**Tzara, Tristan (1896-1963)**

Born Samuel (Samy or Sami) Rosenstock in Moineşti, Romania, Tristan Tzara is an avant-garde poet, performer, critic, and film director. Together with Hugo Ball, Hans Richter, and Richard Huelsenbeck, Tzara founded Dada in Zurich, Switzerland, as an iconoclastic and fiercely anti-bourgeois protest movement in art, active from February 1916 to 1920. Though introduced by Ball, the word Dada first appeared in print in Tzara’s anti-war Dada novelette *The First Celestial Adventure of Mr. Fire Extinguisher* (1916) (Dickerman 33). The Romanian poet flaunted himself with his adopted name, wearing spats and his trademark monocle, just as he flaunted the word Dada in banners, posters, advertisements, and a journal, presciently branding the movement that made nonsense its trademark. Like a modern-day *Seinfeld*, deeply steeped in Romanian Jewish humour and culture, Tzara’s Dada claimed to be about ‘nothing’, as famously formulated in his 1918 ‘Dada Manifesto’. Thus Tzara’s Dada exhibited a distinctly nihilistic and absurdist dimension, as seen, for example, in his 1920 poem, which offers instructions on how ‘To Make a Dada Poem’ from newspaper clippings (http://bit.ly/IPpRV1).

With its spectacular and scandalous events, Tzara’s brand of Dada had an enormous impact on Modernism on both sides of the Atlantic. His reputation was already well established when Tzara moved to Paris in 1919, and lodged with Francis Picabia’s mistress Germaine Everling (Sanouillet 101), forming new alliances with the Paris dadaists who met at the Café Certa. In 1921, he sent Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp his authorization for the launch of the *New York Dada* magazine in April 1921. Besides editing the *Dada* magazine (from 1917-22), Tzara solicited contributions for an international anthology, *Dadaglobe* (which remained unpublished), and wrote Dada plays such as *The Gas Heart*, which premiered in 1921 at a Dada salon at the Galerie Montaigne with costumes by Sonia Delaunay; and *Handkerchiefs of Clouds*, which premiered in 1924 at the Théâtre La Cigale in Paris. Tzara’s publicity-savvy promotion of Dada as a world movement did not go unnoticed among international modernists. Dismissively alluding to Tzara in an unsigned 1924 editorial in the *transatlantic review*, a young Ernest Hemingway writes: “how very much better dadas the American dadas, who do not know they are dadas … are than the French or Roumanians who know it so well” (103). Yet even as modernists ostensibly defined themselves in opposition to Dada, they often appropriated and assimilated Dada strategies including collage, visual poetry, genre-crossing, and stripped-down language.

Tzara’s efforts to coordinate Dada as a world movement failed, when major avant-gardists in Europe embraced André Breton’s Surrealism, to which Tzara himself would significantly contribute by the early thirties. Forced into clandestine activity during the Nazi occupation of Paris, he formulated a critique of the movement in *Le Surréalisme et l’après-guerre* (1946). From 1925 to 1942, Tzara was married to Swedish modernist writer, poet and painter Greta Knutson (1899-1983), with whom he had a son, Christophe (born in 1927). Tzara’s papers are housed at the Bibliothèque littéraire Jacques Doucet in Paris.

**References and Further Reading**

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