Chapter 16

“Je détruis les tiroirs du cerveau”: Reading Incoherence in Picabia and Automatic Writing

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The notion that Dada set out to destroy language and cleanse meaning before making way for the creative liberation of Surrealism, ushered in by écriture automatique, has become a critical-historical commonplace, largely under the influence of André Breton’s version of events. Yet this tidy sequence both sidelines the extraordinary verbal creativity of much Dada writing and arguably over-states that of Les Champs magnétiques, conventionally accepted as the first “automatic” work. It rests more on ideological conviction than on close attention to the texts, leading in the case of Francis Picabia (1879-1953) to the virtual neglect of a complex body of writing passed over as simply “nonsense”. The present paper compares the strategies of verbal and textual incoherence employed by Picabia to those found in Les Champs magnétiques by subjecting to close analysis two near-contemporary samples, both published in Dada periodicals and therefore, to readers of the day, clearly marked with the Dada “brand”. Each will be explored, as far as possible, from the perspective of a sympathetic audience encountering the text for the first time and with the aid of paratextual information largely drawn from the Dada periodicals themselves. This reader-oriented approach will allow us to capture the patterns of verbal and conceptual disruption in the texts and so characterise their particular types of incoherence.

“Je détruis les tiroirs du cerveau, et ceux de l’organisation sociale: démoraliser partout”: the “Manifeste Dada 1918” (Dada 3 (1918): 2) sets as a key goal the breaking down of the patterns of thought that
had led to the obscenity of World War. Tristan Tzara’s target is not just a set of abstract, hypocritical moral values, but European society’s whole system of concepts and assumed relations between them; not just corrupt ethics but the underlying ontologies on which they are founded. “Tiroirs du cerveau” bespeaks the bureaucrat’s desk, drawers and pigeon-holes full of tidily-arranged ideas, each in its allotted place, categorised, classified and put away together, and the War as a consequence of banal, consensual thinking rather than individual evil. The origin that the Dadaists identified from the earliest days of the movement was the uncritical use of everyday language by which society became complicit in the conceptual distortions it encoded. Hence the attack on words (in formulations echoing the *Parole in libertà* of Futurism) delivered by Hugo Ball in a manifesto read out at the first “soirée Dada” of 14 July 1916:

> Il ne faut pas laisser venir trop de mots. Un vers, c’est l’occasion de pouvoir se passer de mots et de langage. Ce langage maudit, auquel colle la crasse comme à des mains de courtiers, qui ont usé les pièces de monnaie. Je veux le mot là où il s’arrête et là où il commence. Chaque chose a son mot; c’est là que le mot lui-même est devenu une chose. Pourquoi l’arbre ne peut-il pas s’appeler Plouplouche et Plouploubache quand il a plu? et pourquoi doit-il s’appeler quoi que ce soit? Avons-nous à accrocher partout notre bouche? Le mot, le mot, les maux justes en ce lieu, le mot messieurs, c’est une affaire publique de première importance.²

For Ball, the reason why language is cursed, tainted with capitalist monetary values and locked in the straitjacket of consensual meaning, is a kind of lexical tyranny, the socially-enforced correspondence between concepts and the “maux justes”³ that represent them. His plea for the right to make new assignments of sounds to ideas, or even to refuse nomination altogether, echoes the key contemporary insight of Saussure, that language is not a nomenclature of existing concepts, but both the sound of a word (*signifiant*) and the meaning it names (*signifié*) are defined differentially, in contrast to those of adjacent words and concepts, and so possess, contrary to bourgeois assumptions, no inherently given “content” at all.

Tzara’s injunction in the 1918 manifesto for writers to demolish the *tiroirs du cerveau* picks up Ball’s challenge. He condemns authors of conventional, comprehensible literature for collaborating with a diseased and putrefying society, figured as a urine-soaked animal wallowing in its basest instincts: