

## *The Cultural Afterlives of DADA*

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**Abstract:** With his Dadaists friends, Tzara constructed in Dada an art based, like religion, on an interior play of conflicting emotions, soulful contradictions, and haunting echoes moving in auditory progression toward today's approximate culture. Beyond reinforced origins that incorporate such diverse influences as his native village or the fin-de-siècle Dandies, Tzara's approximate aesthetic conjures the self-separation of artistic sensibility that once consolidated the community of the early saints. The play *Tzara arde și Dada se piaptână: Fantoma de la Elsinore* (*Every Tzara Has His Dada: The Ghost of Elsinore*) by Ion Pop, Ștefana and Ioan Pop-Curșeu is an illustrative example of the cultural afterlives of Dada.

**Keywords:** Dada, Christianity, Dandyism, Levant, *Tzara arde...*, approximation

Marking the Centennial anniversary of Dada, the play *Tzara arde și Dada se piaptână: Fantoma de la Elsinore* (title of the Romanian language version) or *Every Tzara Has His Dada: The Ghost of Elsinore*. (title of its English version<sup>2</sup>), brings an innovative staging of the three martyr saints, Casdoas, Govdela and Gargal, foregrounded in traditional religious texts. According to theological sources, Gabdelas and his sister Kazdoa are, respectively, the son and daughter of the Persian Emperor Sapor who become Christian under the guidance of the faithful Govdela. The same religious circle also features prominently the martyr saint Dadas and Gargal, the wizard who converts to Christianity after witnessing the miracles wrought by Gabdelas's faith.

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2. The performance is a coproduction of the National Theatre in Cluj-Napoca, The Faculty of Theatre and Television UBB Cluj and the Persona Association; its premiere was at the National Theatre in Cluj on February 9<sup>th</sup> 2016, and it was also performed at the Riverside Church Theatre, Columbia University, New York, September 9<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

In the play's ingenious context the authors imagined<sup>3</sup>, the three saints are reconfigured as radically de-socialized beings that dissolve the ideological limits of art and life in the double guises of Dadaists and floating angel souls. Consolidating the memory of the Dadaists through this transformative process that draws strength from Christianity, the play's Director, Ștefana Pop-Curșeu appears to grant both the Dadaists and the saints a peculiar afterlife, bigger than life and more expansive, extravagant, and generous.

Personified on stage by talented actors, Gargal, the wizard of the religious texts and simultaneously the Dadaist Marcel Iancu/Janko is interpreted by Rares Stoica; Gabdelas, intermixed with Govdela, metamorphosed on stage into Huelsenbeck is played by Cristian Grosu; and Kasdoa, the updated version of Casdoas and associated with Hugo Ball, acquires stage life through Cătălin Codreanu.



**Fig. 1:** The Angel, the three Saints and Tristan Tzara coming back from the dead

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3. The play is a collective creation, written by Ștefana and Ioan Pop-Curșeu with the outstanding contribution and help of the avant-guard specialist, Professor Ion Pop. See his article *De la théâtralité des manifestes dadaïstes*, in *Studia UBB Dramatica*, 2-2016, p. 9-18.

In the outstanding interpretation of Filip Odangiu, Tzara is the play's raconteur and quintessential Dada artist, a possible cvasi-descendant of the martyr saint Dadas, who reminisces the moments of the Cabaret Voltaire and Café de la Terrasse with lines bounced back and forth with the other Dadaists, Marcel Janko, Hugo Ball and Huelsenbeck. In English, Romanian, French or German, the play's textual references can be traced back to journals and manuscripts but are also borrowed from Shakespearean plays, *Hamlet*, *Richard III*, or *Macbeth*, Baudelaire, or Villon to suggest the troubled background, behind WWI's front lines, of Zurich in 1915-1916, and of a variety of moments that marked the Dadaists' and Tzara's lives and work.

Although absent from the stage until the very last moment of the play, the Christian martyr Dadas suggests a significant and powerful connection with Tzara, who becomes in the last scene the fourth Saint. Like the enthusiastic founder of Dadaism who gathered followers in the early days of the new century, Dadas set the tone for the series of conversions during the reign of Emperor Sapor and is thus implicated in the subaltern discourse of the play. Further, since the obscure origin of the word DADA continues to fascinate, the play confers a new spirituality to the Dadaist movement through the dramatic association with the holy Christian martyrs by suggesting a powerful connectivity between Dadaism and a homegrown Christianity organically integrated in the fertile soil of Tzara's motherland. As a saintly apparition, Kazdoa (the double of Huelsenbeck) pontificates with sublime affectation: "Tzara came up with the word Dada on 8 February 1916, at 6 in the evening. I was there with my 12 children when Tzara for the first time uttered this word which filled us with justified enthusiasm. This occurred at the Café de la Terrasse in Zurich *et j'avais une brioche dans la narine gauche*"<sup>4</sup>.

While sublimating the forefront figures of the Dadaist movement with the ancient Christian saints and the 12 apostles of Huelsenbeck's pronouncement, and relying on Tzara as its mouthpiece to provide a ludic backdrop for the afterlives of Dada, the play may also be seen as articulating the Christian crisis and cultural conflicts that mar the face of an endangered contemporary Europe assailed by migrants and confused by weak leadership.

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4. The play, yet unpublished, exists in manuscript format. All quotations from the play indicate page numbers in parenthesis.



Fig. 2: Saint Casdoas, Saint Govdela and Saint Gargal

More specifically, in the context of an ascending secularism coupled with a surging rise of Islamic fundamentalism, the association of Dada and Christianity may be viewed as an allegorical commentary on the relationship between European and Christian values reflected in artistic representation. By definition, Europe is essentially Christian, born and nourished in the spirit of Christian faith and values. As Horia Patapievici has recently noted in his *Partea nevazută decide totul*, “the political annihilation of Christianity in Europe, which has been going on for some time now as new religious denominations are favored, spells out the demise of Europe”<sup>5</sup> (my translation).

To be sure, the two Pop-Curșeu project a bittersweet play that makes one think about life as a *theatrum mundi* and about religion as a matter of artistic frenzy or consciousness in afterlife, not of God; however, the play

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5. “Anihilarea creștinismului în Europa în mod politic, cum se întâmplă de la o vreme încoace când se favorizează alte credințe, înseamnă dispariția Europei.” Patapievici, Horia-Roman. *Partea nevazută decide totul*, Bucharest: Humanitas, 2015. 127-167.



resonates with a sort of Dada-triggered transcendence that inspires the human mind to be more loving, more generous and accepting, less egocentric and politically engaged than it is in its current state.

The play's dramatic interest is clearly in the ingenious and vivid association of the three Dadaists and Tzara with their corresponding, resurrected Christian saints in a contemporary Europe heavily embroiled in governmental regulations and distorting policies. Could the saints be troubled by neglect and a destabilizing threat of an invasive political correctness and a resulting necroreligious system? Working along similar lines with Michel Foucault's argument that modern biopolitical governance is predicated on the institutional regularization of life and promotes in fact the state's "power and capacity to determine who will live and who will die," any state in Europe, past and present, may go as far as to stipulate that a citizen be punitively removed from the societal space.<sup>6</sup>

In this context, Tzara's legendary disruption of the social fabric allows for his association with other rebellious spirits like Hamlet's, a suggestion intended by the play's artistic director who titles the English version of her play with cultural insinuation as *Every Tzara Has His Dada: The Ghost of Elsinore*. Firming up the literary lineage that links Hamlet to Tzara, in the play's effortless movement across cultures and historical eras, young Tzara, like the celebrated Prince who feigns madness to escape punishment, falls back on the unlikely diagnostic of *dementia praecox* as a type of efficient insanity used in real life to escape mandatory drafting for military service in WWII:

Doctor R: Come in gentlemen. Mr. Samuel Rosenstock?...You have been asked to report for conscription. Are you fit for military service to the country? Are you aware that half of it is under occupation?

....

Doctor C: Let's see. (*reads excerpts from the report*) "The patient is unable to adopt a behavior that is oriented towards a precise goal, features serious memory and language disorders, catatonic states and cognitive dysfunctions...he claims, being convinced that he is right, to write coherently, even though the next sample of his texts speaks for itself..."

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6. Foucault, Michel. "Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976 trans. David Macey.

Dr. R (*to the other doctor*): It's clear, he's insane.

Dr. C: I don't think we need such soldiers.

Doctors R and C: The diagnosis is firm: dementia praecox. Goodbye." (19)

Further linking the play's text to *Hamlet*, Tzara's next outburst appropriates verbatim Hamlet's projection of madness as a mere cover for his plans to unmask the king's crime. "What they don't know is that I'm mad only from the East; when the wind does not blow, I can easily tell the difference between a hawk and a heron (19)", he declares by way of identifying himself with Hamlet, the character and his exploits in the larger theatrical frame. Like Hamlet, who used the theater to project his inward directed emotions in the actors' staging of the *Murder of Gonzago*, Tzara relied on performance in the early days of Dada to free his imagination fettered into the absurdity of conventions and to question and smash his Jewish cultural taboos.

In another humorous and innovative staging of his emotional kinship with Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark, Tzara has his fictional attendant, Glauser, call him "Prince of Da" and thus leaves open the association of Dada/Tzara with Hamlet/Denmark as a suspended moment within the fluid nature of the Dada representation whose purpose is acknowledged in *Monsieur Antipyrine's Manifesto*:

DADA remains within the framework of European weakness, it's still shit, but from now on we want to shit in different colors so as to adorn the zoo of art with all the flags of all the consulates. We are circus ringmasters and we can be found whistling amongst the winds of fairgrounds, in convents, prostitutions, theatres, feelings, restaurants, ohoho, bang bang." (20)

Flowing next from the walls of Elsinore into an African Song that is in fact a phonetic poem, the Dada Dance entails a precise choreography that combines a rigidity of arms and simultaneous sauntering on stage as the Dadaists protest against various taboos; the chaotic shouting culminates with Tzara's pronunciations of Dada's objectives: "abolition of memory; abolition of archeology; abolition of prophets; abolition of the future; absolute and unquestionable faith in every god that is the immediate product of spontaneity [generating] a roaring of tense colors, and interlacing of opposites and of contradictions, grotesques, inconsistencies: Life."<sup>7</sup>

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7. *The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology*, ed. Robert Motherwell. New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, 1951. 22



Fig. 3: Dada dance and manifestos

Unlike the troubled Prince's agonizing thoughts and murderous outbursts, however, Tzara's striking behavior is never a dark night of the soul; his gingerly trespasses are of a minor and pardonable kind, in the realm of the aesthetic imperatives of art, and could be seen as an excessively exuberant life that glides effortlessly, the way angels do, into the space of the Dadaists' afterlives. On stage, Tzara symbolically draws a cross on his coffin-like suitcases – a gesture of resurrection through art and performance that suggests Dada's breaking out of the Swiss space and journeying with veritable wanderlust not only to Paris and Berlin but into the movement's afterlife.

Much like Tzara who moved within the parameters of shock and surprise, Dadaism, the movement he created, was invented at the twilight of the Habsburg Empire as a manner of being, *a façon d'être* that did not depend only on its worldly, visible manifestation and its negative relation to the fin-de-siècle aestheticizing movements and ornament, but also, and greatly, on the challenges of the religious quest. In self-mocking tone, Tzara sees his role as "pointillizing in the clay in which the master artificer, God, has imprisoned his talent, amusing and angelic when it overwhelms the bourgeoisie (15)".



**Fig. 4:** Hugo Ball (C, Codreanu), Tristan Tzara (F. Odangiu), Maya Chrusiecz (S. Pop-Curseu), Marcel Ianco (R. Stoica) and Huelsenbeck (C. Grosu)

From its inception at the Café de la Terrasse, behind the war zone in a pacific Zurich that sheltered exiles, Dada aimed to jolt with a fist or an axe a complacent bourgeois world bored with its decadence, *l'art pour l'art* movements, Symbolism, the *Jugendstil*, and with Nietzsche's much hailed announcement of the death of God and the claim, in *Birth of Tragedy* (1870), that life could only be justified on aesthetic, not ethical grounds. As Hugo Ball humorously reminds us, "For me a revolution in the form of "art for art's sake" is not seductive at all. I want to know the direction in which something is heading."<sup>8</sup>

To draw attention to their own agenda, Dadaists wore clothing and devices that fashioned a literary style so outlandish that it seemed in the beginning not to be a style at all; it was, however, a dramatically loud and cluttered ensemble that made the movement's chief advocates heard beyond the sordid and dull fin-de-siecle, offering Tzara the chance to escape his

8. Ball, Hugo. *Journal*, 30 June 1915, 60. 9

ancestors' narrowly circumscribed village of Moinești for the broad vistas of European culture. Behind the elusive surfaces of meaningless sounds without center or purpose Tzara introduced to a cheering crowd at the Cabaret Voltaire not so much a variety show filled with circus figures as a reimagined constellation infused with the sacred images of his native land: the shouting of Romanian peasants became the bizarre metaphors and word contractions of a form of specific art and the recognizable signs of a reinvigorating tradition that proposed to demolish the decrepit cultural matrixes of Europe's "exquisite corpse," as Andrei Codrescu, the fine cultural observer of the Levant, was to write in his interesting study, *The Posthuman Dada Guide: Tzara and Lenin Play Chess* (2009). By contrast with this culturally putrid world, Tzara's spirit foregrounded boldly the artistic body in motion, with the dubious artistic and social status of an approximate man liberating his soul from its material and social fetters in the Dada dance: *Une Dada dance bien connue consiste à mettre ses bras en l'air (épaule perpendiculaire au tronc et avant-bras perpendiculaire au corps) et à sauter en même temps* (20).



Fig. 5: The Dadaists at the Café de la Terrasse

In the play's English version *Every Tzara has his Dada*, Tzara is once again the approximate man who asks for the chance to go back to 1915, "even if just for an hour," to the glorious days when, dressed in a dandy suit, he was "an ex-communist, a cabaretist, a multi-linguist, a historicist, an exorcist, Mysticist, neo-chemist, contortionist, equilibriste, absintheist, accordionist, tragedianist, encyclopaedist, pornographist, blah-blah-blahist, felationist, sternocleidomastoidist," (3-4). Having triggered the dramatic movement of the play, Tzara's desire to revisit the past underscores not only a confessional note but also a desire to expiate in Dadaist terms, by adopting a new type of religious discourse fit for the afterlife but also in keeping with his Jewish tradition. Having staged Tzara in this theatrical production, Pop-Curșeu's play is likely to have found inspiration in the fertile tradition of Tzara's Jewish heritage that took the bawdy jokes, ludic songs, and shadow theatre of the shtetl to the theater, song and cabaret of Broadway and Hollywood. Against the musical background of Romanian music playing like spontaneous rap, in the play's third section *The Confession*, Tzara speaks about his father's death, the troubled relations between father and son, and the news of his father's death that reached him by way of a letter from his old friend, Ion (Bebe) Vinea. Shattered emotionally, Tzara has to fill the vacuum left behind by inventing his own theatrical space, the Dada.

Thrust into the world, Tzara imagines himself embarking upon an imaginary, mythical journey back in time that parallels that of Orpheus, or perhaps Dante. The first stop is at the Cabaret Voltaire, with Marcel Janko as the guide. Here is Emmy Hennings, selling bubble gum cigarettes and photos of herself in a seductively alluring role played with remarkable aplomb by Ștefana Pop-Curșeu. Her costumes provide something more than an ornamental surface of Dada line and contour as they resemble an alternative to the fin-de-siecle decadence and the traffic of clothes. Transformed into a living artwork, Emmy Henning's elaborate attire, like that of the caged bird beautifully enacted by Patricia Brad in another performance of the National Theatre in Cluj<sup>9</sup> becomes a measure of artistic expression and representation falling into the broad range of body artists and artistic innovation which the Dadaists projected at the Cabaret Voltaire.

Throughout the play, the actors' extravagant clothes capture with great finesse the impulse to aestheticize the body which Dadaism inherited from Dandyism and which turned them at once into priests and victims. As

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9. *Sânziana și Pepelea* by Vasile Alecsandri, directed by Alexandru Dabija, premiere October 6th 2013.



Baudelaire observed with prophetic accuracy in speaking about the dandyists, such “complicated material conditions to which they [Dandyists] submit, from an impeccable toilet at every hour of the day and the night to the most perilous feats of the sporting field, are no more than a system of gymnastics designed to fortify the will and discipline the soul.”<sup>10</sup> Supporting their elaborate game in similar fashion, the Dadaists fanciful clothing aimed to project a certain religion by physically inviting a process of socialization, what an 1893 journal of gymnastics called “a complete system of psychic, aesthetic and physical culture.”<sup>11</sup> It was, at the turn of the century, for Dandyists and for Dadaists after them, a “rediscovery of the body” as a reaction against “bourgeois respectability,” both an aesthetic and an ascetic ideal which the Dadaists embraced with the fervor of converts to their new religion. As Huelsenbeck exclaims in the play by quoting from Hugo Ball’s Journal, “Art aims to please the public with exquisite tastes” (7).



**Fig. 6:** Tristan Tzara arriving in Zurich in 1915, welcomed by Marcel Ianco

10. Baudelaire, Charles. *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*. trans. and ed. J. Mayne. London: Phaidon Press, 1964.

11. Quoted in Mark M. Anderson. *Kafka's Clothes: Ornament and Aestheticism in the Habsburg Fin de Siècle*, New York: Clarendon Press, 1992. 74



By the end of the Great War that has encroached the Dadaists behind the war zone, "Dada had broken out of the Swiss matrix. Paris was already full of Dada flyers, Berlin was also roaring dadaizing" (23), but Tzara was contemplating new shores. Unlike his friend Janko who went back to Bucharest, Tzara chanted in characteristically singular mode: "I've carried my country on my back" (24). The questions of identity, place and belonging translated into Dada and the quality of a dada life: contradiction, approximation, prodigality, resistance to definition.

He ended up in Paris, where the Dadaists had to make way for Breton and the surrealists. But the Surrealists were unable to heed the Dadaists who "wanted to make people better, to help them understand that the only brotherhood is found in a moment of intensity in which the beautiful is life focused on the height of a tightrope ascending towards effulgence" (*Faites vos jeux*, 24)

Could this sense of idealized brotherhood have prompted Tzara to join the horrors of Soviet politics and membership in the French Communist Party? Or was it the fear of fascism? Pop-Curșeu's play certainly flirts with the idea of a silly choice when their Tzara addresses Hugo Ball as "Comrade Guidencrantz" and Huelsenbeck as "Rosenstern" in yet another allusion not only to Hamlet's two meddling friends who end up badly but also to Queen Gertrude of the Shakespearean original who mixes up the two worthies as a direct reaction to their clownish identity. With the messianic expectations of Communism dampened by Khrushchev's 1956 invasion of Hungary, Tzara renounced membership in the party and, in the play's lineup, became linked with the murkiness of the Levant, which is suggested in Tzara's claim of "having been born in Constantinople" (26). For him, as for the Dadaists, borders were largely imaginary, or in any case the world was an extended Levant that translated into an eternity of connectedness separating the official, paper geography from aesthetic constructs.

To Saint Gargal's pronouncement that the Dada Movement died because of "the absence and refusal of ideology" or that the Dada Movement died in 1923, Tzara is offering a solid rebuke: "The whole world was Dada, take a look around you, dada is still alive today, self-dissolution propelled it into eternity" (25). Is this a Christian eternity? One is certainly inclined to feel that way given Radu Cernatescu's view that "Dadaism is revealed as the most violent mystical movement in the arts"<sup>12</sup> or the Dadaists' own claim in

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12. "Mistica dadaismului," <http://Radu-CERNATESCU.BLOGSPOT.COM/>. May 1, 2008.

Manifestul colectiv, "Dada soulève tous" of 1921 that "Dada existe depuis toujours. La Sainte Vierge déjà fut dadaïste."<sup>13</sup>

By attaching Christian ties to their claims, the Dadaists longed for transcendence in their art. This certainly appears to be the glue of Pop-Curșeu's play as the authors link the major Dadaists with the saints of the early Christian church now residing in the celestial realm and with Tzara knocking at Heaven's gate.

With Dada leaking out into today's world, would a revival of the interest in the aesthetic sublimation of Christian values unify today's Europe? This could certainly be a hidden message within the play. Tzara, the approximate man, lives in the present as much as in the past or the future. Mysticism and metaphysics are the popular forms of Dada now in vogue, particularly evident in the New Age, vegans, gluten free diets, Blue Whale games, churches, mosques, and so on. As the countries of Europe are besieged by migrants and terrorist plots, the resetting of the button to simple village wisdom embraced by Dada is suggested humorously in the play's Romanian title, *Tzara arde și Dada se piaptână*. Widely circulated in various Balkan countries, the proverb *țara arde și baba se piaptână* has a form of mystical currency with its reliance on the traditions of the Old and the New Testament that may just take Europe on its onward journey of faith posing as the afterlife of art in a reconfigured contemporary space.

Like Hamlet who casts his dying voice for the new Prince Fortinbras in a suggestive turn from Denmark's hierarchic sovereignty to the anticipation of the new, horizontally configured political structures<sup>14</sup>, Tzara marks at heaven's gate the representational field of Dada as the space of art in which sovereign and subject alike are inscribed. Dramatically, then, Dada allegorizes in Pop-Curșeu's intriguing vision the transition from modernity, where art and the artist are inseparable from the collective domain, to Dadaism's rationalized and effusive aesthetic space where the Dada artist emerges, even as he constitutes himself against the aesthetic, as *a contradiction* that our world will retain and cherish. With Tzara, the aesthetic is recast precisely as the collapse of the horizontal, or as transcending the reinforced horizontal into horizon, i.e., the discontinuity of Fortinbras's rule as a story of reinforced aesthetic origin which Tzara appropriates from Elsinore as his own self-inscribing character, the conjuring alternative of the inevitable shadow / artist of his own ordering and inaugural determination stacked on exclusionary and

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13. Manifestul colectiv, "Dada soulève tous" (1921), in 19:24, Ed. Daniel Stuparu.

14. Lupton, Julia. *Thinking with Shakespeare: Essays on Politics and Life*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2011, 89-91.

consolidating self-separation. Through Tzara, as the play's Christian setting suggests, the Dada artist evokes that quintessential aesthetic sensibility of the early saints afflicted with a narcissism prior to ego, indistinguishable from sociality and expressing a community in suspension.

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