preference for symbolic over phenomenal color. In this sense, the move towards pure abstraction signals a preference for signs over

physical perceptions, and amorphous psychic moods (*Stimmungen* in Kandinsky's terminology) over the banal facts of direct observation.

For this further development, again Denis is an eloquent spokesman; as he wrote in 1909, "emotions or spiritual states, caused by any spectacle, bring to the imagination of the artists symbols, or the plastic equivalents. These are capable of reproducing emotions or states of the spirit without it being necessary to provide the *copy* of the initial spectacle." According to the considered conclusion of Maurice Denis, "thus nature can be, for the artist, only a state of his own subjectivity. And what we call subjective distortion is virtually style."⁷ Such emotional, spiritualist stylistic phenomena, arising from "subjective distortion," were directly tied to certain fundamental, sweeping changes in basic metaphysical beliefs held by visual artists. As one troubled century merged into another, the new metaphysical systems were, naturally, reflective of similar ideological shifts apparent among most other classes of the European intelligentsia. The more strictly modernist equation, "Abstraction = Spirituality," was, for instance, early drawn by Paul Gauguin; in a letter sent from Pont Aven in 1888, he simply stated that "ART IS AN ABSTRACTION." According to Gauguin, "creating, like our Divine Master, is the only way of rising toward God."⁸

Insistence upon the sacerdotal essence of modern art was a notion first widely popularized in published Symbolist art theory.⁹ With perhaps different nomenclature, the self-inflating idea—the Artist as Priest and Prophet—is still very much with us. In recent memory, perhaps the most egregious example was the widely acclaimed performance art practiced by Joseph Beuys (1921–1986), who happily called his significance-charged artistic "mission" that of an ancient "shaman," but whose activities were labeled by some less sympathetic, professional observers as representing mere "Jesus-Kitsch."¹⁰ This earnest performance by a radical avant-garde artist of his self-appointed messianic vocation, at least within twentieth-century art, is now a largely conventional manouever. It is also nothing new within the broader span of the history of art. Indeed, the provocative idea of God-like artistic creation appears to have been commonplace within classical literary theory. However, the real situation was otherwise. According to E. R. Curtius,

Ancient Greece put the poet in the category of "god-like men," alongside heroes, kings, heralds, priest, seers. . . . [Nonetheless,] the Greeks did not know the concept of the creative imagination. They had no word for it. What the poet produced was a fabrication. Aristotle praises Homer for having taught poets "to lie properly" (*Poetics*, 1460 a, 19). For him, as we know, poetry was *mimesis*, "imitation," and indeed "imitation of men doing something" (*Poetics*, 1448 a, 1). Imitation can [only] present things as they are or as they appear or as they ought to be (*Poetics*, 1460 b, 10–11), hence is not to be understood as a copy of nature but instead as a rendering which can be a refashioning or a new fashioning.¹¹

Nonetheless, modernist manifestations of the messianic artistic mission abound. In 1913, Guillaume Apollinaire stated that the understood goal of Cubist painters was “to express the grandeur of metaphysical forms,” to which end “they discard more and more the old art of optical illusion and local proportion.” This collective drive to abstraction “is why contemporary art . . . possesses some of the characteristics of great, that is to say, religious art.”¹² In 1914, Franz Marc proclaimed the fact of “our European desire for abstract form,” adding that this kind of “art is our religion, our center of gravity, our truth.”¹³ In 1920, Paul Klee declared that “art is a simile of the Creation,” and due to the opportune intervention of the modern artist, “out of abstract elements a formal cosmos is ultimately created.” Moreover, this new abstract-formal picture is so “similar to the Creation that to turn an expression of religious feelings, or religion itself, into reality a breath is sufficient.”¹⁴

Besides unilaterally designating himself to be a divinely inspired Creator, the modern artist also envisions himself to be a Prophet: he foresees the shape of the future and, typically by means of the abstract spirit, he leads the people, who are implicitly compliant, towards the promised utopia. Wassily Kandinsky boldly proclaimed this prophetic-messianic function of the modern artist in 1911: “The abstract spirit takes possession first of a single human spirit; later it governs an ever-increasing number of people. At this moment, individual artists are subject to the spirit of the time [*Zeitgeist*] which forces them to use particular forms related to each other and which, therefore, also possess an external similarity,” wholly abstract in this case.¹⁵ Apollinaire said much the same thing in 1913: “Poets and artists plot the characteristics of their epoch, and the future docilely falls in line with their desire. . . . The energy of art imposes itself on men, and becomes for them the plastic standard of the period. . . . All the art works of an epoch end up resembling the more energetic, the more expressive, and the most typical art-works of the period.”¹⁶ In 1915, Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler spoke of Pablo Picasso as an artist who is “possessed of the divine gift, genius,” and who likewise provides “proof that the appearance of the esthetic product is conditioned in its particularity by the spirit of the time. . . . The artist, as the executor of the unconscious plastic will of mankind, identifies himself with the style of the period, which is the expression of this [collective] will.”¹⁷

Again, the immediate historical source for the now ubiquitous, orthodox modern theory of the God-like, creator-artist myth is Symbolist art theory. The prophetic obsession is then obvious, and particularly we have the well-known example of a group of young Symbolist painters, tending towards precociously abstracted figuration, who collectively called themselves *les Nabis*, “the Prophets.” Their role model was Paul Gauguin. These artists—Sérusier, Denis, Bonnard, Ranson, Roussel, Vallatton, and others—surely knew that, besides “prophet,” the old Hebrew word *nabi* variously connoted

priest, protoguru and shaman, prognosticator, deliverer-redeemer, magus, dream interpreter, seer, and the divinely designated author and spokesman for Yahweh-God (see I Samuel 9:9, 19; 10:1, 6–13, 25). For further confirmation of the artist's polyvalent nabi-prophet identity, we have in 1888 the precedent of Gauguin's abstract, divine creation. Thus, it seems fitting that Gilbert-Albert Aurier would refer to Vincent van Gogh in 1892 as "a terrible, maddened genius, often sublime, sometimes grotesque, always near the brink of the pathological." That trait of "maddened genius" was, of course, positive; even more so was the mad Dutchman's world-mission, as "a messiah, a sower of truth, one who would regenerate the decrepitude of our art, and perhaps of our imbecilic and industrial society, [for] he has delighted in imagining a renewal of art."¹⁸

In his formulative study of imaginative literature between between 1870 and 1930, *Axel's Castle* (1931), Edmund Wilson asserted that the ideas developed in the often underrated Symbolist period had, in effect, propelled the course of creative thought long after its putative demise. Accordingly, Wilson found ongoing symbolist literary effects and themes in such post-Symbolist writers as T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Marcel Proust, Gertrude Stein, James Joyce, and a host of others. In his comprehensive listing of the post-Symbolists, Wilson also included the visual artists then affiliated with dadaism ("a queer special development of Symbolism") and Surrealism, and all other modernist art movements, "piercing together poetic mosaics . . . to include quotations from, allusions to other levels of reality." These artists then were practicing the typically early modernist compositional techniques of collage and assemblage. Wilson summed up this ongoing Symbolist doctrine as follows:

Every feeling or sensation we have, every moment of consciousness, is different from every other; and it is, in consequence, impossible to render our sensations as we actually experience them through the conventional and universal language of ordinary [experience]. Each poet [and artist] has his unique personality; each of his moments has its special tone, its special combination of elements. And it is the poet's task to find, to invent, the special language which will alone be capable of expressing his personality and feelings. Such a language must make use of symbols; what is so special, so fleeting and so vague cannot be conveyed by direct statement or description, but only by a succession of words, of images, which will serve to "suggest" to the reader.¹⁹

Something very similar had been conceived during the Symbolist era, itself a period notoriously fascinated with hermetic languages, by a thinker with no particular artistic or occultist inclinations, the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913).²⁰ He stated that any successful attempt to communicate ideas requires a "system of conventions," by which means what was

originally mere noise for the listener (or just a colored blob for the painter's viewers) becomes intelligible as part of an agreed-upon system of signs. Saussure's "sign" unites, through cultural convention, the *signifiant* (signifier) and *signifié* (signified). Both coexist as symbiotic components of the Saussurian Sign. In retrospect, Saussure's linguistic analysis represents another attack on the positivist distinction between the objective, physical reality of objects and events and an individual, subjective perception of reality. Saussure and his Symbolist contemporaries in the emerging social sciences (for instance, Sigmund Freud and Émile Durkheim) bridged this gap.

According to Saussure, social reality is conventionalized by an agreed-upon system of collective norms that organize essentially subjective representations of the world. Representations give meaning to disparate communicative acts. Saussure's evolving theories led him to postulate the future existence of a "science of signs," one which long afterward would become emblematic of postmodernist thought: semiology. As was only briefly suggested in Saussure's posthumously published *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916), he had earlier received the first glimmerings of "a science which would study the life of signs within society. . . . We call it *Semiology*, from the Greek *semeion* ('sign'). . . . This procedure will not only clarify the problems of linguistics, but rituals, customs, etc. will, we believe, appear in a new light if they are studied as signs."²¹

Saussure was just one contemporary advocating new systems of relations, that is, expressions of interactive formal strategies by which a whole series of disciplines, from physics to painting, radically transformed themselves at the crucial hinge between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.²² An erudite contemporary's retrospective summation of what seemed to be transpiring, in effect a significant shift in focus from objects to relations, is Alfred North Whitehead's *Science and the Modern World* (1925). Looking back over what seemed to constitute a newly entrenched modernist perception of the world around him, Whitehead recognized that "this new tinge to modern minds is a vehement and passionate interest in the relation of general principles to irreducible and stubborn facts [now] absorbed in the weaving of general principles. It is this union of passionate interest in the detailed facts, with equal devotion to *abstract generalization*, which forms the novelty in our present society." One clear symptom of the new mentality was "that the adequacy of scientific materialism as a scheme of thought for the use of science was endangered [and particularly] the notion of *mass* was losing its unique pre-eminence [in favor of] the notion of *energy* being fundamental. . . . But energy is merely the name for the quantitative aspect of a structure of happenings." In this topsy-turvy world, exclaims Whitehead in reviewing the theory of relativity, "Heaven knows what seeming nonsense may not tomorrow become demonstrated truth!" As defined by Whitehead, who was not addressing any particularly modern notion of art, "to be abstract

is to transcend particular concrete occasions of actual happenings [involving] consideration of the nature of things antecedently to any special investigation into their details. Such a standpoint is termed ‘metaphysical.’” Indeed! Overall, Whitehead concludes that “the old phraseology is at variance with the psychology of modern civilizations. This change in psychology is largely due to science, and it is one of the chief ways in which the advance of science has weakened the hold of the old religious forms of expression.”²³

In the voluminous critical and esthetic debate that surrounded Symbolist innovations it was always the traditional vocabulary of the Esoteric Tradition that best served to define the new aspirations. The Esoteric Tradition, or Occultism, is the mass cult which is hidden (*occulta*, from *occulere*, to cover over, hide, conceal). Occult precepts can be easily documented in the oldest surviving esoteric texts, some dating from the Hellenistic period. This tradition includes the *Corpus Hermeticum*, a collection of metaphysical tracts written in the first through fourth centuries A.D. that describes Alchemy, the “science” of transforming common metals into gold. The historical conditions governing repeated outbreaks of the Esoteric Tradition are diverse. As a rule, however, the common starting point of Occultism seems to be anxiety, particularly the kind induced by abrupt technological and social change. Occultism represents a more or less natural human psychological reaction to unsettling times. The nineteenth century clearly was such a period, and the Esoteric Tradition was a fundamental influence on the development of Symbolism. Accordingly, key phrases in the standard lexicon of Symbolist art theory include the occultist paradigms of an Artist-Priest, the Infinite, the Transcendent, High Consciousness, Metaphysical Insight, Correspondences, Synaesthesia, and so forth. Art is, therefore, for the Symbolist Artist-Theoretician functionally a religious art, and the concrete visual sign of its pseudoreligious intention is abstraction.

The historical situation of the Esoteric Tradition visibly infected all levels of Occidental modernism. The late James Webb (1946–1980) was the most accomplished historian of the Esoteric Tradition and the author of a monumental study collectively called *The Age of the Irrational*. As he repeatedly emphasized, Occultism has always been of particular interest to the modern artist. Arising from his sense of bohemian and/or avant-garde alienation, the eventual result, stated Webb, was for the artist to take on the more positive “stance of the elect race.” As Webb further recognized, this haughty pose is a functional parallel to the perennial “need among Occultists to appear especially alert.” Webb concluded,

Another group which proclaimed itself “elect” was that of the Artists. . . . Because of the juxtaposition of Occultist and Artist in Bohemia, occult teaching became the source to which the priests of this, one of the several secular religions, most easily turned. The two traditional patterns of redemption—the pursuit of the Beautiful, the Good,

representing the search for Divine Union, whilst the descent into the Abyss is the alchemical process, the progress through the Mysteries, trial by ordeal—these became translated into terms of Art; but also of the Artist's life. Without these traditional bases, the mythical figure of the Artist would not be as it is popularly conceived. . . . There has always been something of the magical in the work of the artist. The ability to conceive and execute personal worlds, conceptual, visual, abstracted, is, by definition, out of the ordinary. . . . In any case, because Art itself had become a religion, the Artist naturally acquired the status of priest. . . . The Artist was at liberty—indeed compelled—to treat the standards of the world as if they did not exist.²⁴

Webb further draws a wider conclusion regarding the relation between what he aptly calls the “Occult Establishment” and the contemporary art establishment. “Illuminated Art derives from Occultism,” Webb asserts, “and much modern art is indirectly illuminated, or directly ‘occult.’” Webb then points out that “this alliance began in Paris in the 1890s, when the Occult Revival coincided exactly with the Symbolist movement, and the Symbolists drew a great part of their inspiration from the Occultists. Occult theories resulted in the conception of the Artist as a saint and a magician, while his art became less and less representative of ordinary reality and hinted at things ‘beyond.’” At this point, Webb again underscores the crucial role of the Symbolists and their *fin de siècle* art and theory in the formation of those attitudes which still characterize much of elitist modernism. According to Webb, “from this departure of the Symbolists, from the universe of agreed discourse for private or superior worlds, has sprung the tampering with ‘everyday’ reality which has become so central a feature of modern art. Naturally, similar developments were going on elsewhere, just as the reaction against the tyranny of Reason occurred in other places. But Paris remained the hub from which the magic influences radiated, the center of artistic and occult experiment.”²⁵ The Esoteric Tradition and the Symbolist milieu in Paris prove to be the major context for the evolving thought and future art of Marcel Duchamp.

For further definitions of the most significant features of the modern Esoteric Tradition, we are considerably in the debt of a leading student of the occult content of Symbolist-period literature, John Senior. Senior's findings may be summarized as follows, with uppercase emphasis added to the larger metaphorical-metaphysical verities (i.e., buzzwords).²⁶ True Believers in the Esoteric Tradition hold that the Universe/Cosmos represents a single, eternal, ineffable substance. As the Occultists, ancient and modern, would have it, this universal substance uniquely manifests itself to clairvoyants in certain privileged ways. Besides “cosmic energy,” especially common are perceptions of “spirit,” generally perceived as fire or light, or some other kind of luminosity. Such subphysical emanations of Light/Spirit are further taken to repre-

sent manifestations from On High, from a variously named Universal Creator, Demiurge, or Logos, sometimes simply labeled “The One.” As is typically explained, all things progress or “evolve,” and are mainly comprehended by means of dialectical, paired opposites: male-female, light-dark, vertical-horizontal, etc. The goal of the Occultists is to arrive at Equilibrium or Harmony, thus achieving what the medieval hermeticists had called a *coniunctio oppositorum*, a “marriage of the opposites.” As an apparently logical extension of such dialectical perceptions, Occultists endlessly affirm that “things above are as they are below,” meaning that Mind and Matter become One. As the True Believer holds, all religions are just variations on a single, transcendent, now lost, primordial Unity. Occult knowledge of the One represents what the Occultists call “Timeless Wisdom,” what was called in the Renaissance a *philosophia perennis*, which, like a universal solvent, cannot contain any single definition of itself.

According to these ubiquitous thought patterns, only the Imagination is real. Given this, any analogy conceived by the unchecked Imagination is as valid as any other pseudoscientific proof of metaphysical Correspondence between material (base) reality and the (superior) Other World, a concept influentially articulated by the eighteenth-century Swedish seer Emanuel Swedenborg. According to this conventionalized system of parallelisms, mind and matter are one, things above are as they are below, the Imagination is truly reality itself, and so forth. However one arrives at the realization of the latent (*occulta*) Correspondences, it is accepted that Man lies at the center of occultist thoughts. The human body is, accordingly, taken to represent the particular sign of Creation in the widest sense: the perceptible operations of the universe, the macrocosm, are often symbolized in the shape of a living man, a microcosm. Since men and women are created by sexual means, then it logically follows that the sex act—the microcosmic image of Creation—is both a divine sign and a gift from On High (*au delà* in the terminology of modern French esotericism). As an attribute of the Divine, neatly dividing itself into Male and Female components, conjoined Sex/Creation represents Harmony and Perfection. In the sex act, a *coniunctio oppositorum*, the male supposedly achieves his own inherently female nature and thus becomes symbolically androgynous, transmuted into one flesh, and thus made whole. Of all the “spiritual sciences,” it was Hermeticism, physically practiced as Alchemy, which most frequently resorted to such erotic imagery. So did Marcel Duchamp.

The supreme task of Mankind is, therefore, Self-Realization. To know thyself—*nosce te ipsum*—is to be everything, to become self-realized and empowered. It is a progressive discovery, achieved through illuminist initiation, that is realized in Passages. Such occultist passages are traced through the successively ascending layers and stages of the human psyche. Having gained self-realization, certain occultist “Supermen” then turn back, “de-

scend,” to help their as yet unrealized fellow beings. From this lofty viewpoint, the Uninitiated are seen to exist in metaphorical Spiritual Darkness, situated somewhere below (*vers là-bas*, according to the French esotericists). The occultist *Übermenschen* “enlighten” their ignorant fellow humans through arduous practice, grace, virtue, and experience. Standing metaphorically above the rest of men, esotericist Supermen are also visibly recognized by their distinguishing attributes. The signs of their imaginative superexistence may include distinctive tonsure, decorative accessories and badges, circumcision and tattooing, peculiar ritualistic dress, and eccentric gestures and behavior patterns, some of which indicate androgynous sexuality. Marcel Duchamp employed many such disguises (e.g., fig. 20; see also MD-129, MD-131, MD-134, MD-136, MD-162).

On this level, as everywhere else, one notes an obsessive preoccupation with symbols. Since the mystagogue’s Higher Truths cannot be immediately apprehended by uninitiated minds, they must be conveyed to lesser, unempowered human vessels by and through symbols. Besides resorting to unique and often extremely complicated symbolic systems, themselves generally taken to be empowered in order to affect less developed minds on unconscious levels, esoteric Adepts typically form organized Brotherhoods. These Spiritual Communities are essential in order to facilitate the all-important, decidedly evangelical Work of Self-Realization. Their obsessive preoccupation with Illumination/Enlightenment—in short, with their own egos—is narcissism, pure and simple. The functional manifestation of the empowered ego is Magic, which, more often than not, is opportunistically called something else. Whatever we (or they) choose to call it, the tangible products of the Esoteric Tradition are, at bottom, physical display patterns of the omnipotence of the Individual: his/her Thought, Freedom, and Will. In sum, esoteric Enlightenment and occult Vision are the unique perceptions of Superior Realities, and those clairvoyant, highly privileged insights “penetrate” through to what lies beyond the Phenomenal World. What skeptics might call “the real world” (lowercase) is, according to standard occultist doctrine, the only aspect of reality accessible to the not-yet-initiated. Since they are said to uniquely perceive significant “hidden realities,” the kind inaccessible to mere laypersons, modern artists are implicitly considered to be “initiates.”

Having stated some common generalizations, we may now proceed to examine the historical evidence attesting to the wide diffusion of these esoteric ideas, elitist superstitions resurfacing under many guises, which sought to close the gap between man and the intangible. The manifestations of modern Occultism are truly hydra-headed. This widely misunderstood heading, representing the secular Spirituality of the modern epoch, shelters an astonishing range of strange, unorthodox obsessions, always couched in semi-religious terminology. The specifically modernist manifestations of timeless

esoterica include: the practice of hypnotism, magic, astrology, mental telepathy and clairvoyance, water dowsing and crystal gazing; the search for lost continents; the belief in pyramidology, witches, poltergeists, vampires, reincarnation; resort to water-diets and vegetarianism; pledging allegiance to UFOs (flying saucers) and ETs (extraterrestrials), supermen and super-races; pursuing research in geomancy, phrenology, homeopathy, chiropractic and osteopathy, phrenology, parapsychology and (some of) psychiatry, graphology and physiognomy, palmistry, allopathy, and alchemy. It makes for a formidable list.

Anna Balakian, a notable student of the Symbolist and Surrealist cultures in France, has made explicit the immediate, published source of most of these antimaterialist ideas. As she observes, “the Symbolists and their international coterie agreed on accepting a common origin in the philosophy of Swedenborg [even though] the manners of transmission have been multiple and simultaneous, as Swedenborgism became associated [first] with the Romantic tradition.”²⁷ Balakian stresses that the Swedish seer, a *clairvoyant* (*Hellseher* in German), was the synthesizer of many earlier forms of the *philosophia perennis*. As she recognizes,

It was not the originality of Swedenborg’s theories that made it such an attractive cult but rather Swedenborg’s ability to sum up and popularize so many parallel mystical notions that were inherent in the cabbalistic and hermetic cults. . . . Not a single new truth was discovered by Swedenborg: his precepts had all been conceived earlier; his philosophy was a synthesis of all the occult philosophies of the past. In turn, the translations of Swedenborg—into English, French, and German—were so numerous that his ideas became common property and underwent the distortions that generally occur in the indiscriminate handling of abstractions by those who need the concrete example of the thought.²⁸

Trained as a civil engineer, Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) framed his esoterica as a comprehensive, mechanistic system. In contrast to most of the other modern spokesmen of the Esoteric Tradition, Swedenborg proceeded from a traditional biblical context. Elaborating upon scriptural precedent in the traditional, medieval, Occidental mode, Swedenborg concluded that human spirit already pre-exists in natural form, but needs further redefinition in terms of existence in the afterlife. Trained in the scientific methodology of his time, Swedenborg accordingly sought scientific proof of life after death. This proof was found in the Imagination, in the inner consciousness of spiritual sensations, which he treated as being distinct from sensual perceptions. Thus, for Swedenborgians, every natural, physical vision had its penumbra of spiritual recognition; as Swedenborg put it, a dead person “is simply separated from the physical component . . . when someone dies, he simply crosses from one world into another.”²⁹

The recognition of ongoing life beyond (*au delà*) was to be achieved through the enlightened perception of symbols. Swedenborgian *symbola* are phenomena in the physical world that have a dual meaning, either to the earthly perceptions or to the spiritual organs of man, where “*such things exist as the ear has never heard, nor the eye seen.*”³⁰ The mind and the human imagination live on forever, even after the corruption of the earthly body. According to Swedenborg, “it was ignorance to believe that in this heavenly kingdom intelligence died at the departure and dormancy of material things. . . . To the extent that a mind can be led away from the sensory matters in the outer person or the body, it is raised to spiritual and celestial matter.”³¹ Tied to these concerns is an omnipresent leitmotif, that of the “correspondences.” John Senior puts this famous doctrine into its true perspective, remarking how, had Swedenborg instead called his doctrine “allegories,” then “there would have been little theological dispute. But, like a true Occultist, he called them ‘facts.’”³² As Swedenborg himself put it in his most influential publication, *Heaven and Hell* (1758),

The nature of correspondence is unknown nowadays; this for several reasons. The foremost reason is . . . love of self and love of the world. [One who] focuses on worldly things only, since those appeal to his outward senses and gratify his inclinations, he does not focus on spiritual things since these appear to the inner senses and gratify the mind. . . . The ancient people behaved differently. As far as they were concerned, a knowledge of correspondences was the finest of all knowledges.³³

We shall see that European esotericists believe that the so-called ancient people were sensitives, *clairvoyants*, which moderns clearly are not—unless they are avant-garde artists. Although little discussed as such, this invidious comparison, one monotonously drawn even today between precivilized, superior, cosmic consciousness and modern, inferior materialism, is ubiquitous. Long after the popular demise of Swedenborgism, the same belief in the intellectual and ethical superiority of vaguely stated ancient doctrines becomes an essential component of primitivism. Although the primitivist look of most modern art, from Gauguin up to the present day, has been widely studied by a host of art historians, the strictly occultist parallels to, and even direct origins of, many modernist primitivist notions still tend to be overlooked. In spite of this stubborn omission in the standard explanations of Modernism, the esoteric background constitutes an essential chapter in the story of the genesis of modern art, particularly the rampantly primitive kind.³⁴

As remarked earlier, one obvious characteristic of modernist art is abstraction, specifically the outright renunciation of Renaissance perspective schemes. The result is a perception of spacelessness. This is another important

idea for which a *locus classicus* may be found in Swedenborg's *Heaven and Hell*—even granted that the notion of spacelessness is present in *all* kinds of European mystical literature. Speaking of “Space in Heaven,” the clairvoyant Swede pointed out diligently,

Angels have no concept or idea of place or space. As this can only look like a paradox, I should like to bring it out into the light, for it has a major bearing. All journeys in the spiritual world occur by means of changes of the state of more inward things, to the point that journeys are simply changes of state. . . . This is how angels travel. So they do not have any spatial intervals, and without spatial intervals, there are no spaces. Instead, there are states and changes of state. Since this is how journeys occur, nearnesses are clearly similarities, and distances dissimilarities, in the state of more inward elements. . . . There are no spaces in heaven, except outward states corresponding to inner ones.³⁵

Similar conditions affect the peripatetic extraterrestrials ubiquitous in postmodernist, New Age popular culture.³⁶

Swedenborg's *Heaven and Hell* represents quintessential postmedieval esotericism in that it incorporates many of the themes and motifs that appear repeatedly in modern esoteric and art-theoretical texts. The basic occultist pattern endlessly repeats itself, regardless of explicit function, supposed doctrinal differences, or dates of publication. On the other hand, Swedenborgism is acknowledged by historians to have been an all-pervasive factor in early modernist cultural life in France. In a poem aptly titled “Correspondences” (ca. 1861), Charles Baudelaire wrote, “Nature is a temple with living columns, whence often exit a few confused words. In the Temple of Nature, mankind passes through forests of symbols that observe him with intimate glances.”³⁷ For Baudelaire and his devotees, all this eventually led to a dark but profound Onement, an ineffable *l'Unité* that is infinite, like both the night of the temporal world and the clarity of sensation that comes with spiritual enlightenment.

Besides the case of Baudelaire, there may be also cited a passage from Gérard de Nerval's *Aurélia*. Here the pre-Symbolist poet speaks of dreams, and points out how “Swedenborg called his visions *Memorabilia*.” As Nerval further explains, such Swedenborgian memorabilia are specifically related to reveries or dreams. In Nerval's interpolation, “Dreaming is a second life . . . that separates us from the invisible world. It is an underground wave that gradually enlightens as one is removed little by little from the shadows and from the pale and mutely static figures who inhabit the realm of limbo. The world of the Spirits is opening up for us.” As did many of his contemporaries, whether attributing the popular idea that “*Le monde des Ésprits s'ouvre pour nous*” to Swedenborg or not, Nerval believed in the indestructibility of the Spirit. For Spiritualists, this is an enduring fact. As such, the imperishable

Spirit may be usefully contrasted to the deceitful mutability of earthly matter, which changes according to Good or Evil impulses.³⁸

Whereas one could endlessly cite references to Swedenborg in French literature likely known to Duchamp, the most widely known and comprehensive statement is found in Honoré de Balzac's mystic novel *Seraphita* (1835). *Seraphita* is an androgyne, a kind of genderized correspondence between Male and Female.³⁹ As such, s/he illustrates the perennial wisdom of the ancient Hermeticists' desire to reconcile the opposites (*coniunctio oppositorum*). The mythic figure of the Androgyne was to become of capital importance to the Surrealists. However, well before them, by 1919, the motif had become a central concern of Duchamp, who probably had read *Seraphita*. The artistic result was Duchamp's androgyne, in effect him/herself, "Rose Sélavy" (see fig. 20). As is recognized by scholars of Balzac's once immensely popular mystical novel, he had derived the myth of the Androgyne from Swedenborg. In *Seraphita*, one reads:

To poets and writers, [Swedenborgism] is infinitely marvellous; to seers, it is all absolute truth. . . . By learning the *correspondences*, by which worlds are made to concur with the heavens, one comes to know about those correspondences which do exist between these visible and tangible things of this terrestrial world and those invisible and unfathomable things belonging to the spiritual world [*choses invisibles et impondérables du monde spirituel*]. This perception is what Swedenborg had called a *celestial arcanum*.⁴⁰

This bisexual being is, however, a motif which also figures in the works of the German Romantics, as well as in French letters, in fiction by Xavière Gauthier, Sar Joséphin Péladan, and the Dumas brothers, among others. Many of these authors were familiar with, and typically associated the Androgyne with its pre-Swedenborgian origins in Alchemy (see figs. 21, 22). Evidently, so did Duchamp (fig. 20). According to strictly hermetic allegorical practice, and as they all knew, the Androgyne is the ubiquitous symbol of the *coniunctio oppositorum*, the imaginative joining together of Male and Female, or "Sulphur and Mercury" in specifically alchemical parlance. As used later by the Surrealists, the Androgyne still represented much the same idea, but was then given a more erotic emphasis. As they stated, echoing the Alchemists, the sexual act is an ecstatic union, a symbolic fusion of Male and Female, which blurs all distinctions between the sexes.

Another important early contribution to the evolving proliferation of modernist esoterica was Mesmerism, named after its founder Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815). At well-attended séances, Mesmer practiced what we would today call hypnotism. In the early Romantic period hypnosis seemed a kind of white magic, offering proof for the existence of the soul, of a hereafter, and all forms of prophetic, mentally superior Spiritual Vision, in

short, clairvoyance. In its strictly artistic applications, its corollary became “automatism,” a somnambulist tactic producing the Duchampian procedure of an “art made by chance” (further discussed in chapter 7).⁴¹ Thus, as a bridge between science and esotericism, hypnosis in part fostered the modern occult revival, and its popularity in the Symbolist period is attested to by some twelve hundred bibliographic references.⁴²

In practice, Mesmer’s esoteric hypnotic doctrines showed themselves to be clearly akin to Swedenborg’s correspondences. Mesmerism postulated the existence of a subtle fluid pervading all bodies and manifesting itself in the motions of the planets, in tidal and atmospheric changes, and in other natural cycles. Mesmerism additionally had a particular therapeutic application: when the natural ebb and flow of “mesmeric” fluid within the human body is put out of harmony with the universal rhythm, nervous or mental disorders result. In the Mesmeric application, spiritual harmony could be achieved by magnets attached to the body to redirect the vital fluids. Mesmer explained in his *Mémoire sur la découverte du magnétisme animal* that

Animal magnetism is a fluid universally diffused; it is the medium of a mutual influence between the heavenly bodies, the earth, and animated bodies; it is everywhere continuous, so as to leave no void. Its subtlety admits of no comparison; it is capable of receiving, propagating, communicating all the impressions of motions. . . . The actions and the virtues of animal magnetism may be communicated from one body to another, animate and inanimate. . . . In animal magnetism, nature presents a universal method of healing and preserving mankind.⁴³

Invisible, animal magnetism is all-pervasive, just like *l’Hypnotisme* as practiced later in the Symbolist era. So too, a century after Mesmer, were the occult “lines of force” illustrated by the Futurist painters.⁴⁴

Swedenborgism and Mesmerism paved the psychological way in Europe for Spiritualism, an American import dating from the late 1840s.⁴⁵ The initial outburst, framed as a religious revival, displayed definitely anti-aristocratic phenomena: convulsions, glossolalia, trances, visions, table-rappings, men barking like dogs, and other behaviors. America was (and still is) a sprawling and raw land ruled by what has often been called the “Protestant mentality,” characterized by a bewildering tendency to ideological fragmentation. As the historical evidence painfully attests, besides its enviably fertile industrial production, America is also perpetually ready to manufacture ever more heterogeneous cults and sects, allowing ever more diverse points of view, some quite bizarre. As with the strictly occultist sects, there were two broad paths along which the new Protestant sects could journey. Either the road led to some kind of compromise with the reigning scientific rationalism, or it doubled back to a fresh assertion of the *philosophia perennis*. Initially wholly American, Spiritualism briskly crossed the Atlantic, became

hugely popular in France, and thereby acquired a more traditional, European, scripturally ritualized character. By the 1850s, a leading proponent was Allan Kardec, who proposed an unabashedly Swedenborgian doctrine in his *Livre des Esprits* (1857). Kardeckian spirits, likewise invisible but all-pervasive, evolve through different grades as they acquire higher moral and intellectual qualities. These various esoteric doctrines and influences culminated in the foremost figure of the nineteenth-century occultist revival in Duchamp's homeland, the one who synthesized all that had historically preceded him within the Esoteric Tradition, Éliphas Lévi.⁴⁶

"Éliphas Lévi" was the nom de plume of Alphonse-Louis Constant (1810–1875), a figure now generally acknowledged to be the most important synthesizer of esoterica in nineteenth-century France. In Lévi's two fundamental, often reprinted studies, *Dogme et Rituel de la Haute Magie* (1856) and *l'Histoire de la Magie* (1860), we find the ultimate resolution of *philosophia perennis*. It is no coincidence that such Ancient Wisdom happens to appear on the chronological threshold of the new age of early Modernism. Lévi's newly whipped up Ancient Wisdom incorporated into one grand fabric esoteric strands as diverse as Swedenborgism, the Cabala, Zoroastrian Manicheanism, Satanic worship, Mesmerism, witchcraft, Pythagorean number mysticism and, most significant for my purposes, the Hermetic Tradition, physically expressed through Alchemy. For Lévi and his followers, hidden/occult wisdom is all one and the same. "Behind the veil of all the hieratic and mystical allegories of Ancient Doctrines," affirms Lévi, "there are found indications of a Doctrine, which is everywhere the same and everywhere carefully concealed."⁴⁷ The importance of the pseudonymous Lévi for the development of the modern Esoteric Tradition in France is perhaps incalculable; as John Senior tersely announces, "he is the single greatest occult influence on Symbolism. Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Villiers, Mallarmé, and Yeats read his works."⁴⁸ Probably, so did Duchamp.

Of particular interest is Lévi's vision of the imagination as an organ of symbolic perception. As Lévi shows, this notion was as common in mid-nineteenth-century mainstream Occultism as it was to be three decades later in Symbolist literary theory. Lévi explains, "I speak of the Imagination, which the Kabbalists term the *DIAPHANE* or *TRANSLUCIDE*. Imagination, in effect, is like the soul's eye; therein forms are outlined and preserved; thereby we behold the reflections of the Invisible World. It is the glass of visions and the apparatus of magical life . . . because it is the Imagination which exalts will and gives it power over the Universal Agent." Like the Symbolists who followed him, Lévi also exalts the "word" as a "sign" of the veiled truth lying *au delà*, beyond reality: "L'Imagination est l'instrument de L'ADAPTATION DU VERBE." Given this linguistic verity, "Imagination is the Instrument for the ADAPTATION OF THE WORD," Lévi then states, "as a fact, the word, or speech, is the veil of being and the characteristic sign of life." It therefore

follows that, symbolically speaking, “every figure is a character [and] every character derives from and returns into a world.” As a result, “in other words, the form is proportional to the idea; the shadow is the measure of the body calculated in relation to the luminous ray.”⁴⁹

Also having an apparent *locus classicus* in Lévi’s magical writings is the typically Symbolist (now generally modernist) notion of the Man of Genius.⁵⁰ This proto-*Übermensch* is the ecstatic genius dominated by his imagination, and this faculty makes him a prophetic seer. As Lévi remarks, “the Man of Genius differs from the dreamer and the fool in this only: that his creations are analogous to truth, while those of the fool and the dreamer are lost reflections and borrowed images. . . . The Imagination of the Adept is diaphanous, whilst that of the crowd is opaque. . . . In virtue of positive science, the Seer knows that what he imagines is true, and the event invariably confirms his vision.” Lévi generously acknowledged the sources of this ecstatic visionary notion that prophetically articulated Symbolist perceptual-conceptual theory. “It is by means of this light,” states the French Magus, “that ecstatic visionaries place themselves in communication with all worlds, just as so frequently occurred to Swedenborg.”⁵¹ Throughout his works, Lévi’s debt to Swedenborg is patent. An apt example is a poem by Lévi, “Correspondences” (1851), which directly inspired a much better known poem by Baudelaire with the same title, written ten years later (in part quoted above).

Lévi’s *Correspondences* also provide a handy catalogue of later Symbolist leitmotifs, including the following assumptions: “Forms constitute a language which speaks to us while we are asleep. The Dream is the mirror of the Soul. In this way, the Earth responds to the Heavens by means of a secret harmony. By hypothesis, the invisible therefore resides within the visible—*L’invisible est dans le visible*.”⁵² It was Lévi himself who, in 1856, clairvoyantly wrote a précis of the whole program of the Symbolist art mentality that was to follow him: “What is the ultimate reason of allegories and numbers, the final message of all symbolism? . . . The answer to the enigma is MAN! . . . Everything is symbolical and transcendental in this titanic epic of human destinies.” As in the case of the subsequent evolution of Symbolism, so was it with the historical rise of the first Occultist doctrines. This is an idea which now seems confirmed by Lévi’s own observations: “It was necessary to exonerate miracles under the pretence of superstition and science by an unintelligible language. Hieroglyphic writing was revived; pentacles and characters were invented to summarize an entire doctrine by a sign, a whole sequence of tendencies and revelations in a word.”⁵³ In his other major treatise, *Histoire de la Magie*, Lévi took as his opening statement the familiar idea that Occultism was the embodiment of hidden, primitive wisdom, the *philosophia perennis*: “Magic is the science of the ancient Magi.”⁵⁴

Lévi typically inveighs against contemporary materialism. “We call ourselves strong-minded,” he states, “when we are indifferent to everything

except material advantages, as, for example, money. Given ignorance, wealth furnishes only destroying weapons." At that point, Lévi introduces his own, stridently antimaterialist remedy for the ills of the contemporary world. The solution for Lévi is the perception of a hidden, universal life force, an idea common to the early avant-garde artists. This new (actually neo-Mesmeric) spiritualist and animistic vision is what Lévi calls that

Composite Agent, a natural and Divine Agent, at once corporeal and spiritual, an Universal Plastic Mediator, a common receptacle for vibrations of movement and images of Form, a fluid and a force which may be called, in a sense at least, the Imagination of Nature. By the mediation of this Force, every nervous apparatus is in secret communication together; hence come Sympathy and Antipathy, hence dreams, hence the phenomena of second sight and extra-natural vision.

Lévi named this wonder-working phenomenon "Astral Light." By these occult visionary means, also standard features in early twentieth-century avant-garde theoretical writings,

Sight is turned inward, instead of outward; night falls on the external and real world, while fantastic brilliance shines on the world of dreams; even the physical eyes experience a slight quivering and turn up inside the lids. The soul then perceives, by means of images, the reflection of its impressions and thoughts. . . . It is the Universal Imagination, of which each of us appropriates a lesser or greater part according to our grade of sensibility and memory. Therein is the source of all apparitions, all extraordinary visions, and all the intuitive phenomena peculiar to madness or ecstasy.⁵⁵

In light of what follows, it is especially interesting to note that Lévi (not at all uniquely) repeatedly calls Occultism an "Art." As he states, "it must not be forgotten that Transcendental Magic is called the Sacerdotal Art and the Royal Art."⁵⁶ Lévi takes as a maxim of his solitary pursuits a resounding slogan: "THE SEAL OF NATURE AND OF ART IS SIMPLICITY."⁵⁷ Elsewhere, Lévi explains what may be called the historical necessity for the Occultists' obsession with imagist signs and symbols. Lévi grandly announces that "the prophets spoke in parables and images, because abstract language was wanting to them, and because prophetic perception, being the sentiment of Harmony, or of Universal Analogies, translates naturally into images. Taken literally by the vulgar, these images become idols or impenetrable mysteries. The sum and succession of such images and mysteries constitute what is called Symbolism." Lévi concludes that "the multiplicity of Symbols has been a book of poesy indispensable to the education of human genius."⁵⁸

Finally, besides constantly alluding to the Occultist as an Artist and a Symbolist, Lévi also neatly establishes that large-scale occultist eruptions are mainly manifestations of “anxiety induced by change.” According to the way Lévi explained his situation in 1860, “in the chaos of universal doubt, and amidst the conflict of science and faith, the great men and the seers figure as sickly artists, seeking the ideal beauty at the risk of their reason and their life.” In his age, just as in ours, avant-garde or bohemian Artists and marginal or clairvoyant Occultists are never properly appreciated by society at large. “Genius is judged by the tribunal of mediocrity,” Lévi laments, “and this judgment is without appeal, because, being the light of the world, Genius is accounted as a thing that is null and dead whenever it ceases to enlighten. The ecstasy of the Poet is controlled by the indifference of the prosaic multitude, and every enthusiast who is rejected by general good sense is a fool and not a genius. Do not count the great Artists as bondsmen of the ignorant crowd, for it is the crowd which imparts to their talent the balance of reason.”⁵⁹ Whatever its many names, the Occultist viewpoint typically represents an elitist, highly privileged, antidemocratic spiritual vision.

I have perhaps taken an unusual tack here by defining Lévi’s importance for the central figures of the evolving Symbolist aesthetic, itself essential for early twentieth-century artistic abstraction, Duchamp’s included. But what was Lévi’s significance for the history of Occultism itself? For Christopher McIntosh, the answer is perfectly clear.

It is this: Lévi helped to change the popular concept of magic. Whereas magic had hitherto been regarded by most people as a means of manipulating the forces of nature and by many as a dangerous superstition, Lévi presented it as a way of drawing the will through certain channels and turning the magician into a more fully realized human being. . . . Lévi was not the first to express it in writing, but he was the first to popularize it on a large scale.⁶⁰

So doing, Lévi rendered an important but wholly ignored contribution to art history. Modern Occultism, a popular concept of magic, was amalgamated into Symbolist thinking, particularly that which refers to the visual arts. Following the Symbolist epoch, the original, essentially occultist, postulates of Symbolist art became completely standard in modernist art theory.⁶¹ The strongest evidence is that of a shared conceptual vocabulary, for this best indicates a community of fundamental beliefs existing between Occultists and Symbolists. The key terms identifying the underlying contributions of the Esoteric Tradition to distinctly modernist art concepts include the following, constantly reiterated buzzwords: Analogy, Intuition, Memory, Ancient Wisdom, Harmony, Imagination, the Dream, Correspondences, Suggestion, the Symbol, Manipulation of Matter, Essences, Will, Hidden Energies, Vitalism, and others. Last, but scarcely least, is Abstraction.

For the pursuit of these linguistic linkages between esoteric sectarian scriptures and avant-garde artistic expression, our optimum guide is Gabriel-Albert Aurier (1865–1892).⁶² Aurier was a critic who perhaps best articulated the art theory of his period, Symbolism. As was so common to the anarchistic tendencies of this period, as well as the avant-garde in general, Aurier began by taking up an emphatically antimaterialist stance. Aurier's antimaterialism, like that of so many of his artistic contemporaries, defied the mainstream attitudes of an era in which, he says, the establishment "tried to introduce science everywhere, even where it is least concerned." For Aurier, these positivist natural sciences "are, by definition, not able to come to absolute solutions." By his reckoning, such materialist thinking "must, therefore, be accused of having made this society lose faith, become earth-bound." The widely accepted positivist attitudes of the physical scientists account, Aurier believes, "for the poorness of our art, which they have assigned exclusively to the domain of imitation, the only quality that can be established by experimental methods." Alas, "by means of positive science, we shall have returned to animality, pure and simple. We must react." And what then is the answer, the means of reaction, the ready-made solution, the way out? According to the bold-faced conclusion of Aurier, "IT IS MYSTICISM ALONE THAT CAN SAVE OUR SOCIETY FROM BRUTALIZATION, SENSUALISM AND UTILITARIANISM."⁶³

In an article published in 1891, in which Aurier discussed the art of Gauguin, the French critic attributed to this renowned Symbolist artist "the clairvoyance of that inner eye of man, of which Swedenborg speaks." As such, for Aurier and his readers, Gauguin's art is "the representative materialization of what is the highest and the most truly divine in the world, of what is, in the last analysis, the only thing existent—the Idea." Appealing to the authority of a Neo-platonic notion beloved to the Esoteric Tradition, "the poor stupid prisoners of the allegorical cavern fool themselves in contemplating the shadows that they take for reality," Aurier concludes that "the normal and final end of painting, as well of the other arts, can never be the direct representation of objects. Its aim is to express Ideas, by translating them into a special language." Even though one must doubt that Ferdinand de Saussure ever read any of Aurier's art criticism, a general functional alignment between the two apparently disparate contemporary thinkers is clear. The common glue is Symbolist culture. According to the new terms of his special language, Aurier proposes that "objects cannot have value more than objects as such; they can only appear to him [the clairvoyant] as SIGNS." As a result, the Symbolist artist—a mystic and a seer—*must* resort to abstraction. According to Aurier's emphatic conclusion, "the task of the artist, whose eye is able to distinguish essences from tangible objects, . . . is a *necessary simplification in the vocabulary of the sign*." In short, for Aurier, and for a great many later modernists, "objects are nothing but the revealers of the

appearances of these ideas and, by consequence, have importance only as signs of Ideas.” These ideational signs manifest themselves on the artist’s canvas, revealing his uniquely privileged “insight into the symbolic correspondences.” In properly Symbolist painting, according to Aurier, “every detail is, in fact, really nothing but a partial symbol, most often unnecessary for the total significance of the object.”⁶⁴

To achieve his goals, the Symbolist artist resorts to the pictorial equivalent of the *philosophia perennis*; according to Aurier, the visionary and modernist artist “has thus, in the last analysis, returned to the formula of art that is simple, spontaneous and primordial.” *L’art primordial* means, of course, what we call, with the benefit of art-historical hindsight, “primitivist imagery.” To be a modern primitivist you certainly need not merely ape tribal art ransacked from the French colonies. Aurier is talking about the *idea* of the primordial, or primitivist attitudes, and not necessarily about any particular art-historical forms. Therefore, Aurier affirms that “all primeval revelations” are, “without any doubt, the true and absolute art, fundamentally identical with primitive art, to art as it was divined by the instinctive geniuses of the first ages of humanity.” By deliberate means, the modern primitivist artist, uniquely endowed with psychic gifts, “finds himself confronted with nature, knowing how to read in every object its abstract significance, the primordial idea that goes beyond it.” And just what is it that lies beyond this abstract significance? Obviously, it is that Ancient Wisdom which has always been available to the uniquely enlightened. In 1892 and immediately afterwards, that gift was particularly the province of the visual artist and, Aurier concluded, “thanks to this gift, art which is complete, perfect, absolute, exists at last.”⁶⁵

We have yet another corollary in Paul Adam’s preface to Georges Vanor’s *L’Art Symboliste* (1889). As Adam then claimed, “the Age is evidently preparing itself for a new period, a period of force, one of a Science of the Consciousness and of a general felicity. The coming epoch is bound to be mystical and abstract in its imaginative reveries.”⁶⁶ Or, similarly, we again have the case of Albert Aurier, who wrote how the future age “shall be a Century of Art succeeding the Century of Science, an age of desperation and lies.” In the forthcoming “*Siècle de l’Art*,” says Aurier, collectively we shall find ourselves entering into “a new art, idealistic and mystical.”⁶⁷ Therefore, Kandinsky’s supposedly original call in 1912 for “the great epoch of the Spiritual” had already been articulated at least twenty years earlier in Aurier’s strident heralding of “*un art nouveau, idéaliste et mystique*.” Kandinsky’s *geistige*, a spiritual foundation for truly innovative art, is largely a paraphrase of published and widely discussed Symbolist texts, which in turn had an unmistakable functional affinity with widely read apocalyptic texts like that of Éliphas Lévi. Since we know that Duchamp read Kandinsky, why not Lévi as well?

In short, any number of artists belonging to what was then a beleaguered avant-garde collectively believed and published statements to the effect that a wholly New Art was bound to transpire as one century merged into a bright new one. The year 1900 was rife with utopian and millennialist promise. Specifically, the new century promised an idealist and mystical new art, for which the most appropriate language was the dematerialized rhetoric of ethically pure abstraction. This is the broader historical context for Kandinsky's *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*; so also is the timeless wisdom of the Esoteric Tradition. These contexts provide a particularly cogent reason why, in 1912, Marcel Duchamp would bother to trudge through the murky German text of Kandinsky's detailed discussion of "The Spiritual Element in Art," which directly propels *gegenstandlose Malerei*, "nonobjective painting." But even if he had never heard of the recent German publication, his own contemporary French culture, as much *symboliste* as *occultiste*, would have inexorably shaped the future of Duchamp's unquestionably unique, also unquestionably influential, art.