Abstract: This essay begins with a brief history of the problem of the body in philosophy showing how various philosophers have approached the problem and linked it to theory of language. The essay then offers a critique of structuralist/poststructuralist insistence that there is nothing outside the text, and that the only way the body appears in it is as a representation or trace. Kristeva says of modernist poetry that it tries to write in a language that manifests the points of the irruption of the body into language; semiosis, the bodily aspect of the generation of such symbolic systems as language. The aim is to work towards a dialectical theory of body and language – beginning with Tristan Tzara’s early manifesto soundings – although the term “dialectic” functions here as a metaphor for interaction. Thus aspects of Dada poetry can be looked at in terms of the corporeal dimensions of rhythms (as opposed to the purely linguistic understanding of formal rhythms such as meter), the importance of contradiction, paradox and nonsense, delirium, body image, and the performativity of the body – body as sign, such as is seen in the move from a purely verbal drama where the body is of secondary importance, to the kind of drama where the body is a significant part of the repertoire of gestures (including language) that make up dramatic performance, of whatever kind. What is centrally addressed is the relation between body and language, and the essay identifies the tension between a radically systemic and disembodied construal of language and the poetic practice of bringing into play an elemental dynamic. Language and the elemental body are equally constitutive of symbolic representation and are fused in what the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty terms “incarnate logic”. This incarnate logic, or voice, is expressed both in the movement of bodies across the dreamlike geography of the narrative, and the paradoxical figures which sustain narrative momentum; thus, space is neither purely mental nor objective (the observer is in the observation).
“Thought is made in the mouth” – Tristan Tzara

1. The corporeality of language

In his *Critique of Cynical Reason*, Peter Sloterdijk argues that the Enlightenment has bequeathed to contemporary western society a seriously distorted form of thought, one that constitutes itself as the negation of the materialism of the body. Thus knowledge has come to be understood purely in terms of the categories of the understanding and the logical intricacies of moral reasoning. Whether one is an empiricist or a rationalist, idealist or realist, the epistemological orientation to the world neglects the fact that the act of knowing is bound up not only with logic, but also the world of sensation, of sedimented bodily knowledge. For Sloterdijk, such disembodied knowledge is a form of evil insofar as knowledge of the other comes to be based on the paradigm of objectivity (Sloterdijk 1988: xxxi). In his opinion, the corrective involves what he terms a physiognomic philosophy, one that bases itself on knowledge of the body. He goes on to develop a kynical philosophy based on thinkers and writers in the past who posited the body as the revolutionary moment in history. According to Sloterdijk, the study of the body would offer society an inverse representation of itself, one that nonetheless would be eminently recognisable, if contrary to social *mores*. Even if Sloterdijk speaks of trying to find what it is that lies beneath knowledge systems, he does not envisage a being-in-itself, a realm of brute reality overlaid by social symbolic systems. What he does envisage is a philosophy wherein language and knowledge systems retain the dialectical relation with the body that constitutes a dynamic and not passive component in any symbolic system. In the following lines he states what, for example, the inclusion of the arse would mean for any future philosophy:

The arse seems doomed to spend its life in the dark, as the beggar among body parts. It is the real idiot of the family. However, it would be a wonder if this black sheep of the body did not have its own opinion about everything that takes place in higher regions. […] Dying and shitting are the only things one must do. […] The arse is thus, of all bodily organs, the one closest to the dialectical relation of freedom and necessity. […] To understand the arse