

The New Man—Armed with the Weapons of Doubt and Defiance: Introduction by Hans J. Kleinschmidt

I

For a while my dream had been to make literature with a gun in my pocket.

—HUELSENBECK, *En avant dada*, 1920

At the beginning of an extended lecture tour in the winter of 1970, Richard Huelsenbeck gave a talk on dada at the Goethe House in New York.¹ * He did not beat a drum nor did he read from a prepared manuscript. For an hour and a half he spoke with wit, charm, and the disarming blend of seriousness and self-irony so characteristic of this elder statesman of dada. The audience responded with delight when he described how he had chanted his early “African” poems to the accompaniment of a tom-tom, shouting at the end of each poem: “Umba, umba.” “I was very good at ‘Umba, umba’ in those days,” he said, and his listeners roared with laughter.

But this was New York 1970, not Berlin 1918. Dada 1970 was very dignified. The man who was the courier of dada, the man who brought it to Berlin and said that “by giving the word dada to the movement, I gave it its revolutionary impetus,” is today dada’s chronicler.

Following the lecture, a young person loudly asked for the floor: “Dr. Huelsenbeck! Our protest, our refusal to accept the Vietnam war, our refusal to accept the hypocrisy of our leaders, isn’t our protest the same as yours was?”

* Numbers refer to the Notes which start on page xlvii.

"I don't think so at all," he replied. "Because the two situations are quite different. You have to know the background story. All men are victims of—or, if you will—all men express their historical context."

There was silence. The young protester sat down in astonishment.

I had looked forward to this moment with a mixture of eager anticipation and apprehension. How, I had wondered, would a founder of dada react to the protest of 1970? In recent years he had emphasized more and more the philosophical, psychological, and moral aspects of dada, while minimizing its political side. As I expected, the issue of civil disobedience, its possible justification, had been raised at once.

Huelsenbeck fielded their probing questions calmly and wisely, no doubt disappointing most of the young people in the audience. "We were never really politicians," he explained. "Certainly not in Zurich, where ironically the police took an interest in our carrying-on while leaving completely undisturbed a politician who was preparing a great revolution. I am referring to Lenin, who was our neighbor at the Cabaret Voltaire.

"Dada was a protest without a program, without a political program. We protested the system without ever offering alternatives. Dada was a moral protest not only against the war but also against the malaise of the time; it was an awareness that something was very wrong.

"The protest arose from a deep creative doubt. One must protest what is morally wrong. To protest what is wrong is a creative act. It becomes a power in itself.

"Dada was a collective struggle," Huelsenbeck continued, "a struggle for individual rights, which included values. It was not interested in providing moral justification for political activism or, for that matter, for any particular system. The dadaist knows that moral struggle is individual; man must arrive at his own decisions, his own values."

From the audience, another voice was heard: "But in America . . ."

Huelsenbeck didn't wait. "In America," he answered, "the situation is different.

"Germans . . . we . . . were brought up with *die Kultur* to justify everything we did." Then he hesitated. "Our moral backing was *die Kultur*, the same *Kultur* that led us into World War One.

"We revolted against that system, against its justification, its *Kultur*. Dada was a revolt-plea, a plea for a new humanism. We knew," he said, "that within every civilization there is an inherent system that justifies that civilization. We protested all systems in the name of freedom, in the name of the individual."

This was the elder dada statesman speaking as philosopher and historian. He was leaving it to today's youth to start the fire the next time. The young had to arrive at a measure of spiritual awareness and achieve their own moral guidelines.

"But it is not only the young," he reminded the audience. "Everyone has this responsibility, the responsibility of existence, the creation of individual values and the acting upon them." This had been his own experience.

II

Dada is eminently civilizing. . . .

—HUELSENBECK, *Dada Almanach*, 1920

Richard Huelsenbeck was born on April 23, 1892, in Frankenau, in the province of Hesse, Germany. Frankenau at that time was very small and poor. Huelsenbeck's father was the town pharmacist and barely able to support his small family, for the peasants had little if any money to spend on medicines.

Richard was the younger of two children. (His sister died during the influenza epidemic in 1919.) Not long after Richard was born, the family left Frankenau and moved to Dortmund, in Westphalia, where his father became a chemist. His mother welcomed the move to Dortmund; she was not a particularly happy woman and had suffered a depressive episode while in Frankenau.

In 1911, Richard was graduated from the humanistic Gymnasium in Burgsteinfurt. A humanistic education in Germany in the early part of the twentieth century involved a constant emphasis on classical studies, since teaching was based on the principle of *kalokagatia*,² meaning that "what is beautiful must also be good." This was, of course, only a step from the rather arrogant assumption that the creation of anything "beautiful" in art, literature, music, or science justified a superior attitude to which less *kultivierte* people were not entitled.

Huelsenbeck's father had his eye on civil service and wanted him to study law, but Richard wanted to study literature and art history. The son won out. His maternal grandfather had awakened Richard's love for poetry early in his life, and he had been writing poems and short prose pieces since the age of sixteen. The boy felt that his grandfather was a frustrated poet and as a result "melancholic" most of his life.

He was permitted to go to Munich to study with two of the greatest teachers of that time: Heinrich Wölfflin, the great innovator in art-historical thinking and methodology, and Artur Kutscher, a professor of literature who belonged to Frank Wedekind's circle. Kutscher was a stimulating and provocative teacher who conducted his seminars in a fashion considered revolutionary in academic circles at the time: he encouraged his students to engage in lively exchanges of opinions and critical comments about literature, social conditions, and political events. It is not at all surprising that the young Huelsenbeck was particularly influenced by Kutscher, who, with Wedekind and the poet Max Halbe, sat at the round table of the "Eleven Executioners" in Kathi Kobus's well-known bar, the "Simple."³ Huelsenbeck's ambitious dreams of immediate acceptance by these formidable literary luminaries into their exclusive circle remained unfulfilled.

It was in Munich that Huelsenbeck met Hugo Ball. The year was 1912, the year of the *Blaue Reiter* of Kandinsky and Franz Marc and Paul Klee. Hugo Ball was close to this group and was profoundly affected by Kandinsky, whose personality and teaching made a lasting impression upon him. Ball had originally planned to collaborate on the *Blaue Reiter* almanac, but his work as stage manager at the Ida Roland Theater and other commitments interfered.

Ball was an extraordinary human being. A visionary, a deeply religious man who in his youth, under the influence of Nietzsche, had rebelled against the church, a highly gifted writer and poet, he combined, in a rare fashion, a sharply critical intellect with a nobility of spirit and grace. Ball was six years older than Huelsenbeck, and he exerted a strong influence upon the young student of literature.

In 1913, Ball and Hans Leybold founded the magazine *Revolution*, to which Huelsenbeck contributed as "Paris correspondent"—even after his return from Paris, where he had been studying philosophy at the Sorbonne during the winter semester of 1912/13. *Revolution* did not survive 1913, dying after five issues. The very first number was confiscated by the police because of Ball's poem "Der Henker" (The Hangman); in fact, for a while it looked as if Ball would have to stand trial for blasphemy.

The good burghers of Munich were outraged by two lines of the poem:

O, Maria, du bist gebenedeit unter den Weibern,
Mir aber rinnt der geile Brand an den Beinen herunter

[Oh, Mary, you are blessed among women,
While the wanton firebrand runs down my legs]

Revolution

Auflage 3000

Zweiwochenschrift

Preis 10 Pfg.

Jahrgang 1913

Verlag: Heinrich f. S. Bachmair

Nummer 1

München

15. Oktober



Richard Seewald: Revolution
(Original-Holzschnitt)

Inhalt:

Richard Seewald: Revolution — Johannes H. Becker: Freiheitlied — Erich Mühsam: Revolution — Hugo Ball: Der Henker — Leonhard Frank: Der Erotomane und diese Jungfrau — Klabund: Drei Gedichte — Fritz Venz: Das endlose Sein — emmy henning: Ich bin zu gleicher Zeit — Hans Harbed: Georg Büchner — Franz Blei: Aber Maurice Barrès — Kurt Hiller: Alfred Kerr — Adam: Die katholischen Gegenfüßler — Legbold: Der Vortagsreisende Noda Noda — Klabund: Das Herz der Laster — Bachmair: Die Aufregung in Wien — Notizen.

Mitarbeiter:

Adam, Hugo Ball, Johannes H. Becker, Gottfried Benn, Franz Blei, Max Brod, Friedrich Eisenlohr, Engert, Leonhard Frank, John H. v. Gorsleben, emmy henning, Kurt Hiller, Friedrich Markus Hübner, Philipp Keller, Klabund, Elfe Laster-Schüler, Iwan Lazang, Erich Mühsam, Heinrich Norwak, Karl Otten, Sebastian Schatnagl, Richard Seewald und andere.

Actually, the intent behind the poem was not so much to shock or desecrate as to show that although man creates ideals, he lives far from them. On the road to perfection, or to ideal expression, sensuality lies as an obstacle, the symbol of man's common expression. Symbolization and idealization are always symptoms of man's imperfection, just as art derives from incompleteness. The poet may lament the human dilemma that is the source of his endless quest for ideal love, for "goodness and wholeness from that which in fantasy had been injured and rendered bad."⁴

When Ball left Munich in 1914 for Berlin, Huelsenbeck followed him. Ball left because his plans for an expressionist theater in Munich had not come to fruition; Huelsenbeck had decided to study medicine in Berlin. It was a powerful instinct for survival that motivated this move rather than an abandonment of art and literature. Gottfried Benn and Alfred Döblin, two giants among the poets and novelists of the expressionist era in Germany, were also *Dichter-Ärzte*, poet-physicians, who often commented on the discouraging fact that they would have been unable to survive on their meager earnings as writers.

Huelsenbeck's energy during this next decade of his life was boundless. Even with his full preclinical program of anatomy, physiology, histology, chemistry, and so on, he found the time and inspiration to write poems, essays, and book reviews for Franz Pfemfert's *Aktion*, a leading literary magazine with strong left-wing coloration, and for the A. R. Meyer publishing company.

Huelsenbeck and Ball, who had found work as editor of one of the many little magazines of the time, were in Berlin when World War I burst upon their lives. Their opposition to the war grew into explosive feelings against the German Reich under the vainglorious Kaiser Wilhelm II and against "the German intelligentsia," one of Ball's favorite expressions. The famous declaration of German literati and scientists supporting the Kaiser and the war impressed them as a "most terrible perversion." To give formal and public expression to their antiwar feelings, the two organized meetings and poetry readings to commemorate poets killed at the front, such as Charles Péguy, a French poet who had fallen at the beginning of the war. Soon their stance became more aggressive, culminating in 1915 in an "expressionist evening" in the Harmoniumsaal, an evening with clearly dadaist elements. German *Kultur* was condemned as an ideological power tool of the government, and Huelsenbeck recited his first "Negergedichte," in which each verse ended with a deafening "Umba, umba."

Ball left Berlin for Switzerland in the fall of 1915, and Huelsenbeck

followed him a few months later. Ball wrote in his diary (published as *Flight Out of Time*) under the date of February 11, 1916: "Huelsenbeck has arrived. He pleads for reinforcing the rhythm (the Negro rhythm). He would like best to drum literature into the ground."

A few weeks before Huelsenbeck's arrival in Zurich, Hugo Ball and Emmy Hennings founded the Cabaret Voltaire. A Swiss precursor, the Cabaret Pantagrue, occupied the same house, the Meierei, in the Spiegelgasse, for several months in 1914. Swiss poets met in the Holländerstübli (Dutch Room) of the Meierei once or twice a week to hold readings of their own works. Their magazine, *Pantagrue*, appeared twice, in March and May of 1914.⁵

Tristan Tzara and Marcel Janco, two Rumanians who had originally planned to travel to Paris, had already joined forces with Ball and Hennings before Huelsenbeck's arrival. Tzara's manner, his aggressive managerial talent and his far-flung correspondence with literary luminaries, as well as the indisputable fact that he was very much at home in French, German, and Russian literature and therefore had a tendency to take over, antagonized both the sensitive and reserved Ball and the ambitious and self-willed Huelsenbeck. Although Tzara later claimed to have found the word "dada" (and seduced Arp into writing a mock "certificate" to that effect, which was promptly taken seriously by some historians), there can be no doubt that Huelsenbeck was the one who came upon the magic word in an edition of *Larousse*. Huelsenbeck's ire at Tzara's claim knew no bounds, and even as late as 1949, in a manifesto, he continued his attack on Tzara over this very matter. But the controversy over priority can be put to rest by Hugo Ball's letter to Huelsenbeck of November 8, 1926, from Sorengo-Lugano: "Would you care to write a few lines for the *Literarische Welt* about my new book, *Flight Out of Time*, a diary of 1913-21, Duncker & Humblot? I would be very grateful, so that no Berlin wiseguy gets hold of it. I am going to have the publisher send you the book. At long last I too have described dadaism in it (cabaret and gallery). *You would then have the last word in the matter, just as you had the first.* . . ."⁶

The single element that bound these young men of different nationalities, religions, and—most important—personalities together was their impassioned quest for a new reality in the social, political, and artistic-intellectual realm. The absurdity of the mission, its truly tragicomical aspect, was the fact that all of them were artist-intellectuals but utterly naïve about politics. In Zurich, therefore, this quest for a new reality found expression almost exclusively on literary and artistic levels. In their work, Arp and Janco

rejected the overheated expressionism of the Brücke artists (Kirchner, Heckel, Schmidt-Rottluff, Nolde, and Pechstein) as fervently as they turned away from the formalism of art nouveau and the decadent neoromanticism of academic art. For Arp, especially, abstract art was far more than a protest against established formalism: it was an expression of a basic truth as an artist.

The revolutionary zeal of this group of young men pushed them to the point of doubting the validity of language and all established grammar. Ball's and Huelsenbeck's sound-poems are evidence for the excitement, courage, and creative fervor of that moment in time. What united them in their extravagant performances was the conviction that their defiance and doubt contained a moral truth.

Not surprisingly, Huelsenbeck's parents had no understanding of their son's artistic and intellectual aims. When he presented his mother with a copy of his *Phantastische Gebete* (Fantastic Prayers), she burst into tears, fearing that he had gone stark raving mad.

Hugo Ball, who found his collaboration with Tzara in running the Galerie Dada not at all to his liking, left Zurich with Emmy and settled in the Ticino in August 1916. He returned for a few brief visits to Zurich but his break with Tzara and dada was final. Huelsenbeck reacted stormily to Ball's departure—with insomnia, a “nervous stomach,” continual vomiting, and obvious despondency. Although he found Zurich “unbearable” without Ball and determined to leave at once, he postponed his departure from week to week. He was still in Zurich in October when he wrote to Ball describing his suffering and noting, with characteristic self-irony, that his complaints may be “the punishment for that dadaist hubris you believe you have detected.” Only the news that his father was gravely ill put an end to his own ailments, and he left at once for Germany.

In January 1917, Huelsenbeck arrived in Berlin, where he soon united with Raoul Hausmann, George Grosz, Franz Jung, Walter Mehring, and others to found Berlin dada. A period of furious literary activity ensued. He contributed to several magazines: Wieland Herzfelde's *Die Neue Jugend*, in which Huelsenbeck published his manifesto “Der neue Mensch” (The New Man), Hausmann's *Der Dada*, and Pfemfert's *Aktion*. He also found time to write the long story *Verwandlungen* (Metamorphoses), which Roland-Verlag published in Munich in 1918. This story of a marital triangle was eventually hailed as “the first symbolic surrealist novella in Germany.”⁷ How Huelsenbeck found time and energy to attend classes at medical school and to prepare himself for his examinations remains a complete mystery.

But he did pass his state board and became a doctor. What an unusual

doctor, though! A photograph in the second edition of his *Phantastische Gebete* shows him sporting a monocle in his right eye, which was his way of parodying the Prussian Junkers. Most of his time was spent in the Café des Westiens and in interminable debates with poets, literati, journalists, and would-be politicians. There he met Else Lasker-Schüler, Gottfried Benn, Alfred Döblin, and the Herzfelde brothers, Wieland and John. At night Huelsenbeck continued to write poems and book reviews for the *Literarische Welt*, and somehow he found time to write his famous chronicle of dada, *En avant dada, Dada siegt!* (Dada Wins!), and *Deutschland muss untergehen!* (Germany Must Fall!), and also to edit the *Dada Almanach*—all published in 1920. The following year the prestigious Munich publishing house of Kurt Wolff brought out his novel *Doktor Billig am Ende* (The End of Doctor Billig), which Döblin praised as “ingenious, with striking character profiles and forcefully worked-out images.”

Berlin and the Club Dada were no longer a large enough forum for Huelsenbeck's ideas. In collaboration with Hausmann he organized “dada evenings and dada conferences” in Leipzig, Prague, and other cities, always provoking the unsuspecting citizenry, whipping them into a state of uncontrollable frenzy but always escaping personal harm at the last moment.

A falling-out with Hausmann over the direction dada was taking, and especially over Hausmann's increasing concern with artistic productivity of all sorts at the expense of a literary and social focus, led to Huelsenbeck's departure in 1922 for Danzig, where he became an assistant to Professor Wallenberg, a leading authority in the field of neuropsychiatry. It was here in Danzig that he met and married Frau Beate, a strong personality and a gifted artist, whose collages “fascinated” Huelsenbeck and impressed even Hans Arp. After a brief and unsuccessful attempt to build up a private practice as a general practitioner, Huelsenbeck returned to Berlin, but not without having first tried his hand at playwriting. Shortly before he left Danzig, his play *Das Geld unter die Leute* (Money among the People) was produced in the Stadttheater.

Back in Berlin in 1923, Huelsenbeck was a physician “only pro forma,” as he puts it, although he attended many psychiatric lectures in the Charité. These were years of inflation in Germany, when the economy was in a state of total chaos. Officially, Huelsenbeck worked on a panel of physicians in a National Health Clinic, but most of his time was predictably spent in the irresistible Café des Westiens. What he wanted most of all at this point was to remain a *poète engagé*, and, if this was not possible, a writer who would always be in the thick of things. Current events intrigued him, and journalism seemed to be the logical answer. He promptly became “perma-

nent correspondent" of the *Berliner Tageblatt*, the leading Berlin newspaper, and of the *Berliner Illustrirte*, the *Literarische Welt*, and the *Boersenkurier*.

In 1925 he hired himself out as ship's surgeon on a Hapag Line freighter that was bound for China, Japan, Burma, Formosa, Sumatra, and the Philippines. On his return, six months later, he found Europe "humorless, sad, and emaciated." He was writing as always, publishing brief pieces in magazines and newspapers, all the while collecting material for a book. In its July 1926 issue, *Der Querschnitt*, one of the most widely read art and literary magazines in post-World War I Berlin, published an article of Huelsenbeck's entitled "Ostasienfahrt" (Voyage to East Asia), which is notable for its sardonic little vignettes. It also reproduced a photograph showing a youthful and handsome Dr. Huelsenbeck in a self-assured pose. In 1927, we find him again as ship's surgeon, this time on board the *Reliance*, sailing around Africa. The trip led to a new literary success for him, *Afrika in Sicht* (Africa in Sight), a combination travel book and novel, which was acclaimed by Hermann Hesse in the *Berliner Tageblatt*.

In 1928, the *Berliner Illustrirte* sent him as a correspondent to Russia, Manchuria, and China. He met Chiang Kai-shek and attended the funeral of Sun Yat-sen. A travel book, *Der Sprung nach Osten* (The Leap to the East), and a novel, *China frisst Menschen* (China Devours People), appeared in 1930. The latter, his most popular book of the thirties, is set during the Chinese civil war of the twenties. Both these books have been called early examples of automatic writing in modern German literature.

In 1931, Huelsenbeck was again working as a far-flung correspondent, for the *Münchener Illustrierte*, another leading illustrated magazine, which sent him to the United States, Cuba, and Haiti. With Hitler's rise to power, in 1933, Huelsenbeck was immediately expelled from the Writers' Union and was "forbidden to write." Repeated efforts to obtain immigration visas for the United States for himself and his family (a son and a daughter) failed because he did not know how to get affidavits, and the next three years were dominated by fear of imminent arrest. Just before the Nazi take-over in the winter of 1932-33 Huelsenbeck's comedy *Warum lacht Frau Balsam* (Why Is Mrs. Balsam Laughing), which he had written in collaboration with Günter Weisenborn, was produced, with the prominent actress Agnes Straub in the lead, at the Künstler Theater in the Rankestrasse in Berlin. Several SS men attended the performance and created a disturbance, demanding to know where the authors were. Huelsenbeck managed to leave the theater but not without being followed by one of the

SS men. He got away, eventually, but his fear of being recognized sooner or later as the dadaist Huelsenbeck and author of anti-German literature remained strong. He devoted himself to the practice of medicine and hoped that the Gestapo would take a long time to discover that the doctor and the dadaist were one and the same person. In the meantime, letters and magazines that George Grosz kept sending from America attracted the attention of the Gestapo, and agents returned to Huelsenbeck's house more and more often, asking searching questions and convincing him that any letters he might send to America would be intercepted.

He realized that he must leave Germany and quickly. Again he found a job as ship's surgeon, this time on board the *Klaus Horn*, and took his wife with him. From the West Indies they were able to write to their friends in the States, asking for the indispensable affidavits. In the spring of 1936 Huelsenbeck was finally able to leave Germany, and a few months later Frau Beate followed him to New York with Mareile and Tom. Ironically, shortly before his flight from Germany, the big Ullstein publishing house brought out a novel of his, *Die Sonne von Black Point* (The Sun of Black Point), in one of their popular magazines.

The first two years in New York were hard, since Huelsenbeck was practically penniless. But he survived again. While waiting to be granted a New York State license to practice medicine (which he received through the personal intervention of Albert Einstein), he was able to support his family by writing a "sort of family history of a very wealthy industrialist, an incredibly boring job."

Motivated by a desire to relinquish dada completely, he changed his name to Charles R. Hulbeck. He lived a very quiet, impoverished life, having cut all contacts with his past. "All people's pasts are painful. You have to lose the past sometimes," he says, "in order to find it." And to walk away from the past meant, of course, to remain aloof from the people he had dealt with in the dada movement.

There was an unmistakable undercurrent of hope in this Americanization of Huelsenbeck's name. "Hulbeck"—the philistine American—was symbolic of his emerging new self, his new American self. Like George Grosz he wanted to give himself a chance to become a member of a new society, and—who knows—maybe a better one. His optimism undoubtedly accounts for his slip in *The Dada Drummer* when he turns the title of his friend's book around to read "A Big Yes and a Little No" (see p. 57). So the name change signified his intention to make a new beginning. He said: "Somehow it had to be possible to accept the face of the human."

He decided to practice psychiatry. He underwent a didactic analysis with Karen Horney and took part in founding the Association for the Advancement of Psychoanalysis. He later joined friends and associates in forming the Ontoanalytic Association in New York, and in 1969 he was given that society's coveted Binswanger Award for his contributions to existentialist psychiatry.

And, of course, he again found time to write. He wrote innumerable articles for German and Swiss newspapers and magazines about the "scene" around him, its social side, its psychological and philosophical and existential aspects. He wrote about the rapidly changing American art world with perception, a sharp eye, and at times, an even sharper pen. He was one of the first to recognize a dada kinship in Tinguely, whose work he furthered and about whom he wrote eloquently and with his old passion. His essays on George Grosz, Arp, and Duchamp are little gems of characterization. He also found time to write a book he whimsically entitled *Mit Witz, Licht und Grüte: Auf den Spuren des Dadaismus*, which is the central essay in this volume. This very German title with its slightly Berlinesque flavor, "With Wit, Light and Brains: On the Traces of Dadaism," seemed a bit heavy for this edition, and so we have changed it to "The Dada Drummer." Reminiscing about the days in Zurich and the years of turmoil in Berlin, filled with excitement, creative courage, and innovative daring, Huelsenbeck succeeds in blending, in a casual narrative flow, philosophical flashes with illuminating anecdotal vignettes, and he tells it all with disarming self-irony.

In 1969, he retired from his psychiatric practice and moved with his wife to Switzerland, where he now lives in a place called Minusio, in the Ticino. [Richard Huelsenbeck died on April 20, 1974, as this book was about to go to press.—Ed.] He is "retired" in a typically Huelsenbeckian fashion: he lectures all over Europe and returns once a year to the United States and Canada to hold forth about dada, and of course, he continues to write. More surprising, however, this man, who is remembered by many as one who wanted to destroy art, has become a painter. A painter *à l'écart*, perhaps, but still a painter who has already had several exhibitions in New York and two in Milan. So, just as Klee and Kandinsky were poets "on the side," Huelsenbeck is today a painter apart from his first and dominant creative

Bernard Karpel put it most succinctly and beautifully in referring to "the three seminal personalities" of the dada epoch: "Arp for art, Tzara for journalism and Huelsenbeck for avant-garde literature as politics and philosophy. Without him, Dada in Europe—as well as its American reaction—is unthinkable; with him, it becomes contemporary and luminous."

III

Dada is the creative activity par excellence.

—HUELSENBECK, *Dada Almanach*, 1920

Studying the vast literature on Dada that has accumulated over the past fifty years, one is reminded of the lapidary adage that “history consists of stories we invent about the past.” The temptation of an egocentric reinterpretation and re-evaluation of historical phenomena seems overwhelming. We impose structures and schemata upon the past in order to crystallize meaning and facilitate intellectual comprehension of developments that would otherwise remain obscure, bewildering, and threatening. And we also use history to understand ourselves better. We may fall into the trap of projecting our fears and prejudices, our moral, political, and aesthetic values into that past and thereby distort utterly what really happened. Kasimir Edschmid, who was a writer and intimate friend of many leading poets, playwrights, and literati of the expressionist era, and who was active in Germany during its heyday of hectic productivity and afterward, when it hit the bottom of the abyss, reveals the exasperation of a participant in events that he can no longer recognize as formulated by the historians. He wrote in 1964 that to interpret the German expressionist era from a purely philosophical point of view is as misleading as to proceed from an exclusively sociological approach. These scholars, he finds, have in common an almost uncanny method of selecting, “in all innocence, of course,” only the material that fits their theories. And since they usually have only *one* theory, they are completely unable to be objective and are forced “to mix with inimitable dogmatism the qualities and contents of books and the parts individual authors played . . . their priority, their passion, their impetus, their status—they see embodiments of their own ideas of that time and not the epoch itself.”⁸

The art historian has his own yardstick, the evolutionary approach. In his postscript to Richter’s *Dada: Art and Anti-Art*, Werner Haftmann tries to be fair to the contribution dada has made by saying that “Dada was the effective (and thus historically right) expression of a mighty surge of freedom in which all the values of human existence . . . were brought into play. . . .” But then he goes on to reduce dada’s innovations in art, typography, and literature to “derivations” stemming “almost exclusively” from “the Expressionists, Cubists, and Futurists, as well as Kandinsky, Klee and de Chirico.” Both Hugo Ball (in *Flight Out of Time*) and Huelsenbeck

(in *En avant dada*) clearly indicate their indebtedness to the futurists and the cubists, but dada went far beyond anything Marinetti or Boccioni ever dreamed of or intended. Even the futurist soirees were apparently not, as Haftmann puts it, “virtually indistinguishable” from the dada evenings. Edschmid says that they were “similar in the noise they made but not in their essence. . . . The dadaist nonsense was no mere anarchy but a demonstration of how a certain anarchism might lead to something positive after pensioning off a century-old tradition.”⁹

But the arbitrary attitudinizing about dada has gone far beyond anything that could be called subtle differences of emphasis, and thus research into the dada movement can be a historian’s nightmare. As if the rugged and reckless individualism of the founders with their personal feuds, their malicious gossip, and their mania for priority were not enough, we find that art and literary critics have succeeded in confounding the picture further by inventing their own “histories” of dada. There are the art historians who see dada only as a precursor to surrealism and find little, if anything, to differentiate one from the other. There are literary historians who write books about the poetry of dada and surrealism, making the work an exclusively French creation, with Tzara as protagonist, and with Ball, Arp, Hausmann, Schwitters, and Huelsenbeck never even mentioned.¹⁰ Anna Balakian in her biographical study of André Breton is thorough in her research of the surrealist movement and sensitive in her analysis of the life, background, and work of the “Magus of Surrealism.” But her partisanship runs away with her when she contrasts Breton’s military service during World War I (he was one of the young men “uprooted from their studies to defend their country”), with the draft dodging of Arp, Ball, and Huelsenbeck (who is described as “a physician-psychiatrist with a marginal interest in African dance”). The activities of the three dadaists are characterized as “quasi-artistic” and their “behavior was distinctly subversive both socially and politically. They practiced total unemployment for a while. Destruction and revolution were in the air; at a nearby café Lenin could be seen playing chess. The psychiatrist Jung was also in Zurich.”¹¹

Besides being unsympathetic to Huelsenbeck, these lines seem almost dictated by an attempt to establish political “guilt by association.” Lenin was “nearby,” but he was not interested in their productions; indeed he was singularly cool toward art in general and modern art in particular. Arp, Ball, and Huelsenbeck never met Lenin although Tzara later told friends in Paris that he “exchanged ideas” with him, but that impresses me as pure dada hubris. As to the implied connection with Jung, other authors

have gone even further and made Huelsenbeck a Jungian. But in fact, he never met Jung and never became an adherent of his psychoanalytic school of thought. Jung, incidentally, like Lenin, had no use for the dadaists and is known to have made some very unkind remarks about them.¹²

And as to whether the behavior of the dadaists in Zurich was "distinctly subversive both socially and politically," Michel Sanouillet for one has taken the proper stand that it is quite erroneous to stress the political side of their activities at the expense of their artistic experimentation.¹³

Even here—in their poetic innovations—many researchers have misguidedly maintained that they derived from Alfred Jarry. In fact, Jarry is frequently credited with being the father of the true dada spirit. To be sure, his outrageous *Ubu Roi* caricatured and ridiculed the bourgeoisie of the turn of the century. And he was the "inventor" of "'Pataphysics," the ironic "science of imaginary solutions," in which Dr. Faustroll explains that the world consists of nothing but exceptions, and that the rule is precisely an exception to the exception. The philistines' blind faith in progress through technology, their pride in material gain had provoked his devastating gibes. As early as 1902, in his novel *Le Surmâle*, he satirized the influence of the machine in contemporary life.

However, I believe that the influence of Jarry and his ironic brainchild, the science of 'Pataphysics, on the dada creations at the Cabaret Voltaire has been highly exaggerated. The evidence points in another direction. The sound-poems, simultaneous poetry, and nonsense poems produced by Arp, Ball, Huelsenbeck, and Tzara, in a remarkable display of spiritual harmony and artistic collaboration, have a source much closer to them culturally than Paris and Jarry.

Hugo Ball was to claim later that he was the inventor of the sound-poem, but this is no more or less than a case of convenient forgetting in the service of narcissistic ego gratification. In Munich, Ball had been very close to Kandinsky and the Blaue Reiter group. Kandinsky exerted an immense and lasting impression upon Ball, who said later (in *Flight Out of Time*) that Kandinsky had been much more than an inspiring teacher: "He was like a priest to us."

In 1912, the *Blaue Reiter* almanac, edited by Kandinsky and Franz Marc, appeared. While it was still in the planning stage, Ball had been included among its proposed contributors, although he was later dropped. In the published volume, Kandinsky described his experiments with poems devoid of semantic meaning: "The sound of the human voice was applied in pure fashion, i.e., without being darkened by the word, by the meaning

of the word.” It is totally inconceivable that Ball was ignorant of Kandinsky’s theories regarding both painting and poetry. Despite Kandinsky’s penchant for writing his own history (after all, wasn’t he the sole inventor of abstract art, according to him?),¹⁴ it is known that he mentioned to Ball the Russian phoneticists Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov, who had created what they called “transrational language” in their “zaum” productions. Arp, in an article on “Kandinsky the Poet,” mentions that such poems from Kandinsky’s collection *Resonances* were “recited for the first time in the Cabaret Voltaire.” This was another of the dadaists’ innovations: they were the first to recite nonsense lyrics and sound-poems publicly.¹⁵

As a matter of fact, “Lautgedichte” were familiar to the German public through the poetry of Paul Scheerbart and Christian Morgenstern. As early as 1897, Scheerbart wrote a sound-poem¹⁶ that starts with

Kikakoku!
Ekoralaps!
Wiao kollipanda opolasa . . .

He entitled the poem “Ich liebe dich.” Morgenstern’s *Galgenlieder* (Songs of the Gallows, 1905) were extremely popular, especially “Das grosse Lalulà”:

Kroklokwarfzi? Semememi!
Seiokrontro-prafriplo:
Bifzi, bafzi; hulalemi:
quasti basti bo . . .
Lalu lalu lalu lalu la!

Morgenstern’s poems were also part of the repertoire at the Cabaret Voltaire, and the similarity between them and Ball’s sound-poems is striking. This is from one of Ball’s earliest:

gadji beri bimba
glandridi lauli lonni cadori
gadjama bim beri glassala . . .

While reciting this very poem, Ball experienced something akin to religious ecstasy: “At this point, I noticed that my voice . . . had taken on the ancient cadence of priestly lamentations, that style of liturgic chant that reverberates through the Catholic churches of Orient and Occident.” He had attempted to penetrate “the innermost alchemy of the word, and even give up the word entirely, thus safeguarding poetry’s last and holiest realm.” New words had to be found, “brand-new words invented for one’s