

DADA, EXPRESSIONISM, AND SOME MODERN MODES

by Robert P. Newton

Anyone who observes the current cultural scene, curious but somewhat disoriented as he well may be, will have heard the term *neo-Dada* applied to what is called the Pop-Art movement—that recent practice of art which introduced as sculpture large-scale facsimiles of soap flake packages set in a place of honor on the plush rugs of the elegantly wealthy; which hung on irreverent walls bright, painted reproductions of Superman and the American flag; and which transported to the museum floor cheap soda counters and old, weathered auto bodies, to be peopled by realistic and shabby plaster of Paris figures staring into space or lying together.

These casts might remind some viewers of those historic ones that preserve the last hours of Pompeii (or suggest to the less sympathetic the decadent phase of empire), but also—and here is our own purpose—they recall to mind the Dadaist's *Readymade* and his *found environment*.

Our theoretical observer may also have sensed these objects' affinity with the cult of *camp*, the taste for the tastelessness of mass culture, of commercialism, unsophisticated pathos and idealism, the just barely old-fashioned and tawdry, a cult that led to the renaissance of Batman and the comic strips, the movies of the thirties, the Tiffany lamp and the like. One attempts, through this gesture of mock enthusiasm, to alienate the sensibility from things that have in the past been too much and yet not enough of oneself, so that, from a great ironic distance, they again become visible as autonomous *things*.

And should our observer have wandered into that curiously "new" form of theater, the "Happening," he would discover spectators a few of whom at least were engaged in a similar spiritual

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exercise. As they watch the performers execute basically simple everyday actions, however absurd or meaninglessly violent in the context, set among nonillusionistic props made largely of everyday utensils, exchanging everyday words in a senseless abstract dialogue—as they watch, the faithful show-goers of the avant-garde are attempting to experience an essentially mystical paradox. On the one hand, to feel that the performers are *not* “performers” and do not consider or comport themselves as such, but simply are just what they are—actual people doing actual, accidental things. And on the other hand, to ritually invest these accidental, concrete things with an absolute significance they would obviously not have if performed by the spectators in their own unobserved lives.

The attitude, now, which seems to suffuse all these phenomena—Pop-Art, camp taste and the Happening—is, in most general terms, a tension of the *banal* and the *artistically ceremonious*, an attitude which in the light of history we need not hesitate to call *dada per se*.

Art history moves dialectically by nature, and thus a number of critics currently have been tempted to contrast the manifestations above with the rather different, “heroic-pathetic” modes of action painting, abstract Expressionism, radical political idealism and “beat” poetry of the Allen Ginsberg *Howl* variety, with its mood of cultural doom. Werner Hoffmann speaks of a “heated” as opposed to a “cool” species of romanticism within the genus Modernism, of art without facts (purveying formal and esthetic values) as against facts without art (prompting a conceptual or even metaphysical response).¹ We thus might also find in modern art a strain of *expressionism per se*.

It is interesting to view in our own day and society a reenactment of even the chronological sequence of Germany’s historical Expressionist and Dada movements, a sequence and also a simultaneity now as then of the unsettled elements of modern art, still unsettled and still productive.

From our own vantage point we can now profitably look back and compare the conflicting aspirations, insights, and achievements of artists and literati at the end of this century’s second decade.

Many recent literary publications in Germany have tended to subsume Dadaism under the rubric Expressionism, a confusion which fortunately has not occurred in art history. In reality, Dada is the true German heir of Futurism, the primordial artistic rebellion of our times, and as such it merits new consideration in

German esthetic history. Dada, as an international impulse, lends more to an understanding of contemporary trends than does Expressionism in its European variants, even to the understanding of quite recent German poetry. For of Expressionist poetry we recall above all the grotesque and apocalyptic images, along with the really quite personal styles of writers like Heym, Trakl, and Lasker-Schüler. The Expressionist's vatic stance, the abstract utopian component, the too often feckless *Schrei* of pathos, are no longer, or perhaps not quite yet again, to be relished as such. Today, it is primarily the techniques of Expressionist drama, persisting through Brecht and the Theater of the Absurd, which interest us.

By contrast, most of Dada's repertoire has recently returned, and not only in retrospective book and exhibition. To be sure, Dada remains more vital in its ideas, methods, and perspective than in its palpable works. While Expressionism, for all its mannerisms, does not assume a constructively novel attitude toward the basic function of art, Dada is the effective European proselytizer for the antiart evangel, a movement which tells us much about the modern psyche and which, along with sterile excess, has borne much fruit. How numerous are the modern genres which strive for alienation from the esthetic trance—for example, in the assimilation of art and sport or art and cabaret entertainment, or in the interchange of art and everyday objects. Much modern art is literally "inconceivable" without recognition of the artist's reliance on an inherent, if forever indecipherable, "meaning" in his material, a power of self-existence which, it is hoped, supplants the artist's weakening intention.

The historical force of Dada is increasingly recognized. Michael Kirby in his book on *Happenings* defines them generically as "a form of theater in which diverse elements, including nonmatrixed performing, are organized in compartmental structure,"² and he expressly names Dada as the progenitor of nonmatrixed performing and compartmental structure—meaning the mixture of stage and everyday life (sometimes in a found environment) and the simultaneous presentation of diverse activities.

In a volume of articles on *The New Art* ("Pop-" and "Op-"), one finds no reference to Expressionism, but Dada and Surrealism are cited on several occasions as sources or parallels. One critic, Allen Leepa, distinguishes the old and the new, if not quite correctly: "Where Dada was primarily an act of rebellion, and a romantic one at that, pop-art is primarily parody. It is anti-Romantic, anti-emotional, anti-intellectual and anti-art."³ Certainly, Dada is a

fountainhead of antiart, and probably most of these attributes can be assigned it.

Martin Esslin, in his book on *The Theater of the Absurd*, finds Dada important mainly for its having borne Surrealism, but he does see in Tristan Tzara's Dadaist play *The Gas Heart* a use of the clichés of polite conversation which foreshadows Ionesco.⁴ Incidentally, Tzara's vision of a Dada theater presages the truly non-illusionistic production; it will, says Tzara, "leave the direction to the subtle invention of the explosive wind [of spontaneity], with the scenario in the auditorium, visible direction, and grotesque means— . . ."⁵

To render more clearly the notion of a timeless dada, let us recall some of its forebears and return then to Zürich in 1916 and what came after.

In the broadest sense, dada is the consciously ironic presentation or staging of something banal, quotidian, or childish and inappropriate, even vulgar or incoherent, in a formal, ceremonial, or portentous context which of course arouses quite different expectations. The conventional framework may be a theatrical presentation, a cabaret number, art exhibition, picture frame, an apparently purposeful meeting of serious persons, or may simply be given by the esthetic or categorical expectations which the act of approaching a work of art excites in us. The purpose is to provoke, to astonish, and hence paradoxically to entertain, but also, at least in the higher forms, to reveal a new realm of experience—in art, thought, or existence. In this sense there has always been a kind of dadaism in the form of especially crass travesties. One tells the story of a theater director of the early eighteenth century, Kunst by name, who in the spring of the year invited the elegant world of Moscow, with them Tsar Peter the Great, to a gala surprise performance. Great suspense preceded the opening of the curtain. As it rose the glittering public saw only a sign on the empty stage: "April the first." Director Kunst, like later Dadaists, was forced to flee.⁶

Moreover, the Zürich Dada group is not the first organized society of jokesters known to German literary history. In *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, Goethe mentions a tippling fraternity in Wetzlar whose four degrees of ordination had names such as "The Transition," "The Transition's Transition," "The Transition's Transition to the Transition," etc., terms which had to be interpreted and amplified by the initiates, just as later the word *Dada* was first invented and then, a posteriori, found to have meaning. Goethe, incidentally, considered such doings an inane pastime. To be sure—

if Johann Wolfgang, or as the Dadaist Hugo Ball calls him, Johann Fuchsgang von Goethe had entered more readily into the dada spirit, we would not have *Werther*, or would have it as in Friedrich Nicolai's parodistic version, *The Joys of Young Werther*, where Albert loads Werther's suicide pistols with chicken blood.

In the nineteenth century in France there appears the prophetic figure of Lautréamont with his "Les Chants de Maldoror," employing the grotesque, alienating metaphor that tends to appear in all modern poetic isms. This prose poem contains the famous "de-ranging" simile: "Beautiful as the unexpected encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissection table," a practical prescription for the building of a *Readymade*.

Among more recent kindred spirits the Zürich Dadaists named Alfred Jarry, Guillaume Appollinaire, Christian Morgenstern, Jakob van Hoddis, Alfred Lichtenstein, and naturally the Futurists.

Since Dada, along with August Stramm's so-called absolute lyric, is in some respects but a steward of Futurist doctrine in Germany, we must examine the latter's esthetic capital.

The poet Gottfried Benn has adjudged the manifestoes of Futurism, emanating, most of them, from the founding hand of Filippo Marinetti, "the ground-laying event of modern art in Europe."⁷ Futurism still advanced an esthetic theory, as against the antiart pose of Dada, but it espoused new antitraditional and antimuseal ideals of beauty, destructive of the art found beautiful hitherto—an almost Nietzschean master-poetics. In the original manifesto of 1909, the lordly virtues of courage, boldness, and indignation are prized as poetic elements, the newly perceived beauties of speed and aggressivity are indited, an appeal is issued to storm and destroy the established museums and libraries, to battle against moralism, feminism, and utilitarian cowardice, and the whole grandiose hubris of the prewar European years—the "Proud Tower," as Barbara Tuchman has called it—bursts out in the final pose: "Standing at the pinnacle of the world, we hurl once more our challenge to the stars." By all rebellious similarities, how arrogantly provincial seems this mood today, as interplanetary flight indeed transcends the pinnacle of the world—and looks back in longing and humility.

In Italy and France, Futurism rapidly became a self-confident culturopolitical party, which agitated and advertised, with airplanes, posters, and newspapers, which staged street protests, mass demonstrations, exhibitions, lectures, conventions, and quite generally established a pattern for the uproar that surrounded later isms.

Despite the somewhat fraudulent bustle, another "Technical Manifesto of Futuristic Literature" in 1912 quite clearly brings to view the constitutive characteristic of what was actually new in the literature of that time—a dynamism of endlessly concatenating and deliberately dismaying images, linked by the principle of maximum disorder. This style necessitates, or at least the Futurists demanded, the elimination of the Self from literature, since the Self is an insuppressible principle of order. In this the Dadaists followed suit. (It is an interesting footnote to the history of the Self in modern literature that Marinetti later turned to Fascism, the great Russian Futurist Majakowski to Communism, as did a number of Dadaists, and that Dadaist Richard Hülsenbeck went on to become a psychiatrist.)

For the Futurist poet, furthermore, it is superfluous that he be "understood," in the normal rational sense. To illustrate non-conceptual communication, Marinetti used the then very up-to-date technological image of "wireless ideas" (wireless telegraphy was patented by Marconi in 1896), i.e., images not linked by syntax or punctuation, which—we must assume—short-circuit the reader's obsolescent logical wiring, to bear a direct message.

German critics, incidentally, habitually accept August Stramm as inventor of the so-called telegram-poem, influenced by their awareness that he was a post-office official. In fact, Stramm is a rather unimaginative camp follower of Marinetti, and even Marinetti is not first. Paul Klee, the painter, was writing asyntactical, short-versed poems in 1901.⁸ Determining the true source of modernistic innovations is very difficult indeed.

But at least we can probably say that Futurism gave the decisive publicity to notions such as the simultaneous poem and the bruitistic or onomatopoetic poem. And German Expressionism, in the pages of Herwarth Walden's periodical *Der Sturm*, found prefabricated by the Futurists its own glorification of "intensity," unresolved and unresolvable, the permanently revolutionary gesture.

Elements of Dada that do *not* seem to occur in Futurism, however, are the notion of pure aleatory art and the attitude of ironic distance and nonparticipation.

With these achievements we approach Dada itself, a current which, despite the geographical and ideological separation of its capitals, by no means flows so diffusely as the volcanic aggregate of Expressionism—an incomplete fusion of poetic substances as various as Trakl, Becher, Stramm, and Werfel.

Even before Zürich there existed recognizable Dada in New York City, where Marcel Duchamps, author of the famous Futuristically-styled kinetic painting, "Nude descending a stairway," produced new scandal successes in 1914 with his *Readymades*; that is, ready-made commercial items, found or bought somewhere—a bicycle wheel, a bottle-drying stand, a hat rack—which were placed on a pedestal and then displayed ceremoniously as sculpture in museums, without the artist's having imposed even the slightest change. In a further development the found object was given an illuminating title; thus a snow shovel was labelled "Before the Broken Arm." The *Readymade* in itself is meant to derange the viewer's automatic apperceptions, to reactivate the eye, and reinstate the thing; given a title, its action changes and becomes conceptual—yielding Novalis' "wunderliche Einheit" of alien things encountered in one place or time, or making perhaps only a short-lived joke. In general, Dada art tends to function intellectually, rather than by affect or sense—even in the plastic arts.

Literature also knows a pre-Dada phase. In the year 1911, Hans Arp was writing what later would be called Dadaistic poems, which did not appear until 1920 under the title *The Bird and Two Others* (*Der Vogel Selbdritt*). In 1915 the Expressionist magazine *Die Aktion* carried a "Manifesto of Impertinentism," whose authors extol their own terrifying virtues: insolence, impudence, and a complete lack of dignity.⁹ Further, the Impertinentists expressly reject political Activism, Expressionism, dynamic Futurism, the whole reigning glorification of deed and the pathos of the world reformers. (It is the archetypical Cynic point of view, revived even more drastically today by wandering mendicants in the Hippie world.) More interesting still, from the esthetic point of view, is that the artist's sense of identity with his own works is disavowed and ridiculed.

Others too claim rights of paternity to Dada—during the years 1913 to 1915—but it seems historically just that the tag for such a high-spirited and impersonal creative stance should have been plucked by chance out of a French dictionary, by the members of a traditionless and short-lived cabaret on the sidelines of the world's first grinding cataclysm, a cabaret directly across the street from which—and this is a "wunderliche Einheit" no one misses—lived a quiet Russian emigré, Vladimir Iljitsch Lenin, coming, as we know, to other conclusions.

The artists who sang, danced, recited poems, staged skits, and insulted the public in Zürich's Cabaret-Voltaire in 1916 were an

international group, most of whom had fled their homelands in rejection of the war whose absolute senselessness no one any longer doubted. From Rumania came Tristan Tzara and Marcel Janco, from Germany the founder Hugo Ball, along with Emmy Hennings and Richard Hülsenbeck, and from Alsatia the perhaps artistically greatest, the painter and poet Hans Arp. Both Ball and Hülsenbeck had been active Expressionists in Germany; Arp was au courant of all developments in modern art; Tzara was the intellectual, the politician and man of the world. What they staged every night in the smoky little hall of the Cabaret-Voltaire was by no means only Dada. Modern poetry from Rimbaud to van Hoddiss, Heym, and Werfel was recited and the main attraction for the audience, largely students, had very little to do with modern art at all—it was the talented Emmy Hennings, singing her chansons and sensationalistic ballads, à la Mack the Knife, accompanied by a balalaika band. When a second chanteuse was to be engaged, one sought a suitable stage name—she was to be called Madame So-and-so—and in the process one came across the word *dada* in a lexicon. One says “one” advisedly since the actual honor of discovery was later bitterly disputed, to the point that two of the litigants, Tzara and Hülsenbeck, refused to appear in the same anthologies. But at the time the word itself occasioned spontaneous and general applause. It was international in sound, short, and had a primitive and nonsensical power of suggestion. In Slavic languages it meant “Yes, yes,” in German it mimed a baby’s babble, and in French it meant “hobby-horse.” And these overtones were felt to be of meaning. Incidentally, *Dada* is possibly the very first of the non-sense names for a vital life-style, the likes of which have so multiplied in the twentieth century. These no longer summarily specify an esthetic, philosophical, or social doctrine, but suggest the immanent force of a mythical spirit.

In the noise and turmoil of a student hangout, the magical word *Dadá*, still spoken with French terminal stress, became a slogan for everything revolutionary, astonishing, and antibourgeois that was offered to the public, a clientele, furthermore, that was never far from a drunken brawl if the show should momentarily lag.

A first great Dada success was the premiere performance of a trio simultaneous poem, three various texts in three different languages, spoken at once but with artfully inserted pauses, so that duo and solo parts also occurred. The texts were either nonsense in themselves or in the context; were amusing or obscene;

sometimes they were simply old hit songs, become ridiculous in the surroundings. Hülsenbeck reports the event as follows:

Tzara, Janco and I stepped up on the stage, bowed and pulled out our sheet-music like a jodler group about to sing of woods and lake, and then each one uninhibitedly screamed his text into the ears of the perturbed listeners. It was the first simultaneous poem that had ever been performed publically on a European stage.¹⁰

Transcending even this, such performances were then accompanied by mixed noises in a sort of *musique concrète*—drums, cow-bells, blows on the table and the howling of sirens. Hugo Ball explains the intention:

The poème simultan is concerned with the value of the voice. The human voice represents the soul, individuality in its wandering among demonic attendants. The noises represent the background; the inarticulate, calamitous, predestining. The poem attempts to illustrate the entanglement of man in the mechanistic process.¹¹

This attempt to utilize artistically the "new" sounds of the industrialized world, its abrupt, untiring, and inhumanly rapid motions, is actually still derivative and based on Futurist ideas. The not entirely unsympathetic press could write about it almost like a psychodrama: "They are men possessed, driven, maniacal, for the sake of their work. They turn to the audience as if it should espouse their illness and they present it with evidence to judge their condition."

Additional evidence were the "Phantastic Poems" of the dashing and spirited Richard Hülsenbeck who, during his recitations, threatened the audience with a horsewhip held ready in his hand. Much in these poems shows only a simple delight in burlesque images and nonverbal sounds that render a mystic, musical accompaniment—as in the Greek-sounding refrain "Schalaben-schalabai-schalamezomai"; but in some of them the grotesque meets the rhapsodic in a poem of oddly eidetic power, as in this second part of Hülsenbeck's "Dada-Poem":

Hardly had we pulled the pants off the man
When he stood there in abundance and astonished at so much
Enthusiasm and he blushing said: "How can you?"
And we said, where there's a will, there's a way, and the
Best virtue is ability, if you look at it right.
And the man said OK. and we shook hands.

That was the time when the sing-song of the bells deluded
The sinners, and they stepped out of the house, casting

Their spectacles away, and they cast their crutches away,
And when the crutches were gone they cast their neckties away,

The rose and the lilac colored neckties,
And when the lilac colored neckties were gone,
They cast themselves away and casting themselves away
They threw themselves forward. And we met them on the
Market-place
Where the banners greeted the Emperor.

The Emperor was a young man and he had the world
Beneath him and he bore the Imperial Orb like a truss,
Like the upright man that he was. And he said, he was as
Upright as was possible and he held the Imperial Orb
On high towards the people, up to his Adam's apple,
And the people threw apples to him, and all were happy
With the apples.

And the man whose pants we had pulled off stood there
And considered his destiny. "There is sulphur in the air,"
He said, "and the rivers coil into the distance, towards
The horizon. And the houses crackle in the sun
And wind and the people stand together like frogs
In the pond, and everyone stands together.

And we took the liberty and we spoke to him,
While the disciples stood around and were lamenting
The common lot of mankind. And a woman drew bread
From her basket and she said "Aha" and we all said:
"Aha."

That was the time when the years turned black and silver
In the glow of eternity and the reddish light grew pale
And the song of the stars was no more.

The "plot" is farcical; the images scurrilous at times. Irony is paired with fatefulness. There is a hint of Bertolt Brecht's affectionate grotesqueness matched with pragmatic realism. Yet, despite the crackling houses and sulphurous air, the world is less desperate, the tempo less forced, and the eye more firmly fixed on the object than we are accustomed to in the styles of Expressionism. That is certainly not true of all Dadaist poems, but we remark again and again in image, trope, and sense that a more serene, playful, and objective point of view declares itself, set off against the Expressionist backdrop of literary hubris and despair. Among the Expressionists we note more rarely this self-possessed, almost child-like pleasure in fancy, free of contemporary *Angst*. Hugo Ball clearly recognizes the nonsense and naiveté as a mechanism to recapture childhood's unspoiled bliss.

We perceive the tone again in Hans Arp's "Kaspar is Dead," the Dadaist poem most frequently anthologized. As in the Expressionist *Menschheitsdämmerung* (1919) there are intensifying, apocalyptic images; there is a certain ominousness; but we don't feel that dread and utopian exaltation are pushed so programmatically—betimes to the stage of deadened receptiveness. In the *Menschheitsdämmerung*, editor Kurt Pinthus took "radicality of feeling" as one guideline to Expressionism, and significantly no Dadaists appear there.

In the typical Dadaist poem we must try to realize the poet's visions *intellectually*. Expressionistic phantasmata, on the other hand, could more easily be *illustrated*, as happened in some topical Expressionist painting. Dada art, by the way, knows sculpture, montage, nonobjective graphic art, but—save for important exceptions like Max Ernst and Picabia—no real depictive or expressive painting.

The images in the second half of Hans Arp's "Kaspar is Dead" sometimes elude the eye, but they may often still win the mind:

Why have you abandoned us. In what shape now
Wandered your beautiful great soul. Did you become a star
Or a watery chain on a whirlwind or an udder of black light
Or a transparent tile on the groaning drum of stony being.

Now wither our tops and our toes and the fairies lie
Half-charred on the funeral pyre.

Now thunders the black bowling-alley behind the sun
And no one winds up any more
The compasses and the wheels of the barrows.

Who eats now, with the phosphorescent rat, at the lonely
Barefooted table.

Who drives away the sirococo devil when he tries to
Seduce the horses.

Who will explain to us now the monograms in the stars.

His bust will grace the mantle-piece of all truly noble men
But that is no consolation and snuff for a death's head.

This blend of bizarre imagery with a cool, reportorial, consciously constructing procedure was last practiced before the National-Socialist era by the Dadaists and has been regained in the postwar period by poets such as Paul Celan and Günter Grass. There seems now to be a school of true neo-Dadaists in younger poets like Reinhard Priesnitz, Rolf Haufs, and Gerhardt Rühm.¹²

The tone and attitude naturally did not spring newborn from the

Cabaret-Voltaire. We have mentioned Hans Arp's earliest poems, which owe much to Christian Morgenstern. In 1914 Hugo Ball had published poems in *Die Aktion* which seemingly strive to escape the spell of Expressionist subjectivity into a lighter social world, as in this last stanza of Ball's poem "The Sun":

I cannot contain myself: I am full of bliss.
 The window cross-works burst. A children's nurse
 Hangs to her navel out of a window.
 I cannot help myself: Cathedrals explode with organ fugues.
 I will create a new sun. I will strike two together
 Like cymbals, and extend my hand to my lady.
 We will float away in a violet sedan-chair across the rooves
 Of your bright yellow city
 Like silken paper lanterns in the breeze.

Very softly we seem to hear the exotic voice of Else Lasker-Schüler, which is true in even greater degree for Ball's very beautiful poem "Cimio" from the same period. With Else Lasker-Schüler, the affectionate nurse on the edge of the Expressionist battlefield, Dadaism has in common the calm showing forth of pictures and a true sense of humor, not just of the macabre.

The originally Expressionist Hugo Ball was the very one to bring Dada to full bloom. He enjoyed experimenting in traditional as well as novel forms. Along with Kurt Schwitters, who was much more extravagant, Ball raised the *Lautgedicht*, the poem of pure sound, to unforeseen levels of splendor. This was a poetic genre that could look back with pride on some tradition: Paul Scheerbarth, Christian Morgenstern, the Futurists—indeed, the nonsense of nursery rhymes and the religious phenomenon of glossolalia, or speaking with tongues. But one had never approached the matter with such serious enthusiasm as now the Dadists did. As Ball said: "All words have been invented by other people. I want to create my own mischief."¹³ The *absolute sound poem* differs from the *bruitistic* poem in so far as the latter seeks to render the new sounds characteristic of the metropolis, whereas the former is nonimitative. Ball's premiere reading of his *Lautgedichte* was accomplished in the fantastic costume of a futuristic bishop, with witch-like miter and pluviale, and as he read the poems he gradually slipped into the tone of liturgical lamentation. Here the mere sound of a voice became an important heuristic clue to the scene enacted, and we are reminded of Antonin Artaud's assertion that this is the "hour of intonations"¹⁴ in the theater; the tone of voice is a more important gesture than the reference of its words—the most spontaneously

and essentially human paralanguage. A stanza from Ball's "Clouds" will give an idea of this art form (the suggested stress marks are mine).

élo[˘]men élo[˘]men léfitaló[˘]minai
wól[˘]minuscáio
bá[˘]umbala bú[˘]nga
á[˘]ycam glástula féi[˘]ro[˘]fim flí[˘]nsi

And so forth. Echoes of several languages speak alternately, including Old High German, but we likely do not err if we trace to rhythm the poem's instinctive appeal. We know that Hülsenbeck too liked to hammer out strongly rhythmical sound poems. The absolute poems of August Stramm, although intelligible as language, really depend on rhythm for their expressive mood. Expressionist critics quite generally equated the concept of "rhythm" with their sensation of a new and powerfully emergent spirit in the world.

These poetic experiments had the most effective consequence in works where nonverbal sound adds musical moments of expression to an at least locally rational context. By contrast, contemporary German lyricists have abandoned strong rhythms as an expressive mode, with some prominent exceptions like Paul Celan's "Todesfuge."

The bruitistic invention was the opposite of rhythmical or euphonic, consisting of protracted screeching vowels and clusters of noisy consonants. Over these the erstwhile Expressionist Gottfried Benn has sniffed magisterially: "For the moment, however, one must say that the occidental poem is still held together by a notion of form and is shaped of words, not by belching and coughing."¹⁵

Inspired by Marinetti's style book, Ball moved forward in the field of the *lettristic* poem. The reader, or viewer, is here diverted by reflection on the various styles of type used to set words or verses, which themselves may be scattered poster-fashion about the page. Guillaume Apollinaire had previously created lyrical ideograms, or picture poems, and of course, both the poem set in the shape of an object and the differently typeset lines were not unknown to Baroque poet and printer. The Berlin Dadaist Raoul Hausmann went still further by letting the typographer invent his own poem, picking letters and types to form a pattern unconcerned with words.

This leads to the *aleatory* poem, assembled by pure chance. In one variant, Hans Arp likewise exploited the (unsuspecting) printer

by sending deliberately illegible manuscripts to be set. Resultant misapprehensions yielded an original and haphazard text. We recall Goethe's reflection: "I always think, when I see a typographical error, that something new has been invented."¹⁶

It was the versatile Arp, too, who with closed eyes marked sentences in newspaper ads, which were then randomly pasted together into poems. He explained: "We thought we could see through things into the essence of life, and that's why a sentence from a daily paper stirred us as much as one by a prince of poets."¹⁷ Tristan Tzara proceeded even more consistently as verbal haruspex; he drew single words from a bag and laid them end to end. Especially Arp's method recalls the artistic *Readymade*.

The aleatory process results in those "simultaneous," "acausal" images known even to Expressionism, but more unfathomable and soberly suggestive. Taken at face value, it implies a Dada willingness to let Essence reveal itself, rather than to drive it out by force of questionably clairvoyant associations, as was the Expressionists' subjective strategy. Such enterprises, like action painting, are just an extreme case of the general will in modern art to exalt the act of creation over the work of art, to celebrate it as ritual that conjures metapersonal faculties, so that the congregated public may itself be drawn into the rite.

This all took place in a world which did not know the resources of electronic processing, to which some enthusiasts today would assign a similar role—especially in music—that is, to call down a purely random, nonhuman revelation in new artistic insights and inventions, since the artist's own restricted personal consciousness is exhausted now and shorn of interest. Recently, computers have been used to compose aleatory poetry in German, but revelation is still tinged by humanity in the choice of lexicon and syntactical programming. And we can hardly prevent reading common human experience into random utterances like: "Base doctrines always draw pistols" (*Niedrige Lehren ziehen immer Pistolen*).¹⁸

The Dada movement was not so soon exhausted. With time, burgeoning fame, and increased interest and irritation among the city's population, Dada transformed and extended itself. Hülsenbeck found it a magical phenomenon, a lot of the magic stemming from the name. The original cabaret was abandoned, since the continual uproar disturbed the sleep of the neighbors, possibly even the historic dreams of Lenin. An art gallery was opened, which also served as a nonmatrixed theater. There were lectures, Dada soirées, gala evenings on a growing scale. With time, too, came a changing of

the guard. Hugo Ball, the most complexly inward personality, and with him Emmy Hennings, left first for Bern and then retired to Tessin, to lead a religious life of self-imposed poverty. The boyish Tristan Tzara revealed himself as a shrewd and energetic impresario, who knew how to turn to coin the burghers' clearly instinctive need to be ridiculed and goaded to indignation. Hülsenbeck journeyed as the apostle of nonsense to Berlin, where in the air of post-war Germany Dada became eventually a utopian Communist movement.

Backed by an active publicity and numerous converts, Dada soon conquered all Europe. Broad publicity would seem essential to many modern movements in art, promulgating, as it does, the sense of a dominant spirit in the times—from which, rather than from good works, proceeds artistic grace.

Franz Kafka saw the triumphant Berlin Dadaists in Prague. He thought they were striving to escape from an infantile solipsism but could not do so, and this, if true, would relate them as a phenomenon of the times to Kafka himself.

Into this period of fashionable hubbub fall the many pranks that one usually associates with the name Dada, for example, Marcel Duchamps' atavistically satisfying Pop-work "Mona Lisa with Moustache." The "Portrait of an Unknown Person," a framed mirror, fits the same category, as does the art exhibition announced with the title "Nothing" on posters everywhere in the city, and which then revealed, to the breathlessly arriving visitor, just exactly that: several cavernous rooms. Dada composers, inspired by the noise-organ of the Futurist Luigi Russolo, rearmed with a new arsenal for the concert hall—pistols, typewriters, motors, and airplane propellers. Poets proffered poems so spread around the page that no end or beginning could be discerned, the ultimate in "open" form. A poem was printed with its words completely blotted out, its perhaps vital message masked forever. Reading the letters of the alphabet slowly from A to Z constituted the poem "Suicide" (1920) by Louis Aragon.

In the peripheral city of Cologne, Kurt Schwitters was working, a modern E. T. A. Hoffmann figure and one of the most persevering Dadaists. His monumental inspiration was the so-called *Merz*-construction, a species of art between sculpture and architecture, which, built of wood, many other materials, and banal household objects, gradually overgrew and filled whole rooms in Schwitters' home. Twice in his lifetime Schwitters, as a political refugee, had

to abandon such Merz-constructions to his baffled pursuers, the Nazis, but he resolutely began a third in England.

Schwitters is the author of the best known Dada love poem, of which one should recall at least the concluding portion. The puns translate with unexpected felicity:

Red blossom, red Anna Blume, what do people say?

Quiz question: 1. Anna Blume is bats.

2. Anna Blume is red.

3. What color is the bat?

Blue is the color of your yellow tresses,

Red is the screeching of your greenish bat.

You simple maiden in workaday dress, you dear

Green beast, I love to you! You of you you to you, I

To you, you to me, — we?

That belongs (incidentally) in the ember pan.

Anna Blume! Anna, A-n-n-a, I dribble your name.

Your name drips like soft beef tallow.

Do you realize, Anna, do you really know?

One can read you also from the back, and you, you

Most splendid girl of all, from the back as from

The front, you are: "a-n-n-a."

Beef tallow drips caress across my back.

Anna Blume, you drippish beast, I love to you.

The immanent poetic power of the declined personal pronoun has asserted itself again in our own day. In a recent work of Reinhard Priesnitz we read the line: "You ofyouoyouyouofyouoyouse," an inadequate translation of the original "Du deinerdirdichdeinerdirch."¹⁹ The unannotated form *dirch* derives perhaps from the language of a cultured Berliner.

Schwitters, a man of impressive stature and powerful voice, was a charismatic figure on the lecture podium. Hans Richter—artist and chronicler of Dada—gives an eye-witness account of Schwitters' reading his hissing, bellowing, crowing bruitistic poems, the "Proto-Sonatas," to an audience in Potsdam of unsuspecting Prussian army officers and high civil officials, gathered in an otherwise quite respectable bourgeois manse whose dynastic family was devoted to the muses. Richter describes the initial silence of consternation among the listeners who knew very little of modern art. Tension accumulated very quickly:

I saw with delight how two generals in front of me had to press their lips together with utmost force so as not to laugh; how their faces above the high stiff collars first became red and then light blue. And then suddenly something happened for which they were no longer responsible; they exploded with laughter, and the whole audience, re-

lieved of the pressure which had accumulated, exploded in an orgy of laughter. Refined old ladies, rigid generals, howled with laughter, gasping for air, slapped their thighs, coughed. All that disturbed Kurty in no way. He just switched his trained and enormous voice to volume ten, which drowned out the storm in the audience, so that it almost became an accompaniment to the Proto-Sonata.²⁰

After Schwitters restored silence and brought the performance to an end, the generals reportedly expressed their admiration and gratitude to Schwitters for a true pleasure. Regardless of whether the compliments were meant as elegant irony or not, the vignette is significant. For everywhere, even in the stronghold of propriety, the Dada artist's need for personal caprice evoked a deep positive resonance—often in violent opposition. The opportunity was welcomed to escape for once the spiritually demanding esthetic attitude and all practical, intellectual, and ideological rigor, to get out of oneself in absurd laughter or in rage—"for which they were no longer responsible." It was a spontaneous liberation, a touch of exhilarating insanity, and this was the reaction Dada sought to release.

Cruelty and fanaticism were far from Dada's mind, but its appeal tells a good deal about the mood of Europe before the advent of Fascism, and even more about the continuing vital role of humor and provocation in the modern arts. There exists, incidentally, a similar account of a Dada reading by the now Fascist Marinetti to a banquet of National-Socialist bigwigs. But they didn't laugh.

The release was more negative and unregenerative at the last great Dada manifestation in Zürich, its swan song there in April of 1919. The audience as usual had come to savor the pleasures of being insulted and the younger ones to assist in the trouble. The first part of the program came off without notable incident, though Tzara had surpassed himself in the genre simultaneous-poem: a chorus of twenty persons were speaking different works. After the intermission came a contemptuous manifesto by Hans Richter, and then an interlude of antimusic composed by Hans Heusser. This met little opposition, but Arp's poem "Cloud Pump" caused some disorder. It was interrupted by occasional catcalls of "Bosh!" and "Nonsense!" Hans Richter tells us of the end, a half-theatrical, half-political ritual that was repeated in many places thereafter. Even today the distinction between participatory theater and political demonstration is an often shadowy one:

Then came Dr. Walter Serner (the Dada dandy and Don Juan) in a flawlessly brushed black jacket, striped trousers with gray tie, as

at a formal engagement. His tall elegant figure first transported a headless tailor's mannequin on the stage; then he went back, fetched a bouquet of artificial flowers which he gave the dummy to smell where its head should have been, and laid the bouquet at her feet. Finally he brought a chair and seated himself astride it, in the middle of the stage with his back to the public. Then he began to read from his "Last Loosening," the anarchistic credo of Dada . . . At last! That was just what the audience had waited for.

The electricity in the hall rose to high voltage. At first it was so quiet that one could hear a pin drop. Then some cat-calls, at first jeering, then enraged: "Louse, pig, impudence," . . . until such a concert of noise developed that one could hardly hear Serner, but in a pause in the noise one did hear the sentence: "Napoleon was a pretty rugged bum himself."

Then it started; why with Napoleon, who after all was no Swiss, I don't know? The young people, who mostly were sitting in the balcony, jumped onto the stage with pieces of the railing that had withstood centuries of time, chased Serner into the wings and out of the building, broke the tailor's dummy, the chair, trampled on the bouquet. The whole hall was in an uproar.²¹

It is a short step to the idea of destructive Happenings, like those of Jean-Jaques Lebel in Paris. And it is soirées of this sort, not Dada's own drama, that have probably most influenced institutional theater, albeit in more tempered forms. The audience may be either ignored or deliberately tempted or invited to judge the action or become part of it, as in current productions of the *Living Theater*.

Dada evenings were often improvised, with the Dadaists simply doing on stage what they would otherwise have been doing at home, typing poetry or quarreling with one another. Sometimes the entertainment was held in a "found environment"; a meeting in Cologne could be entered only by passing through a privy. In short, a good deal of the activity was unmatrixed, "events" in which the theatrical spell was broken. They were attended like boxing matches or auto races, as Brecht suggests the modern theater should be. In Dada's formal "plays," like Tzara's *The Gas Heart*, a strong, almost schizophrenic contrast between physical action and abstract dialogue prevailed, a condition approached again in productions of Peter Weisz's *Marat/Sade*. Not so common are the dramatically appropriate albeit fanciful or grotesque metaphors of Jarry or Apollinaire.

The proclamation of manifestoes like Serner's formed an organic part of Dadaist activity, even though the movement expressly opposed intellectualized theories. Tzara explained: "I am against manifestoes on principle, just as I am against principles."²² These

documents help clarify Dada's professed intent in spite of the disclaimers; and, though that is less true of Serner's brilliantly mad "Last Loosening," the slogan at least—last loosening—is a just expression for deed and idea of Dada.

More frequently one spoke of absolute freedom and mobility of the spirit. "To be a Dadaist means to let oneself be thrown by things," we read.²³ The *thing* is no longer passive object of the mind, but self-willed partner, or even the unfathomable master of essence to which we abandon our being. Logic, imitation of nature, every conventional human limit or expectation, in art as in the psyche, could only stifle this sublime feeling of irrational independence and letting loose. "What is divine in us," says Tzara, "is the awakening of the anti-human action."²⁴ Thence the urge to artistic self-abnegation, the hope for a purely chance revelation, and the expenditure, often the waste, of creative force on ephemeral production of a liberating distance—through nonsense and alienation.

From the notion of such freedom springs the dialectic of contradiction. Opines Tzara: "One can, with a single energetic leap, perform simultaneously quite opposite actions."²⁵ The old notion of the *coincidentia oppositorum* is derived from the more youthful *élan vital*. One hopes, paradoxically, to affirm the power of life by continual negation, combatting the intellectual tyranny of abstraction, the ethical tyranny of judgment and the sensual tyranny of beauty. Reason is hard, dangerous, and—most significantly—futile; nonsense is finally recognized as the sense of existence.²⁶ Nothingness is promulgated as an active principle, since it contains *all* possibilities, and so one begins to exhibit "Nothing" and to seat the public before a now completely empty stage. Pure opposition seems the compelling mode of freedom—and, in addition, amusing and exciting.

Since Dada opposed every hard and fast position, whether in ethics, esthetics, or politics, it mocked and scorned Expressionism with its prophecies, its pathos, and world-reforming ideas. It considered these the inflated pretensions of impotent spirits, and could not stomach the big words like humanity, fraternity, compassion, or even doom and terror. Richard Hülsenbeck, who later became a psychiatrist, often finds the simplest psychological formulae for the syndrome:

Since Dada is the absence of relationships to all things and thus has the ability to enter into relationships with all things, it turns against every kind of ideology, . . . every state of conflict, against every inhibition. . . . Since Dada is flexibility *per se* and cannot com-

prehend how one could settle rigidly on anything, it provides an example of pure freedom of character without any pathos.²⁷

The freedom of absolute alienation is today no less an intoxicating experience, usually intermingled with a genetically regressive strain of Expressionistic pathos.

It is obvious that the antiart pose is not to be taken quite seriously; there were, after all, highly gifted artists in the movement like Arp and Max Ernst, if no great poets. And the Dadaists themselves sometimes say that they are practicing a new style, the only possible modern one. As a style it claims to replace conscious artistic formal relations by the principle of arbitrary juxtaposition,²⁸ but often enough it is but a seeming unpremeditation, really calculating its effect. Indeed, Dada needs to nurture a continuous awareness of given form as the required frame of alienation, if it is to play its characteristic game of solemnizing the senseless, and it never shrilly polemicized about shattering all form as did Stadler, Werfel, and the Expressionist critics.

In the archetypical Expressionist one senses a greater fettered violence. It is hardly paradoxical that the nonsensical Dadaists leave the impression of more objective, realistic, if not more admirable personalities than the Expressionists, who tended either to be passionately and not very effectively *engagé*, or to withdraw into a sort of *Wesensschau*. Though the Dadaist endeavor may be absurd, it is, as Middleton says, concretely absurd.²⁹ Hugo Ball is spiritually more poised than his intellectual Expressionist counterpart, Gottfried Benn, a man whose work one may esteem without crediting him with serene spontaneity. Even Benn's most impenetrable poems are not the record of a free play of association, but the product (whose mechanics is hidden) of a few rigidly controlling ideas.

The Dadaist is at home not in the problems of madness and decaying flesh, but in the social world of entertainment. He neither seriously threatens nor converts; possesses no intellectual goods, he would claim, but is also not possessed. When he wishes to *épater le bourgeois*, he does not reach for sword and flame, i.e., pen and ink, but steps bodily before them in a kind of psychodrama to free them, supposedly, from their narrow conceptual world. The nudity rampant in the modern theater likewise attacks—psychological rather than logical—inhibitions, perhaps with the unconscious motivation of banalizing and disarming an irrational force. Apropos *plastic art as entertainment*, many contemporary forms, especially the apparatus of mechanical and electronic "sculpture," once more supply the public need for undemanding delectation in the arts—a

delight, as is appropriate to our age, in function rather than representation.

In comparing Dada and Expressionism we have made polemic points, and no one could think of denying the power and gifts of a Benn, a Heym, a Trakl, an Else Lasker-Schüler, or of seriously asserting that in German literary Dada a totally absorbing and important work appears. But we dare not expect it, for the movement was too radically committed to a method and not to palpable achievement. Yet since methods often age less rapidly than palpable achievement, the Dadaist mentality has apparently outlived the Expressionist *Schrei*.

As Hülsenbeck maintained: "Dada won't die of Dada. Its laughter has a future."³⁰ We have cited a number of present-day parallels along the way, and could list many more. Only too obviously the young playwright Peter Handke's *Reviling the Audience (Publikumsbeschimpfung)* is a formalized elaboration of Dadaism. But today's audience applauds rather than riots as it did at the final great Zürich manifestation. Considering that public reaction to documentary plays—those by Hochhuth for example—reveal it still capable of indignation, we must assume that this aspect of Dada has been outdistanced by social and political reality.

Likewise, Andy Warhol's underground film that, for six hours, fixes on a sleeping person, does not exceed in grandeur of conception the "Dada Scenario" of Kurt Schwitters, whose performer mounted the stage and simply counted for hours "without being in the least concerned about response in the audience." In actual execution the idea is artistically doomed, and Dada was never so pedantic as to try it. (Counting aloud, objectifying the ennui of passing time, is a topos extending back at least to the Romantics.)

For our own day, it is undoubtedly in the material arts—music, painting, sculpture—that the collaboration of chance and the numinosity of simple substance and things will reveal their most enduring potential for the arts.

NOTES

1. "Zur Eröffnung der Ausstellung 'Neue Realisten des Pop-Art,'" *Akzente*, XII (1965), 7-13.

2. (New York, 1966), p. 21.

3. "Anti-Art and Criticism," in *The New Art. A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York, 1966), p. 147.

4. (New York, 1961), p. 265.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 263.

6. See Peter Schifferli, *Das war Dada: Dichtungen und Dokumente* (Munich, 1963), p. 7.
7. "Probleme der Lyrik," *Gesammelte Werke* (Wiesbaden, 1968), IV, 1062.
8. Paul Klee, *Gedichte* (Zürich, 1960), pp. 41-49. Rhythms and tone of the later Else Lasker-Schüler are also anticipated here.
9. In *Literatur-Revolution 1910-1925*, ed. Paul Pörtner (Darmstadt, 1961), II, 475-476.
10. *Mit Licht, Witz und Grütze* (Wiesbaden, 1957), p. 44.
11. *Die Flucht aus der Zeit* (Luzern, 1946), p. 80. These and all following translations of German texts are my own.
12. See their contributions in *Akzente*, XIII (1966).
13. "Manifest zum 1. Dada-Abend in Zürich 1916," in *Literatur-Revolution*, II, 478.
14. "The Theater of Cruelty (First Manifesto)," in *The Theater and its Double* (New York, 1958), pp. 89-90.
15. "Probleme der Lyrik," *Gesammelte Werke*, IV, 1063.
16. "Maximen und Reflexionen, 1032," *Goethes Werke* (Hamburg, 1953), XII, 511.
17. *Wortträume und schwarze Sterne* (Wiesbaden, 1953), pp. 5 ff., reprinted in *Theorie der modernen Lyrik*, ed. W. Höllerer (Munich, 1965), p. 211.
18. *Computer-Lyrik. Poesie aus dem Elektronenrechner* (Düsseldorf, 1967), p. 40. The book can hardly be said to have an author, but it is "programmed and published" by Manfred Krause and Götz F. Schaudt. A few hundred words were taken from Goethe, Droste-Hülshoff, Claudius, and Tagore, along with their rhymes and syntactical sequences. Most nouns are in the plural, most verbs in the infinitive or present tense.
19. *Akzente*, XIII (1966), 397.
20. Hans Richter, *Dada—Kunst und Antikunst* (Cologne, 1964), p. 144.
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 81-82.
22. "Manifest Dada 1918," in *Dada Almanach*, ed. Richard Hülsenbeck (Berlin, 1920), p. 117.
23. Richard Hülsenbeck, *Dada: Eine literarische Dokumentation* (Hamburg, 1964), p. 29.
24. "Manifest Dada 1918," p. 128.
25. *Ibid.*, pp. 117-118.
26. Raoul Hausmann defines Dada as: "The exact technique of nonsense finally recognized as the sense of the world," in *Der Dada* (Berlin, 1919), reprinted in *Literatur-Revolution*, II, 507.
27. "Einleitung zum Dada-Almanach 1920," in *Literatur-Revolution*, II, 519.
28. According to Schwitters, "Dada Complet. 1," in *Theorie der modernen Lyrik*, p. 215.
29. J. C. Middleton, "Dada vs. Expressionism, or The Red King's Dream," *German Life and Letters*, XV (1961-62), 41.
30. "Einleitung," *Dada Almanach*, p. 8.