

**CHANSON  
DADA**

**TRANSLATED BY LEE HARWOOD**



**TRISTAN TZARA  
SELECTED POEMS**



**BOSTON, MASS.**

*In memory of Gael Turnbull*  
(1928–2004)  
*poet explorer*

CHANSON DADA  
TRISTAN TZARA, SELECTED POEMS

Copyright © Lee Harwood 1987, 2005

Excerpt from *L'homme Approximate* (1925–1930), c. Editions Gallimard, Paris, 1968.

Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917/1964, photo credit: CNAC/MNAM/Dist. Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, NY.

Black Widow Books edition, November 2005

Black Widow Books  
134 Boylston Street  
Boston, MA 02116  
[www.blackwidowbooks.com](http://www.blackwidowbooks.com)

ISBN-13: 978-0-9768449-0-7

ISBN-10: 0-9768449-0-7

Library of Congress Control Number: 2005905003

Production & design by Windhaven Press ([www.windhaven.com](http://www.windhaven.com))

Printed in the United States

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*Tristan Tzara personally approved the publication of a number of these translations and his son Christophe Tzara later gave his permission to publish this selection of his father's poems. My whole-hearted thanks for their kindness and generosity. I would also like to thank Michael Couturier for his advice on my translations.*

Lee Harwood

## evening

fishermen return with the waters' stars  
they share bread with the poor  
thread beads for the blind  
emperors go out in the park at this hour which  
is like the bitterness of engravings

servants bathe the hunting dogs  
the light puts on gloves  
shut window in consequence  
go out room light like the apricot's stone  
like the church's priest

good lord: make soft wool for doleful lovers  
paint the little birds in ink and renew the face  
of the moon

—let's go catch beetles  
to shut them in the box  
—let's go to the streams  
to make baked earth jugs  
— let's hug ourselves  
by the fountain  
—let's go to the public park  
—until the cock crows  
and the town is scandalized  
or to the loft  
the hay prickles you hear the cows low  
then they remember the little ones  
let's go

## Cosmic Realities Vanilla Tobacco Dawnings

1

listen I'm going to make a poem but don't laugh  
four roads surround us and we tell them light  
ON THE PRAYER POSTS AND YOU WERE TALKING TO  
elephants at the circus like the light  
I don't want you to be sick anymore you know  
but why why do you want to whistle this morning  
telephone  
I don't want I don't want and he grips me TOO  
TOO HARD

2

this copper morning  
your voice trembles on the line  
yellow locked itself in the villa like blood  
the woman covered in verdigris of verdigris  
dissolved like mist in small bells  
tear—seaman's ticket—white tear  
here's a light which could be black  
flower

3

on steel and salt lillies tell me again that your  
mother was kind

4

I am a line which expands and I want to grow in an  
iron tin pipe  
I say that to amuse you

5

not because I could have been a wax archangel  
or evening rain or car catalogue

6

in the graves red life is boiling  
for silence I'll have my joys  
you told me that I may pity you  
and I didn't cry when you saw me, but I would have liked  
to cry in the tramway  
you said to me I want to leave  
the pearls of the tower of my throat were cold drum-major  
for the hearts and slide  
insects in the thought don't bite me,

ah { flower of fingers  
the water snarls

and if you like I'll laugh like a drain and like a  
fire

7

say: empty thought  
quick you know  
I'll be a  
cello

8

I'll hold your coat for you when you leave as if you  
weren't my sister



9

peals  
in frost steel  
do you sleep when it rains?

10

the farm hands wash the hunting dogs  
and the king strolls followed by the judges who resemble  
doves  
I've seen at the sea's edge the tower bound with its sad  
PRISONER  
in the pits switch on  
in consequence } of ice  
lord lord  
forgive me }

11

LARGE TEARS slide the length of the draperies  
head of horses on the basalt like  
glass toys between the stars with chains  
for the animals  
and in the glaciers I would like to follow  
with root  
with my sickness  
with the sand that swarms in my brain  
for I am very intelligent  
and with the darkness

12

THE PORCELAIN song thought  
 I'm tired—the song of queens  
 the tree bursts with food like a lamp  
 I CRY want to rise higher than the fountain snake  
 in the sky for earthly gravity no longer exists at school and in  
 the brain  
 my hand is cold and dry but it has caressed the spurt  
 of water  
 and I have again seen something in the sky as the water screws  
 the fruits and the gum

13

but I am serious in thinking about whats happened to me  
 lila  
**LILA**  
**LILA**  
**LILA**  
**LILA**  
 your brother shouts  
 you tell him  
 between the leaves of the book your hand moist  
 with lime paint my belief  
 burns without light in the wire  
 LILA

14

your eye is large  
 lord in the draperies

20 *Tristan Tzara*

your eye runs behind me  
your eye is large as a ship forgive me  
send medicines  
the stone

14(a)

lover's heart open in the stream and electricity  
let's consider the point  
always the same  
hairs grow around it  
it begins to jump  
grow  
climb towards the final burst  
encircle slips  
quickly  
quickly  
rolling  
nocturnal  
turnings

15

among the sorrows there are organisms and the rain  
your fingers

# TURNINGS

16

bay  
your heart will fly making things so high  
in flights of shudders squeezed like the tree  
between the blushes of splendours  
you leave



the paths  
the branches  
lick the snow of thighs

17

where one sees bridges connect breaths in the night  
the darkness divides and collects in the villas  
led by paths and winds towards your caress  
rain

18

the horse eats coloured  
snakes be quiet!

19

the stone  
dances dances lord  
the fever thinks a flower  
dances dances on the hot stone  
tress  
discordantly begins again for the darkness *my sister, my sister?*

## 1 Preface

It's an evening early in the spring of 1916. In a shabby side street in Zurich is a small bar. Here there is a cabaret—the Cabaret Voltaire.

Outside Zurich and neutral Switzerland is the ceaseless carnage of the First World War. In the German offensive at Verdun in between March and September there are 395,000 French casualties and 405,000 German. This is to be followed by the British offensive on the Somme where between July and November the casualties are 400,000 British and 260,000 German. The 'blood bath' fills up and the bishops bless the guns.

Inside the cabaret a group of young men and women, poets and painters, exiles and refugees from the war, perform. Around the walls of the bar are pictures by Hans Arp, Viking Eggeling, Marcel Janco, Macke, Marinetti, Modigliani, Nadelmann, Pablo Picasso, and many others. 'Coloured papers, ascendancy of the New Art, abstract art and geographic futurist map-poems.' On the small stage the performers recite poems, shout manifestos, sneer and strut and charm, sing, dance, and make music.

Tristan Tzara, Richard Huelsenbeck and Marcel Janco perform a 'simultaneous poem'. All three recite together in three different languages—French, English and German—texts that have nothing to do with one another and are a mixture of poetry, sentimental popular songs, pompous and boring letters and journals, nonsense, and pure and meaningless sounds. And all this is interspersed with the beating of a giant drum, whistles being blown, laughter and lots of rrrrrrrrrrrrr.

This explosion is followed by 'Negro' songs. The words sung or chanted and all accompanied by 'big and small exotic drums'.<sup>2</sup> The texts themselves are sometimes taken from German anthropology magazines and then treated by Tzara, or sometimes totally invented and interspersed with mumbo-jumbo.

Then Hugo Ball, in a costume made of tubes of cardboard, is carried on stage and intones—



Raoul Hausman,  
*Wooden Head*, 1918

gadji beri bimba  
glandridi lauli lonni cadori gadjama bim beri glassala  
glandridi glassala tuffm i zimbrabim  
blassa galassa tuffm i zimbrabim...<sup>2</sup>

Ball wears a tight-fitting cylinder of shiny blue cardboard with two more blue tubes for his legs. Over this is a huge coat collar, again cut out of cardboard. It's scarlet inside and gold outside and is fastened at the neck so that by raising or lowering his elbows it could flap like a pair of wings. And on his head he wears a high blue and white striped witch doctor's hat. As he continues to chant—

zimzim urallala zimzim urallala zimzim zanzibar...<sup>3</sup>

—some of the audience begins to protest, some laugh and applaud. Ball continues, unable to move because of his costume.

There is piano music and balalaika music. Emmy Hennings performs

songs with an intentional shrillness that jars and perturbs the audience. There is ‘tumult and solar avalanche.’

And all this is to be called DADA!  
And what’s DADA?

## 2 Apologies and Asides

As always when we turn to the Oxford English Dictionary we get a neat enough summary of what we’re looking for. And so—‘*Dada*...an international artistic movement repudiating tradition and reason, and intended to outrage.’

This is all true enough. Dadaism was a brief anarchic art movement that started in Zurich and lasted from 1916 to 1923 at the latest. For many people, and even those interested in the history of art, that’s it. They might add that it’s considered the first ‘anti-art’ movement as well as the father of Surrealism. But after such generalizations the details blur and the trouble begins. The trouble is in how we can come to an understanding of the very special and particular qualities this movement represents. The Dada movement was filled with contradictions and complexities and it’s only too easy to be distracted by the historical chronology of Dadaism and to miss the essence of Dada.

To get a clear idea of Dada some wider issues must be considered if we’re to avoid approaching it as an irrelevant though colourful antique. We also need to get past some of our present prejudices. Dada, as I’ve said, is considered the first ‘anti-art’ movement and these days there is nothing more art conscious than ‘anti-art’ movements. ‘Anti-art’ groups depend for their effect, their power to shock or impress, on their audience having firm preconceptions of the nature of art and their being knowledgeable about contemporary art and art history. Marcel Duchamp’s *Mona Lisa* with a moustache drawn on is fairly meaningless if you don’t know the original portrait by Leonardo da Vinci. In recent years the whole concept of a self-conscious avant-garde, especially ‘anti-art,’ has been rightly questioned

## Sources

The best collection of the main Dada manifestoes and texts in translation is *The Dada Painters and Poets* edited by Robert Motherwell (Documents of Modern Art, vol. 8 / Wittenborn, Schulz, Inc., New York, 1951). Of all the books on Dada the most readable and accurate account is Hans Richter's *Dada Art and Anti-Art* (Thames & Hudson, London, 1965).

Sources of Quotations:

- 1 Tristan Tzara—*Zurich Chronicle 1915–19* (in *Dada Almanach*, Berlin, 1920) included in Motherwell's anthology
- 2 Hugo Ball—*Flight out of time* (Viking Press, New York, 1974)
- 3 Hans Richter—*Dada Art and Anti-Art*
- 4 Allen Ginsberg—*Howl & other poems* (City Lights Books, San Francisco, 1959)
- 5 Tristan Tzara—*Dada Manifesto 1918* (in *Sept manifestes Dada*, Jean Budry, Paris, 1924) see Motherwell
- 6 Hugo Ball—*Zur Kritik der deutschen Intelligenz* (Freie Verlag, Bern, 1919)
- 7 Richard Huelsenbeck—*En Avant Dada: A History of Dadaism* (Paul Steegemann Verlag, Hanover / Leipzig, 1920) see Motherwell
- 8 Tristan Tzara—*Le surréalisme et l'après-guerre* (Nagel, Paris, 1947)
- 9 Tristan Tzara—*Manifesto on feeble love and bitter love* (in *Sept manifestes Dada*) see Motherwell
- 10 Mary Ann Caws—*The poetry of Dada and Surrealism* (Princeton U.P., Princeton, 1970)
- 11 *Three Painter Poets: Arp, Schwitters, Klee* (Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1974)
- 12 Tristan Tzara—*Chansons Dada: Selected Poems* (Coach House Press, Toronto, 1987)

### **Publisher's note:**

Thanks go to the following for their expert help in researching illustrations for this article: Nora Meninsky, Art Librarian of the Arts Council of Great Britain; Paul Cover of The Tate Gallery and Thames & Hudson for permission to use reproductions from the book *Dada Art and Anti-Art* by Hans Richter (available in paperback at £3.95).

## Bibliography of Tristan Tzara: Books published 1916–1982 Poetry

- 1916 *La première aventure céleste de Monsieur Antipyrine*. Collection Dada, no. 1, Zurich.
- 1918 *Vingt-cinq poèmes*. Collection Dada. Zurich.
- 1946 *Vingt-cinq-et-un poèmes*. Collection l'âge d'or, Editions de la Revue Fontaine, Paris. (1918 text augmented with an unpublished poem.)
- 1920 *Cinéma calendrier du cœur abstrait. Maisons*. Collection Dada, Au Sans Pareil, Paris.
- 1928 *Indicateur des chemins de cœur*. Editions Jeanne Bucher, Paris.
- 1929 *De nos oiseaux*. Editions Kra, Paris.
- 1930 *L'arbre des voyageurs*. Editions de la Montagne, Paris.
- 1931 *L'homme approximatif*. Editions Fourcade, Paris.
- 1968 Second edition. Collection Poésie, NRF / Editions Gallimard, Paris.
- 1932 *Ou boivent les loups*. Editions des Cahiers Libres, Paris.
- 1968 Second edition. Poésie Club, Guy Chambelland, Librairie Saint-Germain-des-Prés, Paris.
- 1933 *L'antitête*. Editions des Cahiers Libres, Paris.
- 1949 Second edition. Editions Bordas, Paris.
- 1934 *Primele Poeme ale jui Tristan Tzara urmate de Insurectia dela Zurich*. Editura Unu, Bucharest. (Tzara's first poems, written in Rumanian.)
- 1965 *Les Premiers poèmes*. Editions Seghers, Paris. (French translation of the 1934 text revised by Tzara, and five unpublished early poems.)
- 1935 *La main passe*. Editions G.L.M., Paris.
- 1935 *Sur le champ*. Editions Sagesse, Paris.
- 1936 *Ramures*. Editions G.L.M., Paris.
- 1937 *Vigies*. Editions G.L.M., Paris.
- 1962 Second edition. Editions Alexandre Loewy, Paris.
- 1938 *La deuxième aventure céleste de Monsieur Antipyrine*. Editions des Réverbères, Paris.
- 1939 *Midis gagnés*. Editions Denoel, Paris.
- 1948 Second augmented edition. Editions Denoel, Paris. (1939 text augmented with the collected *La main passe*.)