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Connections Between the Dada Movement
and
Six American Fiction Writers

by

Rubén Fernández

Department of English
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Contents

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Foreword

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the connections between the Dada movement and six expatriate American fiction writers, and to illustrate its impact on their work. In order to do this, I have unearthed a whole body of fictional works by French, German, and American authors thus far almost entirely neglected.

Chapter I comprises a brief history of Dada and acknowledges the presence in New York City—towards which most of the American writers and artists gravitated prior to their expatriation—of the Dada Spirit and of what has come to be termed proto-Dada.

Chapter II consists of a description of Dada's theory of language, together with a survey of the most representative works of fiction by French and German Dadaist authors. I have chosen to employ a feature analysis on the texts in order to highlight their common characteristics as well as their obvious and far from coincidental similarities with the American novels and short stories viewed in subsequent chapters.

The different ways in which Dada affected Robert M. Coates, Djuna Barnes, Laurence Vail, John Dos Passos, and Nathanael West—and was affected by Gertrude Stein—are examined in chapters III to VIII. Each of these chapters comments on the American authors' general involvement with the movement, and focuses on one aspect of Dada which became particularly obvious in their work: playfulness in Coates' *The Eater of Darkness*; existential despondency in Barnes' short stories; violence, murder, suicide, and the "unmotivated crime" in Vail's *Murder! Murder!*; Dadaist pictorial and poetic techniques in Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer*; disgust in West's *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*; and the object-portrait as Stein's contribution to Dada.

Robert Motherwell's and Michel Sanouillet's comprehensive texts on Dada (for these and the following works see bibliography), although indispensable for an overall understanding of the movement, do not provide an in-depth examination of its artistic and literary manifestations. That gap has been partially filled by the more recent studies by Mary Ann Caws (on Dadaist poetry), J. H. Matthews (on Dadaist theater), William S. Rubin (on Dadaist art), and Inez Hedges (on Dadaist film).

Dickran Tashjian has meticulously documented the influence of Dada on modern American art and poetry (William Carlos Williams, Hart Crane, E. E. Cummings are among the poets included in his study). Also, and to the best of my knowledge, he has been the first scholar to recognize and analyze in detail the Dadaist inclinations of some American magazines such as *The Soil*, *Contact*, *Broom*, and *Secession*.

However, despite these and other academic approaches to Dada (Stephen C. Foster's, Rex Last's, Serge Lemoine's, Helena Lewis', Ileana B. Leavens', and Alan Young's among others), no attempt has as yet been made to study Dadaist fiction. The Dadaists' belief in the unviability of fiction as a literary means for the expression of their ideas, and the extremely limited circulation of the works of fiction they actually wrote can hardly account for such an absence of scholarly interest in the subject.

Karen Lane Rood's *American Writers in Paris, 1920-1930* has rendered the task of researching who was in Paris and when a great deal easier. Hugh Ford's book is essential in that it provides accurate information concerning the publication of works by American writers in Paris between 1920 and 1939. Those interested in further investigating the artistic/literary atmosphere in Paris during the nineteen-twenties and the circumstances which precipitated the American expatriation to Europe will find particularly helpful the memoirs of Malcolm Cowley, Matthew Josephson,

Samuel Putnam, and Sylvia Beach, as well as Shari Benstock's insightful study of the women of the Left Bank.

As a movement, Dada went beyond the provinces of literature and the arts; it was a way of life, a state of mind, a spirit (now known as the Dada Spirit), the goal of which, as George Ribemont-Dessaignes once wrote, was the "liberation of man" (Motherwell 105) from the shackles of modern existence. Art and literature always played an ancilliary role in the development of the movement. The Dadaist notions burst forth and took form during the group's vibrant gatherings in the Parisian Café Certá, and were divulgated not so much through their writings, which were never widely read, or their evanescent works of art, as through their provocative public demonstrations and mystifying acts of Dadaist derring-do. One did not become a Dadaist by virtue of one's literary or artistic creations alone. Dadaist art and literature came naturally when one *lived* Dada; and, I believe, in order to live Dada and, as a result, create Dadaist literature and art, one had to be personally acquainted with the Dadaists and take part in their activities. That is the reason why in the chapters concerned with individual American writers I have placed considerable emphasis upon their involvement with the group and their personal connections with its members, so as to measure their "dadaness" as well as that of their writings.

Some readers of this thesis might find it odd to find Dos Passos, Barnes, or West in association with Dada. However, this should be no source of surprise. Dada, more than any other avant-garde coterie of its time, was the direct result of a profound dissatisfaction with the war and what was looked upon as the self-indulgent contentedness of modern society. It represented a youthful explosion of pent-up anger and creative energy, a perfect forum for the artistic expression of the young American writers who, tired of the wasteland in which they thought their country to be

unretrievably immersed, had chosen to exile themselves in Europe. Thus, the artistic products of Dada and some of the early writings of the misnamed Lost Generation of American writers can be viewed as their frenzied reaction to the times, which, in some cases, bear little or no resemblance to what the same artists and authors produced later on in their lives. As a point in fact, most of the Dadaists advanced in new directions after the movement's demise, and some (George Grosz comes to mind) even denied having been involved in it at all. Louis Aragon, an adamant denouncer of war and politics in his Dadaist years, ended up joining the communist party and being decorated for his bravery in World War II. Matthew Josephson was converted to Dada by Aragon during his expatriation in France. He signed Dadaist manifestos, wrote Dadaist poetry, and became an unyielding spokesman for Dada upon his return to the United States in the early twenties. In later years he repudiated it and became a commercially successful writer of literary biographies. Most of the works studied in this thesis were written when their authors were still in their twenties and under the influence of Dada, and, for the most part, have little to do with what they were to write once the fireworks of Dada had died away.

It may be contended that West's *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, Coates' *The Eater Of Darkness*, or Vail's *Murder! Murder!* constitute parodies of Dada rather than representative examples of Dadaist literature. However, such a contention can be refuted on the grounds that Dada and parody are indistinguishable. Gallimard, the house that published most of Dada's writings, announced Ribemont-Dessaignes' *Le Bar du lendemain* both as the most significant novel of the Dada era and as a hidden parody of the movement. Dada is a parody of the lunacy of the times, of war, of society, and ultimately of itself. If the above-mentioned novels are parodies of

Dada, then they *are* Dada, because Dada is always and most of all a parody of itself.

I am aware that the present study does not exhaust the subject. Much remains to be said about the many American "little" magazines that flourished both in Europe and America during the twenties and thirties and their connections with Dada. The authors with whom my thesis is concerned might not be the only American fiction writers influenced by Dada. Also, in the sixties Dada experienced a revival in America: the literary manifestations of this Neo Dada, a designation which includes Pop Art, Happenings, and Environmental and Conceptual Art, are also worth considering.

Yet, it is my hope this thesis will encourage other students of modern literature to do more research and cast more light upon this fascinating field.

I. A Brief History of Dada

> *Every product of disgust that is capable of becoming a negation of the family is dada; protest with the fists of one's whole being in destructive action:* ***DADA****; acquaintance with all the means hitherto rejected by the sexual prudishness of easy compromise and good manners:* ***DADA****; abolition of logic, dance of those who are incapable of creation: DADA; every hierarchy and social equation established for values by our valets:* DADA; *every object, all objects, feelings and obscurities, every apparition and the precise shock of parallel lines, are means for the battle of:* ***DADA****; the abolition of memory:* ***DADA****; the abolition of archaeology:* ***DADA*** *the abolition of prophets:* ***DADA****; the abolition of the future:* ***DADA****; the absolute and indiscutable belief in every god that is an immediate product of spontaneity:* ***DADA*** *. . . Liberty:* ***DADA, DADA, DADA****; —the roar of contorted pains, the interweaving of contraries and of all contradictions, freaks and irrelevancies: LIFE* (From Tzara's "Dada Manifesto," Tzara 13).

1. The Birth of Dada

There is no lack of historiographical studies of Dada. Nonetheless, an outline of its birth and quick international development will provide a background essential to the understanding of the Paris Dada encountered by the American expatriates. It will also belie some deep-seated misconceptions of the movement, and prepare the way for the view of Dadaist fiction which will be offered in chapter II.

In a March 1950 letter to Robert Motherwell, Jacques Henry Levesque made the following groping attempt at elucidating the Dada Spirit:

> The dada spirit is undefinable, like life, with which, in the end, it can be identified; . . . [It] condemns, because of their

> inefficacy, literature, art, philosophy, ethics—not only theoretically, but also in regard to the pretentiousness of the men who are their high priests (Motherwell xxxix).

Prior to the official inception of the movement, the Dada Spirit had been embodied in the restive lives of artists and poets like Jacques Vaché, Arthur Cravan, Guillaume Apollinaire, Erik Satie, Marcel Duchamp, Francis Picabia, Alfred Jarry and Blaise Cendrars, who engaged themselves in a headlong struggle against the shackles of society, family, art, literature, and conventional mores, and who fought, as Gabrielle Buffet-Picabia wrote, "to retain and express their individualities, soaring above the crushing, ruthless wheel of the madness of modern civilization" (Motherwell 13).

Unlike the Dada Spirit, which is akin to life itself and consequently cannot be chronicled, the Dada movement does have a history. It sprang simultaneously—partly spontaneously, partly through the exchange of ideas—in various European countries and in the United States, and was officially baptized in Zurich in 1916. The first artists to call themselves Dadaists (Hugo Ball, Tristan Tzara, Richard Huelsenbeck, Hans Arp, Emmy Hennings, Marcel and Georges Janco, and Sophie Taeuber) were exiles who had fled their war-ridden countries for neutral Switzerland. They soon became involved in the activities of the Cabaret Voltaire, a combination of café-bar, cabaret, show-room and art-gallery opened by Ball in the Holandisches Meierei, Spiegelgasse 1, Zurich, on February 5, 1916. The Cabaret was contrived by its founder to be "a center for artistic entertainment, where artists will come and give musical performances and readings at the daily meetings," as well as an open invitation to the "young artists of Zurich, whatever their orientation . . . to come along with suggestions and contributions of all kinds" (Ball 50).

Before long the Cabaret Voltaire became a melting pot for the latest trends in music, art, and literature; a clearing-house of the newest products of Expressionism, Cubism, and Futurism. The only agglutinative elements in such an eclectic mélange were a shared disgust with the war and an explicit revolt against the bourgeois, whose blind faith in the infallibility of logic was held responsible for the war, and whose philistine appreciation of mainstream artistic manifestations was held in contempt.

It was not until Ball's final break with Dada at the end of May 1917 (for reasons beyond the scope of this thesis), and the subsequent take-over of the movement by Tzara, that Dada's extreme positions on art, literature, society, and Western civilization took shape. By the time Dada commenced its rapid growth throughout the world, a consolidated body of Dadaist notions and attitudes had crystalized from the early confusion.

Dada sprang from disgust at the war. It represented an attempt to outdo the madness of those who brought it about and an unyielding rejection of an inherited world of what the Dadaists thought to be obsolete bourgeois values.

In order to retreat from the contradictions of their time, the Dadaists adopted a pose of brilliant child-like naiveté. Bent on subverting the bourgeois, they vindicated the exploitation of the naive, the irrational, the spontaneous and the abnormal; they advocated the abolition of logicality and the systematic transgression of the prevailing moral system.

Dada sought to bridge differences between nations and stood in direct opposition to politics and the institutions of the Western World: nationalism, patriotism, militarism, capitalism and religion. It also was against art and literature insomuch as they might conform to the conventions of the past. After a short period of support, the Dadaists came to reject even the most innovative forms of artistic and literary expression (Cubism, Expressionism and Futurism), which they looked upon as

"laboratories of formal ideas" (Tzara 5), as systematized attempts to achieve a merely aesthetic goal. They proclaimed the imperative necessity to create new forms of expression in art and literature.

In the same breath, the Dadaists were individualistic and gregarious, earnest and indifferent, disgusted and naive, high-spirited and potentially suicidal, simple and mystifying. They expressed their revolt against "this humiliating age" (Ball xxiv) with manifestos, poems, paintings, sculptures and demonstrations conceived to shock the public. They were against all systems, since "the most acceptable system is that of having none on no principle" (Tzara 9).

Such extreme negativity has led both the critics and the general public, despite Motherwell's dispassionate revaluation of the movement, to regard Dada as a disruptive phenomenon and an encumbrance to the healthy growth of modern art and literature. T.S. Eliot described it as a "diagnosis of a disease of the French mind" (Young 97), while Robert McAlmon dismissed it as a multi-color detonation that was "nothing," to which young, artistically-inclined loafers adhered because it gave them the opportunity to "do nothing and feel fine about it" (167).

A quick illustration of the geographical proportions attained by Dada in barely a five years' space, its sporadic recurrence in the form of artistic explosions and retrospective art exhibits from the time of its official demise in the mid-twenties to recent times, and the intellectual stature of its young members will suffice to give an idea of the sincerity of the movement and the degree to which the notions it propounded affected modern and contemporary art and literature.

In 1917, Richard Huelsenbeck left Zurich for Berlin, where social distress, revolutionary effervescence, disillusionment with the war, and the imminent decline of imperialism led the Berlin Dadaists to abandon art and literature almost entirely and to participate in the on-going socio-

political struggle. Together with Johannes Baader and Raoul Hausmann, Huelsenbeck introduced Dada with a roaring success in Leipzig, Teplitz, Prague, Mozarteum, and Karlsbad. Max Ernst and Kurt Schwitters waved the Dadaist banner in Cologne and Hanover respectively; and Rudolph Schichler, W. Schtuckenschmidt, Hans Citroen, Otto Schmalhausen, Clement Pansaers, Mac Robber and Jacques Edwards did the same in Karlsruhe, Magdeburg, Amsterdam, Antwerp, Bruxelles, Calcutta, and Chile. The journal *MA*, published in Budapest and Vienna, carried some of the most arresting examples of Dadaist verbal and visual images. In 1919 a Dadaist group called *Nichevoki* [the Nothingists] was founded in Moscow. Soon afterwards the poet Ilia Zdanevich, leader of the avant-garde group H_2SO_4 in Tiflis, founded the "official" Russian branch of the movement. In Japan Takahashi Shinkichi published *Poems of Dadaist Shinkichi* and a novel entitled *Dada* in 1923. In Italy Julius Evola became Dada's foremost representative, while Picabia introduced it in Barcelona. In 1920 the first and only issue of *New York Dada*, edited by Picabia, Duchamp, and Man Ray, was humorously ratified by Tzara as an official Dada publication. In January of the same year Dada arrived in Paris. In his 1920 "Zurich Chronicle 1915-1919," Tzara was proud to announce that:

> Up to October 15, 8590 articles on Dadaism have appeared in the newspapers and magazines of: Barcelona, St. Gall, New York, Rapperswill, Berlin, Warsaw, Mannheim, Prague, Roschach, Vienna, Bordeaux, Hamburg, Bologna, Nurenberg, Chaux-de-fonds Colmar, Jassy, Bari, Copenhagen, Bucharest, Geneva, Boston, Frankfurt, Budapest, Madrid, Zurich, Lyon, Basle, Christiania, Berne, Naples, Cologne, Seville, Munich, Rome, Horgen, Paris, Effretikon, London, Innsbruck, Amsterdam, Santa Cruz, Leipzig, Lausanne, Chemnitz,

Brussels, Dresden, Santiago, Stockholm, Hanover, Florence, Venice, Washington, etc. etc. (Motherwell 242).

As late as 1936, Huelsenbeck, the self-designated historian of Dada, wrote "Dada Lives," in which he contended that the movement was still alive and well. The impact of Dada on the German public was so powerful that Hitler thought it necessary to mention it in his Nuremberg speech of 1934 and also in *Mein Kampf*. He threatened the Dadaists and their successors with arrest, and referred to the movement as "spiritual madness" and "art bolshevism" (Motherwell 281). Soon after his rise to power, an exhibition of "Dadaistic Works of Shame and Filth" was organized to educate the German people about the dangers of decadent and subversive art. After World War II the exhibitions of Dadaist art were numerous: at the Düsseldorf Kunstalie in 1958; at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 1959; at the Kunsthaus in Zurich in 1966 (celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the birth of Dada); at the Museé National d'Art Modern in Paris in 1967. The sixties saw the development of a Dada-like, deadpan realism in art and literature which came to be known as Neo-Dada or Neo-Realism.

Dada gathered to its cause some of the brightest young artists and writers of the war generation, and became a vehicle for the expression of their disdain of Western culture. It was "the phenomenon of the finest minds of a young generation rising up and crying a loud and resounding '*merde* ' to all the human civilization that had gone before" (Putnam 163).

Contrary to the widespread belief that they were ignorant of the Western literary/artistic heritage, the Dadaists were in fact widely read and learned. In 1923 Malcolm Cowley agreed with his fellow expatriate, Matthew Josephson, that the Dadaists were "the most amusing people in Paris" (*Exiles* 135), and was genuinely impressed by Louis Aragon, of

whom he said that he had "read everything and mastered it" (*Exiles* 163). The same was true of André Breton, Tzara, Ball, Ribemont-Dessaignes, and most of the other Dadaists. It must be understood, then, that the scornful, nihilistic position they adopted was not prompted by the deficiency of their knowledge of the past, but was the logical consequence of the impossibility of employing such knowledge to express the paradoxical realities of modern life.

2. New York Dada

New York City was the undisputed American center of the arts during the war, and was to remain so, despite social and political changes, for many years after it. Most of the literary and artistic fermentation and insubordination took place in Greenwich Village, the home to most American and foreign artists and writers while in New York.

In 1914 Walter Conrad Arensberg and his wife moved from Boston to New York. Their salon soon became a haven for European as well as American young writers and artists. Many years later, in 1949, Gabrielle Buffet-Picabia would remember the Arensberg's Salon as a place where "at any hour of the night one was sure to find sandwiches, first-class chess players, and an atmosphere free from conventional prejudice," and would say of the Arensbergs themselves that they displayed "a sympathetic curiosity, not entirely free from alarm, towards the most extreme ideas and towards the works which outraged every accepted notion of art in general and of painting in particular" (Motherwell 260).

Nine years before the Arensbergs' establishment in New York, Alfred Stieglitz had opened the Camera Work Gallery at 291 Fifth Avenue. Intense photographic experimentation was carried out there, the results of which appeared periodically in *Camera Work*, the gallery's own magazine.

Both the gallery and the magazine, which later on changed their names to 291, were extremely influential, in that they prepared the way for the First International Exhibition of Modern Art which opened in New York on February 13, 1913. Paintings and sculptures representative of all the trends of modern European art (Cubism, Futurism, Abstract Art, Fauvism, etc.), were exhibited there and thus introduced for the first time to the American public.

For three years, until its closing in 1917, Stieglitz's gallery vied amicably with the Arensbergs' Salon as a haven of modernism. Among the young artists who frequented both venues were Francis Picabia, Marcel Duchamp, and Man Ray, who shortly afterwards would be celebrated by the Swiss and French Dadaists as proto-Dada figures, and would become involved in the development of the Dadaist movements in Zurich, Paris, and New York itself.

The Arensbergs' Salon, due to the unconventionality of its gatherings, its anti-social and anti-traditional leanings and, most importantly, to the endless discussions on modern art and literature it promoted, could be considered the birthplace of American Dada and, consequently, given that the Cabaret Voltaire did not open its doors until February 1916, of international Dada.

Ileana B. Leavens has contended that the Salon was not Dadaist insomuch as it lacked an undercurrent of thought, "in contrast to Zurich, in which the common factor for the group was a protest against the war." It must be noted, nevertheless, that her denial of the Salon's founding role stems from her conviction that such a role belongs instead to 291, "where the unifying philosophy had been, throughout its history, a revolt against tradition." Both 291 and the Salon, she concedes, "had comprised an attack on the philistines, on the bourgeoisie" (140), but the desire for

experimentation common to Zurich and 291, she concludes, was absent from the Salon.

Purely Dadaist gestures, gratuitous acts in defiance of order, tradition, and intellectual high-mindedness were common in those days in the Village. On January 23, 1917, Marcel Duchamp, together with John Sloan and a few other enthusiastic friends, climbed onto the top of the Washington Arch in the heart of the Village. The object of the enterprise was to have a "midnight picnic," and to boisterously "proclaim the independent republic of Greenwich Village" (Leavens 143). Two months later, Duchamp selected a urinal, signed it with the name R. Mutt, and proudly submitted it to be exhibited at the 1917 Independents Exhibition.

At the same exhibition, proto-Dada hero Arthur Cravan, notorious for his attacks against the philistines who looked upon art as a social event, was invited to give a lecture on the subject he was supposed to know most about: modern art. He appeared on the stage obviously inebriated, and immediately proceeded to strip himself of his clothes before the astonished audience. The police were summoned and Cravan was manhandled, handcuffed and carried off to prison before he could finish his extemporaneous performance. Walter Arensberg, who looked upon Cravan's action as a perfect *succés de scandale,* bailed him out of jail that same evening.

Another mystifying resident of the Village was the Baroness Elsa von Freitag von Loringhoven. Josephson has portrayed her in the following manner:

> She was said to be the widow of a German nobleman who had lived for a time in New York. She wrote poetry in a mixed German-English, and also made Dadaist artifacts in imitation of Marcel Duchamp, as well as sculptured reliefs

> that had bits of colored rubbish and tinfoil in them. She decorated her own person in a mechanistic style of her own device, shaving her head and painting it purple; wearing an inverted coal scuttle for a hat, a vegetable grater as a brooch, long ice-cream spoons for earrings, and metal teaballs attached to her pendulant breasts. Thus adorned and clad in an old fur coat, or simply a Mexican blanket, and very little underneath, she would saunter forth to serve as one of the truly curious sights of the village (120-21).

Considered separately, all the above gestures might be construed as the humorous antics of a few young men and women. Examined together, as the product of the artistic community of the Village, they reveal a pattern of thought, a disrespectful, anti-academic, anti-bourgeois attitude which was rapidly spreading not only in New York but in other urban centers of the world under the name of Dada.

The formation of the Inje-Inje movement in New York in 1920 clearly foreshadowed the foundation of New York Dada the following year. John Baur, in *Revolution and Tradition in Modern American Art*, has described the Inje-Inje as having been founded by Holger Cahill:

> Inje, Cahill had read in a book by a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, was the only word in the language of a South American tribe of Indians, who managed however to communicate a wide range of meanings through different inflections of the word accompanied by various gestures. His movement proposed to return to a comparable simplicity, to cut away the superstructure of our cultural refinements and discover the basic and most direct forms of human

> expression . . . Inje-Inje lasted for only two or three years and had relatively little effect on American painting . . . Several Inje-Inje poems were written by Malcolm Cowley and Orrick Johns . . . (Leavens 143).

When lecturing about his group in 1957, Cahill recalled that Cowley had been sent to France in 1921 as a representative of the Inje-Inje. Cowley answered Leavens' queries about the matter by stating that Inje-Inje was "a Dada joke—but there was no school, except those like me who enjoyed the joke" (Leavens 144).

In 1921 the Societé Anonyme, established in the Spring of 1920 by Katherine Drier, Duchamp and Man Ray in defence of the modernist tendencies in America, sponsored Marsden Hartley's lecture entitled "What is Dadaism," which officially introduced the movement to the American public. Soon afterwards, Duchamp, Man Ray, Hartley, Arensberg, Buffet-Picabia, Adon Lacroix, the Baroness, Joseph Stella, E. Varése and Stieglitz founded New York Dada. In April of the same year the first and last issue of *New York Dada* came out. In "The Importance of Being Dada," the afterword to his collection of essays entitled *Adventures in the Arts*, Hartley summed up the propelling forces of New York Dada as: liberation from the past, convention, tradition and heritage, together with an acrid criticism of the older generation through the witty implementation of humor.

New York Dada, which was particularly prolific in the visual arts, experienced its sudden demise when Picabia and Man Ray, who constituted the backbone of the movement, moved to Paris in their search for a better soil to sow their creative seeds.

With the exception of Gertrude Stein, who was quite a few years their senior, all the American writers on whom the following chapters will focus lived in New York City during the years prior to their departure for France in the early and middle twenties. Born at the turn of the century, they, like most of the writers of their generation (E. E. Cummings, Harry Crosby, Matthew Josephson, Malcolm Cowley, Slater Brown, Dashiell Hammet, Sidney Howard, Hart Crane, Janet Flanner, Mina Loy and others), rebelled against their middle-class families and the philistinism of their hometowns, and left for New York as soon as they had the opportunity to do so. There, they became imbued with the artistic and literary activity of the Village, and met other American and European avant-gardists. Also, they became familiar to a greater or lesser extent with the pervading Dada Spirit, the proto-Dada personalities and coteries of the Village, and, finally, with New York Dada itself. Their time in New York prepared them for what the European avant-garde in general, and Dada in particular, had to offer.

3. Paris Dada: The Demise of the Movement?

Three features distinguished the Paris Dada from their counterparts in America and the rest of Europe: their almost exclusive dedication to literature and relative neglect of the visual arts; their admission to belonging to a literary tradition of which they considered themselves the last triumphant stage; and their notorious public demonstrations.

When Tzara arrived in Paris from Zurich in January 1920 he was profusely welcomed by the leading literary coteries, which, thanks to Breton's enthusiastic promotional campaign, were already favorably inclined towards the Dadaist cause. These were André Gide and the *Mid-Sud* group, the writers grouped around Apollinaire, and, most

importantly, the *Littérature* group, of which Breton, Aragon, and Philippe Soupault were the founders. It was not till 1919, after the three young writers had been discharged from military service, that the first issue of *Littérature* was published. The magazine conveyed the aggressive reaction of its editors against the self-contented bourgeoisie and the prevailing conformism of their time, a reaction which had been accentuated by their experience of the war.

It is not surprising that they aligned themselves with the Dadaist principles immediately they became acquainted with the movement. As if to illustrate their official adherence to Dada, the May 1920 issue of *Littérature* featured 23 Dada manifestos by 12 different authors (Breton, Aragon, Soupault, Paul Eluard, Ribemont-Dessaignes, and some Zurich and New York Dadaists).

Contrary to the most extreme Dadaist postulates, the Paris Dadaists were willing to revaluate their literary past, prefering to direct their attacks against particular "fatuous writers" (Balakian, *Breton* 54), usually chosen by Breton, rather than, as had been the case in Zurich, against literature in general. They admitted to being part of a long tradition of French writers which dated back to Rousseau and included the Romantics, the Symbolists, and the Cubists. A few writers were rescued from oblivion and elevated to the category of Dadaist heroes: Arthur Rimbaud, Isidore Ducasse, Count de Lautréamont (the author of *Les Chants de Maldoror*), Alfred Jarry (the author of the play *Ubu Roi*), and Apollinaire, who was the link between Cubist and Futurist literature and the pioneer of automatic writing and the use of free associations.

Details of the campaigns of public mystification and desecration on which the Paris Dadaists embarked between 1920 and 1923 are available from various sources (see Motherwell and Sanouillet). It suffices to say that their anti-public crusade was one of the main factors that precipitated

Dada's demise. The insulting actions that at first infuriated the audiences at the Dada public demonstrations gradually became predictable antics which the public learned to enjoy. Plays, manifestoes and gestures intended to offend the audiences soon became innocuous sources of enjoyment. The Dadaists's efforts to scandalize and outrage became ineffective. Paris Dada was doomed from its birth, it being only a matter of time before it found itself unable to conjure up hoaxes provocative enough to elicit social outrage.

Two events need to be recounted as symptomatic of Dada's final agony as a movement. In May 1921 the *Trial and Sentencing of M. Maurice Barrés, by DADA*, organized by Breton, was staged at the Salle de Societés Savantes. Barrés, who had once been a spirited writer and had now turned, in the Dadaists' opinion, into a nationalistic spokesperson of war and patriotism, was accused of "offence against the security of the spirit" (Motherwell 185). Present in effigy, Barrés was defended by Aragon and judged by Breton, while Ribemont-Dessaignes performed the duties of public prosecutor and Jacques Rigaut and Benjamin Perét played the part of witnesses. The trial was regarded by some of the "kernel" Dadaists as a betrayal of the anarchic principles Dada stood for, in that it represented a serious, organized action directed towards the achievement of a predetermined goal. Dissatisfied with the direction his associates were taking, Picabia refused to participate in the event and removed himself from the movement. Tzara, probably the most radical of the Dadaists, took part in the trial and tried his best to be as disruptive as possible. His attempts to turn it into a typical free-for-all Dadaist hullabaloo, however, met with failure.

Breton's attempt in February 1922 to organize the *Congrés International pour la Detérmination des Directives de la Défence dė l'Esprit Modern*, to which representatives from all the literary and artistic modern trends had

been invited, was the last straw for Tzara, Ribemont-Dessaignes and others. Upon declining in civil terms Breton's invitation to participate in what in his opinion was an unforgiveable breach of the Dadaist faith, Tzara was accused by Breton of being a "publicity-mad impostor" (Motherwell 119). In several articles printed in *Comoedia*, Breton held Tzara responsible for the difficulties he was experiencing organizing the Congress, accused him of not being the legitimate father of Dada, and ridiculed his lack of intellectual power. A meeting was called by Ribemont-Dessaignes at the Closerie des Lilas to give Breton the opportunity to explain publicly his sallies against Tzara and further to discuss the Paris Congress. During the meeting Breton and Tzara failed to work out their differences. Insults were exchanged, and the Paris Congress collapsed.

4. Dada and Surrealism

Once the Paris Congress was scuttled, divisions within the Dadaist ranks became unavoidable, due to differences of principles and personal antagonisms. Breton and his associates (Perét, Eluard, Soupault, Baron, and Vitrac to name a few) began their groping steps towards the proclamation of a new faith which became official in 1924 with the publication of Breton's *Surrealist Manifesto.* Notwithstanding Breton's initial efforts to minimize the obvious influence of Dada on his new program (by celebrating André Vaché as the true Surrealist source of inspiration and decrying Dada as inefficacious and aimless), the first years of Surrealism, between 1922 and 1925, proved to be a continuation of Dada with very minor changes. Not until ten years later, in "Surrealism: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow," which appeared in the September 1932 issue of Edward Titus' *This Quarter*, would Breton bring himself to

recognize the importance of Dada in the birth and later development of Surrealism. In his essay he spoke of Dada as "a group whose germinating force has . . . been decisive and, by general consent of present day critics, has greatly influenced the course of ideas" (Motherwell xxxiii), and emphasized the invaluable contributions of Duchamp, Picabia, Tzara, and Vaché.

Unlike Dada, Surrealism was not fully satisfied with the idea of absolute destruction, and firmly believed in the existence of a world between reality and dream, a surreality, in which all the contradictions between the two worlds were resolved. The only way to reach "the marvelous" was through the liberation of the subconscious and by bringing down the barriers imposed on man by reason, which they aspired to achieve by dint of the conscientious implementation of techniques such as dream recitals, hypnotic trances, and automatic writing. Also in contrast to Dada, the Surrealists felt confident they could alter society by means of their intellectual revolution.

It is noteworthy, however, that their desire to discover a new reality—or surreality—and their confidence in their ability to effect a drastic change in the social consciousness were the only aspects that distinguished the early Surrealism from Dada. The revolt against conservatism, the necessity to abolish conventional beliefs, the struggle against rationality in human behavior, and the expression of their precepts through scandalous, insulting gestures were the props supporting both Surrealism and Dada.

Furthermore, the literary works published by the Surrealists between 1922 and 1925 were hardly distinguishable from those of the Dadaists. Mary Ann Caws has admitted that "frequently the chief difference between Dada and Surrealism . . . seems to be only a difference of tone or of style, since the themes they deal with are so similar." "At other times," she concludes, "even their styles are similar, especially in the more 'poetic'

writings" (*Poetry* 100). J.H. Matthews corroborates such a notion: "No guaranteed criterion exists that, cutting across misleading chronological boundaries, would permit us to classify this play as unquestionably of Dada inspiration and that play as of purely Surrealist derivation"(4).

It was not until 1925 that Surrealism really parted from Dada. By then the idea of revolution had been exalted for a number of years, to the extent that Surrealist actions had become, like Dada's, an end in themselves. Thinking that Naville and Perét, the editors of Surrealism's official publication, *La Revolution Surrealiste*, were still too involved with Dada's anti-art farcicality, Breton took over the editorship and gave Surrealism a new direction by making a public commitment to the Revolution, one which was not only intellectual but also political.

Like Dada, Surrealism had always been in favor of the revolution against the bourgeois establishment and the old social system it upheld. As far as the Surrealists knew, only the Russian Revolution had succeeded in overturning the bourgeois system. Sharing the same enemy, Surrealism joined the communist cause in 1925. Whereas Dada had always refused to compromise and prefered to perish rather than to join in an organized cause, Surrealism chose political commitment to avoid going stale and becoming innocuously inoperative in the modern world.

From 1925 onwards Surrealism became the leading avant-garde movement in France and, soon, in Europe. Dada, despite its official demise, continued to produce uncompromising works of art and literature during the middle and late twenties.

II. Dada, Language, and Literature

> *The **BAZOOKA** is only for my understanding. **I write because it's natural like I piss like I'm ill*** (From Tzara's "Unpretentious Proclamation," Tzara 15).

1. Dada's Theory of Language

Part of the absurdity that emanated from the Dada artistic and public manifestations derived from their conviction that human beings are unable to communicate among themselves by using the language of the past: "A monstrous aberration makes people believe that language was born to facilitate their mutual relations" (Motherwell xxxiii), wrote Breton. The Dadaists developed a theory of language based on their belief that the existing linguistic sign system was the most elaborate fabrication of human reason. Through the codes of syntax, grammar, and semantics, they thought, people have sought to interpret the world rationally and to assign an absolute value to those codes. This anthropomorphic language system constitutes the cultural order, the structure of social values which, because people forget that they have created these fabrications, is held to be absolutely valid and not an arbitrary interpretation of the world.

It is these social values and the cultural world created by language, they believed, that had caused the war, and also the reason why the Dadaist poets sought to communicate their discontentment with such a state of affairs through a spontaneous language governed by chance. The language of literature had to be invented all over again just as painters were inventing new visual languages for themselves.

In the new language devised by the Dadaists, words lost their denotative aspect and, through their sound and distribution, permitted new

meanings to emerge in vibrations at a spiritual, not intellectual, level. The new language conveyed emotions and sounds that suggested ideas and images without quite naming them. It brought together elements from different spheres and connected disparate items and concepts in startling images and irrational juxtapositions, doing away with the conventional notions of grammar, meaning, syntax, and punctuation. With the necessary adaptational changes, the Dadaist writers used the new language in their poems, plays, manifestos, essays, critical literary syntheses and novels, thus preparing the way for the linguistic literary experimentation of the twenties and thirties, and for the inception of some American little magazines such as Josephson's *Broom* and, a few years later, Eugene Jolas' *transition*, whose "Revolution of the Word" is deeply indebted to Dada.

In what could be viewed as a pure Dada manifesto, the sixteen signers of the "Proclamation" of the "Revolution of the Word" wrote:

> Tired of the spectacle of short stories, novels, poems and plays still under the hegemony of the banal word, monotonous syntax, static psychology, descriptive naturalism, and desirous of crystallizing a viewpoint, we hereby declare that:
>
> 1. The revolution in the English language is an accomplished fact.
>
> 2. The imagination in search of a fabulous world is autonomous and unconfined.
>
> 3. Pure poetry is a lyrical absolute that seeks an a-priori reality within ourselves alone.
>
> 4. Narrative is not mere anecdote, but the projection of a metamorphosis of reality.

5. The expression of these concepts can be achieved only through the rhythmic "hallucination of the word."
6. The literary creator has the right to disintegrate the primal matter of words imposed on him by textbooks and dictionaries.
7. He has the right to use words of his own fashioning and to disregard existing grammatical and syntactical laws.
8. The "litany of words" is admitted as an independent unit.
9. We are not concerned with the propagation of sociological ideas, except to emancipate the creative elements from the present ideology.
10. Time is a tyranny to be abolished.
11. The writer expresses. He does not communicate.
12. The plain reader be damned (Cowley, *Exiles* 276-77).

In poetry, the Dadaists' favorite genre, the new language comprised absolute openness; chance revelations of language and experience in defiance of the logical strait-jacket; a bringing together of elements from different spheres; a connecting of the unrelated through poetic vision and irrational juxtaposition; and a tendency towards the "point sublime" at which all contradictions are resolved but which can never be reached. The Dadaist poets made use of word plays, automatic transcriptions, innovative distribution of the lines in shocking visual patterns, and different type fonts in the same poem. They rejected conventional norms of punctuation and used free verse.

In theater, the new language entailed a lack of thematic consistency and the neglect or abolition of plot. The Dadaist playwrights used absurd

dialogues, non-sensical repetitions of words, and bizarre human situations against the backdrop of a precarious but shocking decoration.

2. Dada and the Novel: A Survey of Dadaist Fiction

In his *Dada Manifesto* of 1918, Tzara defined true literature as that which "never reaches the voracious masses. The work of creative writers written out of the author's necessity, and for his own benefit." Writing Dadaist literature, he continued, entailed:

> The awareness of a supreme egoism, wherein laws become insignificant. Every page should explode, either because of its profound gravity, or its vortex, vertigo, newness, eternity, or because of its staggering absurdity, the enthusiasm of its principles, or its typography (Tzara 7).

A Dadaist work of literature must be, like every Dadaist act, "a cerebral revolver shot" (Motherwell 85). Some of the means employed by the Dadaist poets and playwrights to achieve such a shocking effect have been briefly mentioned above.

But the Dadaists had serious misgivings about fiction. At the time Tzara wrote his manifesto they believed the novel had emerged as a pastime of the middle classes, who were eager to see themselves and their problems in action. It had become one of the bourgeois' means for imposing their vision of the world upon society.

Moreover, whereas the creative explosion alluded to by Tzara could be, and was being, successfully accomplished in poetry and drama, the Dadaist writers could not see clearly how it could be achieved in fiction, a genre

which, by definition, demanded a sustained effort that smothered the author's inventive impulse. The indefinite prolongation of "profound gravity," "vertigo," "staggering absurdity," or enthusiastic typography along the pages of a novel could only lead, they thought, to the physical and mental exhaustion of the author and the failure to make each page "explode."

Fiction, the Dadaists concluded, did not lend itself to the proper expression of their principles. Accordingly, they proclaimed the official death of the novel. Aragon, the most prolific fiction writer of the group, confided to Mathew Josephson during one of their long walks through Paris that the novel was "dead" and expressed his determination to abandon literature (Josephson 114).

However, and not at all surprisingly considering the contradictory nature of Dada—"IF EVERYONE SAYS THE OPPOSITE," wrote Tzara, "IT'S BECAUSE HE'S RIGHT" (15)—some Dadaists did write fiction. They hated publicity and success and, at the same time, prided themselves on the many magazines in which Dadaist writings were being published. Although they believed in chance as the chief force of artistic and literary creation, the Dadas sometimes spent weeks in perfecting a poem. They were out to laugh it all off, to make light of everything; but that was just a way to express their disgust at the world. Why not, then, write fiction, even if fiction is dead?

Recurrent themes in Dadaist fiction are: violence, erotic perversion, action for action's sake, revolutionary destruction, praise of the machine, suicide, gratuitous crime, and a passion for primal ways of thought.

Dadaist fiction presents a sequence of events in which an individual—sometimes a young artist or poet eager to fullfil his (the Dadaist heroes are invariably males) creative potential, sometimes a psychotic person on the

verge of insanity—engages in a series of activities which are either inherently nonsensical or blatant distortions of reality.

The characters, events, and mental processes described by Dadaist fiction writers are alien to those with which the vast majority of the readers are familiar. Consequently, they never fail to shock.

By accommodating the conventions of traditional fiction writing to the expression of their unorthodox themes and ideas the Dadaist novelists flout the notions of literary propriety and allegiance to the past.

In Dadaist fiction plot is either abolished or heavily disrupted by parenthetical insertions, juxtaposition of non-associated events, long lists of words, and typographical experiments.

The city, an emblem of the modern world, is the locale in which most Dadaist works of fiction are set. A new, Dadaist beauty exists in the realities of the city: automobiles, subways, locomotives, skylines, neon lights, sirens and mechanical devices.

The characters of Dadaist fiction follow inner impulses which they themselves cannot understand. Complex character development is thus absent in Dadaist fiction, since its protagonists do not abide by the accepted norms of behavior with which readers are familiar.

Dadaist fiction attacks society, morality, art, literature, reason, culture, and the past. It conveys a message of nihilistic anarchism enveloped in morbid humor and neurotic laughter.

The following is a survey of the works of fiction published by the most representative practitioners of Dada.

Kurt Schwitters: "Die Zwiebel" and *Franz Müllers Drahtfrhüling*

"Die Zwiebel" [The Onion] is a short prose piece of about 2,500 words published in the tenth issue of the German magazine *Der Strum*. The

text opens with the voice of the narrator describing the beauty of the day on which he is going to be butchered. After mentioning that even the king will be present at the execution and that medical assistance has been thoughtfully requested in case somebody happens to feel unwell, the author closes the paragraph by having the narrator say how pleasant it is for him to think that the two pretty girls present will whisk up his blood and clean and prepare his innards.

The narrator welcomes the approach of the moment of his death with a piece of virtuoso acting which is greeted by those present with a round of applause. Once the sacrificial blood has been drunk, the victim experiences a reversed process of recovery, as in a film played backwards, and the king explodes after eating the eyes of the victim.

The narration is continually interrupted by parenthetical comments which sometimes add to the story, but in most cases are totally irrelevant to the narrative. Upon expressing his desire to taste the victim's eyes, the king's request is followed by the incongruous addition: "[Soldiers who are hard of hearing or deaf can obtain free advice and information]" (Last 40). Not only does this disrupt the flow of the prose and the narration of the event, but it adds a new prose style, that of propagandistic texts, introducing a new level of reality independent of that of the main narration.

The story advances in a simple, dispassionate fashion in contrast with the human suffering it depicts. The death of the sovereign has been construed by most critics as the decline of order and reason, and the fall of the systems which have so far deterred humankind from the fulfillment of its potentialities.

The first and only chapter of Schwitters' incomplete novel *Franz Müllers Drahtfrhüling* [Franz Müller's Wire Spring], entitled "Cause and

Beginning of the Great and Glorious Revolution in Revon," was published in *Der Strum* in 1919, and some years later in Jolas' *transition* in its English version. It presents a child asking his mother why there is a man standing there doing nothing. Alves Basenstiel from "Die Zwiebel" is also present. Herr Doktor Leopold Feuerhake and his wife join the group. Every time the doctor's name is mentioned it receives a new appelation, until in the end it grotesquely becomes Herr Doktor Friedrich August Leopold Kasimir Amadeus Gneomar Lutetius Obadja Jona Micha Nahum Habakuk Zephanja Hagai Sacharja Maleachi Feuerhake, the editor of the Revon newspaper. The standing man is unanimously condemned by the on-lookers, who think him a disgrace. At this point, Schwitters introduces a poem with no bearing on the text, returns to the story, goes back to the poem, and finally shifts back to the story, in which we now find Anna Blume, the main character in an earlier poem by Schwitters. The action is interrupted once more by irrelevant parenthetical absurdities, many of them written, as in "Die Zwiebel," in imitation of commercial advertisements:

> [To increase the safety of operation the front half is to be more fully occupied during the journey up the mountains, the rear half on the journey down. Abuses are prohibited by law] (Last 53).

When Anna Blume beholds the man standing in the street, she recognizes the artist in him, his originality, sensitivity, and commendable stance against mediocrity, which the others fail to see. When a policeman addresses Franz Müller, since that is the name the man has been given since the introduction of Anna Blume to the text, he does not reply. By this time a considerable crowd has gathered around Franz. A child is

smothered to death by two women and used as a stool by a short man to see what is happening. Franz eventually walks off, which causes pandemonium and multiple deaths among the roaring public.

This highly imaginative piece of prose is interspersed with repetitions and variations of words, derived from the author's notion that words are not mere instruments for conveying meaning, but actual parts of the structure of the text and aesthetic objects in themselves. By repeating and rearranging words, Schwitters intended to liberate the words from their association with reality and to present them to the reader as plastic objects in their own right. He also used shifting points of view which multiply the levels of reality and tantalize the reader by letting him/her into the narrative and pushing him/her out of it when the point of view is altered.

Louis Aragon: *Anicet ou le Panorama, Les Aventures de Telémaque,* and *Le Libertinage*

The scarcity of translations of his works and the notoriety of his political leanings account for Aragon's lack of literary recognition outside of France. By and large the most prolific of the Dadaists, Aragon wrote a number of novels, two of which are considered paradigmatically Dadaist in style and content.

In 1921 Gallimard, the enterprising publishing house which issued most of the works of the Dadas and the Surrealists, published Aragon's first novel, *Anicet ou le Panorama,* a combination of picaresque story and philosophical tale. The main character, Anicet, is a young poet who has retained from his secondary studies only the rule of the three dramatic unities and the conception of relativity of time and space. Horrified by their son's poetic inclinations, Anicet's parents think him ungrateful and send him away on a trip. In a road-side inn he meets a man who is eating

without touching his food and apparently enjoying it inmensely. Anicet immediately recognizes in him a twin spirit untouched by the constrictions of drab reality. The man introduces himself as Arthur Rimbaud, whom Anicet has always admired, and proceeds to teach him the Religion of Love, which proclaims the necessity of the poet to accomplish absolute beauty through Woman.

Anicet listens attentively and, as a response, tells the French poet the story of his life. He describes in full detail the shops in the Parisian arcade through which he used to pass every day: the wall-paper dealer, the grocer of exotic foods, two tailors, the shop of orthopedic devices. He explains how, as fantastic shapes began to form in his imagination, he would try to convince himself that he was hallucinating. He would hear the scratching of jackal's nails on dead leaves, the howling of white wolves, the hissing of boa constrictors, but would dismiss them as the noises of the sewing machines in the street.

As part of his search for the meaning of life, Anicet is initiated into a secret society devoted to the cult of Mirabelle, a symbol of Woman and modern beauty. The seven members of the society are thinly disguised portraits of Breton, Jean Cocteau, Charles Chaplin, Paul Valéry, Pablo Picasso, Vaché, Max Jacob and Reverdy, all of whom were in one way or another associated with Dada. They vie for Mirabelle's favor, bringing her offerings which express their individual aesthetics, expecting to receive from her absolute beauty as a reward for their efforts.

As part of his initiation, Anicet must perform an act which will prove his aesthetic standards. He breaks into a museum, steals the paintings, which in his system of aesthetic values represent the obsolete results of long-forsaken queries, and burns them on top of the Arc de Triomphe in order to make room for the new beauty. He is admitted to the society and continues to learn from the other members. The novel closes with a

mysterious voice whispering that love and Woman are the poet's only salvation, and reassuring him of the existence of art.

The novel depicts the revolt of the young generation against the traditional values of art and society, and provides an insight into the motives of the genuine artist and a guide to confused young poets unable to find the right path to the fulfillment of their talents. It renders an accurate portrait of the Dadaist poet in his quest for a meaning beyond the trite boundaries of reality. It emphasizes the Dadaist notion of performance in life and in art. The poets' actions are the best illustration of their art, and true art lies in the creative process rather than in the final product. Anicet's destruction of the paintings of the museum is an example of a Dadaist work of art.

Anicet flouts the conventional techniques of the novel by avoiding the logical sequence of events, realistic descriptions of people and objects, and the complex development of characters.

In 1922 Gallimard published Aragon's second novel, *Les Aventures de Telémaque*. The title, plot, and characters are borrowed from Fenélon's epic prose poem of the seventeenth century, but the message now is that of anarchy. Telémaque, accompanied by his tutor, Mentor, lands on an island, Ogyvie, in search of Ulysses. There he is tempted by the goddess Calypso and the nymph Eucharis. The narration of the events is enriched by Mentor's comments, which convey a Dadaist nihilism encapsulated in small aphoristic statements such as: "On a fait des lois, des morales, des esthétiques pour vous donner le respect des choses fragiles. Ce qui est fragile est á casser" (*Les Aventures* 36).

In order to prove his total freedom and his absolute detachment from the world's constrictions, Telémaque jumps off a cliff and kills himself. Mentor contends that Telémaque's suicide does not substantiate his

liberty. On the contrary, inasmuch as his suicide is a rationalized response to his need to prove his freedom, his action is nothing but a corroboration of his enslavement to logicality. Mentor pronounces Telémaque's epitaph: "Avec Telémaque, le hasard a péri. Voici le régne de la sagesse" (*Les Aventures* 100). But he is immediately proven wrong, since no sooner has he finished uttering these words than a loose rock falls from above and crushes him dead as God "éclata de rire comme un fou" (*Les Aventures* 101).

Le Libertinage, published in 1924, contains a number of descriptive passages, confessions, a playlet, pastiches of other writers' styles, and a short story, the last Dadaist piece of fiction written by Aragon before his official embracement of communism. The title of the volume, as well as the preface, are intended to baffle the bourgeois. In the preface Aragon demands absolute freedom for the artist, who is above society.

The short story included in *Le Libertinage* is entitled "La Demoiselle aux principes." It describes the experiments carried out by a young man on a young woman with the purpose of evaluating the effects upon her of incomprehensible behavior, actions, and words. Once the logic she is accustomed to is abolished, she loses her vital supports and commits suicide.

In "La Demoiselle aux principes," as in *Anicet*, Aragon develops a modern urban mythology by conferring aesthetic value upon aspects of modern life such as automobiles, shops, streets, scissors, or cutting irons. The old concept of beauty has been dislocated and transported to new realities.

Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes: *Céleste Ugolin* and *Le Bar du Lendemain*

The author of some of the most arresting Dadaist plays, Ribemont-Dessaignes wrote his first Dadaist novel, *Céleste Ugolin*, in 1926. In it the author studies the case of a person who spontaneously commits several violent crimes. The narration begins with Céleste's seduction of the maid and his self-defence against her vehement accusation that he is totally insane by replying that there are many fewer madmen in the world than is commonly believed. In another scene, Céleste's wife, who is playing the piano for the patients of a sanatorium, is forced to play on until she collapses from fatigue. Two of the patients approach her and dribble saliva onto her pallid face, as her husband suddenly slams the piano lid down on her hands. In "le bein d'or," a haunt of male and female prostitutes, Céleste meets the poet André Vesuve, a caricature of Breton, whose lover at the time, a blind prostitute called Violette, soon becomes his own mistress.

One day Céleste turns up at the café dripping with blood, with Violette's corpse in the car. He incongruously names himself Iggledon, after a real English portrait painter. After several fiascos in his quest for love and pure beauty through Woman, he marries Anna Zennana, a forty-year-old bourgeois who replied to a personal advertisment he placed in a newspaper. She truly loves him, but her love is not reciprocated. In retaliation for her attempt to prevent him from leaving by locking him up, he murders her in the most explicitly brutal scene in the novel: he bites off her lips, spits out the pieces, twists her arms, cracks her bones, and tears off her nose and ears. His last violent act is the gratuitous assassination of the leader of the Romanian government. Before being decapitated, he claims that he is neither mad nor an anarchist.

The novel is a gory illustration of the futility of everything, the meaninglessness of the lives and actions of human beings. Sudden bursts of violence are the only means at the disposal of men and women for escaping the vacuity and hopelessness of their existence. Céleste himself embodies the most extreme, destructive principles of Dada.

The narrative style is colorful and vigorous, even comprehensible, at all times. The dislocation of reality depicted in the novel is not attained through alteration and disruption of the narrative thread, which remains intact, but through the subversion of rationality, morality, and standards of human behavior implicit in Céleste's criminal deeds. The novel presents cruelty, degeneration, and depravity in a dispassionate style with strokes of burlesque and black humor.

One year later, in 1927, Ribemont-Dessaignes wrote *Le Bar du lendemain*, advertised by its publishers as "une des ouvres les plus significatives de l'epoque dada." The novel presents in a simple style the adventures of the Lafleurette brothers (Ben, Daniel, and Cesar), who have rented a room in New-New, a city born of the imagination of the author, in the house of M. Mosé Mosé, the director of the French Seal Fisheries of the Baffin Territory.

They live on the hoaxes and mystifying jokes they contrive, of which they are usually the first victims. Following a series of vissicitudes, M. Mosé Mosé hires them and sends them to the Eskimo villages in the Baffin Territory to protect the interests of his company. On arriving, the three brothers open a bar which, to their astonishment, becomes the temple of a new religion among the Eskimos. The leader of the new faith, Famelik, preaches a fishing manual he himself is unable to understand.

Ben is an artist who paints cruel caricatures of judges, lawyers, and army officers, the symbols of reason, logic, and war. Although he cannot

help painting, he is disgusted by it. He believes in the absurdity of human actuality. Daniel is the spirited man of action, uncommited to any cause, keen on carrying out an extraordinary action without motivation, without result, a pure Dadaist gesture. He takes Angela's naive comment that he is an artist—he admits to seeing beauty in locomotives and in black songs—as an insult. Cesar believes in humankind's incapability of discovering Truth.

The three brothers are looked upon by the bourgeoisie of New-New as mischievious young men leading a life of debauchery, as enemies of society and civilization. Like the Dadaists, they spend most of their time contriving ways of vexing the establishment. Suicide is encouraged throughout the novel as a gratuitous act of self-destruction, the most honorable way of leaving behind the absurdities of the world. Their rejection of the past is illustrated by their contempt for museums. When M. Mosé Mosé offers them the job in Baffin, Daniel accepts unhesitantly on his brothers' behalf, not allowing himself to ponder the pros and cons of his decision and allowing chance to guide their steps. Religion brings about nothing but pandemonium and death.

Blaise Cendrars: *Moravagine*

Moravagine is a prototype of the psychotic genius endowed with an unusually acute poetic sensibility. Before being introduced to this bizarre figure, the reader is given a formal lecture on the evils of psychiatry and internment in mental institutions.

The narrator is Raymond la Science, a young intern in a Swiss sanatorium. When he meets patient number 1731, a little man named Moravagine who quietly indulges in masturbation in his room, he recognizes the warmth and grandeur of that solitary being. Raymond

resigns from his internship and plans for Moravagine's escape from the sanatorium.

The last heir of the Hungarian throne, Raymond discovers, and born prematurely on the day of his father's assassination, Moravagine has spent all his life in complete seclusion. Married at the age of six to a little princess of the same age, he fell in love with her eyes and lived only for her annual visits on their wedding anniversary. A series of frantic, absurd acts of violence performed by Moravagine culminates in the disembowelling of his wife when she tells him she has come to visit him for the last time.

Once freed by Raymond, Moravagine immediately stabs a little girl and consequently, during the next ten years, his path is strewn with women's dead bodies. After innumerable trips, adventures and violent acts, the saga comes to an end when Raymond finds Moravagine, toward the end of the war, in the cell of a military mental hospital. He is now a morphine addict who imagines himself on Mars and is feverishly writing *L'An 2013*, a literary anticipation of the atomic threat.

Moravagine was intended as a celebration of reckless action and violence. Insanity represents the last stage of artistic sensitivity. Any attempt to lock the insane (the artist) in mental institutions (social norms) is condemned.

All the works included in this survey reflect the Dadaist principles in which their authors believed. Most of them were written in the second and third decades of the century, before and during the American writers' expatriation in Paris. Like Coates' *The Eater of Darkness*, West's *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, Vail's *Murder! Murder!*, Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer*, and some of the early stories by Barnes, they illustrate a Dadaist conception of modern life, the one their authors had at the time they

wrote them. The way these American writers came in contact with the Dadaist ideas, and the way their novels and short stories mirror them, will be shown in the following chapters.

III. Dadaist Playfulness in Robert M. Coates' *The Eater of Darkness*

> *Dada is a dog—a compass—the lining of the stomach—neither new nor a nude Japanese girl—a gasometer of jangled feelings—Dada is brutal and doesn't go in for propaganda—Dada is a quantity of life in transparent, effortless and gyratory transformation* (From Tzara's "Dada Manifesto on Feeble Love and Bitter Love," Tzara 43).

To the present date, the works of Robert Myron Coates have received little critical attention, a rather perplexing fact considering his long, consistent contribution to twentieth-century American fiction. From his return to New York from France in the late Fall of 1927 through the nineteen-sixties, Coates produced a nonfictional book—*The Outlaw Years* (1930)—five novels, one of which, *Wisteria Cottage* (1948), experienced a brief flirtation with popular and critical success; two travel books—*Beyond the Alps* (1961) and *South of France* (1965); a reminiscence—*The View from Here* (1960); and three collections of short stories—*All the Year Round* (1943), *The Hour after Westerly and Other Stories* (1957), and *The Man Just Ahead of You* (1965).

In 1921 he traveled to Paris, obeying some complex of impulses that was always a little obscure to him (Coates, *View* 42). During the next six years he became "fairly close friends" (*View* 212) with Hemingway, was adopted by Gertrude Stein as one of her rare protégés, and attended parties held by Ford Madox Ford, Ezra Pound, and the Jewetts. His tall, red-haired figure grew to be a familiar, almost ubiquitous, landmark in the American haunts of Montparnasse.

Despite his popularity, however, Coates was far from being a typical American literary expatriate, in that his activities were not confined to the boundaries of the Left Bank and he did not search the association with his

fellow-countrymen only. From the moment the liner *Oropesa* nosed into the harbor of Cherbourg, he showed a genuine fascination for everything that was French. He knew French well and was not one to miss an opportunity to use it in his struggle to fit in. "I worked at it," he wrote in 1960; "It was somehow important to me not only to be in France and to speak French, but also as far as possible to be French" (*View* 209).

It was mainly his open disposition that allowed him to make the acquaintance of "great ones" (*View* 212) such as Leger, Picasso, Satie, Pascin, Juan Gris, and Tzara, who were unavailable to most Americans; to become involved with Paris Dada; and to write what Ford Madox Ford celebrated as the first Dadaist novel in English. The present chapter explores Coates' involvement with Dada and attempts to elucidate what makes *The Eater of Darkness* a Dadaist novel.

Coates shared with Dada the belief that literature, like art, is a private affair produced by the writer for his/her own satisfaction. What an author writes, consequently, must be incomprehensible to the vast majority of the readers. An intelligible work is the product of a journalist. Success means nothing and must be held in contempt. It was Tzara's opinion that:

> When a writer or artist is praised by the newspapers, it is proof of the intelligibility of his work: wretched lining of a coat for public use; tatters covering brutality, piss contributing to the warmth of an animal brooding vile instincts. Flabby, insipid flesh reproducing with the help of typographical microbes (Motherwell 80).

A favorable review, if it came from the wrong quarters, "from one of the Pooh-Bahs of the period" (Coates, *View* 211), was exasperating. "We felt," Coates wrote of him and the Dadaists, "that if we were in revolt we could

never give quarter to the enemy nor accept it. We were so far out, as the saying goes now, that success distressed us" (*View* 211). Such a supercilious disposition had been Dadaistically dramatized by Aragon, who once wrote an inflamed letter to *Les Nouvelles Littéraires* threatening to wreck the editorial offices if his name was mentioned again in the paper. His name was mentioned again, and the offices were wrecked. When he announced that he would give a beating to any critic who dared to review his new novel, the critics, aware of his irrevocable intention to carry out his threat, did not call his bluff and the book went totally unacknowledged and soon fell into oblivion.

However, it must be noted that Coates' attitude at the time he finished writing *The Eater of Darkness* was not as radical as Tzara's nor as histrionic as Aragon's. He described it as "a confused, variable, and thoroughly jejune mixture of François Villon (the medieval influence and also general rascality . . . ; Sir Philip Sidney (the great sixteenth-century English poet, representing the aristocratic impulse) and Dada, or devil-may-careness" (*Eater* vi).

When the book was completed, he typed it off carefully and, with James Butler's help, illustrated it, bound it neatly, and "thought that would be the end of it" (*Eater* vii). Soon afterwards, however, following Sidney's example (the English poet had "never stooped to seek out a publisher for his writings" [*Eater* vi], but had always distributed a few fair copies among his acquaintances), Coates made a few copies of his book and proceeded to circulate them among his friends. One of them was Gertrude Stein, who "read it, and liked it, and immediately set about getting it published" (*Eater* vii).

Although his first reaction to Stein's initiative and the prospect of seeing his novel in print was a "delicate" yawn, he later admitted that he felt "pretty darned pleased at the way things were turning out," and confessed

that his disdain at the idea of mixing literature with popular success had been simply "hedging" (*Eater* vii-viii).

The Eater of Darkness was published in Paris by McAlmon's Contact Publishing Company in 1926. Although not an "actual flop . . . [it] had a gratifying lack of success in the proper quarters, and a pleasantly comforting *succés d'estime* elsewhere" (*Eater* v-vi). As it turned out, the publication of the book represented a rarely achieved reconciliation of the author's Dadaist beliefs and his haughtily supressed desire for recognition.

If Sidney's "aristocratic impulse" prevailed over Dada's "devil-may-careness" in what concerned its publication, it was Coates' Dadaism that dominated all the other aspects of the novel.

There is insufficient written evidence to measure the depth of Coates' understanding of Dada. In the introduction to the 1959 edition of *The Eater of Darkness* he described it simply as "the one artistic movement I know of whose main purpose was having fun" (*Eater* iv). Yet, it remains unclear whether Coates' conception of the movement included only its mocking playfulness and "I-don't-give-a-damn attitude of life" (Tzara 9), or, having a more complete comprehension of it, he chose to ignore the grimmer underside of disgust and ontological frustration and to subscribe to and employ its lighter side to suit his literary purposes.

The Eater of Darkness reflects Coates' perception of the atmosphere o the period in which it was written, "a mixture of optimism, enthusiam, and intense, if occasionally disorganized, activity" (Coates, *View* 208); a time of experimentation and ferment in all the arts. The early and mid-twenties in Paris were, Coates believed, "a gay time, and it's no accident, I think, that it was the Dada period" (*View* 209). Such a perception seems oblivious to the darker aspects of the period (confusion, dissipation, aimlessness, suicidal recklessness, lack of ideals, etc.), of which Dada was sharply aware.

Accordingly, the Dada pervading Coates' first novel is playful, mischievous, and absurd; not despondent and nihilistically destructive. Coates wrote it, egoistically and, thus, Dadaistically, for his own amusement and that of his friends. Written "out of the author's necessity," each one of its pages explodes, not because of its "profound gravity" or "eternity," but because of its "vertigo," "newness," "staggering absurdity," arresting typography, and the "enthusiasm of its principles." In it, human actuality and all its implications (love, hate, death, sex, reason, social conventions and institutions, etc.) are presented as one non-sensical hoax that must not be taken seriously but healthily ridiculed. By writing it, he became an accomplice in Dada's scheme to "mock existence at each moment, mock ourselves, mock others, mock everything by the perpetual creation of grotesque attitudes, gestures and attributes" (Tashjian 23). By parodying modern urban life and literature, Coates ridiculed himself and Dada, both urban and literary, in a Dadaist, gratuitous act of self mockery.

The Eater of Darkness is dedicated in a characteristically Dadaist fashion to eighteen ill-assorted personalities and institutions. The dedication, which was intended as a tribute to friends and other persons or organizations who had helped in one way or another in the book's production, is a forerunner of the extravagant excesses which are to follow. Among those listed are his father and mother, some of his friends from Paris (Kathleen Cannell, Gertrude Stein and Harold Loeb), New York ex-Mayor Hylan, his publisher (Robert McAlmon), *The New York Times* (to which he contributed regularly "color" stories from Europe), Gerald Chapman (a bank robber and gunman in the news at the time), Nick Carter (a detective created by John R. Coryell, who wrote popular fiction profusely under more than 1,000 pseudonyms), "Sapper" (H.C. Mcneille) and Fantomas (Carter's French counterparts and Coates' inspiration). The 1926 French edition also featured a two-page preface by Arthur Moss entitled "A

Soft Note of Introduction" in which Coates was endowed with "familiar Contact credentials:" no obeisance to tradition, a "lonewolf character," a "young Mahomet blazing his own new religion" (Ford 75).

The novel is a melodramatic, at times absurd, at times comic, always humorously subjective account of the urban adventures, real or imaginary, of a quintessentially Dadaist hero, Charles Drogar,

> . . . one of those rare souls whose spirit seems to have been compounded, as it were, of more fragile substance, of emotion more volatile, perception more finely tunable than the rest, so that he rode currents of intuition that others sank through seeking the rock-bottom of logic, and was uplifted and exalted by the transcendental vapors of a perhaps earthy—even, to continue the figure ad locandum, miry—concept into which others, trudging, stuck bogged and bemisted. (*Eater* 41)

Drogar abandons his lover in Paris and sails for New York, where he rents a room in a lodging house on West Twenty-Third Street. During the first months there, he subsists on graham crackers and a box of powdered milk which he bought in a delicatessen as "a reward to himself for having discovered that its name, when read backward, spelled 'milK'" (*Eater* 18). He spends his time lying in his bed, reading McAulay's *History of the English Nation*, skimming through the worn pages of a copy of a *Cosmopolitan Magazine*, walking along Lexington Avenue, and "cutting out bits of paper into intricate designs" (*Eater* 9).

One night he meets an enigmatic old man, living on the third floor of the rooming house, who calls himself the "Eater of Darkness." He is naked, except for a pair of long green silk stockings and some tattoos on his

back, and shows Drogar a sophisticated contrivance of his own invention, a machine that emits a deadly laser-bullet into the victim's brain at long distances. Still unaware of the contraption's mortal effects, Drogar presses a button and destroys the brain of Edward B. Trulge, a retired businessman of Union Hill, New Jersey. Exhilarated by the possibilities of such an invention, the old man and his new accomplice soon decide to commit a 19-million-dollar bank robbery.

In the meantime Drogar convinces a stranger, Rupert Pragman, to resign his position with the Buckeye Belt and Leather Corporation by offering him a job in a non-existent detective agengy, giving him the secret password "Eggs are indeterminate but fowls are firm" (*Eater* 97). He murders the literary critics of the *New Republic*, *Atlantic*, *Nation*, *Aesthete*, *Dial*, and *Vanity Fair*, as well as several writers (Waldo Frank, Asa Huddleberry, James Thurber and George Jean Nathan amongst them); becomes entangled in a series of absurd street confrontations; and, pretending to be Trulge's nephew, makes love to Adeline, Trulge's niece.

We are told that the old man, known in the rooming house as Mr Constantine, is at the same time Thorndyke Smithers of Long Island (a Gatsby-like stockbroker) and M. Carolo Faudras of Thirty-Eighth Street (an old eccentric who wheels himself around in a bathtub-shaped device and seems to have found a mysterious use for canned pears, truckloads of which are delivered to his house daily). Among Mr Constantine's known past crimes are arson, manslaughter, attempted rape, shop-lifting, barratry, drunkenness, obscene language, resisting arrest, promoting revolutions, and running a house of prostitution without a license.

As prearranged, on the night of the robbery the old man, whose overt homosexual advances have been rejected by Drogar, stays in the lodging house in control of the killing machine while Drogar drives to the bank to collect the money. As he walks into the bank, the lurking guards and

policemen fall one by one dead on the floor. Enraged by Drogar's rejection of him, the old man aims the beam at Drogar's brain when he is climbing back into his car, but a stranger suddenly gets in the bullet's way, dying and saving the young man's life. A car chase ensues, as Drogar speeds, as planned, toward the old man's country house on Long Island. The chase comes to an end when Drogar, at the top of a tower, finds himself besieged by the police, Trulge's real nephew, Adeline (frustrated and expecting Drogar's child), a tough detective hoping for a promotion, and his lover, a prostitute who has fallen in love with Drogar watching him through a pair of binoculars from the window across the street. As all this is happening, Rupert Pragman unintentionally blows up the lodging house on West Twenty-Third Street, killing the old man. Next, we find Drogar ambling down Fifth Avenue with a cigar in his mouth, as his old lover rejoices over a letter from him telling her that he is returning to Paris.

True to its Dadaist inspiration, *The Eater of Darkness* reads as a tongue-in-cheek manifesto against the conventions of fiction writing. The plot, contrary to the impression that the above précis may have given, advances by fits and starts, gambols on swiftly at times, then is interrupted by nebulous concentric parenthetical sections:

> . . . ("Dear Edward. I can't imagine . . . ("Oh! If the police would only . . . ("Now now you know that Mr Larton . . . (An as yet unidentified lady in a checked taffeta blouse burst into violent tears and Charles riveting) . . . said that they are nothing more than a pack of . . .") . . . do something about . . . " . . . how any one could have . . . ") (*Eater* 76).

It meanders its way around digressive chunks of prose (an apologetic address to the vegetable world, a few specious philosophical ruminations

and pseudoscientific disquisitions, etc.) with no bearing on the story, and is worked into newspaper headlines and articles, business door shingles, explanatory footnotes, and enumerations of, for the most part, inconsequential actions and events.

The narrative thread is constantly disrupted by lists of objects and people. As the laser beam seeks out its first victim, the narrative is broken by a three-page record of the things and persons through which it travels. These include a bottle of glue, a cigar, a train station turnstile, two pretzels, the calf of a woman's leg, a glass eye, Laurence Vail, Peggy Guggenheim, Theodore Dreiser, H. L. Mencken, Kenneth Burke, Arthur Moss, and Malcolm Cowley. Normaly unrelated constituents of reality are thus gathered together by the random path of the X-ray bullet, much in the same way as disparate odds and ends are plastered on canvas in a Dadaist collage or words dropped onto the page in a Dadaist chance poem. By listing segments of the physical world and real people, Coates not only illustrates in a playful manner how reality can interfere with the successful production of an imaginative work of literature, but also transports the reader to a plane where the real and the imaginary mingle.

The prose style changes capriciously throughout the novel. Sometimes it is plainly reportorial: "He went into a drugstore and had a malted milk and a cream cheese sandwich. Then he went to Weber and Heilbroner's and bought six silk shirts . . ." (*Eater* 52); sometimes scientific: "Observed phenomena and observed matter are obviously equivalent terms in equation (A) and in equation (B). We can, therefor [sic], substract equation (A) from equation (B) and . . . " (*Eater* 104); melodramatic: "Charles! My love! My life! My soul! I could not stay without you. If it be not fated that we live and love together, then grant me this, my last request, that we die—yes, die! here, together!" (*Eater* 231); impressionistic: "There are purple hills in the background, and the sun glows like magenta moon-

light, with shadow, reclining, chill, violet, and still, behind the Dutch-cut trees that cluster in the black-outlined groups among the deep-napped verdure" (*Eater* 84); or speculative: "Truth, like all things else, fatigues itself in repetition. The secret of revolution. One verges, perhaps unwisely but always with new systems, on an attempt to define the motivation of all human progress" (*Eater* 79).

In addition to the various prose styles, Coates employs techniques borrowed from the silent movies, thus doing away with the notion of fiction as an immutable literary genre and encroaching upon other artistic disciplines. Paragraphs describing specific scenes are followed by captions including the import of the characters' dialogues, resembling a movie script:

> Steps of rooming house on West Twenty-Third Street. A fuzzy little man ascends to door, rings bell. Landlady opens. They talk.
>
> *Caption:*
>
> *"Can I get a room here, Ma'am?"* (*Eater* 196).

The cinematographic effect is further pursued by introducing written directions for the camera, such as "Close-up flash of story" (*Eater* 194), "Fade-out" (*Eater* 192), or "Iris out on the machine" (*Eater* 184).

Coates made a point of flouting the notion of narrative time as a linear succession of events from the first line of *The Eater of Darkness:* "It seems it had been years . . ." (*Eater* 11). The present tense may correspond to the point in time from which the narrator refers to the time when she was remembering her lover (Drogar), or may be the actual word spoken or thought by her upon realizing that it seemed it had been years since her

lover had left her. The verbal form "had been" brings the reader unequivocably to the point in time from which the narrator speaks, and to the time when Drogar left his lover. Three temporal levels (when she is reminiscing, when Drogar left her, when the narrator speaks) coalesce in a single sentence. One more time frame is added in the second chapter when "we next find him [Drogar] in a rooming house" (*Eater* 15), which happened sometime between his leaving his lover and the narrative act itself.

The narrative backtracks in time (as when the author transcribes an excerpt from a Scotland Yard docket which gives the reader details of the old man's criminal past), or jumps forwards in time, revealing the outcome of situations before they actually occur. As the reader is given information about Mr Constantine's past, he/she is also informed that the old man is going to die soon, that his death is going to be spectacular, and that it will be recorded later in the pages of the novel. Sometimes time appears to be totally inconsequential to the author. When the reader first finds Drogar in the rooming house at the beginning of the second chapter, the narrator advises him/her that he has been living there for two months and three days. On the next page, however, after a quite detailed description of the layout and furniture of the room, the time period has changed to two months and four days. On other occasions, the author provides the times when actions take place with punctilious accuracy (*Eater* 85-86).

The novel contains numerous examples of syntactic, grammatical, and typographical excesses. It is replete with agrammatical sentences such as "the empty parrot's cage they had decorated it with watercolors together" (*Eater* 14), or "I will show you my studio the address is we will make tea together I shall give you tea" (*Eater* 11). Many paragraphs are not punctuated and/or finish with commas, colons, or semi-colons. There is

an abundance of print types. Next to a newspaper article filled with blank spaces and unfinished words and sentences announcing the mysterious death of Trulge, the author places a column describing Drogar's reactions when he reads the news. This is intended to fill the article's empty spaces—almost necessitating a simultaneous reading of the two columns—and to produce a shocking visual impact on the reader.

But *The Eater of Darkness* is above all a good-humored literary joke, a parody of the detective and romantic novels in vogue at the time (which anticipates the anti-detective fiction of post-modernism), a send-up of the stylistic idiosyncracies of some contemporary writers, and a pyrotechnical, Dadaist spoof of literature.

In an attempt to ridicule the pseudo-scientific aspirations of detective stories, Coates furnishes the pages of his novel with a profusion of voluminous footnotes added to the main narrative by a voice other than the narrator's. Some of them refer to dubious sources corroborating or elaborating on the characters' contentions: Sprigart and Carm's *The Physicist's Handbook* (Cincinnati, 1914), Gogorza's *La Esencia de las Ciencias* (Valladolid, 1743), Federman's *Die Fabrelationem von Raum* (Leipzig, 1878). Others address the reader and comment on particular aspects of the narrative: "The complete ignorance on the part of Mr Coates of the most elementary principles of plot construction, apparent throughout the book, is here devastatingly revealed" (*Eater* 163); or even continue the narration of the main text, thus forfeiting their original function: "'Look here,' he said thickly rising and he waving a sh-h-h hand the old gentleman understanding nodding to the blackdraped engine but with a sly eye:" (*Eater* 108).

A stranger and Mr Pragman, an amateur private investigator, travel to Chicago and Eire, Pennsylvania, in search of clues about Mr Constantine. During the trip a number of absurd events take place. The stranger buys a

little gilt locket, opens it, and discovers a picture of a fair-haired little girl. After looking at it for a while he says pithily: "We must hurry" (*Eater* 164). Pulling an old broom out of an ashcan, he studies the handle with a magnifying glass; then he purchases biochloride tablets, a couple dozen bananas, and a can of tomatoes in a grocery store. The chain of senseless actions finishes when he is shot at from a window, after which he has discovered the address of the old man's former lover. Unlike in detective stories, where the investigator's methodical, although seemingly incoherent, actions eventually unravel the mystery, in *The Eater of Darkness* the solution to the enigma comes non-sensically after a series of unconnected absurdities.

The melodramatic tone of the romantic novels popular at the time is also put to ridicule in *The Eater of Darkness*, particularly in the last scene, which is a lampoon on the climactic endings of such romances. Drogar, trapped at the top of the tower, is shot at from all sides. Invigorated by his own foolhardiness, he rips his shirt open and waits for the final blow. As a "leaden messenger of death" (*Eater* 230) shoots forth from Adeline's gun in Drogar's direction,

> from the mouth of the tower stairway, all blue and pink and beautiful, burst sobbing panting in the open moonlight to fling herself wildly into his arms—Hélene Montmorency, come to cover his lip's last life with kisses, to shield with the warmth of her fair body that of her lover (*Eater* 230).

Among the contemporary writers Coates parodies in the pages of *The Eater of Darkness*, Eliot Paul, who was one of the leading American critics in Paris at the time, was able to identify Waldo Frank, Cummings,

Sherwood Anderson, Jean Toomer, Max Bodenheim, Frank Harris, Ben Hecht, James Joyce:

> Ah! It had been wonderful in the old days!) remembering; the arm behind her back his legs (hooked) into hers while (the night like a shawl about her shoulders and) the writhing filmy night. I said yes. I always (and) looking down: (*Eater* 186).

and Gertrude Stein:

> Decomposition so intricately prolonged . . . The vegetables are not vindictive (*Eater* 53-54).

By making recognizable the styles of some of the most influential authors of the time in his incongruous novel, Coates intended to question their universally recognized value and to shake the foundations of literature itself. "Uncouth, galloping, riding astride on hiccups" (Tzara 7), he set out to play a Dadaist joke on the "literary medicasters in desperate need of amelioration" (Tzara 8).

All the Dadaist themes appear in the action-packed pages of *The Eater of Darkness*. Gratuitous acts of unmotivated violence are performed by Drogar throughout the novel. However, due to the absence of gory descriptions and to the facetious tone of the narrative, they lack the blood-curdling effect achieved by Ribemont-Dessaignes in *Céleste Ugolin* or by Cendrars in *Moravagine*. Yet, as in these novels, it is not maliciousness that prompts the characters to act violently, but an inner urge they themselves do not understand and are unable to control. In the course of the narration Drogar not only wields the laser machine repeatedly for

murderous purposes, but becomes absurdly involved in a number of sordid street brawls. Hearing footsteps behind him as he walks down a New York street, he expects to be attacked, killed and robbed. When he sees the man whose steps he was hearing walk past him and halt by a door ahead of him, he becomes furious and buffets the man for not living up to his own crazy expectations. At 3:37 one afternoon, an innocent woman is shot dead when she is caught in the middle of a street shoot-out between three men in the tonneau of a taxi and a man on the sidewalk.

A Dadaist fascination for the machine is obvious in *The Eater of Darkness*. Dada's artistic/literary aesthetics was closely related to the machine, which was glorified, but whose disastrous social effects were disregarded. .In a way the main "character" of Coates' novel, the laser machine is also glorified but seen the way children see a lego box. The old man and Drogar are fascinated by it, but fail to comprehend the suffering it inflicts on others.

A Dadaist interest in abnormal sexual behaviors also pervades the pages of *The Eater of Darkness*. It is a prostitute who falls in love with Drogar and later is willing to give up her life to save his. In a pang of exulting enthusiasm at the prospect of a successful robbery, the old man, one of whose past crimes was attempted rape, confesses his love to Drogar and shares with him his dreams about their future together. On his first date with Adeline, in one of the most intense and stylistically accomplished sections of the novel, Drogar ends up having sexual intercourse with her in spite of her initial rejection.

The world of *The Eater of Darkness*, like that of all the Dadaist novels, is a subjective one. The characters act spontaneously, regardless of logic, reason, or social conventions, and embark on shocking activities alien to the reader's world. No logical motives move the characters of the novel to action. Drogar decides to rent a room in the lodging house at West

Twenty-Third Street because he is curious to find out the location of the Seaside Employment Agency advertised by a tin sign in one of the first floor windows. There is no reason for him to think that the man walking behind him in the street has the intention of killing him and stealing his money. There is no reason why, when a passerby bumps into him in the street, he should slam into him with both fists accusing him of trying to convince his wife (Drogar does not have a wife) to run away with him and of being a communist.

The publication of *The Eater of Darkness* caused a considerable, although momentary, critical stir in Paris. The novel's *succés de scandale* is mirrored in two opposing reviews printed in the *Tribune*, one by Eliot Paul, the other by Alex Small. Paul praised Coates' skill as a parodist and found his spoofs of contemporary writers "delicious" (Ford 75). Small, notorious for his ruthless sallies against Left Bank writers, particularly Joyce and Stein, thought the novel worthless and wondered how much longer would intelligent people in Montparnasse "be bullied by the sort of stuff and nonsense which Mr Coates has the infernal cheek to put into print" (Ford 76).

Robert Sage prophesied that, in so far as the novel mirrored the environment of its time, it would not live long (Ford 76). However, three years after its French publication, Lee Furman, the head of Macauly Company—a New York publishing house specializing in mildly prurient stories and "ghosted autobiographies" (Coates, *Yesterday's* 267-68)—was persuaded by Matthew Josephson to include a few avant-garde works in his list. *The Eater of Darkness* appeared in America, with a critical portrait of the author written by Cowley, in 1929, causing a wave of critical uproar.

Among the praising reviews was the one printed in *The Nation*, which concluded that the novel was " . . . one of the most amusing novels of the season. According to Ford Madox Ford, it is a Dada novel. This should

prove that if Dadaism is not taken too seriously, its very unintelligibility may become quite intelligible" (*The Nation* 129:310 S18 '29). The literary reviewer of the *New York Evening Post* deemed the book "one of the cleverest tours de force ever contrived by the pen of a wit. He has managed to inoculate more real back-breaking humor into a single chapter than you will find in the mouths of a dozen Groucho Marxes" (Knight 191). On the negative side, the reviewer for *The New Republic* dismissed "the first Dada novel in English" as "a dime novel, concocted by a young man who wears his tongue in his cheek" and wondered "with some impatience, what this clever young man would achieve if he were to take his tongue out of his cheek" (*TNR* 60:133 S18 '29). The reviewer for the *Saturday Review of Literature* did not qualify his repulsion towards the book: "Typographically, rhetorically, and artistically *The Eater of Darkness* is mad" (Knight 191). No true Dadaist could have expected a better response.

The lack of structure and continuity, the emphasis on subjective perception, and the literary playfulness—all of which he picked up from the Dadaists during his Paris years—remained a part of Coates' style throughout most of his career. His 1933 novel, *Yesterday's Burdens*, although less chaotic than *The Eater of Darkness*, still relies on devices like repetition of words and phrases, inverted time sequences, and subjectivity as a means to blur the distinction between reality and imagination. But the Dadaist anarchy of *The Eater of Darkness* would not appear again until "The Law," one of the short stories of *The Hour after Westerley*, was published in 1957. In that story Coates makes his point by creating a situation in which the law of averages and the law of diminishing returns are repealed.

In the afterword to *Yesterday's Burdens* (1933), Malcolm Cowley lamented Coates' neglect to follow up his rare literary triumphs. Always

aware of the disastrous effects success had had upon some of his friend/writers—Hemingway and Thurber are good examples—Coates made it a habit to stay out of the way of success. When *The Outlaw Years* became an overnight critical and popular success in 1930 and was chosen by the Literary Guild, Coates, unable to understand what exactly he had done "to deserve such loathsome encomiums" (*Yesterday's* v), immediately retired to the country, investing the substantial royalties in the first of his country houses in Sherman, Connecticut. *Wisteria Cottage*, in which the author, for the first time in his career, abandoned his highly subjective and autobiographic approach, almost became a best seller in 1948. Seven years elapsed before his next novel, *The Farther Shore*, was published, almost failing to gain an audience. Cowley was hopeful, however, that the time of Coates' works would come. This chapter is my contribution, brief as it may be, to the realization of that hope.

IV. Djuna Barnes' Fiction and the Dark Side of Dada

> *Dada is life with neither bedroom slippers nor parallels; it is against and for unity and definitely against the future; we are wise enough to know that our brains are going to become flabby cushions, that our antidogmatism is as exclusive as a civil servant, and that we cry liberty but are not free; a severe necessity with neither discipline nor morals and that we spit on humanity* (From Tzara's "Monsieur Antipyrine's Manifesto," Tzara 1).

For all their obstreperous proclamations of liberal notions about sexual freedom, the Dadaists held highly conventional, even traditional ideas about women. Aragon's inveterate proclivity to monogamous infatuation and his restless quest for platonic sublimity in his relationships with women were all too known to his friends. While some Dadaists chose to express their contempt for passé sexual mores and the bourgeois institution of the family by patronising the Parisian brothels or engaging in marriages of convenience with moneyed women (neither of which practices, to be sure, strikes one as being particularly progressive), their heavy-handed *chef d'école*, André Breton, according to one-time American Dadaist Matthew Josephson, ". . . talked much of exercising freedom in every direction, and exhorted us to destroy the institutions of the family and the church," but, he continues, "our learned young anarch admittedly had no taste for libertinage himself" (Josephson 137).

Shari Benstock has insightfully drawn attention to the fact that "Hands Off Love," one of Dada's most daring manifestos, written in support of Charlie Chaplin (whose wife had sued him for divorce accusing him of asking her to perform "unnatural acts"), which justified fellatio and advocated abortion, child desertion, and *ménage a trois* living, counted no women among its signatories (*Women* 380). As a point in fact, very

rarely were women included among the signatories of the Dada manifestos and public declarations, and, when they were, it was usually due to their status of wife or mistress to a member of the group. Women's involvement with Dada, as with most avant-garde coteries in the twenties, was in many cases characterized by financial support (Nancy Cunard is known to have donated generous amounts of money to Aragon, with whom she had a brief romantic affair, and his associates), and free-of-charge publicity (the works of Tzara and other Dadaists were printed and supported by Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap during the Paris stage of their *Little Review)* America's most controversial contribution to European Dada, the Baroness Elsa von Freitag von Loringhoven (who was never a publicist of the movement or the mistress of any of its adherents), was presented and consistently promoted by the *Little Review* as a female Dadaist, for which Anderson and Heap were constantly rebuked.

Sanouillet has provided a list of American expatriate writers and artists who came in contact with the French Dadaists through the offices of Man Ray (*Dada* 300). It includes thirteen men (Harold Stearns, Ezra Pound, Ernest Hemingway—who dismissed Tzara and Dada as "shit" (Carpenter 132)—Slater Brown, E.E. Cummings, Gorham B. Munson, Matthew Josephson, Lewis Galantière, Robert McAlmon, Laurence Vail, Frances Milton Francis, Robert M. Coates, and Arthur Moss); and only four women, three of whom are clear exponents of the aforementioned "publicist" category: Florence Moss, editor together with her husband of the Village magazine *Quill;* Sylvia Beach, who, with her French friend and counterpart, Adrienne Monnier, played an invaluable part in the promotion of pioneering French and American writers; Man Ray's assistant, photographer Berenice Abbot; and Djuna Barnes, bohemian

novelist, playwright, short-story writer, journalist and graphic artist whose life and writings defy any attempt at classification.

Unyieldingly individualistic, dashingly attractive, and armed with an acrid wit and a haughty aloofness, Barnes came to represent the female embodiment of Modernism. If today she stands out as one of the most innovative writers of her time, it was only during the years prior to her death in 1982, after more than forty years of obdurate seclusion—and perhaps because of it—that her works began to arouse serious critical interest. Today *Nightwood* (1936), which has become a sort of cult novel, and the hermetic play *The Antiphon* (1958) are considered her masterpieces by most critics. The present chapter, however, moves away from such major works in an attempt to justify the presence of this exceptional woman in Sanouillet's list. It explores the beliefs she shared with Dada, and reveals Dada's presence in five of her short stories and an uncompleted novel.

By the time of her arrival in Paris in 1919 or 1920 (she was never certain of the exact date), Barnes had already adopted a series of positions akin to the ones vociferously postulated by the French Dadaists. Such an adoption was the result of her intense journalistic activity in New York City, her association with a number of proto-Dada figures (of which the Baroness and Laurence Vail were the most influential ones), and what was described as her genuine and rather dreadful "morbidity" by the notorious Greenwich Village bohemian, Guido Bruno, who interviewed Barnes in *Pearson's Magazine* in 1919 (Barnes, *Interviews* 386).

During her pre-Paris years in the Village, Barnes interviewed popular writers, actors, artists, stage and film directors, boxers, dancers, and singers. She also wrote an impressive amount of feature stories and short-fiction pieces for newspapers such as the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, the *New York Press*, the *New York Morning Telegraph Sunday Magazine*, and the *All*

Story Cavalier Weekly. In her capacity as newspaper reporter she visited Dinah, the then famous gorilla, becoming the recipient of its "at once impersonal and condescending, and yet rather agreeable" embrace (Barnes, *New York* 183). She allowed herself to be forcibly fed in order to raise awareness of the excruciating ordeal the British suffragettes, her "English sisters" (*New York* 175), were made to suffer in the British prisons. She listened to the impassioned diatribes of truth-searching soap-box orators round Ben Franklin's statue, and probed "the souls of jungle folk" (*New York* 190) at the Hippodrome Circus, where she caught a "hint of a possible knowledge of the corners of the human mind supposed to be secret" (*New York* 193). She tangoed at the Arcadia Dance Hall, and visited the last impoverished squatter of the city of New York; joined the mesmerized throng gathered around dentist-showman Twingeless Twitchell and his "tantalizing tweezers" (*New York* 21) at a street corner in Brooklyn, and caricatured her fellow Village bohemians; she saw the diamonds of American magnate Jim Brady, and covered the controversy surrounding the closing of Arbuckle's floating hotel for the poor.

Barnes' contemporaries' perception of the overall significance of her journalistic writings must have been substantially limited by their piecemeal appearance over the years. Fortunately, today's readers can avail themselves of the thematic cohesion afforded by the two compilations of interviews and articles published in 1985 and 1990 respectively (see bibliography). From this vantage point Barnes' feature stories and interviews, written in a half-reportorial, half-subjective style, have the quality of transcending the anecdotal details and directing the reader to the social, political, and, ultimately, existential implications of what the celebrities say and the stories signify. They expose the contradictions inherent in modern urban life, and highlight the simultaneity of disparate occurences in New York City, which functions as

a mirror of Western existence in general. Moreover, they emphasize the contrast between the nullifying effects of reason on human behavior and the primitive, uncanny wisdom of the animal world. The opposition of the human and the animal, civilized sophistication and natural naiveté—"Animals and children: this is the state of creation; after that is civilization" Barnes wrote (*New York* 192)—rationality and suppressed spontaneity, with an ill-hidden apology of the instinctual in humankind, appears as the thematic undercurrent cutting through the bulk of Barnes early newspaper writings.

It was in her newspaper days in New York that Barnes met the Baroness, whom she described in an article printed in the *New York Morning Telegraph Sunday Magazine* ("How The Villagers Amuse Themselves") in 1916 in the following manner:

> . . . one sees the Baroness leap lightly from one of those new white taxis with seventy black and purple anklets clanking about her secular feet, a foreign postage stamp—cancelled—perched upon her cheek; a wig of purple and gold caught roguishly up with strands from a cable once used to moor importations from far Cathay; red trousers—and catch the subtle, dusty perfume blown black from her—an ancient human notebook on which has been written all the follies of a past generation (*New York* 259).

After the Baroness' suicide in the mid-twenties, Barnes, whom the Baroness had nominated executor of her heterodox literary estate, wrote a tribute to her which appeared in *transition* with a short statement by herself and a selection of Dadaist prose and poems by the Baroness. However, Barnes would not carry out her promise to have her friend's

works put into print in book form until 1979, when she asked Hank O'Neal to revise and make ready for publication the Baroness' papers kept in the McKeldin Library at the University of Maryland. O'Neal complied with her request and patiently organized and typed up the Baroness' poems. Although Barnes was willing to write an introduction, O'Neal has described her reaction to them as "non-committal" (*Life* 55). A volume of the Baroness' work finally appeared, without the promised introduction, in 1987.

Barnes' stubborn reluctance to reveal details of her past renders the task of defining her attitude towards the works of the Baroness in the twenties a matter of speculation. It seems quite apparent, nonetheless, that Barnes had looked upon her eccentric friend as a source of literary material rather than as a significant poet. This presumption is corroborated by O'Neal's discovery in the late seventies, among the material on the Baroness given to him by Barnes, of a manuscript, a thinly fictionalized account of the Baroness' life, which, on the face of it, was never completed. It is O'Neal's theory that Barnes must have busied herself with it after the first draft of *Nightwood* (*Bow Down*) was completed. Her project to produce a book-length work based on something other than her family background was eventually abandoned. Yet, the fact that the material she used was the life of her Dadaist friend is significant and must be emphasized.

The unfinished manuscript retrieved by O'Neal in 1979 was not Barnes' first attempt at writing fiction inspired by a Dadaist figure. A few years earlier Barnes had paid tribute to young French Dadaist Raymond Radiguet with her story "The Little Girl Continues" (first printed in Ford Madox Ford's *Transatlantic Review*), which would appear much later in her collection of short stories, *Spillway* (1962), under the title "The Grande Malade."

Man Ray, whom she had met during her New York days in his Village studio, introduced Barnes to Radiguet and other Dadaists at the famed Bôeuf sur le Toit, one of the rare Paris night-clubs frequented by both the French and the American writers and artists. At the time of their meeting Radiguet was one of the "nouveaux venus" (Sanouillet 174-191) in the Dada group, together with Jacques Rigaut, Pierre Drieu la Rochelle, René Crevel, Robert Desnos, Roger Vitrac and Jacques Baron. He was emotionally involved with Bronjia Perlmutter (Moydia in "The Grande Malade," and Sari in McAlmon's account in *Being Geniuses Together*), a young Polish model who, with her sister Tylia, had taken the Bôeuf sur le Toit by storm.

The first works of Radiguet to be published were his poems "Poème" and "Tohu," printed in two issues of *SIC*, the Dada-spirited precursor of *Littérature*, in 1918. In 1919 his poem "Incognito" appeared in *Littérature*, to which he soon became a habitual contributor. He is best remembered, however, for his two novels: *Le diable au corps* and *Le Bal du Comte d'Orgel;* and for his strong impact on his friend Jean Cocteau, who, although eleven years his senior, spoke of him as his "examiner" (Cocteau 51).

In 1923 Radiguet caught a cold that developed into pneumonia. Cocteau sat at his bedside till the end, and, according to McAlmon, let Radiguet have all the drink he wanted so he died as he had been born—unconscious.

Barnes' story, narrated by Moydia's sister to a stranger who might well be Barnes herself in a Parisian cafe, is an account of Radiguet's (Monsieur X in the story) last days, and of his death during his lover's absence:

> He had caught a chill the evening that Moydia left, and it had grown worse and worse. It was reported the Baron [Cocteau]

> was always with him, and when the Baron saw that Monsieur X was truly going to die, he made him drink. They drank together all night and into the morning. The Baron wanted it that way: "For that," he said, "he might die as he was born, without knowing" (Barnes, *Selected* 27).

Whether Radiguet's prose had any tangible influence on Barnes' own style is difficult to say. During one of her many conversations with O'Neal shortly before her death, Barnes "mentioned Radiguet and how she had once written a story about him" (O'Neal, *Life* 27). Apparently, she made no further comment, so that her appreciation of Radiguet as a writer remains undetermined. It is nonetheless remarkable that the life and early death (Radiguet died at the age of twenty) of the young Dadaist had enough impact on her to inspire the writing of one of her most accomplished short stories.

At the time Barnes met Laurence Vail, the "golden boy of the Village" (Field, *Djuna* 60), he "epitomized the wildness of the Village at its most sophisticated" (Field, *Djuna* 15). "High-spirited" and "promiscuous," with "little connection with ordinary behavior" (Guggenheim 54), Vail, considered by Tzara one of the fathers of Dadaism (Rood 394), joined the Dadaist ranks upon his arrival in Paris after World War I. Andrew Field has asserted that Vail was an important figure in Barnes' life for only one reason: for having provided her with his English translation of Charles-Louise Philippe's *Bubu de Montparnasse*, which, in his opinion, "exercised a strong vectoral force" (*Djuna* 158) on the writing of *Nightwood*. However, the consistent correspondence between the two writers over the decades, Barnes' conception of Western civilization, and, most importantly, the stylistic and thematic characteristics of her Dadaist

short story, "The Perfect Murder," counter Field's contention and point to a stronger impact of Vail on Barnes.

From her keen observation of the paradoxical and absurd manifestations of human actuality in the instinct-smothering metropolis, her association with proto-Dada anti-artists like the Baroness and Vail, and her innately pessimistic view of the world—"Look at the life around me . . . is not everything morbid? I mean the life of people stripped of their masks. Where are the relieving features?" (Barnes, *Interviews* 386)—Barnes came to the realization that, behind an illusion of progress, Western history has been a complex record of disunity and disharmony. She found herself inhabiting a barren land not unlike T.S. Eliot's waste land: "The whole world is nothing but a noise, as hot as the inside of a tiger's mouth. They call it civilization—that is a lie!" (Barnes, *Selected* 18). It was her belief that all of the former certainties have vanished along with the systems of thought and religion that supported them. Western institutions are the crumbling ruins of a long-gone past that beguile by providing or condoning the lies of the "Little, dirty, gravy-spilling bourgeoisie" (Barnes, *Smoke* 63).

True knowledge, which can only be obtained by the subjugation of logic by the forces of the primitive and the irrational, is intuitive and resides in the extemporaneous, impulsive side of the human soul. In the contemporary social order, however, there is no room for the instinctual.

As a result, Barnes' short stories present individuals inextricably entangled in the mesh of a reason-ridden civilization, who nevertheless cannot summon reason or convention to combat inner forces that threaten their sense of order and sanity. Most of Barnes' short-fiction characters fritter away their lives, like Clochette Brin in "Prize Ticket 177," "whistling a popular air between bites of a ham sandwich and trips to the stove to stir coffee with a tarnished spoon" (*Smoke* 76); or bogged down,

like Varra Kolveed in "The Coward," in a stultifying "life of unending sameness that has its end in hysteria or melancholy" (*Smoke* 131). They look upon life as "filthy" and "frightful," pregnant with "pain, beauty, disease—death" (Barnes, *Selected* 9). At one point of their lives, the one depicted in the stories, they are put in a position where they are urged to act. Some of them let the opportunity to act and make a change slip away, and at the end of the story continue to look on life without participating in it. Others, on whom I will focus, abandon reason and venture into the unchartered province of unrestrained action, responding to the world in which they live in a Dadaist fashion by performing gratuitous, ineffective gestures of revolt.

Barnes' only purely Dadaist short story, "The Perfect Murder," shares with the others the her distrust of linear progression and chronological character development and an unconventional approach to plot. It reveals Barnes' inclination to subjective rendition as well as her Dadaist penchant for cryptic aphoristic statements.

The story concerns itself with middle-age professor Anatol Profax (his last name hints at his "pro-fact" frame of mind), who has devoted his life to the study of the "effect of environment on the tongue" (Culler 249). After having conversed with the "trained" and the "untrained," the "loquacious" and the "inarticulate"—he found the inarticulate particularly satisfactory in that "they were rather more racial than individual" (Culler 249)—he feels he has covered his field thoroughly and prides himself on not having found anybody who defied his tabulations. Preposterously, he conceives that, although "certainly at some point in his life he must have curbed an emotion, crushed a desire, trampled a weakness" (Culler 251), he is a man of violent passions.

Crossing New York's Third Avenue, he ponders abstractedly over the "key-words" of fanatics like Swedenborg and Blake (Culler 250). As he

broods over his ostensibly emotionless past, he notices a poster depicting the "True and Only Elephant Woman." At this point a woman bowls into him. She introduces herself by taking the professor's arm and exclaiming: "Dying . . . I am shallow until you get used to me. If it were not so early I'd suggest tripes and a pint of bitters" (Culler 252). She confides to him that she has just died from a fall from a circus trapeze and that, devoted to coming back, she sometimes is a milliner, sometimes hungry. She defines herself as a *"trauma"* (Culler 252) and "the purest abomination imaginable" (Culler 254). Her speech, which greatly resembles that of the characters of the Dadaist novels and plays, is a series of unclear aphorisms—"Man is a worm and won't risk discredit, and discredit is the *only* beauty" (Culler 252)—*non sequiturs* and hollow utterances. Her dialogues with Profax are mostly absurd:

> "For instance, I'm lovable and offensive. *Imagine* that *position*!"
> "Do you play dominos?"
> "No. I want to be married (Culler 253).

They decide to get married, but later. Upon his suggesting a cup of coffee, they start for his rooms, her velvet dress "sweeping through the dust, dragging cigarettes butts and stubs of theatre tickets" (Culler 253). He does not know how to class her and fears his great work is now hardly readable. As he sees her fall face down among a pile of his musical instruments, sending sheet music fluttering into the air, he experiences something he has never experienced before. Leaning over, "with one firm precise gesture" (Culler 254), he unexpectedly draws his penknife across her throat and puts her piece by piece inside a trunk. It dawns upon him that he has destroyed definition and will never be able to place her. As he

lifts the lid of the trunk a few seconds later she is not there. He runs into the street and hails a cab. As the taxi starts down the street, he sees her pressing her face against the window of a twin taxi running next to his. He tries to call, but a van comes between them and a traffic light separates them.

The story's facetious tone, the ingenious combination of dream and reality, the subjective description of the professor's scientific enterprises, and the unnecessarily murderous denouement place "The Perfect Murder" in the Dadaist tradition. By juxtaposing incongruous elements, Barnes highlights the ontological obfuscation prevailing in modern society. Gratuitous violence constitutes Profax's response to a reality he is unable to comprehend and tabulate. His action, nevertheless, proves fruitless, since by eliminating the source of mystification he also obliterates the possibility of ever coming to terms with it. The professor's gesture represents his instinctual way of coping with a state of affairs which has defeated his logical resources.

While "The Perfect Murder" concerns itself with an uncalled-for murder, "The Doctors" deals with suicide, an act fervently discussed by all and not less passionately performed by some of the Dadaists. Ribemont-Dessaignes wrote that the Dadaists "were haunted by the uselessness of life itself" (Motherwell 105). Their revolt against society, art, and the past inevitably took the form of revolt against life itself: "there is only one wonderful remedy: suicide" (Motherwell 105). The suicides of René Crevel, Jacques Rigaut and others during the twenties and early thirties had been foreshadowed by that of Jacques Vaché, "dandy, anglomaniac and opium addict, a young man who rejected life" (Motherwell 105) in 1918, shortly after the birth of Dada, which, however, was unknown to him.

Although she considered herself too much of a coward to commit it herself, Barnes strongly endorsed suicide as the most beautiful way of

putting an end to life, which, she once said to O'Neal, is "painful, nasty and short"—and, according to her own account, in her case only "painful and nasty" (O'Neal used this quotation as the title for his book on Barnes). In one of her early journalistic pieces (signed Lydia Steptoe), "What is Good Form of Dying," she jocularly assumes that there is a correct manner in which a young lady must die, which is determined by her hair coloring (prophetically, she states the red-haired woman can resort to seclusion as an alternative to absolute death). Facetiousness, however, gives way to Dadaist decadence in "The Doctors."

Doctors Katrina and Otto Silverstaff had both started for a doctorate in gynaecology at Freiburg-im-Breisgau. Otto had "made it" (Barnes, *Selected* 54), but Katrina had "lost her way somewhere in vivisection, behaving as though she were aware of an impudence" (*Selected* 54). They came to America in the early twenties and, at the time of the story, they have a girl and a boy, have been practising medicine for ten years, and live comfortably on Second Avenue, much respected and appreciated by their neighbors. Otto, who considers himself a "liberal in the earlier saner sense of the word" (*Selected* 55), does not see anything strange in his wife's abstraction, withdrawal, and silence. He thinks of her as being "sea water" and "impersonal fortitude" (*Selected* 55).

One day Katrina receives, to his surprise, a peddlar of books selling bibles. She confides to him her intention to "have religion become out of the reach of the *few* . . . out of reach *for* a few; something impossible again; to find again" (*Selected* 57). In order to do this, she will become his mistress. Puzzled and feeling "fear quite foreign to him" (*Selected* 57), the peddlar takes his leave with an invitation to see her the next day.

Several days elapse, during which his calls are rebuffed, before she finally decides to see him. Coolly, she starts to undress and tells him, in a

tone reminiscent of "What is Good Form of Dying:" "some people drink poison, some take the knife, others drown. I take you" (*Selected* 58).

A few days later, "at dusk, his heart the heart of a dog" (*Selected* 59), he comes into the street of the doctors and, on looking at the house, beholds a length of black crepe hung at the door which advises him of her suicide. Thereafter he becomes a boisterous drunkard, roaming the doctors' quarter. Seeing Otto Silverstaff once with his children, he bursts into profuse laughter and tears.

Nothing in the development of the story leads logically to such an end. Despite her abstractedness, Katrina is not a despondent or disturbed woman. She expresses her love for her husband in unequivocal terms—"I love my husband" (*Selected* 58)—and has two healthy children. Her decision to make religion unbelievable and unpracticable to others (the motives of which remain unknown to the reader and possibly to herself) is carried out by performing two instinctual, unthought actions, adultery and suicide, which defy both her and her family's perception of an orderly world. Her gestures leave those close to her (her children and husband), the book peddlar, and the reader wondering why. There is no answer to such a question, insomuch as Katrina's suicide is a Dadaist *geste gratuit* outside the parameters of logicality.

In "The Perfect Murder" and "The Doctors" Barnes presented gratuitous murder and suicide as professor Profax's and Doctor Katrina Silverstaff's ways of individual, instinctual revolt against existential confusion and a congruent world respectively. "The Terrorists" examines the viability of revolutionary destruction as the only means of attaining freedom. Revolution and destruction were salient aspects of the Dadaist philosophy: "Revolution," declares Bernard Karpel in his critical bibliography of Dadaism titled "Did Dada Die?" "is the consequence of a series of premises,

inexorably translated from concept to reality. Pursued fervently, it dominates Dada in the heart of Europe" (Motherwell 321).

Pilaat, the protagonist of "The Terrorists," is a melancholy, middle-aged man who, coming from a "cleanly" family, has been "comforted and maimed in his conceptions and his fellow love by too many clean shirts in youth" (Barnes, *Smoke* 160). He is painfully aware of how "pitifully weak" the people are, and speaks of them as "the Unfortunate" and "the Miserable" (*Smoke* 160). Feeling the world is not going in the direction he has wished, he longs to correct things, like Dada, "as one cleans up a floor, not as one binds up a wound" (*Smoke* 160). Like the Dadaists, who rejected art as commonly understood in that it must conform to the rules imposed by bourgeois philistinism, Pilaat has abandoned literature. He no longer writes poetry or plays, and has failed to "keep up his connection with a paper which he started, and which spoke harshly of all things" (*Smoke* 163).

Pilaat's young wife, whose name is not revealed in the story, believes in "the vanity of all things and the pessimism of all things" (*Smoke* 160-61). She spends every afternoon in the cafes. At six she clears out for the bourgeois customers, "'the pigs,' the smug and respectable who [bring] their wives and children to dine" (*Smoke* 161). She returns at nine to read Pilaat's old poetry, of which she has grown tired long ago, and to talk about "the revolutionists" (*Smoke* 161).

The story reaches its climax one night in their bohemian garret. After Pilaat has threatened to kill the vocalist who is teaching someone to sing in the room below them (a scene which brings to mind the violent tantrums for which Vail was notorious, and with which Barnes was familiar) he discusses the viability of "destruction on a large scale" (Smoke 168) with his friends and some derelicts he has picked up at his doorstep,

as his wife sits quietly in a corner. He propounds his program of anarchic holocaust in vehement terms:

> I would tear down the scenery . . . I would rip the whole existing plan [of civilization] to pieces. How she would shiver, how she would implore. But I should have no mercy. No, not even when she got upon her knees and wept at my feet and covered them with her insufferable tears. I would invite her to suicide. I would mock at the stains upon her cheeks. I would glory at the dirt on the imploring knees. I would laugh aloud, and shake her by those horrible, ample shoulders of hers, and would cry out to her, 'Now die, die; we do not care! . . . Destroy yourself, for we need a harp on which to sing the song of freedom (*Smoke* 167).

In a huddle, the revolutionists start talking about besieging the town. Names are mentioned as persons to be destroyed (Dada's idea to subject Anatole France to a mock trial must have originated in a meeting such as this, with Breton calling out the culprit's name): "Fists doubled up, eyes sparkled, and the tongue knew no forbidden thing" (*Smoke* 168). As the night gets on they decide: "In the dawn we shall do it" (*Smoke* 169). Soon, "deep breathing" takes the place of "cries, oaths, imprecations" (*Smoke* 169) as "the terrorists" fall asleep.

When Pilaat's wife wakes up the next day at noon, it is too late to start a revolution. In their sleep all the men have moved away the objects they had collected as weapons. Looking out of the window, "She thought of her favorite cafe, and she smiled as she contemplated one or two new phrases she would use in relation to life" (*Smoke* 169-70).

"The Terrorists" can be construed as a satire of café life. The plan to destroy civilization, conceived within the province of such life, backfires, resembling Profax's crime and Katrina's suicide in their Dadaist ineffectuality.

The tension between the forces of nature and the dehumanizing powers of civilization, one of Dada's preoccupations, is brought up in one of Barnes' most popular short stories, "A Night Among the Horses." Mankind is being drawn away from its original, primitively spontaneous state and contaminated with the complications of an intricate civilization, which in Barnes' story is embodied by Freda Buckler.

Freda is perverse and sophisticated. She is described as a complex piece of machinery (manufactured by the civilization to which she belongs): a "small fiery woman with a battery for a heart and the body of a toy, who ran everything, who purred, saturated with impudence, with a mechanical buzz that ticked away her humanity" (*Selected* 31). Her affair with her ostler has "become a game without any pleasure" (*Selected* 31). She torments him with her objects of culture and is arrogantly bent on stepping him up from being a "thing" (*Selected* 31) while he keeps telling her and himself that he likes "being common" (*Selected* 32). If he married her, he reflects, "He wouldn't fit anywhere after Freda, he'd be neither what he was nor what he had been; he'd be a *thing*, half standing, half crouching, like those figures under the roofs of historic buildings, the halt position of the damned" (*Selected* 32).

One night she insists upon his presence at a fancy-dress party to be held in the house: "Come," she says tauntingly, "just as you are, and be our whipper-in" (*Selected* 33). Rebelliously, he appears dressed "like an ordinary gentleman; he was the only person present who was not 'in dress,' that is, in the accepted sense" (*Selected* 33). As he dances with her,

he sees her as a praying mantis. Stepping back, he draws a circle in the rosin around her with the knob end of his cane and darts out of the house.

As he attempts to approach the horses in order to ride away, they do not seem to recognize him. He has spurned Freda, civilization. However, he is not what he once was, or at least that is what the horses sense. In spite of his struggle to return to the primitive he finds himself, after all, in the "halt position of the damned," in a limbo between nature and civilization, claimed by neither. As he stumbles toward the horses he trips and falls to the ground: "The upraised hooves of the first horse missed him, the second did not" (*Selected* 35).

"A Night Among the Horses" comes to corroborate the notions exposed in "The Terrorists." In order for humanity to be able to regain its original, primitive rapport with nature, civilization must be done away with.

In spite of her Dadaist beliefs and conception of human actuality, mirrored in "The Perfect Murder," "The Doctors," "The Terrorists," and "A Night Among the Horses," Barnes lacked the Dadaist ability to be playfully paradoxical, to condemn the inconsistencies of life in our world and, in the same breath, enjoy them with the joyous naivity of a child. Life weighed too heavily on Barnes. Upon her final return to the United States in the late thirties, she was convinced, as she confessed to O'Neal many years later, that, since she was not radiantly beautiful any longer and had written what she considered her best work, *Nightwood*, she had accomplished her mission in life and had no incentive to carry on living. Not courageous enough for suicide (by her own admission), she resorted to the "red-hair's" alternative: seclusion. She was to remain hermetically confined in her small apartment at Patchin Place in the Village for over forty years, until evasive and long-awaited Death came to knock on her door in 1982. Despite her strong desire to die, she did not pass away until the age of ninety.

V. Violence, Murder, Suicide, and the "Unmotivated Crime" in Dada and Laurence Vail's *Murder! Murder!*

> *"It's easy enough to find motives for a crime."*
> *"No doubt . . . but that's exactly what I don't want to do. I don't want a motive for a crime—all I want is an explanation of the criminal. Yes! mean to lead him into commiting a crime gratuitously—into wanting to commit a crime without any motive at all"* (Lafcadio and Julius de Baraglioul in André Gide's *The Vatican Caves*, 197).

Laurence Vail, the son of an aristocratic New England lady and the once commercially successful French-American painter Eugene Lawrence Vail, was born in Paris and brought up, as Ian S. MacNiven has pointed out, "to live like a Frenchman but think like an American" (Rood, 394). After the war, during which he served in the American army as an officer assigned to the Corps of Interpreters, Vail, who attended schools in Oxford and Connecticut, crossed the Atlantic again to spend the rest of his life in Europe, mainly in France.

During the twenties, Vail, novelist, poet, painter and sculptor, joined Paris Dada—Tzara considered him one of the fathers of the movement (Rood, 394)—was an early practitioner of Surrealism in art and literature, and became known to everyone in the artistic community of the Parisian Left Bank as the King of Bohemia and the King of Montparnasse. According to Peggy Guggenheim, he knew all the American writers and painters of the Latin Quarter and a lot of the French ones too (27). Always "bursting with ideas" (Guggenheim, 36), Vail, who in his own words "would be fused into anyone going new ways" (Rood, 394), led an extremely varied creative life and exerted a "catalytic force" (Rood, 394)

upon his many friends, among them Djuna Barnes, Hart Crane, Ernest Hemingway, James Joyce, Robert M. Coates and Ezra Pound.

In literature Vail experimented with form, diction and style. In 1929 he was one of the sixteen writers who, "Tired of the spectacle of short stories, novels, poems and plays still under the hegemony of the banal word" (Cowley, *Exiles* 276), signed the "Proclamation" which announced the "Revolution of the Word" in the June issue of Eugene Jolas' *transition*. Vail's published works include: three novels, *Piri and I* (1923), *Murder! Murder!* (1931), and *365 Days* (1936), co-written with Kay Boyle and Nina Conarain; an early play, *What Do You Want?* produced by the Provincetown Players in 1919; and poems and short stories published in American little magazines such as *Bellman*, *Broom*, *Dial*, the *New Review*, Bob Brown's *Readies* anthology, the *Smart Set*, and Peter Neagoe's *Americans Abroad*.

However, despite his important contributions to the life, art, and literature of his generation, Vail has been thus far largely neglected by critics and historians. Such a lack of recognition must be attributed to his unusual status as a French-born American writer/artist living in France, and to his clearly Dadaist disposition towards fame and success.

In spite of his birth and total command of the French language—he even rolled his r's when he spoke English—Vail rendered himself unavailable to the French public and critics by writing all his published works in English. In the contemporary French critics' eyes Vail was one more of the American writers exiled in Paris. It cannot be said this tendency has changed in more recent times. In his 1965 *Dada à Paris*, Michel Sanouillet included Vail among the American authors who had come in contact with Dada through the offices of Man Ray (300). As for the few American critics familiar with Vail and his work, they all seem to have shared MacNiven's opinion that he had "too much to do in too

many creative fields for him to fulfill all the promise he showed" (Rood 396). His decision to remain permanently in France after the war did not help to bring him any closer to the American readers and scholars. As a result of all this, Vail stands today in a no-man's-land between the critical establishments of France and the United States of America, unclaimed by either.

Also, and, I believe, more importantly, Vail never showed any interest at all in being recognized by the critics—in being successful. Furthermore, he, like the Dadaists, took every opportunity to manifest his contempt for the work of art and literature as a finished product to be consumed by the public/critics, a "ball and chain" in Breton's words, "that hold back the soul after death" (Motherwell 200), and always vindicated the Dadaist notion of "art on the make" and of the artists themselves as living works of art. One does not have to produce art, it was Dada and Vail's belief, in order to be an artist: "I said to hell with art," exclaims Vails alter ego, Martin Asp, in *Murder! Murder!* "I know I can write. Damn well, if I want to. Only . . . I may not always want" (68). One simply has to live to be an artist, because art and life are indistinguishable: "And I'm never going to write another poem in my life," cries Asp again, "Why should we—living poems, fuss about with ink?" (40-41).

It can be argued, not without reason, that the Dadaists contradicted themselves in this point by, on the one hand, haughtily expressing their animosity towards art and success as unwanted restrictions in the creative life of the artist, and, on the other, going to surprisingly great lengths to have their writings published and their artistic works exhibited. True as this may be of some Dadaists, it was not so of Vail. Following in the footsteps of "kernel" Dadaists Jacques Vaché, who, Breton wrote in "For Dada," had the "good fortune" of having produced "nothing" (Motherwell 200), Duchamp, who gave up painting early in his career to dedicate

himself to playing chess, and Jaques Rigaut, who "destroyed his writings as they were finished" (Motherwell xxxi), Vail never published the many other novels he wrote. According to Kay Boyle, he destroyed seven or eight manuscripts during the years they spent together—approximately from 1928 until 1941—(Rood 396). Peggy Guggenheim has related how, the day Pauline Turkel was coming from Nice to type the recently completed manuscript of *Murder! Murder!* Vail seized it and burned it in the stove of his studio. He had to dictate a rough draft of it from memory (Guggenheim 68).

Fortunately, *Murder! Murder!* survived its author's destructive impulses, and it stands today as a literary illustration of the Dadaist notions on violence and crime.

As a state of mind, Dada had implications beyond literature and the arts. It aimed, as Ribemont-Dessaignes has explained, at the liberation of the individual from dogmas, laws, and morality, since "To liberate man seemed to them [the Dadaists] far more desirable than to know how one ought to write" (Motherwell 105). Dada looked upon itself as the foremost manifestation of an "epoch of violence" which "assailed all the moral defenses" established by society (Ribemont-Dessaignes 40): "Morality," Tzara contended in his *Manifesto of Mr Antipyrine*, "has determined charity and pity, two balls of fat that have grown like elephants, like planets, and are called good" (Motherwell 81). The violence vindicated and practised by Dada was directed against the prevailing moral system. It could be collective, in which case it was aimed at the realization of a goal, or individual—purposeless, fleeting, and ineffectual.

> Nothing is lost sooner than violence (unless it be collective). Only when arm in arm with his brothers has the individual any lasting strength. War or revolution is all right; between

> two bombs nothing keeps man from dreaming of his armchair or his cabbages. But left alone on the tight rope with no one in front or behind, a grenade in each hand to kill, every minute, it does not last. A star bursts in the sky and passes in a veil of fleeting brilliance. The warm deep darkness remains with its nightingale's songs, its quilts, its flakes of hope (Ribemont-Dessaignes 40).

Intimately connected with the idea of destruction—"the reactions of individuals contaminated by destruction are rather violent" (Motherwell 247)—Dadaist violence always leads to apathy: ". . . when these reactions are exhausted, anihilated by the Satanic insistence of a continuous and progressive 'What for?' what remains, what dominates is indifference" (Motherwell 247).

Ultimately and, in many cases, unconsciously or not explicitly, aimed at flouting the prevailing moral system (society), "the uselessness of everything" in the "concentration-camp universe" that encircles us (Gerrard 32), Dadaist violence is gratuitous, which reflects the, in theory, liberated moral values of the group, exerted for pleasure's sake—"It is a question of our pleasure, which claims to refresh itself in Violence," wrote Ribemont-Dessaignes (41)—and can be directed against others (which ultimately leads to murder), or against oneself (suicide).

Matthew Josephson has acknowledged that "much of the group's discussion turned upon the matter of 'unmotivated' crimes, or those having a complex motivation" (143). The concept of a crime committed without a motive, by which the Dadaists were fascinated, had been introduced to modern French literature by Stendhal (whose hero in *The Red and the Black*, Julien Sorel, shoots his mistress), Dostoevski (Stavrogin instigates a young girl's suicide in *The Possessed*), and André

Gide, who always showed a supportive attitude towards Dada's endeavors and was held in unanimous admiration by the Dadaist writers. The hero of Gide's *Les Caves du Vatican* (1914), Lafcadio, murders a stranger in a train compartment by undoing the door fastening against which his victim, Amédée Fleurissoire, is leaning. Suddenly out of balance, Fleurissoire falls "into the darkness like a stone" (Gide 191). Lafcadio's reason for committing the crime "is just to commit it without any reason" (Gide 205). Through his action, Lafcadio, who likes to consider himself an "adventurer" rather than a "criminal" (Gide 197)—because "there is no reason that a man who commits a crime without a reason should be considered a criminal"—makes himself into "a free man" (Gide 205).

Crimes of a similar nature were committed by a number of characters of Dadaist fiction: Céleste Ugolin (in Ribemont-Dessaignes' *Céleste Ugolin*), Telémaque (in Aragon's *Les Aventures de Telémaque*), Moravagine (in Cendrars' *Moravagine*), Charles Drogar (in Coates' *The Eater of Darkness*), Professor Profax (in Barnes' "The Murder"), and John Raskolnikov Gilson (in West's *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*). An unmotivated murder is also the main theme in Vail's *Murder! Murder!*

In his novel, Vail presents the desire to kill a fellow human being as a perfectly normal constituent of human nature. "There is no man," it is Asp's conviction, ". . . who does not at least once a week desire to kill his father, mother, sweetheart, baby, wife, or an obnoxious friend or stranger" (Vail 151). There are, Asp contends, two types of human beings The first type is those who, unable to bridge "the gulf between the imagination and the deed," draw back "when it comes to the point" (Gide 192), and, instead of following their instincts to the end,

> . . . argue, sulk; raise their voices, slam a door; join the army, write a play, bite their nails; break china, weep, repent; go in

> for drink, or women, or exploration; buy flowers, collect stamps; get old, go far away, ruin their health and disposition (Vail 151).

The second type is "those rare spontaneous fellows" who, "even as they wish to kill, they kill," and eventually become what society calls "assassins" (Vail 152). Asp—a violent young man who, after brutally beating up Mercy Fogg in the half-reality of a drunken dream exclaims: "I am, I admit, satisfied with my firm behaviour. One must be singularly free of prejudice to strike a small defenceless woman on the nose" (Vail 29)—likes to consider himself a representative example of the second type: "It's so beautiful—ah, wonderful, wonderful—to kill a man. Something different from playwriting, literature. Oh, la la. That's living, my friends" (Vail 209).

Asp's decision to kill Mercy Fogg comes impulsively during a conversation with Miriam Oon in a crowded café in Montparnasse: "I . . . feel wild tonight. I'd like to hurt someone, kill someone. But all people are so horrible. I don't know on whom to start" (Vail 72), says Asp as he drinks a cognac. Made angry by Oon's comment that "It's easy to sit and talk" (Vail 72), Asp vows he will murder anyone of her choice. Oon directs Asp's attention to Mercy Fogg as she walks down the street: "Now if you want to try any experiments . . . " (Vail 72), she dares him.

Leaping out of his chair, Asp follows Mercy Fogg through the streets of Paris, planning his crime, pausing regularly at bars to "rapidly swallow some good wet fire" (Vail 73):

> No, I shall not kill the little prig with one swift thrust. First, quite unsexually, making unflattering remarks about her shapes, I shall forcibly remove her clothes. Then, turning her

> over, I shall try with a knife to improve her posterior parts. Nor will I consider this exercise a waste of time. I should have a fashionable figure for my virgin crime (Vail 73).

Presently, she disappears into a door in a quiet home street. Asp's speech becomes drunkenly muddled as he torpidly eggs himself on to carry out his plan:

> Am I too trunk to pill? Not a fit of it, not a tit of it. Not a hip hip hip of it. Besides, I have my veppons. My steeth, my snails, my boob-nails poops . . . I must be a man, a real murderous man, anyhow some sort of man, push myself into that black crack which any moment may be closing. But the house, blown about by the vapours of my head, will turn, turn, over-turn; now it's here—in front; now there—behind; I do not know in what direction to lurch my person (Vail 74).

The next morning, as he tries to remember the events of the previous night, Asp is informed by a friend that Mercy Fogg has been murdered in her room at the Hotel de Chicago et de Madrid: "Am I a murderer?" (Vail 79), Asp asks himself.

Once he has come to terms with the idea that he, "a man of action" (Vail 203), as he regards himself, may have committed a murder, Asp decides to turn himself in to the police: "I'm going to confess," he confides to Miriam Oon nonchalantly: "Who knows? They may bring out the old guillotine" (Vail 256). It is through his fruitless attempts at giving himself up that an "explanation of the murderer," if not of the murder—which remains unmotivated—is provided, and obvious similarities between

Asp's crime and those committed by the Dadaist fiction characters are revealed.

Determined to confess, to have his crime duly acknowledged by society, Asp is not taken seriously by Peticu—the detective in charge of the case—and frustratingly ignored by the *Sous-Sous Préfet*, the *Sous Préfet*, and, finally, the *Préfet* of French Police himself. As he becomes entangled in the bureaucratic mesh, Asp's facetious nonchalance gradually gives way to ontological despondency: "His flippancy is honest," says Asp's friend, Grusha, in a statement which could also be applied to the Dadaists: "it's real despair" (Vail 254).

In his self-searching quest for an explication of the crime, Asp begins by blaming Miriam Oon: "If [she] hadn't egged me on, I would never have committed murder" (Vail 191), and his wife: " . . . if Polly had been willing to follow me to the Rhine . . . " (Vail 191). Finding such condemnations hasty and unsatisfactory, Asp holds his parents responsible for his crime:

> No doubt they erred. They spared the rod, or struck me in righteous places; made irritations and calluses which, as I grew, grew too, became full-fledged inhibitions and fixations, which, in the long run, caused me to seek relief in assassination (Vail 193).

His anguished struggle to rationalize the murder continues as he puts the blame on society, since, he reflects, his parents, friends, wife, and ancestors were, after all, the products of their times:

> Was not Society itself to blame? Did it not by incommoding me with its stiff institutions and nagging laws create the irritability which caused me to spill female blood? (Vail 197).

Ultimately, there is only himself, the individual, to accuse. In a modern world full of "unbaked, undigested sanity" (Vail 41), in which even an outlaw has no choice but to stand in line to turn himself in, murder represents the only way at the individual's disposal of affirming itself. Only by obliterating someone's existence can one "contribute to the life force" (Vail 209) and become "life." Yet, in order for the individual to assert its own self, the murder must be acknowledged by the society in which it has been committed. As his attempts to confess meet with failure, Asp begins to feel the disintegration of his own individuality:

> Something is wrong with me; it's as though I were gradually ceasing to be a unit. The line is the unit. I, Martin Asp, myself, am but a humble servant fraction (Vail 269).

At the end of his rope—"No doubt of it," he thinks to himself, "I am a null, a zero" (Vail 274)—Asp, in an inebriated stupor, decides to commit the ultimate act, one which will "make a sensation" (Vail 284), as well as ascertain his existence:

> Before them all—my friends, my wife, I shall demonstrate and affirm the life in me by showing them how different I am without it. I shall affirm the life in me by destroying it before them. In the Latin Quarter, in the bar, on the bar, I shall commit suicide before them (Vail 285).

Murder and suicide were acts unanimously endorsed, and sometimes practiced, not only by Dadaist fiction characters but by Dadaist authors as well. Both theoretic murder and suicide became a gruesome reality when

Jacques Vaché killed himself in a formidable and humorous (?) fashion by taking, and forcing two unwary comrades to take, a large overdose of opium, although he knew well the correct method of employing the drug. Unlike Vaché, Rigaut, Crevel, Telémaque, Ugolin, and other suicidal or murderous Dadaist authors and characters, Asp cannot bring himself to act. His self-confidence sinks when, as he expresses to his wife his intention to kill himself, she reprimands him for turning on all the lights in the house before resuming her interrupted night sleep. As it turns out, he never killed Mercy Fogg either. His desire to defend his individuality is thus unfulfilled:

> Mercy Fog is across the street! Then I have never killed her. No one has ever killed her. But what have I been doing all these weeks? Nothing. I have done nothing. I am a nobody. A nothing (Vail 291).

The novel comes to an end when, painfully aware of his being nothing, and, consequently, of his incapability of committing suicide—"But how can I kill myself if I'm nothing?" (Vail 291), he asks himself—Asp begins to cross the street to kill Mercy Fogg, thus bringing the story full circle.

Through his torrential thoughts and desperate desire to express himself through destructive action, Asp secures a place amongst the Dadaist characters. His jocularity is his reaction to the sordidness of modern life. Only when the heaviness of existence overweighs his hunger for living does his hidden, deeply despondent side come up to the surface. Lost in the sameness of the collective body, and constrained by the laws and rules imposed by society, Asp struggles to affirm his individuality, his otherness, by performing a gratuitous act of destruction, of others or of

himself. Yet, his triumph, had he killed Mercy Fogg or himself, would have been nothing but, as Ribemont-Dessaignes wrote, a star exploding in the sky and passing "in a veil of fleeting brilliance" (40). Since the crime must be made known to all of society, murder can only lead to incarceration and deprivation of freedom. Suicide affirms the freedom of the individual at the same time as it prevents the individual from continuing to practice that freedom. Murder, suicide, and acts of violence thus become as ineffectual in the life of the individual as Dada itself in the artistic life of its time. Maybe Ribemont-Dessaignes was right when he wrote:

> Dadaism did not last any more than the length of skirts or a fashionable colour. It may have been the excess of violence itself that did it (40).

VI. Dadaist Art and Poetry in John Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer*

> *I call* je m'enfoutisme *the kind of like in which everyone retains his own conditions, though respecting other individualisms, except when the need arises to defend oneself, in which the two-step becomes national anthem, curiosity shop, a radio transmitting Bach fugues, electric signs and posters for whorehouses, an organ broadcasting carnations for God, all this together physically replacing photography and the universal catechism* (From Tzara's "Dada Manifesto 1918," Motherwell 80).

It was during one of his frequent sojourns in Paris in the early twenties that John Dos Passos, together with Don Stewart, experienced first-hand Dada's most preposterous side. One night, after dining with Dadaists Drieu la Rochelle—whom Dos passos thought to be "the coming French writer"—and Aragon—whom he described as "very much the dashing young poet"—the four writers, "full of beans" and feeling like doing "something outrageous" (Dos Passos, *Best Times* 159), joined Tzara and the rest of his coterie in a typical Dadaist foray:

> Tzara, trailed by the rest in a solemnfaced cue, marched about the streets executing a number of idiotic maneuvers. They had a little chant: Dada, Dada . . . We ended marching pokerfaced through a Turkish bath. Fat men sweating in steamrooms or dunking in swimming pools looked up astonished but offered no resistance. The attendants asked "What the hell?" All any of the marchers would say was "C'est le Dada" (*Best Times* 160).

Dos Passos finishes his rather sardonic account by admitting that such "idiotic" antics left him feeling "a wee mite squeamish" (*Best Times* 160).

Yet, despite his obvious reservations about Dada's public manifestations, an attentive reading of his fiction works from his Harvard days to *Manhattan Transfer* reveals the presence of the other, more serious, side of the movement: the Dadaist poetic and pictorial techniques which Dos Passos absorbed in part through his appreciation of collages by Duchamp, Arp, Ernst, Schwitters, Picabia and other artists associated with Dada, in part through his friendships with and admiration of the works of Dadaists Aragon and George Grosz and proto-Dadaist Blaise Cendrars. Such techniques became particularly obvious in his first mature novel, *Manhattan Transfer*, which represents Dos Passos' attempt to come to grips with the contradictions of modern urban life, and to keep up with the latest developments in literature and the arts.

The novel consists of three books. Each book is divided into chapters headed by short, highly impressionistic prose segments in italic type which serve as an imagistic backdrop to the narrative. Newspaper headlines and articles, popular songs, advertising slogans, together with the introductory segments and the narrative proper, constitute the multi-faceted reality of the novel. There is no discernible plot, no narrative progression, and, except for "Ferryslip" and "Nine Days Wonder," no connection between the titles and the chapters they introduce.

Forceful images follow one another without transition, bringing together seemingly unrelated fragments of the characters' lives. It is due to this rearrangement of different aspects of reality and to the deluge of images, newspaper cutouts and snatches of modern existence that *Manhattan Transfer* has come to be labeled a literary collage and connections have been made between Dos Passos and Cubism. Yet, I believe that *Manhattan Transfer* as a collage is akin to the Dadaist art works of the aforementioned Dadaist artists, and one step beyond the, in retrospect, relatively timid Cubist pursuits.

Whereas for the Cubists the collage elements were "a counterpoint to the painted lines and forms in a whole oriented toward formal values" (Rubin 95), to the Dadaists plasticity was of secondary interest. They borrowed elements from the Cubists for their *image* value, joining them in irrational and unsuspected ways, turning, as E.L.T. Mesens puts it, "plastic revolution into mental subversion" (Rubin 95). "Collage as it is now understood," wrote Aragon in *A Challenge to Painting*, "is something entirely different from the *papier collés* of the Cubists." The Dadaist collage is the artistic presentation of a meeting of two or more distant realities on a plane foreign to them both, a culture of systematic displacement and its effects. By combining materials rejected by artistic tradition and rarely used by the Cubists (such as bus tickets, driftwood, bottle labels, cloakroom stubs, wheel parts, trash baskets, buttons and all sorts of odds and ends collected in the city streets), the Dadaist artists aimed at translating onto canvas Lautréamont's poetic "chance meeting of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissection table" (Rubin 95).

Whereas the Cubist collage was the result of the deliberate manipulation of artistic materials by the artist, the Dadaist collage is, in its purest state, entirely governed by chance. The materials are placed, sometimes simply dropped, onto the canvas, thus allowing for spontaneity and chance to dominate the creative process.

The Dadaist collage always seeks to convey a message to the viewer. It reveals the chaotic disjointedness of the modern world, and, like all other Dadaist literary, artistic, and public manifestations, represents a "cerebral revolver shot" (Motherwell 85) aimed at the bourgeois. The Dadaist collagists intended to ridicule and mystify the bourgeois through the shocking juxtaposition of components of their everyday life. Contrary to the Cubists, creating an aesthetic product was not the first artistic priority among the Dadaists.

Lastly, and unlike the Cubist collage, a Dadaist collage is characterized by its pervasively poetic tone, the intensity and vividness of its colors, the incongruity of its title and, as pointed out by Aragon in the same writing, the absence of glue as an essential feature of composition.

New York City is the dissection table on which distant realities are juxtaposed in *Manhattan Transfer*. Jimmy Herf, the novel's "hero," arrives in Manhattan on a Fourth of July after spending his childhood in England; Congo and Emily are French defectors who hope to start a new life in America; Marco is an Italian anarchist determined to overthrow the capitalist system. Immigrants, milkmen, burglars, real estate agents, bootleggers, seamstresses, drunkards, second-string actors and actresses, corrupted lawyers and politicians, journalists and ex-soldiers, people whose stories would be of no interest to most readers were it not for the author's ability to shuffle and rearrange their episodes, are "dropped" onto the enormous canvas that Manhattan represents. The appeal of the novel does not lie in the individual stories, but in the way snippets of them become fleetingly interrelated, as if by chance, with episodes of the other characters' lives, in the same way that the materials were overlapped, superimposed, or piled up in the Dadaist collages.

In writing *Manhattan Transfer*, Dos Passos seems to have followed Tzara's recipe to create a chance poem:

> To make a dadaist poem
> Take a newspaper
> Take a pair of scissors
> Choose an article as long as you are planning to make your poem
> Cut out the article

> Then cut out each of the words that make up the article and put them in a bag
> Shake it gently
> Then take out the scraps one after the other in the order in which they left the bag
> Copy concientiously (Motherwell 92).

A number of modern urban lives in Manhattan (corresponding to the newspaper) represents the articles chosen by Dos Passos. Once the lives/articles had been chosen, he cut them into pieces (which accounts for the fragmentary appearance of the characters' lives in the novel), mixed them, and rearranged them in a seemingly random fashion. In this light, *Manhattan Transfer* could be construed as a haphazard combination of Dadaist poems which greatly resembles the works of the Dadaist collagists.

However, as was the case with all Dadaist poems and works of art, the sense of chance as a governing force in the creative process is illusory in *Manhattan Transfer* because it is achieved through the implementation of a method. Both Dada and Dos Passos sought, paradoxically enough, to produce chaos by following a pre-established formula/recipe. Moreover, the methodical process was often repeated until the "chance" result appeared to be satisfactorily chaotic. The scraps were shaken in the bag, the street odds and ends dropped onto the canvas, the snippets of the characters' lives in *Manhattan Transfer* repeatedly rearrayed until the final "chance" composition appeared.

Manhattan Transfer conveys a Dadaist message of despair, disgust, isolation, and destruction. Its protagonist—I use this word in the sense that he appears more often than the rest of the characters—is Jimmy Herf, a young, bitter intellectual in the vein of Joyce's Stephen Dedalus who has aspirations to become a creative writer but finds himself hopelessly bogged

down in the drudgery of journalism. Contrary to other heroes of Dadaist fiction such as Anicet, Ugolin, Telémaque, and Moravagine, who manifest their disgust mainly by violent action, Herf evinces his dissatisfaction in a brooding, self-corroding fashion. It is not until the last sections of the novel that he brings himself to act. His ultimate gesture of revolt, leaving New York without a destination, is as ineffectual as any Dadaist gratuitous act. It is only through their ineffectualness that the Dadaist acts managed to communicate the dismal nature of modern existence and the magnitude of the perpetrator's disgust.

Whereas Herf's abhorrence of modern life is chiefly a ruminative one and consequently not typically Dadaist, Stan Every's expresses itself in a paradigmatically Dadaist manner. The son of the head of one of the most respected law firms of New York, Every left Harvard "under slightly unfortunate circumnstances" (Dos Passos, *MT* 185) and spends his time "astonishing the natives . . . with his exploits" (Dos Passos, *MT* 185). Aware of the inadequacy of language as a tool for human communication, Every has long ceased to belief in words: ". . . marriage, success, love, they're just words" (Dos Passos, *MT* 25). He regards success as a sign of human subjugation by modern society: "Why the hell does everybody want to succeed?" he asks himself; "I'd like to meet somebody who wanted to fail. That's the only sublime thing" (Dos Passos, *MT* 105). He finally puts an end to what he considers his nonsensical existence by burning himself to death as he drunkenly sings: *"fire fire, pour on water, Scotland's burning"* (Dos Passos, *MT* 237).

Manhattan Transfer conveys the Dadaist notion that Western civilization, in which "more power has been put in the hands of a few men than there has been in the history of the world since the horrible slave civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia" (Corley 181), must be obliterated. Echoing Mentor's pronouncement on the same subject in

Aragon's *Les Aventures de Telémaque,* Marco believes that "police, governments, armies, presidents, kings . . . all that is force" (Dos Passos, *MT* 36), and that "religion, politics, democracy, all that is to keep us asleep" (Dos Passos, *MT* 37). The obliteration of Western civilization is symbolized in *Manhattan Transfer* by the strange old man's vision of the destruction of the city, in one block of which, he believes, "there's more wickedness . . . than there was in a square mile in Nineveh" (Dos Passos, *MT* 356). In his vision the old man sees "the fire, and brimstone an' the earthquake an' the tidal wave an' the tall buildin's crashing together" (Dos Passos, *MT* 357).

Dos Passos' use of impressionistic imagery instead of explanatory prose in order to illustrate the sordidness of Manhattan life and, by extension, of all urban life, tints *Manhattan Transfer* with a poetic glow similar to the one found in the Dadaist collages and unlikely to be found in the more cerebral, rectilinear Cubist pictorial compositions. The following images exemplify Dos Passos' ability to confer a delicate lyrical tone upon the crude realities of New York:

> The new-born baby squirmed in the cottonwool feebly, like a knot of earthworms (Dos Passos, *MT* 3).

> Men and women press through the manure-smelling, wooden tunnel of the ferryhouse, crushed and jostling like apples fed down a chute into a press (Dos Passos, *MT* 3).

> At the corner of Riverton the old man with the hempen beard who sleeps where nobody knows is putting out his pickle stand. Tubs of gherkins, pimentos, melon-rind, piccalilli give out twining vines and cold tendrils of dank

> peppery fragrance that grow like a marsh garden out of the musky bed-smells and the rancid clangor of the cobbled awakening streets.
>
> The old man with the hempen beard who sleeps where nobody knows sits in the midst of it like Jonah under his gourd (Dos Passos, *MT* 121).

Unlike the more subdued hues of the Cubist collages, the colors of *Manhattan Transfer* are bright and vivid, conveying a kaleidoscopic vision of the city. Looking out of the window in his wife's hospital room, Ed Thatcher sees the avenue lamps coming on "marking off with green shimmer brick-purple blocks of houses, chimney pots and water tanks cut sharp into a sky flushed like flesh" (Dos Passos, *MT* 6). The wallpaper in the room where Jimmy Herf's cousin Maisie plays the piano is "yellow with silvery-shiny roses between the cream woodwork and the gold frames of oil-paintings of woods and people in a gondola and a fat cardinal drinking" (Dos Passos, *MT* 93). Ellen Thatcher strolls up and down her hotel room while "outside the window the backyards are striped with blue and lilac and topaz of a rainy twilight" (Dos Passos, *MT* 243).

Glue was the conventional substance used by the Cubists to bring together the materials of their collages. Contrarily, Ernst described the Dadaist collage as a superimposition of images. In his own words: "Si ce sont les plumes qui font le plumage, ce n'est pas la colle qui fait le collage" (Rubin 95). Ernst, Arp, Grosz, Schwitters, Duchamp and other Dadaist artists rebelled against conventionality by doing away with it. In their collages, the materials are tacked, balanced, stapled, or superimposed on the canvas. The sense of unity is thus merely visual, since the materials, even though they form part of a whole, continue to be individual realities. Like the Dadaist collagists, Dos Passos did away with "glue" in *Manhattan*

Transfer by purposely failing to join the characters with an agglutinative element. Nothing seems to bring the characters together. The readers know nothing about their past, their motives, or the way they came in contact with one another; they see the characters interact *in medias res*, shortly, but are ignorant of how such an interaction came to occur. The relationships between the characters appear to be weak and coincidental, lacking a strong reason to be.

For the reproduction of the sounds, rhythm, and movement of the city, Dos Passos drew upon the works of Blaise Cendrars. Labeled by Henry Miller "the most contemporary of contemporaries" (Chefdor, *Blaise* 97), Cendrars lived an anarchic, reckless life and endorsed a number of artistic and literary movements during the first decades of the century. When the Dadaist journal *Littérature* was founded in 1919, Cendrars welcomed the new possibilities it presented for poetic expression and contributed poems to several issues. His poems and restive life won the admiration of the Dadaists who soon regarded him—Cendrars was a few years their senior—as a proto-Dada hero/poet (several poems by Cendrars were printed by Heuberger in Dada's first publication, *Cabaret Voltaire*, in the early days of the movement).

The author of one of the most representative Dadaist novels, *Moravagine*, Cendrars also wrote an impressive amount of poetry, most of which represents the realization of Dada's poetic ideals. In *Prose du Transsibérien*, allegedly the first simultaneous poem, he used free verse and relied on the strength of words and images for poetic effect. This narrative poem is a study in contrasts between past and present, time and space, as well as a poetic depiction of destruction and revolution. Images, words without correlatives, and extraordinary associations of ideas produce a whirlpool of sensations and thoughts in which past and present become

one and, as in Dadaist poetry and *Manhattan Transfer*, the opposites come together apparently through the intervention of chance. In *Panama*, a first step towards the incongruity of Dada, Cendrars presented sections of contemporary life from daily papers, publicity slogans and catchwords, and alternated them with poetic images and random thoughts. Like the unrelated snippets of the characters' lives in *Manhattan Transfer*, Cendrars' poems became series of totally unrelated words in *Dix-neuf poémes élastiques*, the most daring achievement of the French poet. In his poetic works, Cendrars showed his mastery in the depiction of speed, elasticity, light, color, movement, sound, and rhythm.

Dos Passos began to read Cendrars' poetry in the last years of the war, and his admiration for the French poet's work only increased after the two writers met in the mid-twenties. In 1926 Dos Passos' article "Blaise Cendrars, Homer of the Transsibérien" appeared in the *Saturday Review of Literature*. In 1931 he translated and illustrated Cendrars' *Le Panama ou les aventures de mes sept oncles, Prose du Transsibérien et de la Petite Jehane de France*, three poems from *Kodak*, and forty-seven poems which constituted the bulk of *Formose*, the first of the three volumes of *Feuilles de route*. The influence of Cendrars on Dos Passos is obvious and has been emphasized by George-Albert Aster, one of the most highly respected Dos Passos scholars in France, who has concluded in "Themes et structures dans l'ouvre de John Dos Passos" that "il n'est pas abusif de conclure á une directe influence" of Cendrars on the American author; and that "voir en Cendrars . . . un des responsables de *Manhattan Transfer* est . . . une nécessité d'histoire littéraire" (Chefdor, *Cendrars et l'Amérique* 106-107).

Cendrars' impact on Dos Passos is apparent in the latter's use of simultaneity as a means to cope with the multiplicity of urban life in *Manhattan Transfer*. Simultaneity had been introduced by Robert and Sonia Delaunay in painting and by Cendrars in poetry, and had been

employed by the Cubist and Futurist artists and writers and exploited by the Dadas before the publication of Dos Passos' novel. However, the influence of the French poet is most obvious in Dos Passos' reproduction of the rhythm, sounds and movement of Manhattan. Sometimes, like Cendrars, Dos Passos chose the train and its sounds as a symbol of the city's pulse. The similarity of the following passages from *Manhattan Transfer* and *Prose du Transsibérien* is remarkable:

> The rumpety-bump, rumpety-bump spaced out, slackened, bumpers banged all down the train (Dos Passos, *MT* 73).

> Everything is out of tune
> The "broun roun roun" of the wheels
> Shocks
> Shattering leaps (Chefor, *Blaise* 44).

> Morning clatters with the first L train down Allen St. Daylight rattles through the windows, shaking the old brick houses, splattering the girders of the L structure with bright confetti (Dos Passos, *MT* 121).

> The rhythms of the train
> . . .
> The noise of doors voices wheels grinding over frozen tracks
> The rustling of women
> And the steam engine's whistle
> And the everlasting sound of wheels whirling madly along in their ruts in the sky (Chefdor, *Blaise* 43).

Other times, as the following paragraphs reveal, Dos Passos reproduces the clashing sounds and frictional movement of the city itself:

> The sun's moved to Jersey, the sun's behind Hoboken. Covers are clicking on typewriters, roll-up desks are closing; elevators go up empty, come down jammed. It's ebb-tide in the downtown district, flood in Flatbush, Woodlawn, Dyckman Street, Sheepshead Bay, New Lots Avenue, Canarsie (Dos Passos, *MT* 159).

> Red light. Bell.
> A block deep four ranks of cars wait at the grade crossing, fenders in tail-lights, mudguards scraping mudguards, motors purring hot, exhausts reeking . . . Green light. Motors race, gears screech into first. The cars space out, flow in a long ribbon along the ghostly cement road (Dos Passos, *MT* 204).

Dos Passos was also greatly influenced by the drawings of George Grosz. Grosz, whose "elemental strength," in Hans Richter's opinion, "was the life blood of Dada even before the movement got under way" (Hess 70), stood out as one of the most active Berlin Dadaists. Along with Raoul Hausmann and Richard Huelsenbeck, he participated in the first Dada recital at the Berlin Secession in 1918. In collaboration with Wieland Herzfeld and John Heartfield, Grosz contributed drawings to various Dadaist journals in Berlin, such as *Die Pleite* [Gone Bust], *Der Blutige Ernst* [Deadly Earnest], *Der Dada*, and *Jederman sein eigener Fussball* [Every One his Own Football]. He was also one of the signatories of the Collective Dada Manifesto of 1920.

In his drawings, paintings and collages Grosz reveals in a straightforward manner his despair of the war, contempt for the German bourgeoisie, brutal antimilitarism, disdain for tradition—which eventually led him to abandon paint as an artistic material—awareness of the absurdities of modern life, and ability to satirize the horrors of society.

Dos Passos was very much alive to Grosz' works during his Chicago and Harvard years. In 1936, by which time he and Grosz had been corresponding for a number of years, a volume of earlier and more recent drawings by Grosz was brought out by a New York publisher with a laudatory foreword by Dos Passos entitled "Grosz Comes to America." Dos Passos, who liked to consider himself a satirist, saw in the German artist the qualities of the true satirist, who cannot witness "filth, oppression, the complacency of the powerful, the degradation of the weak without crying out in disgust" and succeeds in turning that disgust into "violent explosive beauty" (Dos Passos, *Fourteenth Chronicle* 420).

From this point of view, *Manhattan Transfer* represents Dos Passos' Grosz-like effort to transform the atrocities of life in New York into an attractive artistic product endowed with a high shock value. On a gray winter day a man stands on a soap-box at Second Avenue and Hudson. Capitalism, he shouts, is a "vampire that sucks your blood . . . day . . . and . . . night." Snow begins to fall while across the street in the Cosmopolitan Cafe faces "blob whitely round the tables like ill-assorted fishes." As umbrellas "begin to bob in clusters up the snow-mottled street," the orator "turns up his collar and walks briskly east along Houston, holding the muddy soap-box away from his trousers" (Dos Passos, *MT* 240). On a cold morning, Herf's cousin James Merivale, recently returned from the war, which he describes as "a great little war while it lasted," and in which he has fought to make "the world safe for democracy" (Dos Passos, *MT* 256), enjoys breakfast with his mother and sister in their warm comfortable

uptown apartment. At the same time, in other parts of the city, "men and women stir under blankets and bed-quilts on mattresses in corners of rooms . . . clots of kids begin to untangle, to scream and kick" (Dos Passos, *MT* 121).

In no other drawing is the likeness of Grosz' and Dos Passos' satirical visions as evident as in *Cross Section*, drawn in 1920 in the turmoil of Grosz' Dadaist activities. Against a background of city buildings, Grosz presents an appalling cross-section of Berlin life: a crippled soldier with crutches, a street vendor hawking his merchandise, a rich-looking man smoking a cigar as he walks, a young woman in flimsy sports attire ogled by a monocled man with a hat, a naked woman, a man drinking beer, and two men being shot at by two soldiers by a dead body on the ground. *Cross Section* appears to be the visual rendition of *Manhattan Transfer*. Grosz' and Dos Passos' all-at-once satirical visions of modern society succeed in transforming their disgust into explosive beauty.

The influence of Cendrars and Grosz, as well as the artistic techniques borrowed from Dada, continued to be present in Dos Passos' fiction-writing during the late twenties and thirties, particularly in *U. S. A.*, his most ambitious work. However, his later works (which deserve more attention than this thesis can afford to give) moved away from Dada in that they went beyond the accumulation of shocking images of modernity and became explicitly political, socially-concerned commentaries by the author. In this sense, Dos Passos and West followed similar paths, from an early awareness of the inconsistencies of modern life reflected in their early works to commitment to the communist cause.

VII. Dadaist Disgust in Nathanael West's *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*

> *The beginnings of Dada were not the beginnings of an art, but of a disgust. Disgust with the magnificence of philosophers who for 3000 years have been explaining everything to us (what for?), disgust with the pretensions of these artists-God's-representatives-on-earth . . . disgust with all the catalogued categories, with the false prophets who are nothing but a front for the interests of money, pride, disease, disgust with the lieutenants of a mercantile art made to order according to a few infantile laws, disgust with the divorce of good and evil, the beautiful and the ugly . . . Disgust finally with the Jesuitical dialectic which can explain everything and fill people's minds with oblique and obtuse ideas without any psychological basis or ethnic roots* (From Tzara's "Lecture on Dada (1922)," Motherwell 251).

While in the past two decades there has been a profusion of in-depth critical studies of West's last three novels (*Miss Lonelyhearts, A Cool Million,* and *The Day of the Locust*) only cursory attention has been paid to his first venture into full-length fiction-writing. This chapter intends to show that *The Dream Life of Balso Snell,* West's most imaginative and experimental novel, reflects not only the author's natural Dadaist disposition, but also his enthusiatic adoption of Dadaist principles resulting from his early reading of Dadaist literature and his personal association with some members of the movement during his brief sojourn in Paris in 1926-27.

Since his highschool years at New York's De Witt Clinton, West showed an inclination to emphasize the bizarre and the unusual of any subject. Although partly a pose shared with many other self-proclaimed "decadent" young writers and artists of the time, West's relish for the abnormal and the grotesque was on the whole an unfeigned one. He was

fascinated by cruelty and its limits, and thought, if the recollection of one of his early acquaintances is to be trusted, "in violent terms and in terms of violence" (Martin, *Art* 32). His fascination with witchcraft, occultism, mysticism, insanity, and the world of dreams was conspicuous years prior to his meeting with the French Dadaists and early surrealists.

In a time when success in the United States was measured in terms of economic wealth exclusively, West, who always regarded education as "social behavior" (Martin, *Art* 37), took his firm stance against conventionality by refusing to take school and college, the sure passport to affluence and social prestige, seriously. Determined not to follow the well-trodden avenues to orthodox prosperity, but at the same time eager to achieve some sort of non-institutionalized recognition, West became a satirist. It can be said that his rebellious temperament, his urge to affront the bourgeois, and his early commitment to the irrational and inexplicable derived from his opposition to a society he intuitively despised, which endeavored to mould him and press worn-out values upon him. Sharply aware that most aspects of American life touched on the grotesque, and, as Jay Martin has put it, "almost unbearably sensitive to the paradoxes of his time" (*Art* 39), West was resolved to make the American Dream run the gantlet of his morbid satire.

Like the Dadaists, West believed in what his friend Robert M. Coates described as a "metaphysics of the accidentalness of doom" (Martin, *Art* 9), a chance world to be taken as lightly as possible. It is in the random combination of circumstances, West believed, in the unexpected and fortuitous that the true beauty of life resides. The allurement of art, art being indistinguishable from life, can only be found in the chance rearrangement of elements, in the spontaneous creative process. (It cannot be left unsaid, however, that although the notion of the extemporariness of art was fervently supported by both West and the

Dadaists, it is a well known fact that West's novels were the result of a painfully slow process that entailed almost never-ending writing, rewriting, editing, and revising. The same is true of the Dadaists, many of whom, according to Malcolm Cowley, "spent weeks or months in polishing and consciously perfecting a few lines of verse" (*Exiles* 153).)

West took great pleasure in indulging his predisposition to the Dadaist hoax as a means of expressing his individuality and his rejection of prevailing rules of behavior. In his highschool years, he and his friends, to the bewilderment and annoyance of the rest of the patrons, enjoyed crying at Chaplin's comedies and laughing at tear-jerking melodramas. On several occasions, during Prohibition, he is known to have taken Brae Rafferty to the synagogue and, introducing him as Mr Fisher, purchased port wine, which they drank with quantities of pistachio nuts. One night he became so captivated by the symbolism of a medallion printed on the cover of a book of Oriental philosophy that he carried the book to a tattoo parlor and had it copied on his arm. As late as 1931, West thought of commiting a purely Dadaist act in order to promote the advancement of avant-garde writing. Theodore Dreiser had buffetted Sinclair Lewis' face after Lewis had accused him of plagiarism. While this controversy was taking place, West, an ardent admirer of Lewis' work, told Martin Kamin: "I think I can get a good deal of publicity for the movement by going up to court and slapping Dreiser's face" (Martin, *Art* 112).

West's natural availability to Dada was reinforced by his vast, although untutored, reading. In 1921, while West was a student at Brown University, the Booke Shop opened at 4 Market Square in Providence. It specialised in modern literature and sold American and English little magazines and the newest books by American, English, and European authors. West, then the fortunate recipient of a $20 weekly allowance, bought more books and magazines than he could read. By the time he

graduated from Brown (where he had been admitted because Tufts, the first university he attended, had mistakenly submitted the much more satisfactory transcripts of a namesake of West's) he had read classics like Petronius, Suetonius, and Apuleius, moderns such as Eliot, Pound, Joyce, Yeats, Max Beerbohm, James Branch Cabell, and Arthur Machen, and admired the Dadaists "as comic writers and experimentalists" (Martin, *Art* 68). He was fascinated by the French symbolists, was familiar with the life and work of proto-Dadaist Alfred Jarry, and expressed continuing affection for Lautréamont's *Les Chants de Maldoror*, Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir* (copies of both of which Aragon had lent to Josephson as part of his Dadaist education), Apollinaire's *Calligrammes*, and Radiguet's *Le Bal du Comte d'Orgel*. He admired Schwitter's *Revolution in Revon* and the poetry of Hans Arp, and was a habitual reader of the French Dadaist journal *Littérature*. His early satirical cartoons (which he soon gave up to dedicate himself entirely to fiction) drew rather heavily on the works of George Grosz, whose *Ecce Homo* West held in high respect and imitated in the satirical drawings he contributed to *The Paradoxian* in Camp Paradox and later to Brown's *Casements* and *Brown Jug*.

His admiration of the Dadaists and their works was not a passive one. Martin holds that at least from the time West managed to enter Tufts on forged credentials—this, Cowley has remarked, "was the ethics of Dada" (Martin, Art 49)—he had been interested in the literary hoax. While in Brown, Jeremiah Mahoney remembers that West was once accused by a classmate of having made a poem by amalgamating two or three Dadaist pieces. West next tried a similar hoax in prose. For years he had read tales of the outdoors in *Field and Stream* and Western magazines, and was aware of the interchangeability of many of their episodes. Following Tzara's recipe to make Dadaist poems almost to the letter, he decided to write tales of the outdoors by picking elements from different stories and

recombining them according to formula. He later explained to a woman in Hollywood how he had written them: "He had gone," she remembers, "to a second hand bookstore and bought about a hundred copies of outdoors magazines;" he then had cut them up and "blended and spliced several stories together" (Martin, *Art* 108). He even managed to have one of these stories, ironically entitled "A Barefaced Lie," printed in the *Overland Monthly* in 1929.

In 1932, shortly after the publication of *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, West associated with editor Alexander King to found *Americana*, a journal of pictorial satire. In the fourth issue Grosz and Gilbert Seldes became associate editors and the magazine found its style. In a manifesto expressing the policy of the magazine, King, West, Grosz and Seldes, after excoriating Republicans, Democrats, Socialists, and Communists in the best Dadaist fashion, declared:

> We are Americans who believe that our civilization exudes a miasmic stench and that we had better prepare to give it a decent but rapid burial.
> We are the laughing morticians of the present (Madden, *Nathanael* 13).

The magazine contained works by West, E.E. Cummings, Perelman and Seldes, and consistently expressed the editors' Dadaist disgust with modern leaders and institutions, which is obvious in the above Dada-like statement of purpose.

Jay Martin has explained West's Dada in the following terms:

> The malaise which produced dadaism in Europe in 1916 bloomed in America to give West, in New York, Boston, and

> Providence, the same evidence of modern absurdity that Malcolm Cowley, E.E. Cummings, and Robert M. Coates found in Paris. West, a few years younger than they, watched the spirit of Dada spring from native soil. He did not need to read descriptions of the Paris scene published in *Broom* by Matthew Josephson or in *Vanity Fair* by Edmund Wilson; he by no means formulated dadaist principles himself. But he made, on his own, the same decisive rejection of society as his contemporaries (Martin, *Art* 46).

That West's Dadaist spirit was inborn and accentuated by his keen observation of the absurdities of modern American life is unquestionable. Yet, the way he expressed his vision of the world in his novels was greatly affected not only by the Dadaist literature he applauded, but also by the forms of Dadaist literary and artistic expression he discovered during his visit to the French capital. Need it or not, West did go to Paris "to touch, however lightly, the literary scene" (Martin, *Art* 83), and to meet Aragon, Philippe Soupault, Paul Éluard, and Max Ernst among others. His short stay in Paris from October 1926 to January 1927 (in later accounts to his friends he sometimes extended this period to several years) served West's work in two ways. On the one hand, it consolidated his naturally Dadaist vision of the world and helped him find its adequate expression in writing. On the other, by emphasizing and at times exaggerating the impact of his Parisian stay on his writing, West found a way of justifying his Dadaist literary inclinations and of presenting himself as a non-political aesthete in a depression-ridden America infested with politically-committed writers.

Begun before graduation from Brown, partially written in Paris, and not published until 1931, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* is Dadaist in form and

content. West acknowledged some of his Dadaist sources of inspiration in "Through the Hole in the Mundane Millstone," published as an advertisement for the novel in 1931 by publishers David Moss and Martin Kamin of Contact Editions, the same house which under the management of Robert McAlmon had published Coates' *The Eater of Darkness* in 1926. In this passage West describes himself as "vicious, mean, ugly, obscene and insane," and compares himself in his use of "the violent disassociated, the dehumanized marvelous, the deliberately criminal and imbecilic" to Apollinaire, Jarry, Ribemont-Dessaignes, and Raymond Roussel (Wisker 153).

When he submitted the first manuscript of the novel to Kamin, West had as his epigraph a quotation from Schwitters which succinctly summarized the novel's import as an attack against art: "Tout ce'que l'artiste crache, c'est l'art" [Everything the artist expectorates is art]. Today Schwitters is best remembered for his Merzkaunst collection of Dadaist collages. By freely rearranging on the canvas bits and pieces collected in the city streets, Schwitters went beyond the merely aesthetic aspirations of most of his cubist precursors and succeeded in elevating the expectorations of Western civilization to the quality of art. The artistic value of his compositions derived not solely from the ornamental results obtained, but from the alluring effect caused by the contemplation of residual elements extracted from their original functions and contexts.

West translated the Dadaist visual collage into a literary collage in *The Dream Life Of Balso Snell* by liberally naming, quoting and misquoting disparate writers and artists of the past and present and by placing their words, the literary miasma of the obsolete literary/artistic world, outside of their original context. In his attitude towards art and literature, West seems to agree with Tzara that "art needs an operation. Art is a pretension . . . " (Tzara 16). The Trojan horse—a symbol of the world of art, modern

society, and the dreams of Western civilization—is West's fictional canvas on which the decontextualized debris is spread.

Forced to enter the wooden horse of the Greeks by the posterior opening of the alimentary canal because "the mouth was out of his reach" and "the navel proved a cul-de-sac" (West 3), Balso, a middle-age bourgeois poet, comically alludes to Dreyden's poem by exclaiming: "O Anus Mirabilis!" (West 3). Upon discovering Nero's last dying words—"Ah! Qualis . . . Artifex . . . Pereo" (West 4)—engraved "along the lips of the mystical portal," Balso carves with his penknife: "O Byss! O Abyss! O Anon! O Anan!" (West 4). Stephen Dedalus' petition to God in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is mangled into: "O Beer! O Meyerbeer! O Bach! O Offenbach! Stand me now as ever in good stead" (West 4). Some of the artists and writers mentioned in the novel are Daudet, Picasso, George Moore, Ingres, Nietzche, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Cézanne, and Chekov. The crime journal of 12-year-old John Raskolnikov Gilson, entitled *The Making of a Fiend*, smacks of Dostoevski's *Notes From Underground*, while Balso and the guide he meets inside the wooden horse bear obvious overtones of Dante's *Divina Commedia*. Structurally, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* is a Dadaist collage made up of fragments salvaged from what West looked upon as the wreckage of the artistic/literary world. It is West's way of thumbing his nose at the traditions of Western art and literature.

Although West did not keep Schwitters' quotation in his final draft—he replaced it with Bergotte's sentence: "After all, my dear fellow, life, Anaxagoras has said, is a journey" (West 2)—the notion of art as refuse expressed in it and in the Merz collages was retained and elaborated on in the guide's voicing of George Moore's assertion that "art is a sublime excrement" (West 8). Books are the excrements of writers, who in their turn feed on the feces of other writers. Literature feeds on its own fecal

matter. The books in the public library where John Raskolnikov Gilson used to spend eight hours a day "smelt like the breaths of their authors; the books smelt like a closet full of old shoes through which a steam pipe passes" (West 17). The people who frequent the great libraries feed on the stultifying refuse of the past. They are the people "who search old issues of the medical journals for pornography and facts about strange diseases; the comic writers who exhume jokes from old magazines; the men and women employed by the insurance companies to gather statistics of death" (West 17). The literary world is a cesspool running over with rotting words, the excreta of authors. Miss McGeeney, one of the bizarre characters Balso encounters on his odyssey along the horse's bowels, is writing the biography of Samuel Perkins, a man of whom "it has been said that he could smell an isosceles triangle" (West 35). Perkins, in his turn, is the biographer of E.F. Fitzgerald, who wrote the biography of D.B. Hobson, who wrote the biography of Boswell. Miss McGeeney is proud to become another link in the symbiotic literary chain, and it seems to her "that someone must surely take the hint and write the life of Miss McGeeney, the woman who wrote the biography of the man who wrote the biography of the man who wrote the biography of the man who wrote the biography of Boswell. And that, ad infinitum, we will all go rattling down the halls of time, each one in his or her turn a tin can on the tail of Doctor Johnson" (West 33).

Mahoney the Areopagite is a catholic mystic who, when his suffering is not too severe, composes verses in imitation of Notker Balbus, Ekkenard le Vieux, and Hucbald le Chauve. He confides to Balso that he has decided to write the biography of Saint Puce, "a great martyred member of the vermin family" (West 10), a flea that was born, lived and died in the armpit of Jesus Christ. In his prime, Saint Puce wandered far from his birthplace, "roamed the forest of God's chest," "crossed the hill of His

abdomen," "measured and sounded the fathomless well, the Navel of our Lord," and "explored and charted every crevasse, ridge, and cavern of Christ's body" (West 10), all of which provided him with the material to write his great work, *A Geography of Our Lord.*

The notion of art and literature as unyielding waste matter is reinforced by the novel's ending, Balso's involuntary seminal ejaculation as, in his dream, he makes rapturous love to his old sweetheart, Mary McGeeney. The task of the Dadaist artist/writer is to transform the ugly materials provided by the modern world into a shocking, new, and thus attractive composition. "Dada," Tzara wrote, "still is a bunch of excrement, but we want to shit in different colors to ornament the zoo of art . . . " (Tzara 1). Under this light *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* can be conceived as a colorful, unfructuous literary self-pollution.

West's Dadaist disgust is not only directed against art and literature. *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* is also a frontal attack on religion, philosophy, literary scholarship and criticism, courtly love, bourgeois prudery and good taste, logicality, and, ultimately, Western civilization and the artificiality of human existence.

West flouts the Old Testament by having the guide, a man with "Tours" embroidered on his cap, tell Balso his blasphemous version of the story of Moses and the burning bush. Moses, he assures him, had rebuked the bush by quoting the proverb, "Good wine needs no bush," to which the bush insolently replied, "A hand in the Bush is worth two in the pocket" (West 6). When Balso runs into Mahoney the Areopagite, the catholic mystic is naked except for a derby hat in which horns are sticking, and is attempting to crucify himself with thumb tacks. Judaism also comes in for its share of scatological satire. "The Semites," Balso chants, quoting C.M. Doughty's epigram, "are like to a man sitting in a cloaca to the eyes, and whose brows touch heaven" (West 8).

Ironically, the eccentric and absurd Mahoney is one who abides staunchly by the teachings of Saint Hildegarde, and who follows in the intellectual footsteps of old sages and philosophers such as Marie Alacoque, Suso, Labre, Lydwine of Schiedan, and Rose of Lima. The wisdom of the past has been masticated, digested and defecated so many times that today only a watery pulp remains.

After reading two letters written by Miss McGeeney, which form part of a novel she is writing in the manner of Richardson, another master of the past, Balso, who thinks she is "a fine figure of a woman" (West 56) and wants to please her, praises her work by reeling off the following cliché-ridden piece of criticism:

> A stormy wind blows through your pages, sweeping the reader breathless . . . witchery and madness. Comparable to George Bernard Shaw. It is a drama of passion that has all the appeal of wild living and the open road. There's magic in its pages, and warm strong sympathy for an alien race (West 56-57).

West's contempt for the bourgeois, to which his novels were paradoxically addressed and his own family belonged, is made evident in the description of the play John Raskolnikov Gilson intends to write. It will constitute his revenge against the type of philistine, bourgeois audience his lover, Saniette, represents: "smart, sophisticated, sensitive yet hard-boiled, art-loving frequenters of the little theatres" (West 30). The play will be staged in a theatre patronized by the discriminating few: "art-lovers and book-lovers, school teachers who adore the grass-eating Shaw, sensitive young Jews who adore culture, lending librarians, publisher's assistants, homosexualists and homosexualists' assistants, hard-drinking

newspaper men, interior decorators, and the writers of advertising copy" (West 30). After flattering the audience and congratulating it on its good taste, the entire cast will walk to the footlights and shout Chekov's advice:

> It would be more profitable for the farmer to raise rats for the granary than for the bourgeois to nourish the artist, who must always be occupied with undermining institutions. (West 30).

In case the audience should misunderstand and align itself on the side of the artist, the ceiling of the theatre will be made to open and "cover the occupants with tons of loose excrement." "After the deluge, if they so desire," Gilson concludes, "the patrons of my art can gather in the customary charming groups and discuss the play" (West 31). Gilson and West knew, however, that such unsavory gesture will only raise the temper of the audience. Like Gilson in his play, in *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* West employed all the weapons at his disposal to affront the public. The world and the public remained, for West and Dada, as "a hostile force to be fought, insulted or mystified" (Cowley, *Exiles* 149).

Courtly and romantic love is ridiculed in the last and longest section of West's novella, which is concerned with Balso's dalliance with Janey Davenport, a "beautiful" and "extraordinarily hunched" (West 37) girl-cripple he meets in a dream within the dream-frame of the novel. The line between dream and reality, diffuse from the first page, is now rubbed out entirely as the reader is ushered into what West later termed the "American super-realism" (Martin, *Art* 146). Janey, for whom Balso becomes "sick with passion" (West 37), suffers from hydrocephalia, is endowed with one hundred and forty-four teeth in rows of four, and carries the unborn child of a former lover in her hump. When Balso

makes a passionate attempt to seduce her, she fends him off and promises she will yield up her "white and pink" (West 39) body to him only if he kills her former lover, Beagle Darwin, who has betrayed her. Then she will commit suicide. To help him accomplish his mission, Janey shows Balso two letters written to her by Beagle, in which he explains in dramatic terms his reasons for not having taken her with him to Paris. Balso is awakened from his dream within a dream by Miss McGeeney's question: "Well, what do you think of them?" (West 56). As it turns out, Beagle's missives are part of Miss McGeeney's new novel. Of a sudden, Balso recognizes in Miss McGeeney his former girlfriend, Mary McGeeney, and immediately steers her behind a clump of bushes, where Mary lies down on her back with her hands behind her neck and her knees wide apart. Against all the rites of polite and dignified courting, Balso delivers a speech in which he, obviously unnecessarily, advocates the practice of sex with rather preposterous political, philosophical, artistic, and temporal arguments before getting down to business.

Ignoring an absurd comment made by Balso as he enters the horse—"If you desire to have two parallel lines meet at once or even in the near future . . . it is important to make all the necessary arrangements beforehand, preferably by wireless" (West 5)—the guide welcomes Balso as an "ambassador from that ingenious people, the inventors and perfectors of the automatic water closet" (West 6) to the people who are the heirs of Greece and Rome. Offended by such effrontery to Western civilization, Balso retaliates by naming what he deems its most stupendous achievements: the Grand Central Station, the Yale Bowl, the Holland Tunnel, and the Madison Square Garden. The maximum realizations of modern Western society, West seems to be saying, are sophisticated constructions designed to host the faceless, gray masses of humanity without making any allowances for individual expression. Individuality

has been supressed by society to such a degree that the lives of men and women have become mere theatrical performances directed by society. "How shall I receive the devastating news?" (West 52) Beagle Darwin asks himself as he imagines the suicide of Janey Davenport. How does society expect him to react? How is he supposed to *act* in order to satisfy the demands of the surrounding world? Spontaneity, freedom, subjectivity, emotions, instinctual behavior are no more.

The Dream Life of Balso Snell is a sally of Dadaist disgust against everything commonly held in respect, salted with liberal doses of gratuitous violence and off-color or scatological humor. Gilson's relationship with Saniette is akin to that of the artist with the audience. Such relationship, Gilson believes, entails the infliction of violence upon the latter. Accordingly, he abuses and beats up Saniette regularly. His killing of the idiot, a mentally retarded dishwasher who "never smiled, but laughed continually" (West 18) represents a paradigmatic Dada *geste gratuit*. Because he wants the police to believe his motives, he will say that he had to kill him "in order to remain sane" (West 20), since he fears that if he told his real motive, that he cut the idiot's throat because the shape and color of his throat, his laugh, and the fact that he did not wear a collar irked him, he would not be believed. The pages of the novel are filled with anuses, excrement, bowels, inflamed prostate glands, atrophied piles, hernias, warts, tumors, pimples, sebaceous cysts, hard and soft chancres, cold sores, stys, and salt-encrusted nostrils, aimed to affront the aesthetic sensibility of the reader.

The message the novel conveys is one of nihilism and destruction. Gerald Lockin has argued that West's nihilism is unique and thus different from Dada's in that it "encompassed not only 3000 years of history, but all the possibilities of life itself" (Madden 53). For West "the future offered no hope" (Madden 53). On the contrary, Lockin opines,

Dada was "destruction, but it was destruction with a better future in mind" (Madden 53). He draws upon Ribemont-Dessaignes to support his contention: Dada, the French Dadaist thought, was aimed "at the liberation of the individual from dogmas, formulas and laws" (Motherwell 102). However, while the streak of ontological optimism is implicit in the Ribemont-Dessaignes' pronouncement (as it is, it must be noted, in any apology of anarchic destruction) the idea of the possibility of a better future was never explicitly expressed by any of the Dadaists. "There is a great negative work of destruction to be accomplished. We must sweep and clean" (Tzara 12), wrote Tzara. Dada did not look to the future. Both West and Dada shared the notion that a thorough cleaning job must be done. What was to be done when that job was finished did not occur to them until later in their careers as they both, although in dissimilar ways, became allured by the potentialities of communism. *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* is, like all Dadaist literature and art, a time bomb in the living room of Western civilization, intended to cause all-encompassing, indiscriminate destruction.

West's Dadaist disgust towards art, literature, society, and life expressed in *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* continued to manifest itself, albeit sporadically, in his next three novels: in Miss Lonenelyhearts' "smile of an anarchist sitting in the movies with a bomb in his pocket" (West 83), or in the "inanimate" exhibit of *A Cool Million*, which featured among other Duchampesque sculptures "a Venus de Milo with a clock in her abdomen, a copy of Power's 'Greek Slave' with elastic bandages on all her joints, a Hercules wearing a small, compact truss" (West 239). However, in *Miss Lonelyhearts*, *A Cool Million*, and *The Day of the Locust*—novels all, as he said in an interview, "of quite a different make, wholesome, clear, holy, slightly mystic and inane" (Wisker 49)—the preoccupation with the self

and its dreams explored in the first novel gave way to social awareness and political side-taking.

Written, West claimed in the same interview, as "a protest against writing books" (Wisker 49), *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* reads like an anthology of Dadaist disgust, and can be looked upon not only as the purest manifestation of West's literary Dada, but, due to the late date of its publication, as the kaleidoscopic cap to full-length, Dadaist fiction-writing both in Europe and in America.

VIII. Gertrude Stein: The Mama of Dada?

> *And while we put on a show of being facile, we are actually searching for the central essence of things, and are pleased if we can hide it* (From Tzara's "Monsieur Antipyrine's Manifesto," Tzara 1).

No study of the American expatriates in Paris in the twenties is complete without a section dedicated to "the Sibyl of Montparnasse." For more than forty years Gertrude Stein managed, with no ostensible effort, to keep up with the latest tendencies in art and literature and to forge, often to her distress, her own myth by projecting to the public the image of the eccentric champion of Modernism. From 1903, when she and her then inseparable brother Leo settled in the French capital, until shortly before the outbreak of World War II, her atelier at 27 rue de Fleurus was the first port of call of most new-come American expatriates and a haven of avant-garde painters and writers. One can say with no fear of exaggerating that Stein knew "everybody who was anybody" (see Hobbouse) in the Paris artistic/literary world during the first four decades of this century.

Despite her desire to be duly recognized as a creative writer, her literary projects were greatly overshadowed by her early association with Picasso's Cubist coterie, her renowned Saturday soirées, and her growing reputation as a pontifical matron of the arts. It was not until *Three Lives* was published in 1909 that many of her acquaintances, and not a few of her closest friends, learned that she was writing at all. She was to remain mostly unread until the straightforward, public-oriented *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* appeared in 1933.

The childish tone and impenetrable nonsensicality of most of her works caused opposing responses among Stein's limited readership. Those who professed they understood what she was up to considered her

the greatest innovator of modern literature; those who could not make head or tail of it thought her the perpetrator of a rather humorless literary joke. She was either not taken seriously or all too seriously, worshipped or ridiculed, highly respected or referred to as the "sacred cow" of modern literature and a "literary idiot" (M.J. Hoffman, *Studies* 76). Only after her death did her works begin to receive proper critical attention, and dispassionate attempts were made to separate her writings from her extremely idiosyncratic personality.

However, it is my perception that the sedulous insistence of most of Stein's students on associating her novel literary ways with the Cubist pictorial innovations has led to a lopsided understanding of her work and of her position in relation to Modernism in general and to specific manifestations of the European avant-garde in particular. This chapter concerns itself with Stein's connections with one of such manifestations: Dada.

The interrelationship between Stein and Dada has been mentioned in passing by various critics but never duly investigated. By the time *Four Saints in Three Acts* was staged in the United States in 1934, Clifton Fadiman had given Stein the title of "The Mama of Dada" (Hobbouse 173), and as such she was famous to reviewers and the general public alike. In his 1920 article "The Disciples of Gertrude Stein," Richard Aldington considered Apollinaire "the first French Apostle of Steinism," and said of Cendrars' poetry that, although not "out-and-out Steinist," it was "tainted" with the same quality of unintelligibility. He also regarded Ribemont-Dessaignes, Soupault, Aragon, Breton, Radiguet, Buffet-Picabia, J. Perez Jorba, Pierre Albert Birot, Paul Dermée, and Céline Arnaud as Stein's French "disciples." Norman Weinstein has felt "the connection between Tzara's dadaism and Gertrude Stein's work tenuous but worth considering" (105). Malcolm Brinnin has refused to recognize even a

tenuous connection. He has categorically asserted that "the Dadaists, led by Tzara, appeared noisily in Paris in 1920, but Gertrude would have nothing to do with them," and has dismissed Fadiman's phrase as a "mildly clever epithet . . . notable mainly for its total inaccuracy" (228).

Stein was cognizant of Dada, and even had her own, rather inaccurate, theory about its birth: "Picabia had found him [Tzara] in Switzerland during the war and they had together founded Dadaism and out of Dadaism, with a great deal of struggle and quarreling came Surréalisme" (*Autobiograpy* 264). However, as it was the case with most of her relationships with the avant-gardists, Stein was interested in the Dadaists as individuals rather than as writers/artists. She was particularly fond of René Crevel, a Dadaist and early practitioner of Surrealism, whom she described as "young and violent and ill and revolutionary and sweet and tender" (*Autobiography* 318). Her attitude towards him was representatively condescending: "he wrote her most delightful english letters, and she scolded him a great deal" (*Autobiography* 318). Crevel and Duchamp, she thought, were the best examples of "the french charm" (*Autobiography* 318). Apollinaire, Satie, Aragon, Hartley, Man Ray, Picabia—whom she dubbed "the Leonardo Da Vinci of the movement" (*Autobiography* 180)—and Tzara were habitual visitors to Stein's home.

The Dadaists, however, seem to have had no tangible impact on Stein's ways and work. At the time they irrupted in Paris in 1920 Stein was a middle-aged woman with a bourgeois taste for the old-fashioned amenities of daily existence. For almost twenty years she had managed to accommodate to the ever-changing flow of the European avant-garde without participating in her contemporaries' tendency to spend half of their time—all of it in the case of the Dadaists—looking for new ways to *épater la bourgeoisie*, of which, in any case, she was a member. Also, Stein did not like to read or write French (although she enjoyed speaking it

immensely), which made her unavailable not only to Dada but to most of the contemporary French literary coteries. Furthermore, a few years prior to Dada's arrival in Paris Stein had already achieved the maximum realization of her literary theories. The process towards abstraction that had began with *Three Lives* had continued in *The Making of Americans* (in which she did away with plot, chronology, and logical causality in order to investigate the "bottom nature" of all the human beings who ever were, are, and will be), and concluded in *Tender Buttons*, in which the literary work became an entity in itself, independent of the constraining conventions of mimesis and linguistic denotation. During the rest of her career, Stein's works would be elaborations on these experiments with no major qualitative changes and very little attention to the works of other writers.

Despite her never having been a Dadaist of program or of spirit, a number of similarities between Stein and Dada are easily identifiable. They were both bent on making a clean sweep of the past, on, to use Stein's own words "killing it dead, quite like a gangster with a mitraillette" (Hobbouse 1). The obliteration of the past entailed the destruction of reason, mimesis, one-point perspective and linguistic denotation, all of which had become inoperative in a century in which "nothing is in agreement, neither the round with the cube, neither the landscape with the houses, neither the large quantity with the small quantity" (Stein, *Selected* 142).

Stein and Dada stood at the front of a general attack against logic. They set out to turn conventional language inside out in order to upset the public's apprehension of the world and to lead them into a realm of aesthetic values foreign to their practical, everyday life. Syntax, irretrieveably grounded on laws of direct causality and linear time, was no longer able to express the spirit of the time.

In their breakaway from traditional literary mores, Stein and Dada ridiculed the use of literary genres in which reality has been customarily incapsulated. Stein wrote short plays, with no characters, divided in dozens of acts, novels without a plot, and poems in prose.

Both Stein and Dada chose to conceal themselves behind a child-like attitude in an attempt to become immune to the harsh contradictions of modern reality. Stein's childish naivete was egotistic and self-indulgent; Dada's mischievous and self-destructive.

Stein and Dada sought to cause the reader to experience a qualitative leap beyond meaning, leaving behind the triviality of the printed word. In her very insightful, although somewhat emotionally biased, article entitled "Speculations, Or Post-Impressionism in Prose" (1913), Mabel Dodge referred to this transcendant quality in Stein's work:

> In one part of her writing she made use of repetition and the rearrangement of certain words over and over, so that they became adjusted into a kind of incantation, and in listening one feels that from the combination of repeated sounds, varied ever so little, that there emerges gradually a perception of some meaning quite other than that of the content of the phrases. Many people have experienced this magical evocation, but have been unable to explain in what way it came to pass, but though they did not know what meaning the words were bearing, nor how they were affected by them, yet they had began to know what it all meant, because they were not indifferent (M. J. Hoffman, *Critical Essays* 28).

Thus, through repetition of words, phrases, and sentences, Stein's prose acquires an almost-indefinable incantory quality very much in tune with what the Dadaists struggled to achieve in their poetry. On June 23, 1916 Ball premiered his "Verse ohne Worte" [poems without words], and "Lautgedichte" [sound poems] at the Cabaret Voltaire. It was his intention to renounce an adulterated linguistic system built upon trite associations. In order to do this he returned to the elements of poetry, to noise and articulated sound, which are fundamental to all languages. His appearance on the stage was a most shocking one. His legs were in a cylinder of shiny blue cardboard which came up to his hips. Over it he wore a huge coat collar cut out of cardboard, scarlet inside and gold outside which hardly allowed him to raise and lower his arms. He began, solemnly:

> gadji beri bimba
> glandridi lauli lonni cadori
> gadjama bim beri glassala
> glandridi glassala tuffm i zimbrabim
> blassa galassasa tuffm i zimbrabim (Ball 70).

Gradually, "the stresses became heavier, the emphasis was increased as the sound of the consonants became sharper" (Ball 70), until the heavy vowel sequences and the stomping rhythm gave him a crescendo that led him into an incantory chant. The method, contrived by Ball and later employed by Schwitters, Hausmann and other Dadaists, was that of repetition and slight alteration of "words" and sounds "accessible to all five senses" (Motherwell xxviii), very similar to the iterative variations used by Stein in her word portraits (the only difference being that Stein used existing words, only to empty them of their meaning):

> This one was working and something was coming then, something was coming out of this one then. This one was one and always there was something coming out of this one and always there had been something coming out of this one. This one had never been one not having something coming out of this one. This one was one having something coming out of this one. This one had been one whom some were following. This one had been one was one whom some were following. This one was one whom some were following. This one was being one whom some were following. This one was one who was working (From Stein's "Picasso," *Selected* 294).

Moholy-Nagy has compared Stein's techniques with Schwitters'. "Trying to define Schwitters poetic quality," he has written:

> it can be said that most of his writing is emotional purgation, an outburst of subconscious pandemonium . . . His verbal 'collages' are good examples of this. There the current of his thoughts is mixed with seemingly random quotations from newspapers, catalogues and advertising copy. With this technique—like Gertrude Stein—he uncovers symptoms of social decay known to all, but neglected or dodged in a kind of self-defence (Motherwell xxviii).

Absurdity and lack of meaning are characteristics shared by Stein's and the Dadaist writers. In an experiment contrived with the purpose of disparaging Stein's nonsensical work, Stuart Pratt Sherman wrote down

about one hundred words on a sheet of paper, cut them apart, separated them into piles according to parts of speech, shuffled them, aligned them, and added punctuation. The result, truly similar to many of Stein's compositions, not only demonstrated how much the executor of the test disliked her work, but also came to illustrate the shocking similitude between her literary productions and Tzara's, regardless of their dissimilar methods of composition and underlying intentions—Stein's revolution was strictly intellectual and literary, whereas most of the literature by Tzara and the Dadaists represented an act of revolt against the world and an attack on literature itself:

> Real stupidity; but go slowly. The hope slim. Drink gloriously! Dream! Swiftly pretty people through daffodils slip in green doubt. Grandly fly bitter fish; for hard sunlight lazily consumes old books. Up by a sedate sweet heart roar darkly loud orchards. Life, the purple flame, simply proclaimes a poem.(Pratt Sherman's experiment in B.L. Reid 12).

> Best to shut in broken cows with mud and splinters and little pieces of gain and more steel doors a better aches and a spine and a cool school and shouting, early mounting and a best passion and a bliss and a bliss and a bliss. No wide coal gas. ("Shout," from Stein's *IIIIIIIII, Geography and Plays* 198).

> . . . appreciate the dream era of the eyes / pompously that to recite the gospel sort darkens / group apotheosis imagine said he fatality power of colours / carved flies (in the theartre) flabbergasted reality a delight / spectator all to effort of the no

> more 10 to 12 / during divagation twirls descends pressure / render some mad single-flesh on a monstrous crushing stage (From Tzara's "when dogs cross the air in a diamond like ideas and the appendix of the meninx tells the time of the alarm programme," Tzara 39).

Stein's contribution to Dada was in the form of word-portraits, a link between the early narrative notions developed in *Three Lives* and *The Making of Americans*, and the abstract illogicality of *Tender Buttons*. From her early days as a writer, Stein had shared with the naturalists the belief that character, the essence of a human being, was not likely to change and thus remained unaltered during a person's lifetime. She held that character manifested itself in repetitions of speech. The innermost psychological subtleties of human character were conveyed to others not through action but through utterances reiterated with slight variations over and over in the course of somebody's life. Since, it was her contention, the aim of the writer was to disclose the character of his/her subjects to the reader, "what is themselves inside them" (Stein, *Lectures* 173), and given that character was unaffected by external circumstances, Stein felt free to ignore plot, action, context, and chronological time in her narratives and word-portraits.

The "bottom nature" of her subjects, "the rhythm of anybody's personality" (Stein, *Lectures* 174), can only be conveyed in the present. Only by remaining in the present can the reader "catch the intensity of movement" inside the subjects and understand "what is moving inside them" (Stein, *Lectures* 183), which confronted Stein with the difficulty of prolonging the present time in her portraits. She solved this problem by resorting to cinema techniques. Like a film, her portraits are made of sentences which differ ever so little from the sentences preceding them.

Like every single photogram in a moving picture, each of Stein's slightly changed sentences obliterates the past and becomes a continuous starting over which eliminates the notions of begining, middle and end paramount in conventional narrative. Stein's portraits are a tail-swallowing process the aim of which is to make the reader have an all-at-once, ever-present experience. In most cases the words that form the word-portraits bear no resemblance to the subject they portray. They are chosen at the moment of writing for their power to suggest what Stein felt to be the essence of the subject. She tried to do what Shakespeare had done in the forest of Arden when "he had created a forest without naming the things that make the forest" (Stein, *Lectures* 236), for, she thought, if you name something, "why write about it?" (Stein, *Lectures* 210).

In 1912, Mrs Knoblauch, an old friend of Stein from her John Hopkin's years, determined to find a publisher for Stein's work in America, turned to Alfred Stieglitz, who, with his Photo-Secession Gallery at 291 Fifth Avenue in New York, had already established himself as a recognized champion of new notions in art and literature. On February 26, 1912, Stieglitz wrote Stein a letter offering to publish her word-portraits of Picasso and Matisse in a special number of *Camera Work* which he intended to accompany with reproductions of paintings by her subjects to illustrate the texts. Stein, he opined, had "undoubtedly succeeded in expressing Matisse and Picasso in words" (Gallup 57-58). The publication of "Picasso" and "Matisse" in *Camera Work* in August 1912 was followed by a reprint of the "Portrait of Mabel Dodge in Villa Curonia" in its June, 1913 issue. Both events had a strong impact on the works of Marsden Hartley and Francis Picabia and were instrumental to the origination and development of their pictorial object-portraits.

The object-portrait (also called machine-portrait) attempted to capture the essence of the subject by rearranging the outer world into unsuspected

new associations. Like Stein's word-portraits, it repudiated likeness and substituted in its place a "new symbolic associative language" (Mellow 189). It was born among the artists of the Stieglitz' and Arensberg's groups in New York (Picabia, Hartley Shamberg, Demuth, de Zayas, and Morton). Its practice extended from around 1915 till the late twenties, its formal resources having been drawn from Cubism (collage) and the machinist aesthetics of New York's proto-Dada. By the time the object-portrait gained currency among the Dadaists (it was introduced to the Zurich and Paris Dadas by Picabia), its original source of inspiration, Stein's portraits of Picasso, Matisse, and Mabel Dodge, had fallen into oblivion.

That Picabia was familiar with Stein's work we know from Mabel Dodge. He had been invited to her salon as soon as he had arrived in New York, and immediately presented with Stein's "Portrait of Mabel Dodge in Villa Curonia." The portrait had appeared in *Camera Work* together with one of Picabia's preliminary manifestos of what was to become the New York branch of Dada and Company. In a letter dated February 13, 1913, Mabel Dodge told Stein about the painter: "Picabia the painter is here and very intelligent and understands it all [the portrait] perfectly. I asked him to write down what he said and will send it to you. I will give him a letter to you as you and Leo will both (strangely enough) like him" (Gallup 74-75). Although there is no evidence that Picabia ever got around to writing and sending to Stein his opinion of the portrait, a chronological study of his paintings reveals the significant fact that his most consistent development of the object-portrait began around 1915, soon after his first meeting with Stein. It was in that year that he painted his most representative object-portraits, of which *Voilá Haviland* (a portable lamp copied from an advertisement), *Gabrielle-Buffet She Corrects Manners Laughingly* (an automobile windshield), and *Portrait Max Jacob* (a flashlight) are examples. That Stein literary invention, the abstract word-

portrait, provided the inspiration for the equally innovative object-portraits of Picabia seems unquestionable (Michael J. Hoffman's contention (51) that the literary portrait was already in vogue in France in the late seventeenth century, particularly at the salons of Mlle. de Montpensie and Madeleine de Scudéry, is not detrimental to Stein's seminal role in her own time in that she was not familiar with them and her portraits stemmed from visual techniques rather than literary).

Hartley had first visited Stein on his inaugural trip to Europe in the Spring of 1912. During the Fall of the same year he wrote Stein from Germany asking her if he "might have the privilege of again seeing the paintings you have which I enjoyed seeing in the Spring" (Gallup 64). He also commented on Stein's portraits on *Camera Work*: "It seems to me a very worthy presentation of your interpretation of the two artists concerned. I think your articles very interesting. They seem to get as close to the subjects in hand as words can go" (Gallup 65). The following year segments of Stein's "play" *IIIIIIIII* were printed in the catalogue for Hartley's exhibition at 291 which opened in January 1914. These segments included three speeches extracted from what was intended to be a word-portrait of the painter, followed by "Points," which incorporated a few more of his isolated lines, and "The Wedding." About the complete play, of which Stein had sent him a copy before publication, Hartley wrote: "It seems to have another kind of dynamic power—a kind of shoot to it and I feel my own color very much in what I say—my own substance" (Mellow 187). In a later letter he expressed his enthusiasm about and indebtedness to Stein's work: "I have always liked very much what I have read of yours because it always had for me a new sense of depth and proportions in language—a going into new places of consciousness—which is what I want to do also—to express a fresh consciousness of what I feel and see around me—taken directly out of life and from no theories and formulas as

prevails so much today" (Gallup 259). Hartley's adoption of the object-portrait was an early one and had direct links with Stein.

The genre went full circle when Dada's object-portrait found its literary counterpart in the "critical synthesis," Dada's own form of literary criticism, the point of which, as Albert-Birot's widow has explained (Tzara 67), was to give an impression of the work in question without the critic intervening or talking directly about it. This new form of literary review was intended to be a form of digest in which the intelligent reader could surmise the critic's opinion of the work. This one was written by Tzara on Albert-Birot's *Trente et un poémes de poche* :

> Irregular necklaces of houses, green fir trees. Each notion in its own box: an atmosphere in a box of matches and speed captured; insects, trams, crawling up towards a glass head. To say: futurism for young ladies, an explosion in a convent school and, squashed under soft pillows, new landscapes? . . . (Tzara 67).

From all the above evidence, it can be concluded: that the title of Mama of Dada, although an appropriate one to suggest the age difference between Stein and the Dadaists and her patronizing rapport with them, is inaccurate in terms of her actual impact upon the movement; that, consequently, the Dadaists were not Stein's disciples in the strictest sense of the word; that, despite her not being a Dadaist, Stein shared with Dada a number of significant characteristics which place them both in the same creative tidal wave that spread over the world in the beginning of this century under the names of Futurism, Vorticism, Expressionism, Fauvism, Cubism, Dada, and Surrealism; that Dada's own pictorial genre, the object- or machine-portrait, originated from Stein's word-portraits, and

later developed into Dada's own form of literary criticism: the critical synthesis; and that, contrary to Weinstein's and Brinnin's contentions, Stein did have something to do with Dada, and the connections between them were more than tenuous and definitely worth considering.

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ERRATA SHEET

Title of thesis: DADA/U.S.A. Connections Between the Dada Movement and Six American Fiction Writers.

Candidate: Mr Rubén Fernández

Faculty: Arts

Page 23	bottom	Der Sturm for Der Strum
		Drahtfrühling for Drahtfrhüling
24	bottom	Drahtfrühling for Drahtfrhüling
26	bottom	roadside for road-side
35	bottom	seek for search
38	line 21	of for o
39	line 9	nonsensical for non-sensical
43	line 24	subtract for substract
45	bottom	ungrammatical for agrammatical
56	bottom	occurrences for occurences
57	line 8	Barnes' for Barnes
62	line 13	delete second "the"
	line 17	middle-aged for middle-age
67	bottom	Smoke must be in italics
73	line 15	Vail's for Vails
83	line 4	Dos Passos for Dos passos
97	bottom	high school for highschool
104	line 5	middle-aged for middle-age
	line 6	Dryden's for Dreyden's
116	line 5	begun for began
	line 16	second "on" must be "or"
119	bottom	Stein for Stein's