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Dada Judaism: The Avant-Garde in First World War Zurich

*Wir armen Juden clagend hungersnot
vnd müßend gar verzagen, hand kein brot.
oime las compassio
cullis nullis lassio
Egypten was guot land,
wau wau wau wiriwau,
Egypten was guot land.*

This is not a dada text, yet it is similar to dada texts in several ways: like many dada poems, it consists of a mix of semantically recognizable words (in German), especially in the first two verses, as well as in the fifth and the last; it also has a syntactic order and suggests a meaning in the sense of practical, conventional language. Likewise, there are lines with unrecognizable words, either with a tonality recalling Latin, or evoking the barking of a dog, additionally parodying the threefold “wau” (German for “woof”) with the line ending “wiriwau.” The main difference from dada texts is that the latter never spoke so explicitly about Jews (“*Wir armen Juden*”).

The quoted text was printed in 1583, in a revised version of the Lucerne Passionsspiel. I have quoted it from the German translation of Sander L. Gilman’s *Jewish Self-Hatred. Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews*.¹ Gilman presents this quotation, spoken by the figures representing the Jews in the Passionsspiel, in order to demonstrate “the subhuman nature of the Jews’ language, a language of marginality” (1986, 76). Gilman also stresses that here, unlike in many other cases, the comic effect of Jewish speech prevails over fear of Jews and is more about making the audiences laugh rather than making them angry.

A long line of discrimination and ridiculing of “Jewish language” can be drawn from the sixteenth century to 1912, shortly before the outburst of the First World War, when Moritz Goldstein’s famous article “Deutsch-jüdischer Parnass” led to the so-called “*Kunstwart-Debatte*” in Germany. Goldstein’s central statement, that “*wir Juden verwalten den geistigen Besitz eines Volkes, das uns die*

¹ Wyss, Heinz (ed.). *Das Luzerner Osterspiel*. Bern: Francke, 1967, 196. Here quoted from: Gilman, Sander L. *Jüdischer Selbsthaß. Antisemitismus und die verborgene Sprache der Juden*. Trans. Isabella König. Frankfurt a. M.: Jüdischer Verlag, 1993, 72. The quote has been taken from the German translation of Gilman’s book, because unlike Gilman’s English original version, it quotes the original medieval German version of the Osterspiel.

Berechtigung und die Fähigkeit dazu abspricht” [We Jews uphold the intellectual property of a people that denies our right to do so], caused a wave of reactions about whether and to what degree Jews were (or were not) legitimate speakers and writers of the German language.²

Since the nineteenth century the use not just of German but of European languages in general had undergone a process of ethnification and nationalization. Intellectuals of the non-Jewish majority contested the legitimacy, or at least authenticity, of the literary production of Jews in these languages. At the same time, Yiddish, the Jewish *lingua franca* before the Holocaust, was disparagingly termed “Jargon,” not least by Jews themselves, as we know for example from Kafka, himself an admirer of Yiddish theatre. In an increasingly nationalized Europe, the mastering of many languages characterized eastern Jewish intellectuals, some of whom were able to author books in multiple languages (such as Simon Dubnow, who wrote in Russian, Yiddish, Hebrew, and German); nevertheless, such multilingualism was perceived as a sign of homelessness and lack of roots, not as a positive, multicultural quality.

There are several reasons to consider dada as having been among the more radical forms of the avant-garde. Dada, from its outset, was an international issue, not least in the various origins of its founders, in the multilingualism it practiced as part of its program, and in the development of several European centers where it was realized. It was a combination – indeed, an amalgamation – of art, poetry, and performance. And, it was a radical way of challenging language, not only as a manifestation of personal or collective belonging, but also as an instrument of semantics, of sending a message and of making sense.

The dada movement had a clear point and place of departure. It had its beginnings in 1916, in Zurich, where it was centered around the group of poets and artists active at the Cabaret Voltaire in the Spiegelgasse, a few houses from where Lenin resided in the months before being transported back to Russia in a sealed wagon. The main protagonists of early dada are well known: German poets Richard Huelsenbeck and Hugo Ball, as well as the latter’s companion and later wife, Emmy Hennings; Alsatian artist Hans Arp and, to a certain extent, his companion Sophie Täuber-Arp; later, Hans Richter, an artist of wealthy German-Jewish descent (although this became known to the public only in 1989); and Walter Serner, a writer born in Bohemia as a Jew with the family name Seligmann who converted to Catholicism in 1913 (he was killed by the Nazis in 1942). Finally,

² For an overview of the article, its historical context and reception see: Julius H. Schoeps et al. (eds.). *Deutsch-jüdischer Parnass. Menorah Jahrbuch für deutsch-jüdische Geschichte*. Berlin and Wien: Philo Verlagsgesellschaft, 2002.

there were two young Jews from Romania: Marcel Janco and Tristan Tzara. Janco, born Marcel Hermann Iancu, was an artist at the beginning of a remarkable career. He later turned to Zionism and returned to Romania, from where he escaped to Palestine, at the last minute in 1941. He went on to become one of Israel's leading artists and turned the village of Ein Hod into an artists' colony, where a museum bearing his name was founded in 1983, the year before his death. Tzara was an author, poet and performer; he was born Samuel Rosenstock in Moinesti (in the province of Moldavia), in 1896. By the age of eleven, he had been sent to boarding school in Bucharest (where he became a schoolmate and friend of Janco) and had begun his publishing activity in Romania. Towards the end of 1915 he came to Zurich to study, but almost certainly also to avoid being drafted, in case Romania (then neutral) entered the war. In Zurich he made the acquaintance of Hugo Ball and soon joined the Cabaret Voltaire, adopting French as his literary language. As this was a foreign language to him and he had, as a schoolboy, mastered German with consistently better grades than in French (Hentea 2014, 27)³, this feat is quite remarkable, especially in the German-speaking environment of Zurich.

One may speculate why Tzara chose French as the language for his poetry and performances. One reason may be that he feared that performing in German with a Romanian accent could, in Swiss-German-speaking Zurich, expose him to the public as a stranger in manifold ways, or even more clearly as an Eastern European Jew. It may also be that his speaking French was a political statement. Coming from a country whose traditional adoration of French culture had been suppressed in the years before and during the First World War by a blunt (and anti-Semitic) nationalism, he was perhaps making a statement by using French as a kind of "counter language" to the nationalistic chauvinism of his home country. Concerning the importance of French to him, it is striking and surely not accidental that Tzara later organized his dada soirée on 14 July 1916, Bastille Day.

For many years, the Jewish origin of various dadaists was not a central issue for research, though it was not concealed, either. The reason it was downplayed may have been the impression that neither the dadaists themselves nor their environment seemed to emphasize the issue. Nor did it become visible in their texts and performances of the time. There may also have been a certain self-restraint involved, stemming from concern that stressing the participation of Jews could inadvertently be seen to be in line with the disqualification of "Entartete Kunst" by the National Socialists, who mixed criteria of origin and modernism in denouncing major artists of the early twentieth century.

³ Hentea (2014, 83) also mentions the "halting and at times ungrammatical French" of Tzara's dada texts.

Yet in recent years, researchers such as Tom Sandqvist, Milly Heyd, Haim Finkelstein, and Marius Hentea have given new emphasis to the Jewishness of the Romanian contributors to dada Zurich, centrally among them Tzara. Albert Boime's article "Dada's Dark Secret" (2010) highlights how Hugo Ball, especially, expressed anti-Semitic feelings that were largely blurred in some later editions of his works but which influenced his approach to Tzara and Janco during and after the dada years. All this sheds new light on dada in Zurich.

Milly Heyd considers Tristan Tzara, along with another groundbreaking Jewish avant-garde artist, Man Ray, in terms of "The Hidden Jew and the Avant-Garde" (2010, 194). She assumes a rather conventional view of the Jew, trying but finally failing to flee or conceal his Jewish identity in a turn to universalistic forms of art.

In showing that the Hasidic and Kabbalistic influences of his youth are evident in Tzara's language practice, Tom Sandqvist (2006) raises a well taken point, as this fact renders language a performative medium of change and creation, rather than viewing it as an instrument of communicating preformed and seemingly unambiguous meaning. But for dada, Judaism has more to it than the transformation of some more traditional or "authentic" forms of Judaism into secular art and literary production. For dada, Judaism is more an attempt to cope with the task of creating new forms of art, in which the general Jewish experience of exile, dispersal, contempt, and non-acceptance is simultaneously transformed, elevated, and abrogated in universalist expression.

For Tzara, dada was not a refuge from Judaism or a means to introduce elements of Judaism (like the Kabbalah) into art. Rather, it was a form of expressing Judaism, clearly not as an explicit form of identity, but in a way that visualized the paradoxical form and essence of being, an experience which could be described as fundamental for contemporary European Jews. This refers to more than just the fundamental paradox recognized clearly by many Europeans of his generation, namely, the irrational consequences of a seemingly rationalized bourgeois way of thinking that had led Europe into a disastrous war. The specific paradoxical experience of European Jews of the age had, even long before, been that of an existence that was "out of order." The simultaneity of affirming the circumstances of one's existence (by assimilation to the ruling classes), yet at the same time negating them (as discriminatory), of creating (national) identity by destroying (Jewish) identity, while defining it as the lack of full participation in the national project, of performing (the national) language by suppressing (the Yiddish) language, while making being Jewish as such into the denial of the ability to write and speak national languages fluently – this was the paradoxical mode of existence of Jews in the early twentieth century.

In Tzara's case, this paradoxical mode of existence is evident even in his name, which he first used as a *nom de plume* in a Romanian publication in October 1915, shortly before leaving for Switzerland. Heyd has collected various explanations for this choice of name:

Beyond the obvious allusions to Tristan and Isolde, it has been suggested that it may mean "sad in the country" (*trist en tsara*). Tzara is also based on "tara," Rumanian for country, more specifically, insinuating land. Another view holds that the pseudonym echoes the name of the poet Tristan Corbière. A further reading of the name was offered by the French poet Max Jacob, namely, that "Tzara" is short for Zarathustra implying a Nietzschean influence. Finally, "Tzara" also suggests the word "problem" in Yiddish, implying "problem" in a Jewish context.
(Heyd 2010, 198)

Another point can be added: Tzara's parents' first language was reportedly Yiddish, and even if (as was likely) it was not spoken at home by a family striving for assimilation, he may have had knowledge of it (Dickerman 2006, 22). If so, the word "Tzara" in its Yiddish (or Hebrew) sense as "problem" would be a kind of complement to the first name Tristan, insofar as it would combine the Romanian word for sadness with the Yiddish word for "problem." Finally, in a permutational reading, "Tzara" could also be understood as a reversal of "*eretz*" or "*aretz*," the Hebrew word for "land," thus reversing the Romanian term ("*tara*"). It would probably be a mistake to try to identify the "correct" reading of this pseudonym – its quality might instead be found in the very multivalence of its associations and connotations, including a variety of multilingual and multicultural combinations. Moreover, it seems that it is precisely the monistic way by which a language seemingly "makes sense" that Tzara tries to attack in his dada activity. Considering Talmudic and Aggadic textual interpretation, one might call this practice of multifaceted readings itself "Jewish" – I refrain from doing so, because it would again be an attempt to clearly and essentially define a "Jewish" way of acting. I focus instead on Tzara's act of de-essentializing and in fact de-constructing readings and methods of thinking and acting.

Tzara himself never discussed his *nom de plume*. But, it is revealing that in his "Manifeste Dada 1918," he offers several interpretations for the word "dada," similar to the manifold interpretations that have been proffered for the name "Tristan Tzara":

Dada does not mean anything

If you find it futile and don't want to waste your time on a word that means nothing ... The first thought that comes to these people is bacteriological in character: to find its etymological, or at least its historical or psychological origin. We see by the papers that the Kru Negroes call the tail of a holy cow Dada. The cube and the mother in a certain district of Italy are called: Dada. A hobby horse, a nurse both in Russian and Rumanian: Dada. Some learned

journalists regard it as an art for babies, other holy Jesus calling the little children unto him of our day, as a relapse into a dry and noisy, noisy and monotonous primitivism. Sensibility is not constructed on the basis of a word; all constructions converge on perfection which is boring, the stagnant idea of a gilded swamp, a relative human product.
(Tzara, 1916)⁴

Stephen Forcer urges us “to read Tzara’s poetry in its own terms as polyvalent text” (2012, 264), and Bernard Noël notes of Tzara “that his name is synonymous with the invention of dada and that in any case that’s what history has decided” (2011, 241).⁵ Since Tzara was the first to use the word dada in print (although the word may have been introduced by Hugo Ball), one may add that, in its intrinsic lack of significance, and concomitant programmatic polyvalence, the name Tristan Tzara can itself be understood as an expression of dada – even though his pseudonym preceded the artistic movement. Tzara had previously used other pseudonyms, and in time he may have discarded this one, too, had it not become entangled with the dada movement.

Like Tzara, Ball associated the term dada with its meanings or allusions in various languages. He described the coining of the term in the context of naming a new journal in April 1916, although it would be over ten years until this note was published in his work *The Flight out of Time*: “Dada is ‘yes’ in Romanian, ‘rocking horse’ and ‘hobbyhorse’ in French. For Germans it is a sign of foolish naiveté, joy in procreation, and preoccupation with the baby carriage” (Dickerman 2006, 33). Although it is interesting to notice that Ball’s reflection on the notion begins with its Romanian and French meanings, it is even more important to mention that in his own public explanation of the word “dada” in July 1916, Ball was looking for a positive meaning of the word. Andreas Kramer quotes Ball’s remark from his opening of the dada soirée on 14 July 1916: Dada was “*Ein internationales Wort. Nur ein Wort, und das Wort als Bewegung*” [An international word. Only one word, and the word as a movement]. Kramer adds that, “[w]here other avant-garde movements announce their intentions in their names, Ball’s remark seems to suggest that the signifier “dada” refuses to be tied to any specific signified – that it was portable as well as moveable, transient and vagrant, and emphatically not at home anywhere” (2011, 203).

It is striking, then, that Tzara’s and Ball’s respective definitions of dada, seemingly identical in their references to nothing specific but the movement itself, differ greatly in how they circumscribe the non-significance of the word. Whereas

⁴ For the French original see: Tzara, Tristan. *Oeuvres complètes. Vol. 1*. Ed. Henri Béhar. Paris: Flammarion, 1975 [1912–1924]. 360.

⁵ “*que son nom est synonyme de l’invention de Dada – et qu’en tout cas ainsi en a décidé l’histoire*”.

Ball does not offer any meaning, dissolving the word “dada” in the term “international” and as a bare “movement” (which may mean a kinetic act as well as a group of artists), thereby trying to describe dada as a kind of Hegelian synthesis of the national clashes in the Great War, Tzara does not use the word “international.” Instead, he offers numerous, quite real yet entirely unconnected meanings of the word in various languages. Tzara’s definition dissolves any meaning that Ball’s “internationality” might eventually develop. According to Tzara, the multilingual potential of the word does not multiply or constitute its sense, but rather eliminates it. Tzara, in other words, does not aim to develop his own dada language; he seeks to unmask language itself as a construction that draws its value, and sometimes its claim to superiority, from an equally constructed concept of identities and values. In themselves, all languages are equal, but equal in their differences. This claim to the right of equality while upholding difference is the basic Jewish claim to a secular society. But the European peoples, be it first for religious or later for nationalist reasons, have never managed to actually understand this right, let alone grant it to minority societies.

If we compare, then, the performative poetry of Ball and Tzara, we realize that their respective concepts of dada poetry differed greatly. Famous poems by Ball, for example, like his “Karawane” or the poem “Gadji beri bimba,” gather words that, for the most part, make no sense in any conventional language, although they contain words or morphemes of specific languages. T.J. Demos has summarized Ball’s practice of poetry and performance as follows:

It is undeniable that there is something intensely private and opaque about Ball’s speech that resists communication, just as his strange costume projects an image of alterity. [...] this solipsistic element highlights the singularity of identity, which refuses to collapse into any unified and essentialized (but nevertheless “imaginary”) community of nationalism. (Demos 2003, 154)

Tzara, in contrast, never used this form of opaque poetry. Creating a language of fantasized wording may have run counter to the specific universalism of art that he was striving for, a universalism based on the pluralism of myriad different elements. He came from a background in which jingoistic and anti-Semitic arguments had long reproached Jews for using impure, falsified language, from early examples in the sixteenth century (as quoted at the beginning of this chapter) all the way to the arguments of Romanian intellectuals in Tzara’s time, who attacked Jews as “foreigners” importing “diseased ideas” into Romanian literature and culture (Hentea 2014, 44). Therefore, Tzara had a different way of expressing himself than Ball. As Henri Béhar (2005, 56f.) makes clear, Tzara’s style is characterized by a formally correct grammar and syntax. The provocative and irritating character of Tzara’s poetry, Béhar claims, stems from the use of a seemingly disturbing

semanticism, combining notions that seem completely out of place, not in their singularity but in their combination.

This underlines the argument that Tzara's concept of dada poetics was different from Ball's, and that this difference can be depicted as "Jewish." Ball, who was traumatized by a visit to the Belgian front (he himself had been rejected for service in the German army, due to health reasons) was obviously searching for a new and newly composed language by which to challenge the language of war. In a way, he looked for poetic ways out of the frenzy of war. It is unsurprising, then, that Ball, at a certain point, stepped out of dada and turned strongly to Catholicism, striving for resolution through religion. Tzara was less driven by pacifist or religious feelings; instead, he was fascinated by the issue of sense and nonsense, using language as a means to serve and simultaneously destroy the needs of meaning in a conventional sense.

Another mode of resistance to Western culture appears in Tzara's "Poèmes nègres" ("Negro poems"), based on poetry from various African languages, as well as from the Fijian and Maori languages. These poems must of course be considered in the context of the general boom, at the beginning of the twentieth century, in what was called "primitive art"; in fact, the poems transform the primitivism of plastic and visual arts into poetry. As quoted earlier, Tzara, in his manifesto of 1918, used the word "primitivism" as one of the characteristics of dada. By mixing translation and original language, a new form of what is termed "*Verfremdung*" (translated, insufficiently, into English as "alienation") is created. It fits Tzara's tendency to use language in order to question the supremacy of language. Sense giving and sense killing might be understood as emerging from the same source – it is not the words that express seemingly irresistible truths, but only their subjugation under the dictates of convention. It may be the case, then, that it was less the oft-quoted "primitivism" of the original that challenged western thinking, but rather the admission of non-understanding. As a Jew, Tzara had many reasons to call into question the so-called disastrous truths and rationalizations of European thinking, one result of which was the First World War – with the discrimination of Jews for centuries being another.

It is in line with this concept of his alienating of languages that, aside from his plays and manifestos, Tzara's most well-known literary work is his creation of and participation in simultaneous poetry. As avant-garde researchers know, the concept of simultaneous poetry was developed not by dada but by the founder of futurism, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. Yet dada, and at its forefront Tristan Tzara, gave simultaneous poetry a new function, quite the opposite of Marinetti's nationalist – indeed, pre-fascist – ideology. Béhar has identified fourteen examples of simultaneous poetry by dada, with Tzara as the only dada group member involved in each. All these poems, each composed by more than one person, contain si-

multaneously recited texts in at least two languages, usually French and German. Tzara's partners in this simultaneous poetry were Richard Huelsenbeck, Walter Serner, Hans Arp, and, once, even Marcel Janco – but never Hugo Ball, although it must be noted that he did write a simultaneous Christmas play (Béhar 2005, 64 f.).

The most famous of Tzara's simultaneous poems comprises lines to be performed in three languages: German (by Richard Huelsenbeck), French (by Tristan Tzara), and English (by Marcel Janco). Its title, which is only in French, is “L'amiral cherche une maison à louer” [The admiral is looking for a house to rent]. The poem was performed on 30 March 1916 at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich (Tzara 1975 [1912–1924], 492–493).

The analogous performance of entirely different texts in three languages is a well-composed cacophony, actually a composition of voices and languages subdued to an exact rhythm. Within this composition, it becomes clear that the French part, composed and performed by Tzara, is the one most clearly connected to the conventional meaning of the French title, especially here:

*Le télégraphiste assassine la concierge qui m'a trompé elle a vendu l'appartement
que j'avais loué*

[The telegraphist kills the concierge who has cheated on me she has sold the apartment
that I had rented]

The title also echoes in this line:

La rue s'enfuit avec mon bagage à travers la ville

[The street escapes with my luggage through the city]

And of course, the theme is picked up in the final line, when the voices speak in unison, in French: “L'Amiral n'a rien trouvé” [The admiral found nothing].

Researchers have understood the admiral's homelessness to be a symbol of the exile that was also felt by the performers of the poem, each of whom was, in some way, an emigré. Of course, the comic aspect of the symbol is that here the person to whom this homelessness is ascribed is a member of the governing classes and the highest military ranks. Without over-interpreting the text, it is remarkable, then, that the quoted French lines spoken by Tzara are those in the poem that most explicitly focus on the concrete reality of being homeless, of being robbed of and denied a home, which, from the outset, would be a home that one did not own but only rented.

In his biography of Tzara, Marius Hentea explains that the style of the texts in the three languages was adapted to each of the speakers:

A gifted musician, Janco sang his English lines. This created another layer of opposition beyond language and provided an underlying melody to the piece [...] Huelsenbeck's aggres-

sive performance style was brought out by the greater number of pure sounds in his lines: “Ahoi ahoi ... prrzza chrrza prrrza.” Tzara, whose small frame and young bespectacled face set him apart, had the narrative center, so the helpless, gentle little boy who has a simple story to tell struggles against a bombastic Huelsenbeck and a melodic Janco. (Hentea 2014, 70)

Later, Hentea adds that “Tzara, who was juggling three languages (Romanian, French, and German), found a natural home in this multilingual ambiance” (2014, 71).

At the same time, however, the languages also neutralize one another, losing their claims to superiority and exclusivity, as well as to such a fictitious quality as “purity.” Language becomes subordinate to rhythm and sound. There is more research to be done regarding how this simultaneous poetry was composed, whether it was written or only performed by a team of dadaist artists and writers. It seems that researchers disagree on this matter. But maybe, in the end, such differentiation between authorship and performance would, in dada, be an unpromising point of departure, considering the necessity of close cooperation.

I have provided a preliminary sketch of what I believe can be recognized as a sort of “dada Judaism” in Zurich. Tracing Jewish origins in a context where extensive measures were taken to conceal explicit Jewishness (which, in this case, did not in the least prevent Ball and Huelsenbeck from eventually referring to Tzara’s or Janco’s Judaism in rather polemical ways) is a tricky process, and I have tried to avoid over-interpretations. My main argument is that the Jewish character of Tristan Tzara’s dadaism is evident in his stressing the multivalence of words and the pluralism of distinct but equally important languages.

Dada without its Jewish protagonists would certainly have had a much different face – probably with more of Ball’s Nietzschean melancholy and introversion, less Latin easiness and playing with conventional language, and fewer of the marketing strategies for the performances that Tzara and Janco doubtlessly brought with them. This issue has not been touched on in this article. Were it ascribed to “Judaism,” it might awaken unwanted connotations, even if it was decisive for the future of dada. For after Ball left dada Zurich, in 1917, it was Tzara who assumed the movement’s leading position. By attracting famous artists to Zurich who presented their works in the context of dada, and with effective promotion of the movement’s name, Tzara may have been crucially responsible for the tremendous career of dada, which was later transferred to other, larger European cities and became one of the most prominent and sustainable notions of European avant-garde.

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