The Jura-Paris Road

> The whole trend of painting was
> something I didn't care to continue.

Duchamp returned to Paris just in time for the opening of the Section d'Or, the largest and most important of the prewar Cubist group exhibitions. Jacques Villon was responsible for the show's title; it referred to a mathematical ratio of parts to the whole (the "golden section") that was used by artists in the Renaissance. Although the ratio did not really apply to the more than two hundred paintings on view at the Galerie de la Boetie, it had a nice ring, and it also served to indicate that the Puteaux artists and their allies in Pierre Dumont's Société Normande de Peinture Moderne were aiming beyond "retinal" painting. The absence of Picasso and Braque, neither of whom had the slightest interest in higher mathematics or philosophical and social ideals, went more or less unnoticed by the public. That spring Picasso and Braque had begun to glue to their canvases bits of paper, wood, and other evidence of the real world; a few of these early collage-paintings could be seen at Kahnweiler's gallery on the rue Vignon, but Kahnweiler did not want his artists to be associated in any way with the work of the rival Puteaux group, and the immense significance of the new collage technique was not immediately recognized. For the moment, the Section d'Or painters appeared to have taken over the Cubist revolution.

The catalog for the Section d'Or lists six works by Marcel Duchamp, only four of which can be positively identified: *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2,* whose first public showing in Paris set off no shock waves whatsoever;

Portrait of Chess Players; The King and Queen Surrounded by Swift Nudes; and the watercolor sketch *The King and Queen Traversed by Nudes at High Speed.* His other two contributions were listed simply as *Painting* and *Watercolor.* (In later years he said that the *Painting* might have been *Sad Young Man in a Train.*) Although Duchamp's first *Virgin* drawing was in the Salon d'Automne exhibition, which had opened on the last day of September, while he was still out of the country, he submitted none of his Munich work to the Section d'Or. Even *The Bride,* his most fully achieved painting to date, was in Duchamp's mind a study for the "large-scale work" that he had conceived at the beginning of the summer, and he was not yet ready to let it out of his hands. The paintings that he did show at the Salon d'Or excited very little attention, although Louis Vauxcelles, who scorned any sort of radical innovation, singled out *The King and Queen Surrounded by Swift Nudes* as an example of the worst and most outrageous tendencies in the new art.

There was one critic, however, who threw the full weight of his already famous name behind the Section d'Or artists. This was Guillaume Apollinaire. By the time the Section d'Or exhibition opened on October 9, Apollinaire had become the leading impresario of the Paris avant-garde. He was thirty-two years old, exuberant and disorganized, a prodigious reader, a nonstop talker and myth maker, and a gifted and dazzlingly original poet. Fernande Olivier, Picasso's mistress in those years, described him this way:

> He was pleasant-looking, distinguished, with sharp features, small eyes rather close together, a long, thin Roman nose, and eyebrows like commas. A little mouth, which he often seemed to make deliberately smaller when he spoke, as though to give more bite to what he was saying. He was a mixture of distinction and a certain vulgarity, the latter coming out in his loud, childish laugh. His hands and his unctuous gestures made you think of a priest. (In fact there were rumors that he was the son of a Vatican prelate. His mother was Russian or Polish.) What struck you above all was his evident good nature. He was calm and gentle, serious, affectionate, inspiring confidence the moment he spoke—and he spoke a great deal.

After years of struggle in a variety of ignominious jobs—tutor, bank clerk, hack journalist, pornographer—Apollinaire had established himself around 1910 as the champion of the most advanced art of his time. His fer-

vent support of Matisse, the Fauves, and the early Cubist experiments of Picasso and Braque had been an important counterforce to the reactions of the established critics, many of whom considered these new developments to be totally misguided, arbitrary, or even mad. Picasso and Apollinaire had been close friends since 1903—so close, in fact, that for a long time Apollinaire hesitated to go to the gatherings of the Puteaux artists because he feared, with good reason, that this would be considered an act of disloyalty. Apollinaire's friendship with Picasso had been severely strained, though, by a ludicrous incident in 1911 that became known as "the affair of the statuettes." A few years earlier, in 1907, a young Belgian drifter and petty thief named Géry Pieret, whom Apollinaire had taken under his wing and employed briefly as his secretary, had gone to the Louvre one day and come out with two small stone sculptures hidden under his coat. Pieret later put out the story that he had done it as a joke, but the Picasso biographer John Richardson suggests another reason: Picasso had recently been looking hard at a new installation in the Louvre of ancient Iberian stone sculptures of the fifth and sixth centuries B.C., and Pieret, when he lifted two of these same Iberian pieces, almost certainly had the artist in mind. Pieret showed them to Picasso, at any rate, and Picasso promptly bought them. Certain aspects of their crude, primitively carved features soon turned up, moreover, in the heads of the two central figures in Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon,* the revolutionary 1907 canvas that is considered to be the beginning of Cubism.

Pieret spent the next four years in America. He reappeared in Paris in the spring of 1911, wearing an expensive suit and flourishing a great wad of cash, which he lost soon enough at the racetrack. Once again Apollinaire came to his rescue, lending him money and giving him a place to stay. Pieret showed his gratitude by making a return visit to the Louvre and stealing another Iberian stone head, which he installed over the mantelpiece at Apollinaire's apartment. Apollinaire's tolerance for this engaging and somewhat crazy Belgian was running out, however, and he succeeded in evicting him from his apartment on August 21, 1911, which happened to be the same day that every Paris newspaper ran big headlines announcing that the *Mona Lisa* had disappeared from the Louvre.

Pieret had had nothing to do with the most sensational art theft of all time. A temporary employee at the Louvre named Vincenzo Peruggia, finding the *Mona Lisa* unguarded one day, had simply removed it from the

wall, carried it to an interior staircase, taken it out of the frame, and walked out with the rolled-up canvas under his coat; the painting turned up two years later, miraculously undamaged, when Peruggia foolishly tried to sell it for 500,000 lire to an art dealer in Florence. In August 1911, however, with the *Paris-Journal* offering a huge reward for the *Mona Lisa*'s return, Pieret saw a chance to pull off a new scam. He sold his most recently acquired Iberian head (the one over Apollinaire's mantel) to the *Paris-Journal,* along with his own colorful account of how he had spirited it out of the Louvre—just to prove, he claimed, that the museum's security system was ineffectual. The *Paris-Journal* returned the sculpture to the Louvre without revealing Pieret's identity, but Picasso and Apollinaire now became very nervous about the other two Iberian heads. Terrified that their involvement with Pieret would become known, Apollinaire gave him 160 francs and put him on a train to Marseilles, the usual sanctuary for petty criminals on the lam. Picasso and Apollinaire spent that night lugging Picasso's two stolen heads around Paris in a suitcase, waiting for the right moment to drop them in the Seine; the moment never arrived, and Apollinaire subsequently took them to the offices of the *Paris-Journal,* under a pledge of secrecy, for restitution to the Louvre. Someone must have tipped off the authorities, though, because on September 7 the police raided Apollinaire's apartment, found some incriminating letters from Géry Pieret, and took Apollinaire off to the Santé, Paris's central prison, as a prime suspect in the *Mona Lisa* theft.

The police kept him there for six days and might have kept him longer if his many friends in the art and literary establishments had not brought pressure for his release. The worst moment came when Picasso, whose name had been wrung from the suspect during interrogation, was brought in and questioned. The presiding magistrate asked him whether he knew Apollinaire, who was also in the room, and the pale and trembling Picasso mumbled, to his lifelong shame, "I have never seen this man." (Curiously enough, Picasso was never charged with receiving stolen goods; if he had been, his status as a resident alien would certainly have led to his being deported.) Apollinaire bounced back quickly enough from the humiliating experience and soon regained his position as the most influential art critic in Paris. But his friendship with Picasso would never be the same. In fact, there is reason to believe that Apollinaire's emergence in 1912 as a champion of the Puteaux Cubists and as one of the main organizers—along with Picabia and the

Duchamp brothers—of the Section d'Or exhibition was motivated to some degree by anger over Picasso's cowardly betrayal at the Santé prison.

In a well-attended lecture at the Section d'Or exhibition, Apollinaire proceeded to "dismember" Cubism into four component parts—scientific, physical, instinctive, and "orphic." He left no doubt that he considered "orphic Cubism," later shortened to "Orphism," the most promising new direction, and Robert Delaunay (not Picasso) its most brilliant interpreter. In his book *The Cubist Painters,* which he was working on at the time, Apollinaire described Orphism as "the art of painting new structures with elements which have not been borrowed from visual reality, but have been created entirely by the artist and have been endowed by him with a powerful reality . . . This is pure art." Since Picasso and Braque never would go all the way into the "pure art" of complete abstraction, Apollinaire was clearly voicing a shift of allegiance—a shift that was much resented. Picasso, Braque, and Kahnweiler made a point in later years of emphasizing Apollinaire's shortcomings as an art critic, although they all three conceded that he was a great poet. Apollinaire "never wrote penetratingly about our art, as did for example [Pierre] Reverdy," Braque said condescendingly. "I'm afraid we kept encouraging Apollinaire to write about us as he did so that our names would be kept before at least part of the public."

It is easy to make fun of the gaffes and absurdities that peppered Apollinaire's writings on art. His reference to Picasso's and Braque's use of numbers and printed letters in their paintings as something "new in art" showed his ignorance of the Islamic tradition (among others), which had made pictorial use of these same elements for centuries. His inclusion of Marie Laurencin in *The Cubist Painters* was an embarrassment; the enchanting Laurencin, whose lyrical paintings had nothing to do with Cubism, had recently left him after two years of being his somewhat less than faithful mistress, and Apollinaire was trying very hard to win her back. In the words of his biographer, Francis Steegmuller, Apollinaire was a promoter rather than a critic; his "erratic flair" for innovation in art was "like that of a hound who picks up too many scents, and he did a good deal of happy, excited barking about it." The fact remains that the artists Apollinaire promoted are the ones whom art history has singled out as the greatest of this century, and his excited barking was an important factor in their struggles for recognition. Some of his insights, moreover, were not only penetrating but prophetic.

Up to this point, Apollinaire had taken relatively little notice of the youngest Duchamp brother. He had mentioned Marcel's "very ugly" nudes in the 1910 Indépendants exhibition, and a few months later, in his review of a Société Normande exhibition in Paris, he had tossed in an unspecific reference to Duchamp as an artist who was "making great progress." More recently, just a week before the Section d'Or opening, he had noted "Marcel Duchamp's strange drawing" at the Salon d'Automne—the Munich *Virgin (No. 1)*. By then Apollinaire must have decided to include Duchamp in *The Cubist Painters,* because he had written to him in Munich that summer to request a photograph. What had sparked his interest in Duchamp, who kept his distance from avant-garde art circles and whose relatively slim body of work to date had made only a modest impression on the critics and on his fellow artists? The catalyst in this case almost certainly was their mutual friend Francis Picabia.

Apollinaire, who needed cheering up after Marie Laurencin left him that June, had turned to Picabia for the kind of close, rollicking friendship that he had once enjoyed with Picasso. While Duchamp was away in Munich, Apollinaire spent most of his evenings with the Picabias, drinking, talking, smoking opium, and careening around Paris in one of Picabia's expensive cars. The combination of Picabia's flamboyant nihilism and Apollinaire's chameleon-like charm—according to his friend Jean Mollet, "Many who knew him slightly used to wonder, when they saw him a second time, whether he was the same man they had met before"—stimulated both of them to madcap adventures, such as painting neckties on their shirts, not showing up for lectures they had agreed to give, or dashing off to London on the spur of the moment. Although Picabia's wife, Gabrielle, once described their conversations as "forays of demoralization," the two men also had deep discussions about art, dialogues in which Picabia, who would paint his first completely abstract pictures in the fall of 1912, worked to overcome Apollinaire's initial opposition to abstraction. When Apollinaire embraced Orphism, or "pure art," he was responding in large part to Picabia's influence.

On October 20, Picabia, Apollinaire, and Duchamp left Paris together in one of Picabia's big cars. Their destination was the tiny village of Etival, high up in the Jura Mountains near the Swiss border. Gabrielle Buffet-Picabia's mother lived there, in an ancient stone farmhouse that had

Francis Picabia, Gabrielle Buffet-Picabia, and Guillaume Apollinaire in Paris, 1914.

belonged to her family for generations, and she and Gabrielle were on hand to greet the travelers when they arrived late at night, after a harrowing twelve-hour trip. While his chauffeur cowered in the back seat, Picabia had navigated the mountain passes on a night of torrential rainstorms, nearly going off the road several times.

Gabrielle describes in her memoirs the vivid impression that Apollinaire made on her mother during the week that they all spent together in

Etival. The pitchman for the avant-garde got on famously with Mme Buffet, an elegant, highly cultivated woman whose grandfather had been a famous botanist and a friend of Lamartine, Chateaubriand, and Madame Récamier. He wanted to know everything about the beautiful and remote region of France they were in, which was known locally as the Zone, and he loved to draw out Mme Buffet on the subject of her eighteenth-century ancestors; with his amazing erudition, Apollinaire told stories about the great intellects of that time as if he had known them intimately. Apollinaire could be tremendously winning, and on this occasion he seems to have been on his best behavior. It rained a lot, so they spent most of their time indoors, playing jackstraws or sitting by the enormous fireplace in the main room, where Mme Buffet subtly guided the conversation in much the same way that her grandmother had done at her literary salons in the previous century. One evening Mme Buffet asked Apollinaire to read some of his poems. "He recited them rather ceremoniously," according to Gabrielle, "in a restrained tone of voice, stressing the rhymes . . . He read several poems from the collection *Alcools,* which had not yet come out, and one of them, which retraced his life, his childhood, and his disappointments, made a great impression on my mother . . . She asked him the title of this poem. 'It's not finished yet,' he said, 'and it doesn't have a name.' Then, suddenly, gracefully, he turned to her and said, 'I will call it *Zone.*' "

In her memoir of the week in Etival—a week that would have lasting repercussions in the work of all three artists involved—Gabrielle barely mentions Duchamp. One might assume that Marcel's quiet ironies had been overshadowed by the extravagant conversational styles of Apollinaire and Picabia, and to a certain extent this was probably the case. Toward the end of her very long life, though, Gabrielle Buffet-Picabia revealed in an interview that she and Duchamp had been much closer than anyone suspected.

During the many evenings that Duchamp spent at the Picabias' large apartment on the avenue Charles-Floquet, he had become increasingly drawn to Gabrielle. A beautiful and highly intelligent woman who gave up a promising career in music when she married Picabia—she had studied counterpoint with Gabriel Fauré and composition at the Schola Cantorum with Vincent d'Indy—Gabrielle understood better, perhaps, than her husband did the impulses that led artists, scientists, and many others in those early years of the twentieth century to try to capture what she once called

"the 'nonperceptible.' " She could also be a very sympathetic and perceptive friend. At that time, as she recalled, "Marcel was much less liberated than one imagines . . . He had remained a provincial young man very attached to his family and to his brothers, for whom he had great respect, while at the same time he was a revolutionary at heart. Clearly he felt that with us he could be himself, which was impossible with him *vis-à-vis* his brothers. The influence of Francis on him was extraordinary, and mine, too, given the customs of the epoch: a woman who dared to have free ideas . . . I believe that it was I who extracted Marcel from his family."

Seven years older than Duchamp, Gabrielle had been startled but perhaps not surprised when he telephoned her in June 1912, just before he left for Munich, to say that he was in love with her and wanted desperately to write her a letter. Gabrielle told him that he could write to her in Hythe, an English summer resort, where she would be staying with her two children (but not Picabia) for a brief period in July. She received two "very beautiful letters" from him in England, she said, one of which compared their situation to that of the couple in André Gide's recently published novel, *Strait Is the Gate,* a bleak tale of idealistic lovers who struggle so valiantly to deserve each other that they deny themselves the happiness of a life together. "I remember being astonished by this letter," Gabrielle said. "These clandestine things greatly troubled me, but at the same time I was very moved by his friendly attitude to me. He said he wanted so badly to see me alone."

There must have been further communications between them, because later that summer, when Marcel was in Munich and Gabrielle and the two children were staying with her mother in Etival, she agreed to meet him secretly. Their rendezvous took place at the railroad station at Andelot, in the Jura, where the branch line from Etival joined the main line to Paris. Gabrielle, who was making a brief trip back to Paris without the children, had told Duchamp that she would be there for an hour or so between trains, but she did not really expect him to show up; she was "stupefied" to find him on the platform at Andelot when she arrived. They had several hours together in the waiting room of the little railroad station. "There was only the main train [to Paris] which went by at about two o'clock in the morning, and another later," she said. "And I stayed: instead of taking the first, I took the second. We remained in the station on a wooden bench. We spent the night, and I left before him. Even now I find it really astonishing and very moving, very young, too. It was a kind of madness, idiocy, to travel from

Munich to the Jura to pass a few hours of the night with me. It was utterly inhumane to sit next to a being whom you sense desires you so much and not even to have been touched . . . Above all, I thought, I must be very careful with everything I say to him because he understands things in quite an alarming way, in an absolute way."

The door opens a crack, then closes. We do not know what they talked about all night. Duchamp's detached and contradictory personality clearly fascinated Gabrielle. In the published essay-memoir in which she wrote of the young Duchamp's "ineptitude for life" and his "almost romantic timidity," she went on to say that there were times when this " 'sad young man in a train' was transmuted into a captivating, impressive incarnation of Lucifer." Gabrielle once told another interviewer that she thought she had "initiated" Duchamp; she used the French verb *déniaisé,* which usually implies sexual initiation, but in this case she must have meant it metaphorically. What seems more likely is that Duchamp, who carried, hidden away somewhere, a lifelong resentment toward his "cold and distant" mother, was able to say things to Gabrielle that he could not have said to anyone else, and perhaps Gabrielle confided in him as well—her marriage to Picabia, a notorious womanizer and a domestic tyrant, gave her plenty of opportunities for unhappiness. The emotional echoes of their secret rendezvous two months earlier must have been in the air, at any rate, during that October week in Etival.

Duchamp was not feeling well on the car trip back to Paris. He slept fitfully and said little. The long drive, however, was the stimulus for a two-page manuscript that he jotted down soon after their return. Written in ink on a sheet of lined paper that is folded in half and dated 1912, it is a document whose Roussel-like mixture of puns, pseudo-scientific descriptions, erotic fantasy, and ultimately indecipherable wordplay sets the tone for all the notes he would later collect in *The Green Box.* Not until the end of the note does it become clear that he is describing a painting—one that he never made.

The two principal images in the text are the *enfant phare,* or "headlight child," and the *chef des cinq nus,* the "chief of the five nudes." The headlight child, a "pure child of nickel and platinum" who dominates and conquers the Jura-Paris road, is a surprisingly romantic metaphor; it could be represented graphically, Duchamp says, by "a comet, which would have its tail in front, this tail being an appendage of the headlight child . . . which absorbs

by crushing (gold dust, graphically) this Jura-Paris road." The visual reference here is clear enough to anyone who has watched a car's headlights probe the dark road ahead. The "chief of the five nudes," on the other hand, is much harder to get a fix on. (We know that there were five people in Picabia's car on the trip back to Paris, counting Gabrielle and the chauffeur.) As any number of commentators have pointed out, *cinq nus* can be read as a pun on *seins nus* (bare breasts), just as *enfant phare* suggests *en fanfare* (with a flourish). But does this help? Not really. We learn from Duchamp's note that the Jura-Paris road, which is "infinite only humanly," has its "termination at one end in the chief of the 5 nudes, at the other in the headlight child," but beyond that nothing is certain. Like many other artists during this period, Duchamp was trying to make visible a "nonperceptible" experience, but he went about it in a way that was new even to him. The "Jura-Paris Road" note shows him entering, for perhaps the first time, the verbal-visual landscape of *The Large Glass.* "From Munich on I had the idea of *The Large Glass,*" Duchamp once said. "I was finished with Cubism and with movement—at least movement mixed up with oil paint. The whole trend of painting was something I didn't care to continue. After ten years of painting I was bored with it—in fact I was always bored with it when I did paint, except at the very beginning when there was that feeling of opening the eyes to something new. There was no essential satisfaction for me in painting ever . . . Anyway, from 1912 on I decided to stop being a painter in the professional sense. I tried to look for another, personal way, and of course I couldn't expect anyone to be interested in what I was doing."

Duchamp's explanation, so long after the fact, leaves unanswered questions. Could he really have been bored with painting? The two exquisitely painted Munich canvases hardly look like the work of a jaded artist. What really bored him was the Paris art world, with its competing factions and fervent theories. For nearly a year, ever since he had removed his offending *Nude* from the Indépendants exhibition, Duchamp had been moving away from the concerns of other artists. Now, in order to concentrate his energy on the large-scale work that he had conceived in Munich, he decided to withdraw from all other artistic activities and to look for a job that would supplement the modest allowance he still received from his father. What sort of job? One that would not take up too much of his time, obviously. Picabia found the solution. His uncle, a bon vivant and man-about-town

named Maurice Davanne, happened to be the director of the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève, one of the city's most distinguished research institutions. With Davanne's assurance of a future position, Duchamp enrolled that November in a librarian's course at L'Ecole Nationale des Chartes. A library job appealed to him because it meant "taking an intellectual position as opposed to the manual servitude of the artist," but he was not giving up art. As he would later explain, "There are two kinds of artists: the artist who deals with society; and the other artist, the completely freelance artist, who has nothing to do with it—no bonds."

Society, however, does not always respect an artist's decision to have none of it. At that moment, in early November 1912, three American artists were visiting galleries and studios and private collections in Paris in a somewhat frantic ten-day search for examples of the most advanced art. Walt Kuhn, one of the principal organizers of what would come to be called the Armory Show, had been stunned by the examples of contemporary art that he had seen earlier in the month at the Sonderbund exhibition in Cologne and at other exhibitions in The Hague, Berlin, and Munich. When he got to Paris, he was joined by Arthur B. Davies, a deeply conservative painter who nevertheless found much to admire in Cubism, Fauvism, Orphism, and other radical trends. Kuhn and Davies agreed that this work must be a prominent part of the big International Exhibition of Modern Art that they were planning to put on in New York, but they knew very little about it. They needed help, and they found it in the person of Walter Pach, an American painter and writer on art who had been living in Paris since 1907. Pach spoke fluent French and German, was sympathetic to advanced art, and knew many of the artists personally. He took Kuhn and Davies to see Brancusi, Redon, Matisse, Delaunay, Gleizes, Léger, Picabia, and a number of other artists; he took them to the apartment of Gertrude and Leo Stein at 27, rue de Fleurus, where they saw the groundbreaking Cubist work of Picasso and Braque; and he also took them out to Puteaux. Pach greatly admired Jacques Villon's paintings and was even more impressed by Raymond Duchamp-Villon—he would later write the first important monograph on Duchamp-Villon's sculpture—but had not paid much attention to the third Duchamp brother until the month before, when he had seen Marcel's pictures at the Section d'Or exhibition. The impression they made then was strong enough to persuade him that "the pictures painted by Duchamp in the years before 1913 stand with the greatest art of modern times."

Marcel was not present on the day that Pach, Kuhn, and Davies visited the studios of his brothers at 7, rue Lemaître in Puteaux. He had just enrolled in L'Ecole des Chartes and was busy learning to be a librarian. Several of his pre-Munich paintings were there, however, brought over from Neuilly for the occasion, and the American visitors decided to borrow four of them for their upcoming show: *The King and Queen Surrounded by Swift Nudes, Sad Young Man in a Train, Portrait of Chess Players,* and *Nude Descending a Staircase.* They also chose nine canvases by Villon, and five of Duchamp-Villon's sculptures—including the dynamic *Torso of a Young Man,* whose features were modeled on Marcel's. Arthur B. Davies, the oldest of the three Americans, was particularly struck by Marcel's paintings. "That's the strongest expression I've seen yet," he said in an aside to his colleagues. It was a sentiment that would be echoed in various, mostly negative ways when the Armory bombshell hit New York three months later, altering the course of American art forever and inflicting on Marcel Duchamp the kind of raucous, derisive fame that is America's specialty.

No one could have been more surprised than Duchamp.