Chapter 16

The Importance of Talking Nonsense: Tzara, Ideology, and Dada in the 21st Century

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Pour faire un poème Dadaïste.
Prenez un journal.
Prenez des ciseaux.
Choisissez dans ce journal un article ayant la longueur que vous comptez donner à votre poème.
Découpez l'article.
Découpez ensuite avec soin chacun des mots qui forment cet article et mettez-les dans un sac.
Agitez doucement.
Sortez ensuite chaque coupure l'une après l'autre.
Copiez consciencieusement dans l'ordre où elles ont quitté le sac.
Le poème vous ressemblera.
Et vous voilà un écrivain infiniment original et d'une sensibilité charmante, encore qu'incomprise du vulgaire. (Tzara 1975: 382)

Tzara’s recipe for Dada poetry remains one of his most well-known published pronouncements. Other famous Tzaraïsmes come to mind: “DADA doute de tout. Dada est tatou. Tout est Dada”; “La pensée se fait dans la bouche”; “Dada ne signifie rien” (Tzara 1975: 381, 379, 360). Over 90 years after the first Dada soirée at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich, Tzara still speaks to us as arguably the most popularly recognisable figurehead for Dada: but this Tzara is more often than not one made up of sound-bites or aphorisms – a sort of papier mâché Tzara strangely reminiscent of Dada montage in which human figures are bound up by newspaper headlines or even wholly constructed out of fragmented printed language – and not read closely as the producer of a heterogeneous six-volume Œuvres complètes who remained
active until his death in 1963, nearly 40 years after the totemic *Sept manifestes Dada* (1924).

In this chapter I want to use Tzara – and the ways in which he is remembered and read – as the starting point for a discussion about actually reading Dada textuality beyond gesture and quotable quotation. I will begin by summarising extended research I have conducted elsewhere in order to show ways in which it is possible to read Tzara’s Dada poetry in its own terms as polyvalent text, and as more or simply other than an extension or creative embodiment of Dada axioms and manifestoes. I will then consider some of the ways in which Tzara’s Dada manifestos speak to a reader coming upon them now, many decades after the highly particular socio-historical context within which they were produced. The chapter as a whole will call for an open-ended approach to Dadaist production, for a flexible mode of reading that is prepared to think about Dada not only as time-specific performance – as symptom, reaction and gesture within a particular period of modern history – but also as an extraordinarily mobile, multi-faceted and long-lived fund of meaning, ideas, and (despite Tzara’s ludic protestations to the contrary) ideology. I shall in turn argue that Dada retains a striking relevance to a range of modern phenomena, ranging from the mass news media and the rhetoric of international politics to the day-to-day business of simply getting by.

Let us then begin by looking at Tzara’s early Dada poetry, and in particular those elements that look like nonsense words. To take an example, in “Pélamide” from *Vingt-cinq poèmes* (1918) the vowel sounds of non-conventional elements mimic and morph into the phonology of actual words from the French language: “ambran bran bran et rendre centre des quatre / beng bong beng bang” (Tzara 1975: 102). Elsewhere, the opening of Tzara’s 1917 poem “Le Géant blanc lépreux du paysage” offers a more extended foray into seemingly nonsensical phonographic play, which is here offered within a fantastical scene of biological process and action:

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le sel se groupe en constellation d’oiseaux sur la tumeur de ouate
bonsour sans cigarette tzantzantzanga ganga
les microbes se cristallisent en palmiers de muscles balancières
bouzdouc zdouc nfoûnfa mbaah mbaah nfoûnfa
macrocytis perifera embrasser les bateaux chirurgien des bateaux
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