

ROMAN JAKOBSON
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CHAPTER 3

Dada

Dada means nothing.

Dada 3, 1918

Dilettantes, rise up against art!

Poster at Dada exhibition, Berlin, June 1920

In these days of petty affairs and stable values, social thought is subjugated to the laws of bell-ringing patriotism. Just as, for a child, the world does not extend beyond the nursery, and everything outside that realm is thought of by analogy, so the petty bourgeois evaluates all cities in comparison to his native city. Citizens of a somewhat higher order lay everything that relates, if not to a different city, then to a foreign country, on the Procrustean bed of the homely and dance according to the tune of their native culture. One's own little world and all that is "translatable" into one's own dialect versus the incomprehensible barbarians—such is the usual scheme. Is this not the reason for the fact that sailors are revolutionary, that they lack that very "stove," that hearth, that little house of their own, and are everywhere equally *chez soi*? Limitation in time corresponds to limitation in space; the past is normally depicted by a series of metaphors whose material is the present. But at the moment, despite the fact that Europe has been turned into a multiplicity of isolated points by visas, currencies, cordons of all sorts, space is being reduced in gigantic strides—by radio, the telephone, aeroplanes. Even if the books and pictures do not get

through today, beleaguered as they are by chauvinism and the "hard currency" of state national borders, nevertheless the questions that are being decided today somewhere in Versailles are questions of self-interest for the Silesian worker, and if the price of bread rises, the hungry citydweller begins to "feel" world politics. The appeal to one's countrymen loses its conviction. Even the humorists are crying that there is no longer an established order of things (*byt*).¹ Values are not in demand.

What corresponds in scientific thought to this sudden "swing"? Replacing the science of the "thousand and first example," inescapable in days when the formula "So it was, so it shall be" ruled, when tomorrow put itself under the obligation of resembling today, and when every respectable man had his own *chez soi*, there suddenly appears the science of relativity. For yesterday's physicist, if not our earth, then at least our space and our time were the only possible ones and imposed themselves on all worlds; now they are proclaimed to merely particular instances. Not a single trace of the old physics has remained. The old physicists have three arguments: "He's a Jew," "He's a Bolshevik," "It contradicts 'common sense.'" The great historian Spengler, in his outspoken book *The Decline of the West* (1920), says that history never existed and is not possible as a science, and above all that there was never a sense of proportions. Thus the African divides the world into his village and "the rest"—and the moon seems smaller to him than the cloud covering it. According to Spengler, when Kant philosophizes about norms, he is sure of the actuality of his propositions for people of all times and nations, but he does not state this outright, since he and his readers take it for granted. But in the meanwhile the norms he established are obligatory only for Western modes of thought.

It is characteristic that ten years ago Velimir Klebnikov wrote: "Kant, thinking to establish the boundaries of human reason, determined only the boundaries of the German mind. The slight absent-mindedness of a scholar."² Spengler compares his strictly relativistic system to Copernicus' discoveries. It would be more correct to compare it to Einstein's; the Copernican system corresponds rather to the transition from the history of Christianity to the history of mankind. Spengler's book has caused a good deal of noise in the press. The *Vossische Zeitung* concluded: "Ah, relativism! Why say such sad things?" There appeared a voluminous reproof that succeeded in finding a true

antidote to Spengler's system. This rebuke resounded from the church pulpit. This is no personal whim—the power of the Vatican is growing; the pope has not had so many nuncios for a long time. It is not without reason that the French government, rejoicing that France has finally disengaged itself from its revolutionary past, is in such a hurry to stress its piousness.

In all domains of science there is the same total rout of the old, the rejection of the local point of view, and new giddy perspectives. One's most elementary premises, which were unshakeable not so long ago, now clearly reveal their provisional character. Thus Buxarin, in his *The Economics of the Transitional Period*, discloses the meaninglessness of the Marxist concepts of "value," "goods," and so on, in application to our time, the fact that they are connected to certain already crystallized forms, the fact that they are particular instances.

Relevant here too is the aesthetics of Futurism, which refused to write beauty and art with capital letters. But Western Futurism is two-faced. On the one hand, it was the first to become aware of the tautological nature of the old formula—"In the name of beauty we are destroying all laws"—from which it follows that the history of every new current in comparison to its predecessor is a legalization of illegality; hence it would seem that there can be no punitive sanctions on what is possible in art, since instead of a decreed new beauty there is a consciousness of the particularity, the episodic nature of each artistic manifestation. It would seem that the scientific, historically minded Futurists, who rejected the past point-blank precisely because of their historicity, are the first who cannot create a new canon. On the other hand, Western Futurism in all of its variants endeavors to become an artistic movement (the thousand and first). "Classics of Futurism" is an oxymoron if you take as your starting point the original conception of Futurism; nevertheless, it has come to "classics," or to a need for them. "One of the innumerable isms," said the critics, and found Futurism's Achilles' heel. The demand arose for a new differentiation, "a manifestation parallel to the relativistic philosophies of the current moment—a 'nonaxiom,'" as one of the literary pioneers, Huelsenbeck, announced.³ "I'm against systems; the most acceptable system is to have absolutely no system at all," added another pioneer, the Romanian Tristan Tzara. There follow battle cries repeating Marinetti: "Down with all that is like a mummy and sits solidly!" Hence "anticultural propaganda," "Bolshevism in art." "The gilding is crumbling off,

off the French, like any other. If you tremble, gentlemen, for the morals of your wives, for the tranquility of your cooks and the faithfulness of your mistresses, for the solidity of your rockingchairs and your nightpots, for the security of your government, you are right. But what will you do about it? You are rotting, and the fire has already begun" (Ribemont-Dessaignes). "I smash," exclaims Tzara somewhat in the tone of Leonid Andreev, "skull cases and the social organization: all must be demoralized."

There was a need to christen this "systemless" aesthetic rebellion, "this Fronde of great international artistic currents," as Huelsenbeck put it. In 1916 "Dada" was named. The name, along with the commentaries that followed, at once knocked out of the hands of critics their main weapon—the accusation of charlatanism and trickery. "Futurism sings of . . ." Marinetti used to write—and then came columns of objects celebrated by Futurism. The critic would pick up a Futurist almanac, leaf through its pages, and conclude: "I don't see it." "Futurism concludes," "Futurism bears with it," "Futurism conceals," wrote the ideologists who had become infected with the exoterica of Symbolism. "I don't see it! Ah, the frauds!" answered the critic. "'Futurism is the art of the future,' they say," he would reflect, "why, it's a lie!" "Expressionism is expressive art—they lie!" But "Dada," what does "Dada" mean? "Dada means nothing," the Dadaists hastened to reply, running interference as it were. "It doesn't smell of anything, it doesn't mean anything," says the Dada artist Picabia, bending the old Armenian riddle. A Dada manifesto invites the bourgeoisie to create myths about the essence of Dada. "Dada—now there's a word that sets off ideas; each bourgeois is a little playwright, inventing different dialogues." The manifesto informs lovers of etymology that certain blacks call the tail of a holy cow "dada"; in one part of Italy "dada" means mother; in Russian "da" is an affirmation. But "Dada" is connected neither with the one nor the other nor the third. It is simply a meaningless little word thrown into circulation in Europe, a little word with which one can juggle *à l'aise*, thinking up meanings, adjoining suffixes, coining complex words which create the illusion that they refer to objects: *dadasopher, dadapit.*

"The word *dada* expresses the internationality of the movement," Huelsenbeck writes. The very question "What is Dada?" is itself undadaistic and sophomoric, he also notes. "What does Dada want?"—Dada doesn't want anything. "I am writing a manifesto and I don't

want anything . . . and I am on principle against manifestoes, as I am also against principles," Tzara declares.

No matter what you accuse Dada of, you can't accuse it of being dishonest, of concealment, of hedging its bets. Dada honorably perceives the "limitedness of its existence in time"; it relativizes itself historically, in its own words. Meanwhile, the first result of establishing a scientific view of artistic expression, that is, the laying bare of the device, is the cry: "The old art is dead" or "Art is dead," depending on the temperament of the person doing the yelling. The first call was issued by the Futurists, hence "Vive le futur!" The second, not without some stipulations, was issued by Dada—what business of theirs, of artists, is the future?—"A bas le futur!" So the improviser from Odoevskij's story, having received the gift of a clarity of vision which laid everything bare, ends his life as a fool in a cap scrawling transrational verses.⁴ The laying bare of the device is sharp; it is precisely a laying bare; the already laid-bare device—no longer in sharp confrontation with the code (*à la langue*)—is vapid, it lacks flavor. The initially laid-bare device is usually justified and regulated by so-called constructive laws, but, for example, the path from rhyme to assonance to a set toward any relationship between sounds leads to the announcement that a laundry list is a poetic work. Then letters in arbitrary order, randomly struck on a typewriter, are considered verses; dabs on a canvas made by a donkey's tail dipped in paint are considered a painting. With Dada's appeal, "Dilettantes, rise up against art," we have gone from yesterday's cult of "made things" (say, refined assonance) to the poetics of the first word let slip (a laundry list). What is Dada by profession? To use an expression from Moscow artistic jargon, the Dadaists are "painters of the word." They have more declarations than poems and pictures. And actually in their poems and pictures there is nothing new, even if only in comparison to Italian and Russian Futurism. Tatlin's "Maschinenkunst," universal poems made up of vowels, round verses (simultaneism), the music of noise (bruitism), primitivism—a sort of poetic Berlitz:

Meine Mutter sagte mir verjage die Hühner
ich aber kann nicht fortjagen die Hühner. (Tzara)

Finally, paroxysms of naive realism: "Dada has common sense and in a chair sees a chair, in a plum—a plum."

But the crux of the matter lies elsewhere, and the Dadaists understand this. "Dada is not an artistic movement," they say. "In Switzer-

land Dada is for abstract (nonobjective) art, in Berlin—against." What is important is that, having finished once and for all with the principle of the legendary coalition of form and content, through a realization of the violence of artistic form, the toning down of pictorial and poetic semantics, through the color and texture *as such* of the nonobjective picture, through the fanatic word of transrational verses *as such*, we come in Russia to the blue grass of the first celebrations of October⁵ and in the West to the unambiguous Dadaist formula: "Nous voulons nous voulons nous voulons pisser en couleurs diverses." Coloring *as such*! Only the canvas is removed, like an act in a sideshow one has grown tired of.

Poetry and painting became for Dada one of the acts of the sideshow. Let us be frank: poetry and painting occupy in our consciousness an excessively high position only because of tradition. "The English are so sure of the genius of Shakespeare that they don't consider it necessary even to read him," as Aubrey Beardsley puts it. We are prepared to respect the classics but for reading prefer literature written for train rides: detective stories, novels about adultery, that whole area of "belles-lettres" in which the *word* makes itself least heard. Dostoevskij, if one reads him inattentively, quickly becomes a cheap best seller, and it is hardly by chance that in the West they prefer to see his works in the movies. If the theaters are full, then it is more a matter of tradition than of interest on the part of the public. The theater is dying; the movies are blossoming. The screen ceases bit by bit to be the equivalent of the stage; it frees itself of the theatrical unities, of the theatrical *mise en scène*. The aphorism of the Dadaist Mehring is timely: "The popularity of an idea springs from the possibility of transferring onto film its anecdotal content." For variety's sake the Western reader is willing to accept a peppering of self-valuable words.⁶ The Parisian newspaper *Le Siècle* states: "We need a literature which the mind can savor like a cocktail." During the last decade, no one has brought to the artistic market so much varied junk of all times and places as the very people who reject the past. It should be understood that the Dadaists are also eclectics, though theirs is not the museum-bound eclecticism of respectful veneration, but a motley *café chantant* program (not by chance was Dada born in a cabaret in Zurich). A little song of the Maoris takes turns with a Parisian music-hall number, a sentimental lyric—with the above-mentioned color effect. "I like an old work for its novelty. Only contrast links us to the past," Tzara explains.

One should take into account the background against which Dada

is frolicking in order to understand certain of its manifestations. For example, the infantile anti-French attacks of the French Dadaists and the anti-German attacks of the Germans ten years ago might sound naive and purposeless. But today, in the countries of the Entente there rages an almost zoological nationalism, while in response to it in Germany there grows the hypertrophied national pride of an oppressed people. The Royal British Society contemplates refusing Einstein a medal so as not to export gold to Germany, while the French newspapers are outraged by the fact that Hamsun, who according to rumor was a Germanophile during the war, was given a Nobel Prize. The politically innocent Dada arouses terrible suspicion on the part of those same papers that it is some sort of German machination, while those papers print advertisements for "nationalistic double beds." Against this background, the Dadaist Fronde is quite understandable. At the present moment, when even scientific ties have been severed, Dada is one of the few truly international societies of the bourgeois intelligentsia.

By the way, it is a unique Internationale; the Dadaist Bauman lays his cards on the table when he says that "Dada is the product of international hotels." The environment in which Dada was reared was that of the adventuristic bourgeoisie of the war—the profiteers, the nouveaux riches, the Schieberen, the black-marketeers, or whatever else they were called. Dada's sociopsychological twins in old Spain gave birth to the so-called picaresque novel. They know no traditions ("je ne veux même pas savoir s'il y a eu des hommes avant moi"); their future is doubtful ("à bas le futur"); they are in a hurry to take what is theirs ("give and take, live and die"). They are exceptionally supple and adaptable ("one can perform contrary actions at the same time, in a single, fresh breath"); they are artists at what they do ("advertising and business are also poetic elements"). They do not object to the war ("still today for war"); yet they are the first to proclaim the cause of erasing the boundaries between yesterday's warring powers ("me, I'm of many nationalities"). When it comes right down to it, they are satisfied and therefore prefer bars ("he holds war and peace in his toga, but decides in favor of a cherry brandy flip"). Here, amid the "cosmopolitan mixture of god and the bordello," in Tzara's testimonial, Dada is born.

"The time is Dada-ripe," Huelsenbeck assures us. "With Dada it will ascend, and with Dada it will vanish."