

Some Memoirs of Dadaism

An Account of the Movement Which Has Undertaken
 to Free French Art from its Classical Rigidities

By
TRISTAN TZARA



TRISTAN TZARA, one of the pioneers of the Dada movement, is quite a young man, slight and dark, with eyes of an exceptional intensity and intelligence, and, withal a childlike expression. From time to time he is the prey of either a pathological laziness, or a consuming activity. He solves his problems of existence by coursing over Europe—from Greece to Italy, from Italy to Germany, from Germany to France, leaving a deep Dadaist furrow wherever he passes. The beginnings of Dada appeared in 1916. At that time Tristan Tzara lived in Zurich where he met Arp, Huelsenbeck, and others who were seeking an existence free from absurd conventions, free from social restrictions. They met and formed the "Cabaret Voltaire", a sort of club where they could indulge in the pleasure of expressing themselves freely among themselves, but not with the idea of launching revolution and destruction. Tzara chose the name "DADA" because it could not be attached to a school or party, or indicate a tendency. ("Dada" really means a hobby or caprice.) In 1918 Picabia came to Zurich and was received by Tzara as one of the prophets of Dada. When Tzara came to Paris, he commenced the most impassioned series of Dadist demonstrations.



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DADAISM is a characteristic symptom of the disordered modern world. It was first inspired by the chaos and collapse of Europe during the war. To the exiled intellectuals of Switzerland, humanity seemed to have gone insane—all order was crashing to destruction, all values were turned upside down—and, in accordance with this spirit, they began a set of wild practical jokes, elaborately silly meetings and fantastic manifestoes which burlesqued, in their violence and absurdity, the absurdity and violence of the life around them.

Among the German exponents of Dadaism, the thing took on a more bitter flavour and, in its concern with society and politics, even a revolutionary aspect.

But the French Dadaists are mostly young men who revelled in it as a carnival of nonsense and in so far as they gave it any point, directed it against the arts.

The Dadaist Bond

AT the beginning of the year 1920, I came back to Paris extremely glad to see my friends again. At the side of Aragon, Breton, Dermée, E l u a r d, Ribemont-Dessaignes, Picabia, Péret, Soupault, Rigaut, Marguerite Buffet and others, I took part in the demonstrations which aroused the rage of the Parisian public.

The début of Dadaism in Paris took place on the twenty-third of January, 1920, at the matinée organized by the Dadaist review *Littérature*. Louis Aragon, a slender young man with feminine features, A. Breton, who betrays in his gestures the stigmata of the religious sectarians, G. Ribemont-Dessaignes, a man whose simple appearance conceals the fiery temper of the great accusers of humanity, Philippe Soupault, whose facility of expression flows forth in bizarre images, gave readings from their works. Picabia, who has undergone so many influences, particularly those of the clear and powerful mind of Marcel Duchamp, exhibited a number of pictures one of which was a drawing done in chalk on a blackboard and erased on the spot; that is to say, the picture was valid for only two hours.

As for me, under the title DADA, I read a newspaper article while an electric bell kept ringing so loudly that no one could hear what I said. This was very badly received by the public, who became exasperated and shouted: "Enough! Enough!" An attempt was made to give a futuristic interpretation to this act, but the point that I wanted to make was simply that my presence on the stage, the sight of my face and my movements, ought to satisfy people's curiosity and that anything I might have said had really no importance.

There were thousands of persons of all classes who manifested very loudly, it is impossible to say exactly what, their joy or their disapproval by unexpected cries and bursts of universal laughter, which constituted a very pretty accompaniment to manifestoes read by

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six people at once. The newspapers said that an old man conducted himself outrageously during the performance, that somebody set off a flashlight, and that a woman had to be taken outside of the hall. It is true that the newspapers had also announced that Charlie Chaplin was going to deliver a lecture on the Dadaist movement. Although we denied the rumour there was one reporter who followed me everywhere, supposing that the celebrated actor had planned to make a surprise appearance and was up to some new trick. I remember that Picabia, who was to have taken part in the demonstration, disappeared just as it was beginning. For five hours it was impossible to find him. The séance ended with a speech by "The King of the Fakirs", M. Buisson, who follows a curious profession, that of prophesying the future, during the day on the Boulevard de la Madeleine. In the evening he sells papers at the exits of the subway.

Dadaist Debates

SEVERAL days afterwards there took place in a church which had been transformed into a cinema—a local branch of the Club du Faubourg—on the invitation of that association which includes more than three thousand laborers and intellectuals—an explanation of the Dadaist movement. There were four of us on the stage: Ribemont-Desaignes, Aragon, Breton and I. M. Léo Poldès presided. The public were more serious here; they listened to us. Their disapproval manifested itself in piercing cries. Raymond Duncan, the philosopher who walks around Paris in the costume of Socrates, was there with all his school. He arose in our defense and calmed the public. A debate followed. The very best socialist orators took part in it and spoke for, or against us. We replied to the attacks and the audience boiled in unison.

A week later a public debate took place at the Université Populaire on Dada. Eluard, Fraenkel, Dermée, Breton, Ribemont-Desaignes, Soupault and I took part with all the force of our temperament in a séance torn by political passions. All the Presidents' manifestoes appeared in the Dadaist review *Littérature*; it is well known that there are three hundred and ninety-one presidents of the Dadaist movement and that anyone can become a president very easily.

"391" was also the name of a review which several of us started; it expanded and became a review of world wide reputation. People finally became afraid of it, because it described

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things as they really are without throwing any veils over them. How many critics are there with no record of imbecilities to regret?

A scandal provoked by the hypocrisy of certain Cubists in the bosom of a modern Parisian art society brought on the complete schism between the Cubists and the Dadaists—an event which gave a great cohesive force to the nineteen dissenting Dadaists.

Paul Eluard, whom we call the inventor of a new "*métal de ténèbres*", began to publish his review *Proverbe* in which all the Dadaists collaborated, and which contributed a spirit of its own. This spirit manifests itself especially in putting logic and language in contradiction. This is how Soupault characterizes the collaborators of *Proverbe*:

Louis Aragon: The Glass Syringe

Arp: Clean Wrinkles

André Bréton: A Tempest in a Glass of Water

Th. Fraenkel: The Great Earth Serpent

Benjamin Péret: The Lemon Mandarin

G. Ribemont-Dessaignes: The Steam Man

Jacques Rigaut: The Hollow Plate

Tristan Tzara: The Man with the Pearl Head

Dadaist books and hand-bills soon spread the agitation through Paris and the whole world.

Dadaist Drama

IN the month of May, the demonstration at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre, that courageous enterprise directed by Lugué-Poe showed the vitality of Dada at its maximum. Twelve hundred people were turned away. There were three spectators for every seat; it was suffocating; enthusiastic members of the audience had brought musical instruments to interrupt us. From the balconies our enemies threw copies of an anti-Dada paper called *Non*, in which we were described as lunatics. The scandal eventually reached altogether unimaginable proportions. Soupault proclaimed: "You are all idiots! You are worthy to be presidents of the Dadaist movement!" Breton read in his thunderous voice, while the stage was shrouded in darkness, a manifesto, by no means gentle, against the public. Then Ribemont-Dessaignes read a soothing manifesto. Paul Eluard presented some Dadaist examples of



DADAISM IN THE THEATRE

A scene from a Dadaist play, presented at the Dadaist Festival in Paris, and designed to shock and flout the public by its disregard of even the most fundamental theatrical conventions. The Dadaists succeeded admirably in their purpose because, at this performance, the public signified its disapproval with cabbages, eggs and beefsteaks. The gentlemen on all fours is Tristan Tzara, the leader of the movement

which I shall describe a typical one. The curtain goes up; two people—one of them with a letter in his hand—appear from opposite sides of the stage and meet in the middle; the following dialogue ensues:

“The post office is right opposite.”

“Whats that got to do with me?”

“I beg your pardon. I saw that you had a letter in your hand, and I thought—”

“It’s not what you think, it’s what you know.”

After which, each goes on his way and the curtain falls.

There were six of these examples, very widely varied, in which the mixture of humanity, idiocy and unexpectedness contrasted strangely with the brutality of the other numbers. I invented for this occasion a diabolical machine composed of a Claxon and three successive invisible echoes, for the purpose of fixing in the minds of the public certain phrases describing the aims of DADA. The ones which made the greatest sensation were: “Dada is against the high cost of living” and “Dada is a virgin microbe”. We also produced three short plays by Soupault, Breton and Ribemont-Dessaignes and “La première aventure céleste de M. Antipyrine”, which I had written in 1916. This play is a boxing match with words, the characters recite their parts standing motionless in sacks and boxing trunks and it is easy to imagine the effect produced performed in a greenish light on an already excited public. It was impossible to hear a single word spoken on the stage.



Tristan Tzara (1896 - 1963)

After the play, Mlle. Hania Rouchine was to have sung a sentimental song by Duparc. The public either took this for a profanation or thought that so simple a thing, which was intended to mark a contrast, was out of place here; in any case, they made no effort to control their expressions of feeling. Mlle. Rouchine, who was accustomed to the great successes of the Théâtre Vaudeville, did not understand the situation, and, after several amenities exchanged with the public, refused to finish the song. She afterwards wept wildly, and it took us two hours to calm her.

There was also a great scandal at the Dada Festival, in the Salle Gaveau. For the first time in our experience we were assaulted, not only with eggs, cabbages and pennies, but even with beefsteaks.

It was a very great success.

The public was extremely Dadaist. We had already said that the true Dadaists were against Dada. Philippe Soupault appeared as a magician. He called out the names of Clémenceau and Foch and, at the mention of each name, a child's balloon came out of a large box and floated to the ceiling. Paul Souday, writing in *Le Temps*, insisted that, from a distance, the faces of the persons named actually appeared on the surfaces of the balloons. The audience was so much excited and the

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atmosphere so charged with emotion that a number of other suggestions took on the appearance of reality. Ribemont-Dessaignes did a motionless dance and Mlle. Buffet interpreted some Dadaist music.

All the Paris celebrities were present. Mme. Rachilde had written a newspaper article in which she invited a *poilu* to shoot us, but that did not prevent her, a year later, appearing on the scene and defending us. She no longer regarded us as a danger to the *esprit français*. They did not kill us in the Salle Gaveau, but the journalists all tried to do so in their notices. Columns were written to tell people that they must no longer talk about Dada,—which suggested this *bon mot* to Jean Paulhan,

“If you must speak of Dada, you must speak of Dada;

If you must not speak of Dada, you must still speak of Dada.”

Of the other Dadaist reviews, *Cannibale* had a great success: it expressed clearly and absolutely anti-literary spirit, which will be the relative spirit of future generations. Their superabundance of life will overflow into the Dada movement, and they will forget the fixed ideas of a rigid convention which is really nothing but laziness.

THE country tormented most, after France, by this tide which knows no barriers, has hitherto been Germany. Already in 1918, Huelsenbeck, a vigorous and intelligent man and a poet of talent, who had assisted at the foundation of Dada in Zurich, brought the Dadaist verities into German in the rôle of a true apostle. There he found enthusiastic friends; George Grosz, who had lived in America, and who expressed in his drawings the tumultuous life of the great American cities, W. Heartfield, a sensitive poet, and Raoul Hausmann, whose field is life. They had long been convinced of the Kaiser's guilt at the beginning of the war, and their relations with Liebknecht, Professor Nicolai and the pacifists were generally known. The many demonstrations which they organized had a great influence on public opinion, and they can boast of having helped to bring on the German revolution.

They have their newspapers, their publishing houses and a Dada Club,

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where some remarkable talents soon appeared—the song writer, W. Mehring, the painter, Mlle. H. Hoech, and the philosopher, Daimonides. They have organized international expositions and tours of the chief German cities. These tours came to a bad ending; only the intervention of the police saved the Dadaists from being killed by the public. At Hanover, where the crowd confiscated their baggage, they had to leave in a great hurry. At Dresden their cash box was confiscated. An opera singer who had no connection with Dada, and who wanted to calm the public, was beaten by the angry mob. At Prague the scandal took on such proportions that the Czecho-Slovak government was forced to drive the Dadaists out, and to forbid any Dadaist demonstration on Czecho-Slovakian territory.

I have not yet spoken of Baader, who is the chief of the Dadaist religion. The number of his disciples is enormous. He has also played a political rôle. At Weimar he threw proclamations into Parliament and interrupted the city by accusing the new revolutionary Germany of being inspired by the reactionary spirit of Goethe and Schiller. Baader, who calls himself the President of the World, is the father of three children. He was twice locked up by mistake in a lunatic asylum. He is not a very interesting man, but certainly a very genial one. On the occasion of the death of his wife, he delivered a long oration to the three thousand people at the funeral, explaining that death is essentially a Dadaist affair. He was smiling throughout the speech. He had, none the less, been very fond of his wife. The same day he cut off his beard, which had been that of a true apostle.

Huelsenbeck is at present a doctor and journalist at Danzig. He is a great friend of America, which he has glorified in three books: *Dada the Conqueror*, *En Avant, Dada!* and *Germany Must Disappear*. The last Dadaist exposition at Berlin also came to a bad end: the Minister of War brought an indictment against the men who had organized it for having insulted the German officers "by deformation and tendencious inscriptions." The defenses of some of the Dadaists are masterpieces of malice and irony.

M. Tzara on the Acropolis

DADA is known throughout the world. During a recent journey I was able to establish for myself that Dada is as well known in Switzerland as at Milan, Venice, Belgrade, Vincovtch, Bucharest, Jassy, Constantinople, Athens, Messina, Naples and Rome. On the Acropolis a professor of theology declared to me, shaking his fist toward the Winged Victory, that God would avenge himself on Dada and all these new-fangled fads.

I have good reason to know about this episode on the Acropolis, because I caught a cold there which lasted three weeks. At Constantinople I talked with a Greek doctor who had lived in Paris and who did not know who I was. He told me that he knew Tristan Tzara very well. Calmly, in spite of my astonishment, I asked him what Tzara looked like. "He is tall and light," he told me. I could not keep from laughing, because I am small and dark.



Duchamp