

SYMPATHY for LYDIE



*Sympathy for Lydie, assemblage, photograph, 2010, L. Brandon Krall*

*When will I be mated?<sup>1</sup>*

Dear Reader, *A Marriage in Check: The Heart of the Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelor, Even<sup>2</sup>* by Lydie Fischer Sarazin-Levassor is a completely fascinating account written by a 24 year-old woman, who in 1927 was so fortunate as to fall in love with and be wedded to Marcel Duchamp, then age 40 years. It is possible, in light of this history, that he would have had a family with her had not the machinations of her family and his “friends” intervened. It is deeply sad that Lydie’s father proceeded to buy her the house in Southern France and a new car, et al. as soon as they were divorced rather than provide a sufficient allowance for them to continue to be married.

The insights this memoir provides into Duchamp’s character, skill and humanity shine, illuminating him wonderfully and for the first time includes mention of his extraordinary aunt

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<sup>1</sup> Naumann, Francis, *The Recurrent, Haunting Ghost: Essays on the Art Life and Legacy of Marcel Duchamp*, page 231, New York, Readymade Press, 2012. Walter Arensberg to Marcel Duchamp (14 July 1951): "It's curious how I get an impression when I look at our paintings of yours from the point of view of their chronological sequence of the successive moves in a game of chess."

Duchamp's response (22 July 1951): Your comparison between the chronological order of the paintings and a game of chess is absolutely right. . . but when will I administer checkmate or will I be mated?"

Naumann, Francis M., Bailey, Bradley and Shahade, Jennifer, *Marcel Duchamp: The Art of Chess*, New York Readymade Press, 2009, page 1.

<sup>2</sup> Fischer, Sarazin-Levassor. Lydie, introduction by Décimo, M., & translated by Edwards, P. (2007). *A marriage in check: The heart of the bride stripped bare by her bachelor, even*. Dijon: Presses du réel.

## SYMPATHY for LYDIE

Julia Bertrand. The memoir renders the atmosphere of an early 20<sup>th</sup> century social milieu in France, the blind cruelty of the haut-bourgeois, the goodness of the Duchamp family and dear Lydie, whose voice is fine and personable and whose account wins my complete sympathy. She is ignored or dismissed by the major Duchamp biographers which is a travesty; this memoir should be a venerated part of the "canon."

In Lydie's memoir she describes a great deal: their betrothal, that 55% of all young men were killed in WW1, creation of the Rue Larrey door and apartment, the trap of too little income set by her father, MD's first transatlantic crossing in the immigrant hold, the iron curtain, MD's hairlessness, Cine-sketch, Brancusi's *nomnette*, being called Maurice, two kinds of activity *maintenance* and *creation*, meeting Robert Desnos, MD and the 4<sup>th</sup> dimension, the Crottis, Yvonne Chastel, H-P. Roche, Sundays in Puteaux et al. In 1919 Lydie age 16 had contracted a serious case of Spanish fever and for years had attacks compelling her to leave Paris for country air. She did not follow contemporary art, liked seeing friends, dancing and golf. Lydie also describes her miserable mother's mistreatment and that of her family toward the newly weds, none of whom invited them to dinner or to meet after they were married. The remarkable person of Duchamp's aunt, Julia Bertrand is described. Bertrand was a very influential intellectual and her influence on the Duchamp children is stellar. Bertrand published under a pseudonym and as a close relative of the Duchamp children she guided them skillfully in matters of philosophy and intellectual pursuit. Bertrand dressed malicly or *à la garconne* and was married to a landscape painter who inherited the Aicard Chateau. Compelling toward the end of this memoir is the account of Yvonne Duchamp's friendship with Lydie and her desire to get a child by her brother and Lydie, which heart breakingly failed.



The following excerpts were transcribed from the memoir written in 1977 by Marcel Duchamp's first wife, Lydie Fischer Sarazin-Levassor:

Pages 209-210. Introduction on the commissioned to write memoir for the Exhibition in 1977:

Whilst preparing the Marcel Duchamp exhibition at the Pompidou Centre, the organizers realized that the French public in their great majority most likely knew very little about his life and work since the introductory notes, interviews and other writings about him and his *oeuvre* were for the most part either published in America or scattered amongst books and periodicals more or less difficult to get hold of.

It was while they were researching his biography that I was contacted so that I might furnish a maximum amount of information about the first period of his life, that is to say up to 1927, the year of his marriage, the year in which he turned his back on Art definitively and devoted himself to chess. My memories being abundant and still quite vivid, I was asked to write an account of those few months that marked a turning point in his life.

## SYMPATHY for LYDIE

My text is therefore a very simple story, deliberately stripped to the bare essentials, of how we were engaged, married, travelled to the South of France, came back to Paris and divorced...

On a different note, the reader may be surprised at the naivety and ignorance of the young women of 1927. It must be remembered that these young girls were brought up during the First World War and still possessed the candour and ideals of purity of the preceding generations. They were not “liberated”, just “tomboyish”, wishing no more than the freedom to live and equality with their brothers at the workplace. It was their elders who, having been suddenly obliged to stand in for the men who had gone to war, had gradually managed to throw off the centuries-old chains and inaugurate a new era for women.”

*Page 40. [This exchange took place in context of how to furnish their apartment, it had been understood that they would live in an apartment together and MD would keep 11 Rue Larrey, a seven-floor walk-up, as his studio.]*

At first I thought his taste for natural things was a reaction against the “refined” aesthetic propounded by the recent Art Deco exhibition. I spoke to him about it: “As far as *lizards* go, I only encountered the variety that basks in the sun. What are these *lizards decoratifs*? Is it a new species?<sup>3</sup> To which he replied: “If a butcher makes a sculpture out of lard, is it culinary art or culinary lard? And what about domestic lard, and the lard of war?<sup>4</sup> So tell me about the Arts. Art is simply the technical knowledge that goes with a profession. Look it up in the Larousse dictionary. So what are the Fine Arts? All the arts are fine. The knife-grinder’s art is particularly fine, and fascinating with it. But he is an artisan. Artisan, artist, what’s the difference? My hairdresser calls himself an artist, so does the man in the patisserie, but Gaston’s art is manual, so that makes him an artisan.”

His ironic tone suggested that there was much left unsaid, but I did not insist as I feared I might have got it all wrong.

“There is no such thing as ‘decoration’,” he continued. “The whole concept needs to be buried. We take furniture in, that’s all. We buy the things we need for our comfort. Keep desires to the minimum and do away with what is not strictly practical. That’s it in a nutshell: Fittings must be useful.”...

*p. 48, [This exchange took place in the context of Lydie being shunned by her haut bourgeois aunt Edith because she was marrying Marcel Duchamp, the “Pope of the Surrealists.”]*

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<sup>3</sup> Les Arts sounds exactly like *lézards*. The pun is an old one (Félicien Champsaur and his illustrator dwell on it in *Entrée de Clowns*, 1884), but it still seems to give pleasure in Paris today. [Translator’s note.]

<sup>4</sup> The punning reaches a climax with “*gros lard militaire*” a combination of *gros lard* (fat slob) and *l’art militaire* (the art of war). There maybe a silent pun: Duchamp employed the word *saindoux* at the start of his speech and the military slang for a corporal is *saindoux*. [Translator’s note.]

## SYMPATHY for LYDIE

...Seeing that I had become pensive, Marcel said to me, very affectionately: "Come now, you must make an effort to become an adult. Free yourself from the family mould. Shake off the weight of heredity. Find yourself, the pure self, like a child newborn." I nodded without grasping what he meant...

"No," Marcel explained, "life poses a string of problems and you have to solve them each in a new way. Accumulated experience isn't a kind of adjustable spanner that can be used to solve all of life's problems. You have to avoid prejudicing – prejudging- a case, which means, of course, no judging in advance. Instead, what is required is constant reflection, continual innovation, like Trotsky's permanent revolution."

"Ok. But what if the next day, having thought it over, the decision made the day before no longer seems viable?"

"It doesn't matter. An equilibrium is maintained, as in chess. You have to try to see everything as if for the first time, all the time, even if it means contradicting yourself, since the context of one day is never quite the same as that of the next."

Page 77. We went through scores of different actions and it was sad to observe that the greater part of existence was spent in the struggle for existence, in 'maintenance,' and that keeping alive and well finally won over the pleasure of creating. Marcel who had lead the conversation like a Socratic dialogue, concluded saying, "So now you can see how necessary it is to eliminate household cares as much as possible in order to be free. Creativity is the only occupation during childhood and adolescence, so these periods are the perfect training ground for the moment when creativity will blossom. The outcome will vary according to the individual. Some people produce the most materials results: children. Others opt for the most ethereal pursuits, namely mathematics and chess, conceptual activities pursued for their own delight without regard to concrete applications. Give that general state of affairs, would it not be better to have done with everything that concerns 'maintaining' our existence, which means not clogging our lives with objects, or our minds with any old literature, and not letting ourselves be imprisoned by that most debilitating of chores we call 'earning a living'? It must be reduced to a minimum if we are to be free. It is just as imperative, therefore, to find the means to do so, whether by private income, patronage or whatever, with guaranteed efficiency and constancy, for anyone who wants to live life creatively, that is, as an artist."

Page 109. [*This passage occurs in the context of MD and LS-L witnessing a seasonal swarm of insects that were being gathered by people of a town in the south of France.*]

...Well no, they [Ephemeron] were not edible, but you could leave them to dry and go fly fishing with them. Mounted on a hook, they became those wonderful flies that we had both delighted in looking at in the *Catalogue de la Manufacture d'Armes et Cycles de Saint-Etienne*.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Manufacture Française d'Armes et Cycles de Saint-Etienne* - was a manufacturer of Radio, Weapon, Bicycle, fishing tools etc. but after WWII the short name "Manufrance" was used, in some documentation (Schématèque Sorokine 1940) the name "Manufacture St. Etienne" in short MF was used.

<http://www.manufrance.fr/> - <http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manufrance>

MANUFACTURE D'ARMES et CYCLES de Saint-Etienne, a history.

L. Brandon Krall scribit © 2014 New York

## SYMPATHY for LYDIE

Ah! The *Catalogue de la Manufacture*! There was not a house in the country that did not have a copy lying about, much to the joy of children and perhaps even of practical use to the adults. It was marvelous. You could spend hours daydreaming as you flipped the pages over. Night falls early in the autumn months, and the adults, grouped around the paraffin lamp, leave little room for the children and their games. That was the best time to make play with the catalogue, snug in a corner with a candle in a little candleholder. If you felt you wanted to do some sport, you were sure to find everything necessary: guns, rifles, cartridges in pretty colours, fishing rods, hooks, flies, canoes and the appropriate wear, bows and arrows, bicycles, saddles and harnesses, even swimsuits. If you fancied adventure, it was easy to set off for Africa or India: there were tents of every size and shape, all the camping gear, canvas water carriers and canvas tubs. If, more modestly, you were a little girl and you wanted to play at being a housewife, there were page after page of pots and pans waiting for you: saucepans, cooking pots, ironware pots, earthenware pots, cups, plates and so on, to suit every taste, every desire, every dream. Marcel and his little sister Suzanne had leafed through its pages all through their childhood, whilst their older brothers played chess at the table where their parents sat. You could leave for Russia on a sleigh, for India on an elephant, for Africa on a camel, with a tropical helmet from the *Manufacture* sitting tightly on your head, a rifle slung over your shoulder, a Kodak at the ready and it's off for adventure, come what may! Marcel led their games, but sometimes he let Suzanne have her way, letting her be orchestra leader and play the harmonium at the same time as the violin, leaving Marcel to choose hunting horn, trumpet and saxophone. Both of us had adored playing the Saint-Etienne catalogue game and we often spoke of it...

Page 143. [*The exceptional Julia Pillore was Duchamp's godmother and his mother's sister by marriage; Julia's mother had married the merchant turned printer Emile Nicole. The following passage occurs in the context of Gaston Duchamp's name change to Jacques Villon, and Lydie being introduced to members of the Duchamp family.*]

He [*Gaston*] owed this pseudonym of his to Julia Bertrand,<sup>6</sup> his cousin, a remarkable woman who had had an enormous influence on all the young Duchamps. When I met her in Puteaux, she was quite stout, very masculine-looking and always had a short clay pipe called a nose-warmer in her mouth; she was highly cultivated, authoritative, had a sparkling wit and intelligence, and had been the intellectual guide of the eldest and then the youngest, and her opinions counted. As a woman, she had been half a century ahead of her times. Naturally, she was a feminist. Avant-garde in everything. I do not know what circumstances led her at a young age to quit Rouen and the confined existence reserved in those days for an unmarried woman, young or old. The obligation to earn a living? The need to escape? A desire to cultivate oneself? Perhaps all of those things. In any case, she had been secretary to the Academician Jean Aicard

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<http://manufrance.wordpress.com/1-manufacture-d%E2%80%99armes-et-cycles-de-saint-etienne/>

<sup>6</sup> Julia Bertrand (nee Pillore, 1868-1960)... She was married to a landscape painter and inherited the Aicard Chateau which is now a museum in Toulon. Julia is nearly impossible to find information about on the internet and she is barely mentioned on the [www.jean-aicard](http://www.jean-aicard.com) web site. Dear Reader, this lengthy footnote about Julia Pillore Bertrand is important for you to read yourself...

## SYMPATHY for LYDIE

for forty years and it was whispered that her contribution to the famous writer's *oeuvre* went far beyond that of her function as amanuensis. Gaston called her Madam Academician and it was taken for granted that *Maurin des Maures* and *L'illustre Maurin* were written entirely by her. And that was only her literary side, acquired by diligent work and the particular circumstances she found herself in, combined with her natural talent. What really characterized Julia Bertrand's strong personality was her interest in philosophy. I am fairly sure that she obtained a degree in philosophy when women had only just been admitted into university. She had forged for herself a kind of mental anthology of extracts drawn from classical and modern authors that she had studied in depth, and she had communicated her knowledge to the Duchamp brothers in the course of long conversation during which each of them put forward their objections and harvested new convictions...

Page 206.

*Rosse est la vie*<sup>7</sup>  
 Isn't that right  
 Rose Sélavy?

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<sup>7</sup> Untranslatable pun. Literally, "Life's a bitch." [Translator's note.]