"DADA"

"I kind of felt sorry for the monster."
—The Girl (Marilyn Monroe), The Seven-Year Itch

Every literary period has its monsters, and the tremors they produce often tell us more about the underlying displacements that make up the phenomenon of literature than the historical moments that literary historians dredge up in their search for a text's meaning. If the term avant-garde has any value at all it is not as a name for the passing phenomenon of "fashionable" texts, but instead as a symptom of certain theoretical and practical issues that push writing's potential to its outer limits. Dada plays just such a role by fathoming the deepest recesses of our modernity and bringing to the fore certain principles that writing continually refuses to avow. Dada still engages interest, seventy years after its passing, whereas simultaneism, futurism, unanimism, paroxysm, and ultrasm (to cite only a few) have long since been relegated to the dungeons of literary history. This is because the Dadaist project illustrates two procedures that are fundamentally poetic: a recourse to the fragment form and a basic refusal of language's role as an organized system of intersubjective communication. In order to set the following analysis in its proper framework, we begin by considering two issues that merit more elaborate treatment, as well as a broader application, than the one given here. Since this essay is of a limited scope we shall merely propose them as practical axioms delineating the contours of a general argument that certain Dada texts serve to illustrate.

The first remark is that when dealing with Dada it is impossible to limit one's study to texts that are exclusively French. A few critical works have attempted to demarcate specifically national domains within the literary phenomenon of Dada—a phenomenon that is, according to its own principles, fundamentally international. Such a project deserves some praise and yet it soon comes to resemble attempts at squaring the circle, especially when the focus of the study shifts from historical aspects of the movement to the underlying principles that govern its texts' production. Dada always considered itself to be an international movement, even when its main protagonists were based in Paris. In his preface for Georges Hugnet's 1956 study of the movement, Tzara declared: "In Paris, DADA was antiphilosophical, nihilist, scandalous, universal" (our emphasis). Moreover, in the preamble to his 1965 book Dada à Paris, Michel Sanouillet has to put forward a certain number of standard precautions in order to justify the national focus of his study:

One of the particularities that distinguish the Dada movement from the other literary and aesthetic schools of this century is the fact that it was born simultaneously in Switzerland and in the United States and from there spread rapidly throughout the countries of both continents between 1915 and 1923. [...] It seemed to me, however, that the Dadaist phenomenon as seen from Paris could be detached from the rest since it constituted a significant chapter in the intellectual history of France, as seen through Dada's links with the various countries where the movement took hold
or left its marks. [...] This study] can be easily integrated within the movement's broader context as long as one remembers the parallel existence led by foreign groups whose importance was in no way less than that of the French branch. (iv)

Such well-intentioned nuancing was nevertheless unable to prevent the storm of criticism that greeted Sanouillet's geographical containment of the Dada movement. The staunchest critics equated the project with an outright falsification of what Dada was all about. The lettrist writer Maurice Lemaître argued that the basic premises of Sanouillet's work revealed the author's complete misunderstanding of the movement:

\[
\text{Let's point out from the outset the chauvinism displayed throughout Mr. Sanouillet's "book": on p. 416 of the chapter on Cahiers dada we read that [...] } \text{"Certain [Dada] discoveries that had been, up until that point, at the embryonic stage were about to undergo a spectacular and unexpected development, thanks to the methodical powers of the French mind. When we consider that Dada, even in Paris, was made up principally of Jews and foreign aliens, of the likes of Tzara, Man Ray, Picabia, Arp, Dali, Miró, Sophie Taeuber, Ernst, Janko, etc., we can only burst out laughing. (our emphasis)}\]

Although we do not wish to be caught up in this debate about Dada's unquestionably international status (which is marginal to the textual analyses we offer here), we have, nevertheless, chosen to discuss predominantly French texts. This is partly because the principles governing these texts prove quite clearly that the controversy surrounding Dada's "nationalism" is based on a fallacy. For if Dada questions language in general, it cannot really be concerned at all with a particular national language.

Our second preliminary remark is of a theoretical nature since it has to do with the sacrosanct linking of Dada to Surrealism. We are not at all convinced by this connection, imposed on the two movements by critics who have followed outmoded historiographical models. Mere habit has made natural a connection between two movements that is not at all obvious but instead demands close examination. After all, we cannot overlook the fact that, at the end of her study of Surrealism, Anna Balakian uses a noteworthy description of the Dadaists as "pilgrims of perdition,"3 nor can we ignore Michel Sanouillet's remark that "we can at least be grateful to the Dadaists for having explored for us, and to their great peril, the unsure and forever receding frontiers of human intelligence" (56). Since both these comments suggest that the Dada enterprise reaches an outer limit of human experience, how can we then speak of a "continuation" or "following up" of Dada in Surrealism? On the contrary, everything seems to suggest that, despite their historical resemblances, the two movements should be clearly differentiated. The more recent studies by Foster and Kuenzli and by Erickson fortunately move in this direction.

From the passage in the first Surrealist Manifesto where Breton sets forth the image as the key to a new, yet still to be founded, aesthetics, Surrealism makes a complete break with Dada and offers a completely different view of literature. Between both movements there are clear divergences that cannot be covered up by hyphenation, or even a slash, but that appeal instead to the disjunctive or. From the standpoint of its symbols, Surrealism is obviously less experimental and less opposed to semiotic orthodoxy than Dadaism. It accepts as a starting principle the possibility of verbal symbols based on the conventional nature of communicative signs, and consequently it limits its innovations to redistributing semiotic
properties via the transferal of figurative meaning. By contrast, what characterizes Dada and
gives its apparently diverse projects an overall cohesiveness is the way it tears apart the basic
pact of linguistic communication and then gathers the fragments together in a plan for a
protosemiotic system that, by its very nature, challenges the convention bound exchange of
signs. The analyses that follow attempt to refine and support these general remarks on the
Dadaist project.4

DADA SAYS NOTHING

Our approach to the literary fragment owes much to the trails already blazed by
Bataille, to Blanchot's untiring investigations, and, more obviously, to a rereading of
Nietzsche. The latter plays a decisive role during the period examined here since the
Nietzschean intertext constantly resurfaces in Tzara's arguments and writings—to such an
extent, in fact, that Apollinaire gave him the nickname Tsara Thoustra.5

We must not forget that the technique of the fragment had been introduced, via collage,
by Cubist painters and had then been fundamentally reworked by the Dadaists, who were
followed in turn by their own successors, called the "ex-dadas" by Yvan Goll,6 who came to
be known as Breton's Surrealists. It all began with the gluing of already-made items onto a
flat surface—items such as newspaper cuttings, bits of card, metal, or wood, pieces of string,
and so on. When painters adopted this technique it was to underscore the fact that their goal
was no longer the creation of an artwork that copied reality in an idealized form. Hence the
importance of a prefabricated fragment, since artists wanted to demonstrate that their work
already used elements from reality, with the result that the frontier between art and reality
becomes fuzzy. As Duchamp himself argued, the reason for this technique was primarily to
deny the possibility of any autonomous function for art.7

The choice of fragments gradually moved from handmade objects to a selection of
machine-made ones, as the taste for technology became part and parcel of the emerging
Modernist movement in art, prophesied by Apollinaire's 1917 dictum that poetry should be
"manufactured" in the same way that the world was now "manufactured."8 Such fragments
have the effect of erasing the original function of the object from which they came, since the
text where they now figure is organized on a new symbolic pattern that is determined solely
by the artist's choice. Breton was thus able to write, at a later stage, that "fabricated objects
have been elevated to the dignified status of art, thanks to the artist's choosing."9

Nevertheless, a key concept in this apparently random use of odd materials quickly emerged:
chance. The artist's intervention became limited to selecting and arranging the individual
elements. Such arrangements were further constrained by the fact that the strangeness of the
juxtapositions, apparently caused by the capricious hand of chance, was precisely the desired
effect. Consequently, the technique of fragmentation allowed the artist to deprive the
assembled objects of any function whatsoever and instead offer us a picture of their apparent
needlessness. What strikes us when we first see such works is both the fortuitous aspect of
their arrangement and also their provocative strangeness. The latter effect first of all
confounds spectators who are used to a mimetic dimension in artworks. Moreover, such
confusion cannot be dissipated by the spectator's attempt to reconstitute an image of daily
reality from the symbolic (dis)order presented by the work in question. The spectator is then
forced to bring into question his or her own habits of aesthetic appreciation, with the result
that the fragment gradually undermines the standard notions of spectator and the surrounding
world. A revealing comment by Udo Rusker shows the importance for Dada of these
principles underlying the reception of artistic fragments. "Dadaism is a strategy," declares
Rusker,

in which the artist can impose on his fellow citizen a small degree of
that inner disquiet which prevents the artist himself from dozing off under the influence of habit and routine. By means of external stimuli he can counterbalance the lack of fervor and vitality in his fellow citizen and lead him toward a new form of living.\textsuperscript{10}

It is useful to introduce at this point an important distinction made by Michèle Duchet between what she calls \textit{fragmentary} and \textit{fragmental} works, which are two different ways for the artist to use sets of fragments within the fields of literature and the plastic arts.\textsuperscript{11} The \textit{fragmentary} technique clearly exhibits its gratuitous nature, as illustrated by Breton's comment from the early period of his own Surrealist venture: "We are even entitled to call a 'poem' the most gratuitous collections [ ... ] of titles, or fragments of titles cut out from newspapers."\textsuperscript{12} Fragmentary works always underscore the provocative aspects of their composition, and their combining of disparate elements simply highlights the haphazardness of the juxtapositions. In \textit{fragmental} works, on the other hand, there is more than just a trace of systematic ordering in the text's overall significance. Indeed, the text's projected unity is iconically inscribed within its written form so that even if the material chosen for the work displays a fragmented form, this material is the opposite of a meaningless amalgam put together simply because of its strangely aberrant elements. On the contrary, the structure of a fragmental work is predicated on a hidden puzzle, so that little by little the reader uncovers a coherent utterance.\textsuperscript{13} Two different techniques of text- and image-production flow from Duchet's contrasting terms: fragmentary works are akin to collage, whereas fragmental ones resemble a photographic montage.

Fragmentary and fragmental works do have one element in common, however. Both promote oblique meanings and consequently attack the predominance of literal, self-evident sense over all other acts of communication, a predominance that is evident in such diverse fields as everyday messages, the self-assured moralizing of fables, the preaching of doctrine, or the lyrical codas to narrative poems. Where the fragmental diverges from the fragmentary, however, is in the latter's espousal of the doctrine of art for art's sake, where provocation becomes an end in itself. For fragmental texts always invite their readers to retrace the thread that leads us back to an initial meaningfulness, with the result that we uncover something more positive than the nihilism of chance occurrence—namely, the uncanny necessity that is created by a system of significance.

It seems to us that the shift from fragmentary to fragmental works marked the end of Dada. If one examines the shift that takes place in either Breton's or Tzara's aesthetic pronouncements one finds the same blurring of the distinction between the fragmental and the fragmentary. Their later political stands and dogmas are in fact merely a symptom of this same shift. Without blinding ourselves to the diversity of the Dada movement, we can nevertheless detect a similar evolution in the other members of the group.\textsuperscript{14} With the taste for excess lasting only a short while, the violent disintegration that characterized Dada's initial phase, along with the propensity for scandal, began to scare off quite a number of artists. Tatlin's constructivist principles attracted such defectors as Lissitsky and Malevitch, while Eggeling's neoconstructivism enticed Hausmann and Schwitters. Arp and Richter rediscovered their taste for order through their work with geometry, Georges Hugnet aptly characterizes the movement's disintegration when he remarks:

Moreover, the abstract painters, who were preoccupied with setting firm foundations for a new type of art that would be grounded in the modern experience—an art that would change the face of beauty and that would be in step with the return to simplicity that characterized the architecture of our times—these painters began to
feel less and less comfortable within the Dada revoit, which was increasingly critical not only of the results that art had produced but also of the very notion of art itself.\textsuperscript{15}

Even Richard Huelsenbeck, who had gained notoriety for his static poems ("Biribum bibibum saust der Ochs im Kreis herum ...") and for his performances at the Cabaret Voltaire, quickly repudiated Dada along with his own pseudonym by becoming Dr. Charles Hulbeck, a fashionable New York psychoanalyst.\textsuperscript{16}

As a result, the truly productive phase of the movement lasted only from the end of 1918—with Picabia's arrival in Zurich—to November 1919, when Flake, Serner, and Tzara published \textit{Der Zeltweg}, the last major public statement by the Anonymous Society for the Development of Dadaist Vocabulary. Beginning with its transfer to Paris in 1920, Dada became a movement bereft of theoretical principles and its championing of fragmentary works was already being attacked, from within the movement, by adherents of fragmental art. In 1921 Picabia declared that Dadaism was "a sham," and even if in 1924 Breton continues to make a case for fragmentary principles, in order to set his own brand of Surrealism against Yvan Goll's Apollinaire-based Surrealism, and claims that he is not an "oracle," but that he prefers the sacred fever of poetic disintegration to any dictates of consciousness (\textit{Manifestes} 60). It is clear that Breton has already found his place within his own movement, and that he has already started issuing papal decrees, along with merit marks or punishments for those who try to emulate him. By 1924 Breton is already writing from the standpoint of transparent meaning and overall meaningfulness.

By taking the side of the fragment against the presuppositions of totality or plenitude, Dada inaugurated a deconstructive model that is predicated on incompatibility and that underscores the impossibility of any apparent unity. Such incoherence at the surface of the text finds its just desserts in the reactions it stimulates in the reader or spectator. Consequently, the reign of passive art consumption is broken, and the reader is shocked into an awareness of his or her own activity, which temporarily forestalls the "demise of intelligence" that Dadaists often predicted for humanity. Hugo Ball claims that in order to trigger this awareness in the reader, "a trench must be dug between the audience and the spectacle, with the latter becoming incomprehensible, and unjustifiable, to the extent that the spectator is cut off from all explanations and is forced to confront himself ’ (C. Goll 60).

Along with Dada's insistence on the fragment as a means of nullifying all semblance of systematic organization\textsuperscript{17} came an attempt at dislocating language, in order to both liquidate its bad effects and build a new foundation. Such a strategy lends credence to the standard image for Dada activities—namely, a laboratory overflowing with a variety of experiments.\textsuperscript{18} Many different workers, each with their own input, took part in these experiments and forged several new paths, but all of them were convinced that the universe was tottering on its old axes and that new horizons were about to be opened up, even if no precise directions or limits were imposed on the experiments. Writing thus came to be seen primarily as a territory to be explored via the destruction of old mias and the laying of new foundations. This viewpoint follows logically from the extreme vehemence that one finds in such pronouncements in \textit{Dada Almanach} as, "Let every person shout out aloud: there is a great destructive and negative task to be accomplished. Sweep away, clean everything off?" (\textit{Dada Almanach} 104).

All responsibility for the catastrophes that had swept down on humanity in the Great War was laid at the door of language, with the result that language itself was to be "cleansed" in Dada's great co-operative task. This is not as surprising as it seems when we consider that every major upheaval in society begins in its early stages by breaking apart or even negating the codes and systems that channel the acts of intersubjective communication. Significantly
Hugo Ball imputes language because it is a space of authority and he even attempts to refuse using it since, according to him, language functions by permitting the spread of capitalism (the buying and selling of actions) and by giving free rein to military discipline. "Words are responsible for war," he declares (C. Goll 60). In order to achieve a "higher" level of humanity, Yvan Goll asks people to express themselves solely through chuckles, onomatopoeias, and rumblings. Hence the famous phonetic poems such as "rhinozerossk hopsamen bluku terulala blaulala l00000," or "trabatgea bor000000000 oo0000 ... ." which were occasionally uttered in front of groups of "300 completely stupefied onlookers" (C. Goll 59). Dada says nothing, Dada phonetizes.

Once language had been deviated from its utilitarian function as a tool for communication there was still more work to be done on it since words had to become completely new objects, freed from all practical conventions. The program that underpinned this endeavor was nothing short of the inauguration of a new symbolic order that would respond to conventions that were as yet unknown, and that had to be discovered and tested through a permanent process of experimentation.

Although merely alluded to during Dada's earliest period, this program quickly came to the fore as a rallying cry for the group. Paul Eluard, who in 1919 was still within the Dada fold, gives an early description of the project in his preface to "Les Animaux et leurs hommes, les hommes et leurs animaux":

> Let's find out what we are capable of doing. Let's try, although it's difficult, to stay absolutely pure, and then we'll start noticing all the things we have in common [...] . As for that unpleasant language that is good only for gossiping, and that is as decrepit as the crowns on our foreheads, let's change it, pull it apart.19

As part of a reference to Apollinaire, he makes the same rallying cry in the first issue of his review Proverbe (1920): "0 mouths! Man is in search of a new language about which the grammarians of all existing languages will have absolutely nothing to say!"

The revolutionary consequences of the enterprise are obvious since an open challenge is thrown out to the proponents of verbal style. It is not a question of merely altering some linguistic conventions but rather recasting all conventions and redefining language on the basis of new criteria. The speechifiers' Babel is cast aside and language is brought back to its minimal units. Sentences are broken up, words are scattered across the page, the alphabet takes on a material form, and letters are dispersed in long typographic strings made up of discrete units that are all sucked into the protosemiotic universe that characterizes this renewed form of writing.

**DADA SEMIOTICS**

Since the term *semiotics* takes on different meanings depending on the theoretical context in which it is used, we shall preface our analysis of Dada texts by mentioning that Saussure's definition of the sign is our starting point. More precisely, with the Saussurian sign explaining only what goes on *within* language, we have preferred to adopt a tripartite diagram that includes both a double linguistic component (the signified and the signifier) and an extralinguistic component (or referent) for which the sign serves as a stand-in (Diagram 1). The signifier is itself double since it includes both the phonetic and graphic aspect of the verbal trace. The signified constitutes the semantic aspect of the sign. Without wanting to prolong these technical definitions that are now part of linguistic orthodoxy, we still want to insist on the fact that the referent is situated outside the frame of language. Consequently, the
Aragon's poem "Suicide" (1920) is one of the clearest examples of this principle whereby language is reduced to its basic units (Fig. 2). In the text the raw material of language is boiled down to its smallest elements. If we use the title as an interpretant we can certainly "explain" what follows. Words are ground down to the most elementary typographic distinctions, which, as Martinet pointed out, are always different from the basic units of meaning.

It is interesting to note in passing that the poem (which today seems emblematic of so many others) in fact played an inaugural part in the history of Dadaism. As Sanouillet has pointed out, the text's publication did not go unnoticed since it received a sarcastic welcome from the respected critics of the time. These critics saw it mostly as a gag or as a facetious example of playfulness. Indeed, in order to carry on the gag, one particularly skeptical critic published a counterpoem titled "Resurrection," in which the alphabet appeared in reverse order, beginning with the letter z.

From a semiotic standpoint, however, the poem's reductiveness remains ambiguous, since it maintains one of the elementary and conventional structures of language—namely, the alphabet itself. By giving us this structure without any apparent change in its order or form, Aragon still allows the reader to reconstitute from his alphabetic grid a number of
linguistic signs that are socially acceptable. Aragon's text is therefore on the boundary line between semiotics and what we earlier termed protosemiotics. There is certainly a reduction of language in the text, but it does not go as far as to dismantle the sign itself. This boundary line is where we find writing strategies that are peculiar to Dada, which will be examined in the following pages.

Of all the Dada works we examine, Raoul Hausmann's famous text "FMSBWT ..." (1918) seems to be the furthest removed from the sign as a conventional unit (Fig. 3).

Hausmann actually defended the "international" character of this work against Schwitters, who uses a similar verbal motif in his text "Ursonata" (1932), but gives it a decidedly German tone. The text's apparent internationalism is no doubt due to the fact that, as in Aragon's "Suicide," communication is reduced to its smallest units of meaning. Here we find a parodic destruction of language that comes about through an accumulation of discrete units (namely, letters) that are offered in a neutral graphic form, since they are all printed in the same typographic style. The text is generated by a punctual sequencing of letters in which all semantic markers are excluded. As a result, the text's signs are truncated and incomplete—all we recognize are signifiers. Moreover, in the opening, marked by the six initial letters, the signifiers are themselves unacceptable since the sequence of consonants is unpronounceable as it stands. Consonants, as their name tells us, must be accompanied by vowels in order to be spoken at all, and it is generally accepted that a sequence of three consonants deprives any statement of its phonetic dimension. We must conclude, therefore, that the structure of Hausmann's poem deprives the text of its voice, thus transforming it into an apparent code, with the result that its phonetic component can only be actualized at the risk of misinterpretation. (This is precisely the route chosen by Schwitters in his "Ursonata": wanting to turn the piece into a text for singing, he changes the sequence "fmsbwt" into "Fumm bô wô fâ.") What we have here can be called a protosign, a sign stripped of its semantic dimension and in which the signifier itself lacks any conventional phonetic form. This neutral and evasive graphic text is linked to language as a whole only by means of its typographic form.

Pierre-Albert Birot's "Poem to be shouted and danced" (1924) also depends on the meaningless accumulation of discrete units (letters again), but instead it reinstates, and even gives precedence to, the phonetic dimension (Fig. 4).
The text's phonetic aspect is apparent in the attempt at creating rhythmical sequences, so that, in line with the title, any linguistic value that the text may have is eliminated in favor of a musical effect. In other words, it is not the words that matter but rather the tune. Another example of this linguistic evacuation of a text is Schwitters's phonic poem (Fig. 5).
Birot's text is more relevant to our argument since its typography is neutralized, no longer underlying any particular word (as the capital letters do in Schwitters's text). It is the lines themselves that stand out for Birot's reader, marking the text's rhythm and indicating that beneath the verbal layer there is an underlying order that dictates the seemingly random layout of graphic marks. A similar underlying order is apparent in Man Ray's pseudo verbal poem "Lautgedicht" (1924), from 391 (Fig. 6).
Whereas typography took over the function of the signifier in Hausmann's poem (the first text examined above), in Birot's poem phonetic value swamps the signifier—as does rhythmical order in Man Ray's piece. If we take at face value certain comments made by the lettristes Isidore Isou and Maurice Lemaître in 1967, it is precisely this technique that moves lettrism close to Dadaism.

The poem "Etyomons," published by Adon Lacroix in 1917, seems to come very close to Schwitters's texts insofar as it too is based on the phonetic qualities of the signifier. And yet on closer inspection it turns out to be a hybrid text rather than a purely phonetic one (Fig. 7).

**ETYOMONS**

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<td>ZI MATA DURA</td>
<td>LAR-R-RITA</td>
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<tr>
<td>DI OQ DURA</td>
<td>LAR-R-RITA</td>
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<tr>
<td>I love you</td>
<td>ASCHM ZT</td>
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mi o do ré mi mi o
< marimelade >
The verbal sequences "not so," "I love you," and "marmelade" are interspersed within the text's phonetic structure. The very title of the volume in which the poem appears—Visual Words, Sound Seen-thoughts, Felt feelings—displays the rather eclectic choice of specialized vocabulary that gave rise to the text. The musical reference given at the end of the text ("mi o do ré mi mi o") nevertheless points the reader to the fact that the poem is also a pseudo-verbal sequence governed predominantly by rhythm.

In Picabia's "Coeur de Jésus" (1920) the subversion of the linguistic sign is achieved by offering a parody of a standard poetic form—the stanza (Fig. 8).

![Coeur de Jésus](image)

The parody works by mixing up signs ("me," "vide," "son," and so on) with non signs (for example, "cha," "gnée," and "radon"). Even if certain elements in the text can pass phonetically for French words, their lack of a conventional graphic form prevents them from taking on fully the role of signs. As with any parody, the obvious upturning and mirroring in the poem attest to there being a prior model for this text that would be made up of authentic signs. Consequently, the text's mode of production implicitly underscores the presence of an underlying semiotic order.

To complete this overview of protosemiotic writing practices within Dada, and especially of those that stem from a foregrounding of the signifier's phonetic dimension, we now turn to "L'amiral cherche une maison à louer" (The admiral is looking for a house to rent), which was published in 1916 by Huelsenbeck, Janko, and Tzara (Fig. 9 & Fig. 9 detail).
This simultaneist poem in fact combines all the properties that have been noted in the previous examples, but in addition there is an overlay of sounds. This overlay has the effect of scrambling passages that, when read separately, appear perfectly clear. In its performed version the text consequently takes on the form of a sound collage, in which the work’s overall noise submerges the fragments of conventional language that form its backdrop. The
parasitic borrowing of fragments subverts any tendency toward communicating a message that the text might otherwise have. Nevertheless, since the text as a whole is built in part on passages that respect conventional words and grammar, a communicative semiotics has not lost all foothold here, even if it is undermined by traces of meaninglessness that make the sum of the fragments unacceptable.

A second protosemiotic strategy within Dada gave preeminence to the signifier's typographic component. Perhaps the most famous example of this tendency is Hugo Ball's "Karawane" (1920), in which each line offers a change in typography, thus varying the effects of the poem's phonetic elements (Fig. 10).

![Image of Karawane poem](image)

**Figure 10**

The iconic value of the poem's form is controlled by the overall layout of the text, which corresponds with that of a traditional verse poem, with each fine beginning at a common margin and ending at an apparently predetermined point. Such a parody of poetic form is perhaps the reason why so many commentators attempt to interpret this text and give meaning to the erroneous sense of familiarity that it suggests to them. In this respect the title acts as a switchman who points the reader in a number of wrong directions. Whereas the meaning of Aragon's sequences in "Suicide" is hard to channel into an interpretation of the
poem as a whole (since this meaning is merely a pointer to the overall goal of the poet's project to use linguistic raw materials against the very notion of language itself), the term karawane (caravan) has been taken to be a thematic marker, which allows some critics to surreptitiously bring the primacy of the signified back into their reading of the poem. Because they detect the presence of elephant in "(j)olifanto," they turn the text into a representational sign for a column of thick-skinned mammals crossing the desert. The so-called lexical units in the text are thus interpreted as parts of a general attempt to achieve imitative harmony (Foster and Kuenzli 67).

If one were to discredit this type of interpretation because of its arbitrary way of grafting meaning onto the text, one would still not have pinpointed its main flaw—its incompleteness. For it does not tell us anything about the particular typographic form of each of the lines. What connection is there between this form and elephants? It seems pointless to look for an explanation in the poem's sound structure (even if Huelsenbeck reminds us that Ball used the poem phonetically), since it is the work's typographic strangeness that is immediately noticeable to the reader's gaze. It would therefore seem that the diversity of printed lines on the page is what constitutes the caravan named in the title. Such a reading would reinforce Ball's explicitly stated goal of liberating humankind from its "empty language," since the arbitrary aspect of signs would be abolished. This would come about not by a mimetic representation of sounds (the apparent evocation of marching elephant steps), but by a straightforward sampling of linguistic units as they actually are—a succession of material traces, in varied forms, that all operate on the same surface level.

Hausmann's "Poem without a title" from 1919 provides us with another typographic model (Fig. 11).
Unlike our previous example, this poem is a case of “type-speech.” With the exception of the final line where empty spaces introduce a rhythmical interval between the letters, the overall rhythm of the text – or more precisely, its tonality – comes not from a scattered distribution of discrete neutral units but from the typographic accentuation that is applied to some of the marks.

All the forms of writing discussed so far in this chapter undermine the signs that make up conventionalized communication by negating what is taken to be a required homogeneity between signifier and signified. The line drawn between these two halves of the linguistic sign is consequently used as a means of separation, since the texts we have examined activate the signifier to the exclusion of all traces of the signified and alternatively develop the typographic or phonetic component of the former. The substance of meaning is linked directly to linguistic materiality, with the result that the path toward interpretation is blocked—a phenomenon that criticism all too readily designates by the term meaninglessness. Nevertheless, even if it is true that such texts convey no obvious or literal sense, they do not cease functioning once their provocative effect has been noted. Each text is a system of exchange in which linguistic value is transformed, so that their non-semantically-oriented statements still belong to the field of significance.

Another principle of semiotic dissidence leaves the constituents of the linguistic sign untouched but instead deliberately opposes the conventional nature of the sign. It does so by questioning the sign’s status as an arbitrary construction that is supposedly not motivated by any extralinguistic reality. In her contribution to Foster and Kuenzli’s collection of essays,
Mary Ann Caws writes of Dada "hieroglyphs" (224), and Rudolph Kuenzli reminds us of Ball’s mystical project of recovering an original, Edenic language that would be purified of all compromises with human usage and where objects themselves would appear as they truly are, while at the same time also being within the verbal realm. The word and the world would thus find themselves reunified in a transcendent truth, with the inherent deception of social signs thus being wiped out.

Such analyses correctly identify a second antisenant model that is present in Dada. According to this model, the goal is to find an adequation between the verbal medium and its extralinguistic referent. After a series of operations contained in the model, the sign apparently rediscovers its motivated, natural, and necessary form.

It seems to us, however, that when Dada began to move in this mimetic direction its subversive practices lost their innovative character. Instead they followed a long tradition that Gérard Genette studies in detail in his book *Mimologiques*, and that is encapsulated in the notion of salvation through writing rather than perdition. One example of this fixation with representational texts is Pierre-Albert Birot's "Offrande" from 1924 (Fig. 12).
The text is similar to a calligram, a filiation that is confirmed by the explicit reference to Apollinaire that is contained within it. Moreover, this text-as-homage was published at the time when Birot stopped following the Dadaist fine and joined the Apollinairians whom Yvan Goll had grouped together in his review *Surrealism* (1924). One can see how certain concrete poems by Garnier (published in 1920) are based on this model, even if they were typed and not printed. Despite the fact that certain critics have interpreted the poem as a pair of outstretched hands to the Apollinaire-star, we avoid this overly simplistic reading of the poem's complexity and...
instead refer the reader to the multiple values possessed by the figure of the star in Apollinaire's poetry.

A second example of Dada's mimetic strain is extracted from Picabia's 1917 "Isotrope" poems (Fig. 13).

\begin{center}
\begin{tabular}{l}
\textit{Culbutés} \\
\textit{Dislocation de l'eau immobile} \\
\textit{Haricots} \\
\textit{Opium} \\
\textit{Explosion} \\
\textit{Le signal des flûtes godille} \\
\textit{A mes pieds.} \\
\textit{Biscornus dans le pli de son hiéroglyphe} \\
\textit{Enceinte} \\
\textit{Ebréchée} \\
\textit{Maison} \\
\textit{Magiques enclos à midi} \\
\textit{De tous côtés horizontal séjour} \\
\textit{Née} \\
\textit{La méthode à embrasser} \\
\textit{Néant.}
\end{tabular}
\end{center}

\textbf{Figure 13}

Especially in view of its title (isotrope originally meant "figure of the same"), the text seems to follow graphic onomatopoeia whereby the vertical axis is opposed to the horizontal one in an endless series of somersaults. Unlike the previous example, this poem does not offer an immediate representation of what the text denotes. The abstract concept designated by the title is put into effect by a typographic ordering that reproduces verbal dislocation while at the same time respecting the conventions of textual typography.

A final example is afforded by "Caricare," published by Zayas in 1917 (Fig. 14).
The traditional frame surrounding a poem has been exploded once and for all. Nevertheless, due to their arrangement on the page, excerpts from conventionalized speech are spread out in an anthropomorphic shape that reinforces the meaning of each fragment while sketching out a simplified human form. The excerpt in the upper portion of the page deals with the mind and is followed underneath with the demonstrative pronoun *Ici* (Here), which introduces the eyes. Lower down still we find hands, and at the very bottom feet.
Despite the fact that the real object is not clearly copied here, it can nevertheless be detected in the schematic ordering of its parts. This process is underscored by the poem's title since "caricare" is in fact the Latin word from which caricature is derived—the latter meaning "an approximate figure."

This brings to a close our typology of poetic forms that suggests some clear steps toward an understanding of Dada writings, which many scholars still believe to be a merely anarchistic and chaotic jumble of signs. It is true that Dada invites such labels as nihilism and gratuitousness through its attack on the authoritarian hold of conventional meaning. On closer inspection, however, it is clear that this attack pushes Dada writing into the realm of abstract symbolism, rather than conventionally motivated meaning, and so it weakens the movement's debts toward mimetic representation. The written text is defined instead as the domain of techno-ludic experimentation where the only things that matter are material inscriptions and a search for significance within the well-known realm of everyday, practical semiotics.

Returning to the semiotic diagram proposed earlier, it is now possible to place the examples we have discussed relative to one another and to the specific sign-components on which they depend (Diagram 2).

Our descriptive analysis, even if it were exhaustive, would be of little value unless it helped us better understand the initial project of Dada's protosemiotic endeavor, along with all the theoretical ramifications that such a project entails. For often the perplexed reader of such texts, even if he or she is aware of their innovative symbolic function, will view them merely as literary games, or exercises in futility.

The project is, however, a much more serious one and it goes back to the very foundations of interpersonal exchange. Umberto Eco has given the following provocative definition of semiotics: "Semiotics is in principle the discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie." The relevance of this definition for an understanding of Dada's epistemological implications is brought out in the remarks from Eluard's "Les Animaux et leurs hommes," which we quoted above and can now restore to their immediate context: "May we rediscover our strength for honesty, as some poets and constructors who lived young have already taught us to do. Let's find out what we're capable of doing. Let's try, although it's difficult, to stay absolutely pure" (our emphasis).

How can the ideals of honesty and purity be restored? According to Eluard and others, it is by refusing any offer of compromise from the falsifying language of fancy oratory. So Dada does not speak. Dada says nothing, and Dada means nothing. Consequently, it is an oversimplification to posit a political or social cause to Dada's revolt, or worse still, to discredit the movement with the derogatory label of nihilism. Dada aesthetics is the direct
result of a moral uneasiness.

And yet even this statement deserves qualification. For there is nothing in common between Dada and a society characterized by conformity, in which the right to pronounce moral judgments has been lost, and where routine concessions are made to bolster the overall indifference that each individual feels. Dada refuses to give in to the imperialism of altered meanings and to be the blissful slave of the manipulative and deceitful process of naming. It is significant in this respect that the movement's grandiose "cleansing" project should first be applied to language itself, which symbolizes such a worship of convention, and a turning of conventions into the consensus of "what is naturally obvious."

As a closing comment, we could speculate on earlier movements of intellectual revolt in which the initial call for a tabula rasa is traditionally accompanied by the hope for a revelation of truth. In this respect, literature and moral philosophy share more than a passing resemblance. For is not the motto Opus impendere vero (To devote a body of writing to truth) one of the early definitions that was assigned to what we now call literature?

Notes

5. Tsara (sic). This pun is quoted by Max Jacob in 391, 5 June 1917.
6. Goll's comment is in the "Manifeste" published in Surréalisme no. 1, October 1924.
8. "Conférence sur l’Esprit Nouveau" given on 26 November 1917 and published on 1 December 1918. Poets, argued Apollinaire, "want poetry some day to be manufactured in the way the world has been manufactured. They want to be the first to give a fresh lyricism to the new techniques of expression afforded by cinema and the phonograph, techniques that have brought movement into art."
11. Michèle Duchet, "Fragments," Les Cahiers de Fontenay 13-15 (June 1979): 45-47. Duchet's investigation has as its object certain texts by Diderot, but her conclusions apply to a much wider field. As we will see, this theoretical distinction is particularly useful for an understanding of Dada.
13. For the importance of the fragmentai in connection with written self-portraits, see Michel Beaujour's "Autobiographie et autoportrait," Poétique 32 (November 1977): 442-58. The fragmentai is also discussed as a writing model in Chapter 1.
14. Of course, the Dada movement included individuals who Bach had their own particular interests. One cannot ignore the fact, however, that the group's members had developed a high degree of conformity among themselves. The ideas put forward by one member were often taken up immediately by the others. Claire Goll has commented that they went out of their way to "ape one another," and later even Tzara was led to criticize the group's
monolithic façade (*La poursuite du vent* [Paris: Oliver Orban, 1976], 150). "I think that the current stagnation that has been caused by trends, the mixing up of genres, and the substitution of groups for individuals, is more dangerous than a reactionary backlash," he wrote in a letter to Breton in 1922.

17. "I am against all systems," declared Tzara, "the most viable of all systems is the one that refuses on principle to accept any system" ("Manifeste Dada, 1918," reprinted in Tristan Tzara, *Lampisteries, précédées de sept manifestes Dada* [Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1943], 29).
18. For the limited usefulness of the laboratory metaphor, see Steven Winspur's "Desnos” ‘Coeur en bouche': Laboratory Catalyst or Surrealist Maze?" *Dada/Surrealism* 9 (1979): 102-14.