

**Freud's Sculpture**, Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, 22<sup>nd</sup> February – 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2006, London, The Freud Museum, 25<sup>th</sup> October – 7<sup>th</sup> January, 2007

**Freud's Sculpture**, edited by *Jon Wood*, Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, 2006, softback, 48pp., 30 ill. (18 colour), £7, ISBN: 1-905462-04-2

It must be kept in mind that, for the collector, the world is present, indeed ordered, in each of his objects. Ordered, however, according to a surprising and, for the profane understanding, incomprehensible connection ... We need only recall what importance a particular collector attaches not only to his object but also to its entire past, whether this concerns the origin and objective characteristics of the thing or the details of its external history: previous owners, price of purchase, current value and so on. All of these – the 'objective' data together with the other – come together, for the true collector, in every single one of his possessions, to form a whole magical encyclopaedia, a world order, whose outline is the *fate* of objects...It suffices to observe just one collector as he handles the items in his showcase. No sooner does he hold them in his hand than he appears inspired by them and seems to look through them into the distance, like an augur.<sup>1</sup>

Walter Benjamin



Figure 1: Max Pollak, *Etching of Sigmund Freud at his Desk*, 1914, courtesy the Freud Museum, London.

It is unclear whether Benjamin had any particular 'collector' in mind when making the observation above, but the evocation of such a distracted gaze – through and beyond the collected objects – finds



a striking visual correspondence in Max Pollak's 1913 etching of Sigmund Freud at his writing desk [fig. 1]. Here the collection of sculptural objects is foregrounded, its presence helping both to frame Freud's gaze whilst also functioning in an indexical relationship to a space over and above its specific location. In this exhibition, curator Jon Wood installed this famous image on the wall opposite the viewer, such that one's gaze was similarly distracted over the antiquities on display by identification with Freud's own meditative position. If, as Karl Kraus argued, Freud's gaze in the Pollak etching is directed with concentrated introspection, we can see this as related to the physical proximity of the collection before him.<sup>2</sup> In actively bringing together discrete material objects, the collection, as Benjamin observes, also encapsulates a multiplicity of individual and cultural memory traces. According to this account, the act of collecting is characterised by the dialectical interplay between the physical encounter with objects kept 'close-at-hand' and the imaginative distance created in mind of the collector through the disparate associations of the particular objects: 'Collecting is a form of practical memory ... of all the profane manifestations of 'nearness' it is the most binding ... [Its] physiological side...is important.'<sup>3</sup> We are told that Freud would habitually handle and inspect the objects whilst speaking.<sup>4</sup> Note that on such occasions he was deeply immersed in some other matter; the tactile encounter occurs distractedly, when Freud's mind was elsewhere. The physical presence of the objects provokes the mind to wander into the more distant recesses of the imagination. A certain doubling is taking place here, since the effort to grasp puzzling remnants of another time and place is precisely characteristic of psychoanalytic discourse itself. If psychoanalysis has alerted us to the otherness with which all speech is permeated – the non-identity between voice, desire and memory – then we should also bear in mind that the body's material interaction with objects is no less overdetermined. Each culture is physically confronted by the material residues of its predecessors – objects which appear to signify both an uncanny familiarity and an unknowable past. How such objects are then 'taken up,' valued or neglected speaks, however obliquely, of the relation between contemporary experience and cultural memory.

The notion that behavioural interaction with objects can be seen as analogous with forms of speech would become a central feature of clinical practice, with the development of what Melanie Klein termed her 'psychoanalytic play technique':

...full use had to be made of the symbolic language of play which I recognized to be an essential part of expression. As we have seen, the brick, the little figure, the car, not only represent things which interest the child in themselves, but in his play with them they always have a variety of symbolical meanings as well which are bound up with his phantasies, wishes, and experiences.<sup>5</sup>



Just as Freud encouraged 'free association' in his adult patients who would speak of their dreams, and in doing so issue up material for interpretation, so Klein believed that children's play articulated unconscious wishes and anxieties in a symbolic language of its own. It is interesting in this light to observe that his collection of antiquities has been termed, affectionately or ironically, 'Freud's Toys.'<sup>6</sup> Of course, children's play is less subject to the censorious ego than is usual in adult behaviour. However, as Freud himself suggests,

When the child has grown up and has ceased to play, and after he has been labouring for decades to envisage the realities of life with proper seriousness, he may one day find himself in a mental situation which once more undoes the contrast between play and reality. As an adult he can look back on the intense seriousness with which he once carried on his games in childhood; and, by equating his ostensibly serious occupations of today with his childhood games, he can throw off the too heavy burden imposed on him by life and win the high yield of pleasure afforded by *humour*... As people grow up, then, they cease to play, and they seem to give up the yield of pleasure which they gained from playing. But whoever understands the human mind knows that hardly anything is harder for a man than to give up a pleasure he has once experienced. Actually, we can never give anything up; we only exchange one thing for another.<sup>7</sup>

On one level, then, Freud's collecting is a deliberate form of self-promotion. He is surely keen to furnish his study with interesting objects illustrative of his professional identity and fulfil others' expectations of an appropriate scholarly environment. And yet at the same time, insofar as these objects may momentarily facilitate the suspension of 'reality' and 'phantasy,' they enable a form of play which substitutes for much earlier modes of satisfaction. If infantile play is itself a defensive response against traumatic experience (as in the account of the *fort/da* game as a repeated attempt at mastering the helplessness felt at the mother's absence,<sup>8</sup> or as Klein would have it, the loss of the breast as 'good object'), we are surely entitled to ask: what structuring phantasies enable the production of compensatory satisfactions? To what extent do such phantasies still underlie 'respectable' adult pastimes? Just as Freud remarks upon the all-absorbing fascination of the child happily at play, so Benjamin remarks upon the way the adult collector 'loses himself assuredly' in the 'magic circle'<sup>9</sup> of the collection's horizons. What rules are observed in this particular form of 'play,' and how does it deliver such a high 'yield of pleasure'?

In his study *Man, Play and Games*, Roger Caillois establishes a typology of 'play' behaviours, in which he argues that forms of play culturally valued in Western civilization have tended to involve 'a taste for gratuitous difficulty,' which he terms *ludus*. This, it is said, 'provides an occasion for training and normally leads to the acquisition of a special skill, a particular mastery of the operation...or the



discovery of a satisfactory conclusion.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, the 'play' involves a purposive element to which one may discipline oneself to excel (crosswords, anagrams, mathematical problems and the like). However, this is said to be just the most developed, later refinement of *paidia*, or the 'primary power of improvisation and joy.'<sup>11</sup> An over-hasty reading of Caillois's text might assume a straightforward teleology is being established here, *ludus* being established as superior 'civilizing' version that improves upon earlier attitudes to play. However, it is evident that with all its refinements and apparent sophistications 'civilized' life has seen the quality and intensity of its available pleasures diminish, whilst the 'energies of intoxication' (to use Benjamin's phrase) continue to exert a powerful subterranean attraction. That is to say, other forms of 'play' will either find some form of expression, or else erupt in a dangerous 'return of the repressed.' Whilst *ludus* might encompass activities culturally valorised for their complexity, simpler forms of play might fulfil psychic needs more thoroughly.

Hence, Caillois is by no means dismissive of non-western forms of recreation. The Chinese term *wan*, for example, is said to cover a 'vast semantic area' of possibilities which fall outside of the more strictly defined character of *ludus*:

To begin with [*wan*] includes child's play and all kind of carefree and frivolous diversion such as are suggested by the verbs to frolic, to romp, to trifle, etc. It is used to describe casual, abnormal or strange sex practices. At the same time, it is used for games demanding reflection and *forbidding haste*, such as chess, chequers, puzzles (*tai Kiao*), and the game of nine rings. It also comprises the pleasure of appreciating the savour of good food or the bouquet of wine, the taste for collecting works of art, or even appreciating them, voluptuously handling and even fashioning delicate curios...Lastly the transitory and relaxing sweetness of moonlight is suggested, the pleasure of a boat ride on a limpid lake or the prolonged contemplation of a waterfall.<sup>12</sup>

Whereas *ludus* privileges instrumental outcomes of play (self-improvement, the attainment of 'excellence'), *wan* describes activities which are enjoyable in themselves, simply *for their own sake*. However, these two categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive. With respect to Freud, we might see the collection of antiquities as offering both an appropriately 'learned' hobby for a cultured bourgeois and respectable professional to pursue, whilst also being simply pleasing in itself. We have already observed his tendency for 'voluptuously handling' the objects, but it bears repeating that Freud quite simply *enjoyed* their physical presence in addition to any cultural or financial value. Whilst, as Wood observes, by the time of Freud's death the collection contained some prize pieces, it is also true that 'many were not expensive, unique or "museum quality" specimens and some were copies or fakes.'<sup>13</sup> It would not be difficult, for instance, to imagine Freud choosing a piece such as the *Baboon of Thoth* ('Egyptian god of intellectual interests, of wisdom and learning, of reading and writing'<sup>14</sup>) for



its symbolic significance with respect to his professional identity, but the object may equally have appealed due to its smooth, tactile qualities [fig. 2]. Indeed, we are told that 'Freud was known to have liked stroking this smooth surfaced marbled sculpture, almost as if it were a pet.'<sup>15</sup> That is to say, he savoured the look and feel of these objects much as he savoured his beloved tobacco (an expensive and addictive pleasure in which he also indulged).

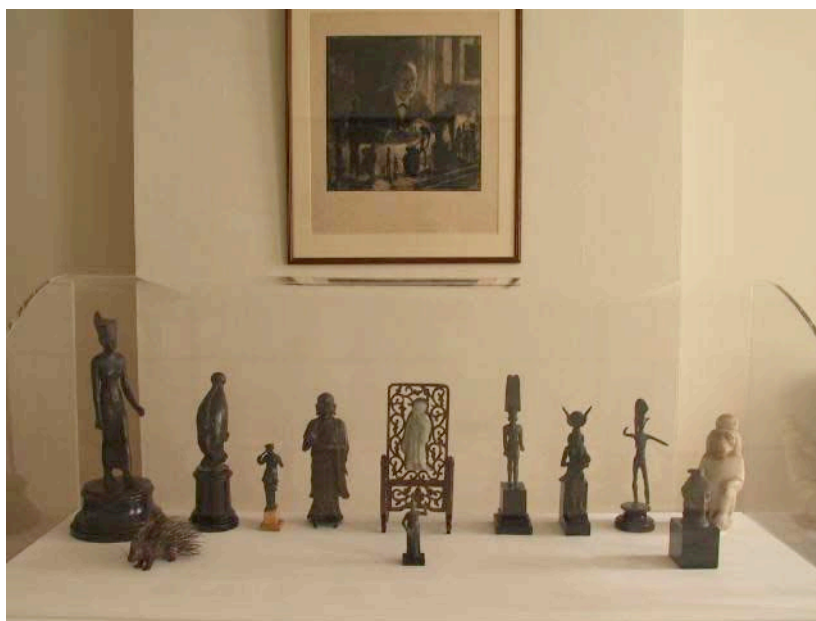


Figure 2: *Freud's Sculpture*, 2006, installation view, courtesy Henry Moore Institute Leeds. Photograph by Jerry Hardman-Jones. *Baboon of Thoth* on far right.

In this respect, the hybrid character of collecting as a form of play might be compared to the game of chess, to which the arrangement of Freud's ensemble of objects bears a striking visual similarity (particularly as the collection grew over the years, the objects tended to be arranged in distinct 'ranks,' with the larger objects at the back). On the one hand, chess is clearly a highly complex game to which players aspire to 'excel': players are ranked hierarchically, 'grand-master' status conferring significant status and implying a great mind. Yet, on the other, it is a game which can be played to idly while away the hours, for no particular purpose other than the escape from demands of everyday life. Indeed, the game was a popular leisure pastime in the Viennese coffee houses Freud frequented. This ambivalence in the nature of chess has been encapsulated by his friend and compatriot Stefan Zweig, whose used chess as the basis for his last work '*Schachnovelle*' (translated as 'The Royal Game'):

...are we not already guilty of an insulting limitation in calling chess a game? Isn't it also a science, an art, hovering between these two categories as Muhammed's coffin hovered between heaven and earth? Isn't it a unique bond between every pair of opponents ancient



and yet eternally new; mechanical in its framework and yet only functioning through the use of the imagination; confined in geometrically fixed space and at the same time released from confinement by its permutations; continuously evolving yet sterile; thought that leads nowhere; mathematics that add up to nothing, art without an end product, architecture without substance, and nevertheless demonstrably more durable in its true nature and existence than any books or creative works? Isn't it the only game that belongs to people at all times? And who knows whether God put it on earth to kill boredom, to sharpen the wits or to lift the spirits? Where is its beginning and where its end?...Every child can learn its basic rules, every bungler can try it; and yet it requires, within those small and unchanging squares, the production of a special kind of master, not comparable to any other kind, men who have a gift for chess, geniuses of a particular kind, in whom vision, patience and technique function in just as precise divisions as they do in mathematicians, poets and musicians, only on different levels and in different conjunctions.<sup>16</sup>

We may note in passing here that this combination of obsessive technical expertise with complete freedom from purposive instrumentality was a large part of its appeal for Marcel Duchamp, a time-served and highly skilled player of the game who would co-author a book on chess which, by his own admission, featured 'end-game problems of possible games but so rare as to be nearly Utopian.'<sup>17</sup> We may also note that Zweig's description recalls a number of similarities with psychoanalysis: the production of a 'special kind of master'; the 'unique bond' between opposing figures; the requirement of 'vision, patience and technique'; the affinities with both science and art – the mechanics of technique coincide with imaginative creativity –and not least, the essential timelessness of the problems it presents.

Beyond such parallels, however, what is the significance of Freud's antiquities' chess-like arrangement? In the context of the historically persistent association of chess with militarism,<sup>18</sup> Molnar's observation that 'the antiquities face Freud as the serried ranks of infantry face their general' is suggestive.<sup>19</sup> In their usual home at 20, Maresfield Gardens, now the location of London's Freud Museum, the objects can ordinarily be seen only in profile from the roped-off viewing position around Freud's desk. Their scale is such that their significance can be overwhelmed in the context of the study as a whole. However, in the Henry Moore Institute exhibition, the objects were mounted on a desk-high plinth which allowed the viewer a frontal view of the sculptural objects in their own right [fig. 3]. This helped to replicate their original conditions of display on the desk itself, a location which as curator Wood explains, 'afforded a horizontal, intimate and immediate surface' from which to view the objects.<sup>20</sup> Importantly, too, it placed the viewer in a position directly facing the ensemble, offering a view much closer to that available to Freud himself. These figures are sometimes described as providing a mute 'audience' observing the scene of Freud's writing. This has some merit, but in



depicting Freud as a passive spectator it misses the sense of a more active, strategic relation towards the objects implied in Molnar's description, a relation more akin to the chess player's position. For if the antiquities confront Freud with the regimented order of a military force, we are entitled to ask, 'who is it that they are expecting to confront?' Might these 'pieces' represent the obstacles which an unknowable opponent (the unconscious) puts forward to 'check' the rationalising ambitions of the analyst? The sharp rebarbative spines of the porcupine might suggest the analysand's resistance to proffered interpretations, for example the warrior-goddess Athena ('missing her spear') could connote disavowal. It is not necessary, however, to assume such a rigidly determinate symbolism is in operation. With regard to Freud's collection, we may also observe that – as with chess – his 'pieces' both observe a logic immanent to their own specific setting but, when seen in isolation, are often of limited intrinsic utility or significance. It is enough to see Freud as marshalling the disparate resources of his own psyche to out-manoeuvre the defensive moves of opposing forces.



Figure 3: *Freud's Sculpture*, 2006, installation view, courtesy Henry Moore Institute Leeds. Photograph by Jerry Hardman-Jones.

If Freud's relation to the objects in some respects reflects the chess-like strategic positioning of the analyst, Isador H. Coriat's clinical observations on chess-playing patients are quite telling. Coriat observes that in those

who had a strong negative transference, the playing of the game [chess] was identified with the analytic situation, that is, a feeling of hostility, a desire to checkmate the passive analyst, who was identified with the passive King (father).<sup>21</sup>



In the analytic setting, as in chess, conflicting forces engage each other tactically and strategically in a power struggle over a single (inter-/intra-) subjective space. In both situations, patients (unconsciously?) felt they were locked into a game in which they felt the analyst-king-father was trying to conquer and overpower their own forces, and sought satisfaction in retaliatory aggression. Ernest Jones, in his celebrated essay on Paul Morphy (a figure once esteemed as 'the greatest chess player of all time' but who died aged 47 after suffering a nervous breakdown<sup>22</sup>) directly confronts the oedipal wishes and anxieties that animates the game. Jones observes that the main goal of the game is a barely concealed substitute for father-murder: the immobilisation of the patriarch, a paternal figure which must be attacked until rendered utterly defenceless. He traces the possible etymology of the English expression checkmate in Arabic and Persian, concluding that the expression 'Shah-mat' literally means either 'the king is dead' or 'the king is paralysed, helpless and defeated.'<sup>23</sup> It is not difficult to see how such manoeuvres lend themselves to an oedipal interpretation, particularly since it involves an active and still-empowered matriarchal figure in the Queen. Jones argues that,

...the mathematical quality of the game gives it an anal-sadistic nature. The exquisite purity and exactness of the right moves...combine here with the unrelenting pressure exercised in the later stages which culminates in the merciless *denouement*. The sense of overwhelming mastery on the one side matches that of inescapable helplessness on the other. It is doubtless this anal-sadistic feature that makes the game so well adapted to gratify at the same time both the homosexual and the antagonistic aspects of the father-son contest.

The playing of chess is seen, here, to represent an avenue for the sublimated expression of 'unthinkable' wishes which must ordinarily remain unconscious. But also, Coriat comments, the game,

protects against the ego against the anxiety of actual parricidal impulses and because of this protective function any unconscious super-ego guilt is minimized or abolished. Hostile aggression tends to accumulate in the ego; the aims of the game thus have protective, liberating and sublimating functions.<sup>24</sup>

This might explain why for the accomplished player, the most deeply satisfying game is not the swiftest possible triumph over a beginner. It is precisely in the unpredictable waves of attack and defence, resistance and counter-attack that the psyche finds its 'yield of satisfaction' in outwitting the forces martialled against it.

In this way, the player might enjoy the rhythm of the game as much as the desired outcome. Much the same is also true of the collector, who seldom develops a collection solely with regard to the possibility



of its completion, or for any discernible measure of self-improvement, but rather to enjoy the very process of collecting.

The analogy between the analyst's strategic relation to the analysand's unconscious and the chess player's relation to his opponents' moves also problematises Freud's claims to have heroically pursued a measure of self-analysis. Is self-analysis not rather like attempting to play oneself at chess, a self-defeating project from the start? Again, the latter topic is taken up in the Zweig novella, in which Dr. B, held in solitary confinement by the Gestapo, manages to steal a chess manual and is forced to try splitting his ego so that he might apply the moves to new game-scenarios and overcome his shattering isolation:

The attraction of chess lies ...only in the fact that its strategy evolves in two different brains, that in this battle of the mind Black doesn't know what White's next move will be, and he is constantly trying to guess and thwart him. While for his part White, countering him, strives to outdo Black and oppose his concealed intentions. Imagine Black and White being one and the same person, then, and you have the contradiction that the same brain knows something and isn't supposed to know it, simultaneously...Such two way thinking really presupposes a complete split in one's consciousness, an arbitrary ability of the mind to switch on and off as though it were a mechanical machine ... [T]here was the risk I would no longer be on firm ground, but would fall into an abyss.<sup>25</sup>

Dr. B. manages to approximate this 'impossible' psychic achievement but only at the precise moment of a vertiginous descent into madness and obsession: the boundaries of phantasy and reality are dissolved in a condition he terms 'chess-poisoning.' The novella, published in 1944 shortly after Zweig's own suicide and against the backdrop of war atrocities, shows the extreme difficulty of confronting the furthest reaches of the psyche and emerging intact. Keenly aware as he was of Freud's own endeavours, Zweig could be read as implying that – like attempting to play chess with oneself – the analyst will either fail to 'engage' the unconscious or succeed all too comprehensively but at the price of annihilating the very possibility of self-knowledge.

Of course, Freud's collecting is not identical to any other 'game,' chess included: it has its own unwritten rules, protocols and techniques. The collection not only grew in overall size over the years, but its composition and arrangement also shifted as new elements were incorporated and others removed from the desk. The evolution of the collection was subject to the logic of the chance find (not entirely dissimilar from the *objet trouvé*) or the availability of material for purchase rather than a deliberately planned exercise. Pieces would fall away and make way for gifts received from others, or souvenirs from his travels. If this is 'chess,' it is a strange surrealist variant in which pieces and rules



mutate in the course of the game. It would be a game of chess closer to that envisaged by Bertolt Brecht, who Benjamin tells us once suggested to him after a game:

You know, when Korsch comes, we really ought to work out a new game with him. A game in which pieces do not always stay the same; where the function of every piece changes after it has stood in the same square for a while: it should become either stronger or weaker. This way the game doesn't develop, it stays the same for too long.<sup>26</sup>

The complexity and unpredictability of such a game would perhaps only be matched by Freud's attempt to engage the unconscious on the chessboard of the analytic session. There is no finite number of 'situations' here – the mutability and resourcefulness of the psyche holds the upper hand and the analyst struggles to learn the contours of the game even as it takes place. It is though, as collector, Freud assembles and arranges these enigmatic objects from 'elsewhere' in order to map and re-order his whole (psychic) world. As master of these diverse objects' fate, he playfully uses the 'toys' as substitutes forces which are comfortably present and malleable, or can be mastered and 'checked.' The figures could be seen as delegates of a parodic 'congress of Vienna,' a comically arbitrary gathering inadequately standing in for the warring forces of the psyche. This exhibition provides a welcome opportunity to consider and enjoy these objects in their own right, and as Freud might have 'engaged' them in phantasy play-combat.

Michael Calderbank

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, [H2, 7; H2a, 1], trans. H. Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Cambridge, MA and London, 1999, 207.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Kraus, *Die Fackel*, 28 March 1914, no. 395, 57, cited in Michael Molnar, 'Half-Way Region,' in *Freud's Sculpture*, exhibition catalogue, Leeds, 2006, 26, n 14.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, [H1a, 2], 205, [H4, 1], 210.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Molnar, 'Half-Way Region,' 20.

<sup>5</sup> Melanie Klein, 'The Psycho-Analytic Play Technique: Its History and Significance' (1955), in Juliet Mitchell ed., *The Selected Melanie Klein*, London, 1986, 51.

<sup>6</sup> See Janine Burke, *Freud's Toys*, Melbourne, 2006 and Louise Bourgeois, 'Freud's Toys,' *Artforum*, vol. 28, no. 5, January 1990, 12.

<sup>7</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming,' (1907) in Peter Gay, ed., *The Freud Reader*, London, 1995, 437-438.

<sup>8</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' (1920), trans. James Strachey, in *On Metapsychology* (ed. Angela Richards), Penguin Freud Library Vol.11, London, 1984, 283-287



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- <sup>9</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, [H1a, 2], 205.
- <sup>10</sup> Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash, London, 1962, 29.
- <sup>11</sup> Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 27.
- <sup>12</sup> Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 34.
- <sup>13</sup> Jon Wood, 'Re-staging Freud's Sculpture,' in *Freud's Sculpture*, 10.
- <sup>14</sup> 'Baboon of Thoth,' (catalogue entry by Jon Wood), *Freud's Sculpture*, 45.
- <sup>15</sup> 'Baboon of Thoth,' 45.
- <sup>16</sup> Stefan Zweig, 'The Royal Game,' in Stephan Zweig, *The Royal Game and Other Stories*, trans. J. Sutcliffe, London, 1981, 8.
- <sup>17</sup> Quotation from *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp* (ed. Pierre Cabanne, trans. R. Padgett), London, 1971, 77. The book referred to is Marcel Duchamp and Vitaly Halberstadt, *L'Opposition et les cases conjuguées sont réconciliées [Opposition and Sister Squares are Reconciled also titled The Box of 1932*, Paris and Brussels, 1932.
- <sup>18</sup> As Alexander Cockburn writes, '... legend has chess being invented as a rehearsal or exemplar of war. There are innumerable examples of generals and statesmen expressing enthusiasm for chess, and their suggestion that their own trade is simply conducted on a larger board. In the popular imagination, mirroring such sentiments, international affairs are often conceived in terms of chess imagery. Hardly an issue of *Punch* magazine in the nineteenth century was complete without a cartoon of "the chessboard of Europe" simulating the play of policy and manoeuvre,' *Idle Passion: Chess and the Dance of Death*, London, 1974, 156.
- <sup>19</sup> Molnar, 'Half-Way Region,' 20.
- <sup>20</sup> Wood, 'Re-Staging Freud's Sculpture,' 6.
- <sup>21</sup> Isador H. Coriat, 'The Unconscious Motives of Interest in Chess,' (1937), n.p. [www.psychoanalysis.org.uk/chess.htm](http://www.psychoanalysis.org.uk/chess.htm).
- <sup>22</sup> Ernest Jones, 'The Problem of Paul Morphy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Chess,' (1931), in Ernest Jones, *Essays in Applied Psychoanalysis*, London, 1951, 165-196.
- <sup>23</sup> Jones, 'The Problem of Paul Morphy,' 168-9.
- <sup>24</sup> Coriat, 'The Unconscious Motives of Interest in Chess,' (1937).
- <sup>25</sup> Zweig, 'The Royal Game,' 34-35.
- <sup>26</sup> Bertolt Brecht as quoted in Walter Benjamin, *Conversations with Brecht*, London, 1973, cited in Alexander Cockburn, *Idle Passions*, 1974, 220, n. 5.

