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## Tristan Tzara's Poetical Visions: Ironic, Oneiric, Heroic

### Abstract

Tristan Tzara is most often associated with Dada, a movement whose influence has often been overlooked. However, Tzara stands out among his peers because of his extensive production of poetical works associated not only with Dada but surrealism and beyond. In all of these texts we see a constant refusal to be complacent about artistic endeavor or the world around us. His Dada texts launch an attack on language by the use of irony and a tension of the text against itself. This internal tension becomes the struggle depicted in his surrealist epic, *L'Homme approximatif*, an unfulfilled search for a cosmic language. Tzara's postwar poetry reflects Tzara's continuous political commitment as well as his ongoing use of irony and dream imagery in order to attempt to redefine the human situation. His critiques of war, commercialism, language and our relation to the natural world are still relevant in the twenty-first century.

### Keywords

Tzara, poetry, surrealism, modernism, Dada, self, L'Homme approximatif, war, commercialism, nature

## Tristan Tzara's Poetical Visions: Ironic, Oneiric, Heroic

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Tzara and Dada: the two names are linked even phonetically and indeed, anyone who begins to research Tzara finds his name inextricably linked to one of the most powerful artistic movements of the twentieth century. Dada burst upon the European literary scene during World War I in Zurich's Cabaret Voltaire with performances, readings and spectacles designed to shock bourgeois mentalities and question all definitions of literature and art. Its influence has continued today, beyond war protests through happenings, streaking, rock concert histrionics and neo-dada art to a contemporary advertising agency based in Australia called Dada. Surrealism, often seen by linear historians as the successor to Dada, likewise permeates our daily visual and verbal spaces. Many television and print advertisements capitalize on the absurd, unexpected or dream-like imagery of surrealist paintings and texts. The expression "It was surreal" regularly appears in daily news items as the reaction of people to various events.

Yet, despite the strong albeit largely unacknowledged influence of these movements on popular culture, the works of Dada and surrealist poets remain relatively in the margins of French literary study. If read at all, these texts are folded into courses on modernism, along with other movements such as expressionism, futurism and cubism. Whereas Tzara followed the same trajectory as many twentieth century poets influenced to varying degrees by all of these movements as well as World War II and its aftermath, he nevertheless rose to a distinctive position. As Mary Ann Caws has pointed out in *Approximate Man and Other Writings*, Tzara is the only poet who left us a considerable body of both Dada and surrealist texts (6). He is not only one of the founders of Dada, he also authored a

recognized surrealist masterpiece (*L'Homme approximatif* 'Approximate Man') and continued publishing poetry until 1961. Authors as varied as Samuel Beckett and Allen Ginsburg or even the group Radiohead have acknowledged his influence.<sup>1</sup> While the present article cannot account for all of Tzara's extensive work, a sampling will highlight a quality that still speaks to us in the twenty-first century: his constant refusal to be complacent, either about artistic endeavor or the world around us.

Undeniably, Tzara's early Dada poetry can be disconcerting. Strings of meaningless syllables, only some of which may be construed to be onomatopoeic, sounds from African languages, arcane scientific and exotic words, which, when taken out of context, lose their meaning, words and images from advertising, and the cacophony produced by simultaneous readings at early Dada manifestations all contributed to a loss of orientation on the part of the reader or spectator. Although Caws has emphasized the circus-like quality of these texts, one might question how amusing they really were. Tzara was reacting violently against long-held values in western civilization and art. Thus his poetry is double-edged: he may be comic, but he also wants to shock and make us uncomfortable with our ways of seeing. His famous recipe for a poem in *Dada manifeste sur l'amour faible et l'amour amer* (1920) 'Dada manifesto about weak love and bitter love,' which involves cutting up random words from a newspaper, refutes all notions of genre and authorship (*Oeuvres complètes* 1: 382).<sup>2</sup>

One of his poems in *Vingt-cinq poèmes* (1918) 'Twenty-five poems,' *pays voir blanc* 'country see white,' (*Oeuvres complètes* 1: 112), is an ironic attack against traditional sonority. The poem begins with a verse whose succession of vowels recalls the play of assonance in the style of Verlaine: "les ors des 10 heures ont brisé la mort." The line could be translated: 'the golden tints of ten o'clock have broken death.' However, if *ors* is taken as a plural conjunction rather than a noun and *dix heures* is a pun on *diseurs*, the text becomes: 'the nows of monologuists [or humorists] have broken death.' Meanwhile, the rest of the poem shows the destruction of this sonority, particularly in the poem's ending: "et poursuis les petits hommes dans leur voyelle / poursuis les petits les petits hommes dans leur voyelle" and pursue the little men in their vowel, pursue the little the little men in

their vowel.' The alliteration mocks the repetition of rhymed poetry and especially the kind of poetry parodied in the first line. Meaning thus is indeterminate and traditional poetry is ridiculed.

Ironic treatment of language is found not only in Dada texts but in later so-called surrealist ones as well, such as *L'Antitête* 'the Anti-head' (*Oeuvres complètes* 2: 263-395), a collection of poetic prose texts written between 1916 and 1931 and published in 1933. The title alone of the third section says it all: *Le Désesperanto*, a neat combination of the French word for 'despair' and Esperanto, the international language based on a rigid grammar and lexicon. *Grains et issues* (1935) 'Seeds and bran,' a hybrid work in which discursive and poetical languages change abruptly, contains a section, *Rêve expérimental*, 'Experimental dream' (*Oeuvres complètes* 3: 7-25), which outlines the unusual characteristics of a dream society. Here we see a theme associated with surrealism including many fantastical images. But there is sometimes a critical or ironical level, in which Tzara seems to make an implicit judgment on what he has written. In one passage from this section Tzara is describing a new sort of joy, involving cruelty and terror, an experiment in which he envisions various effects that eventually become a metaphorical attack on society (women, old men, aristocrats, and crowds in general). But there appears another level which suggests a reflection on the passage and ironically invites the reader to share the judgment: "Des chiens gorgés d'essence, auxquels on aura mis le feu, seront ameutés contre les femmes nues, les plus belles bien entendu" (*Oeuvres complètes* 3: 14) 'Dogs saturated with gasoline and set on fire will be sent to attack naked women, the most beautiful of course.' Further on, he says: "Ce sera très excitant, n'est-ce pas, tout le monde sera de cet avis" (*Oeuvres complètes* 3:14) 'It will be very exciting, right? Everyone will agree.' It is difficult to decide how much irony exists in *Rêve expérimental*, for in his notes to the section, Tzara takes this experiment quite seriously and so do most of his critics. Phillip Beitchman points out that the above quoted scenario is not to be interpreted literally, but that Tzara is "merely stating that in his version of communism life will be a complex and interesting affair" (49). It is true that any ironic tone disappears in *Grains et issues* after *Rêve expérimental*. Yet, in listing the characteristics of the new and free society in his experimental dream, Tzara is very regimental, to

the point of parodying the law: “Il sera interdit au rêve d’accoster les femmes dans la rue” (*Oeuvres complètes* 3: 9) ‘The dream will be forbidden to accost women in the street.’

Tension of the text against itself is a frequent trait of Tzara’s early Dada poetry. Describing these texts, Micheline Tison-Braun says that Tzara systematically interrupts the flow of words and breaks associations (91, note 1). The critic Pierre Prigioni pointed out that this young Romanian poet does everything possible to avoid the birth of a poem, opposing his interior energy and force against words in an *élan toujours brisé* ‘a continuously broken lyrical outburst.’ He adds that the complete failure of western culture is expressed in Tzara’s poetry by the impossibility of the phrase to lead anywhere (Alquié 373-74). Thus, paradoxically, Tzara’s early poetry in its senselessness could still be construed to carry meaning.

However, this tension is played out differently in Tzara’s masterpiece, *L’Homme approximatif*, composed between 1925 and 1931. Tzara is now associating with the surrealists in Paris, and this long epic poem has many dreamlike elements. The work begins with lines whose predominance of nouns and participles, when juxtaposed, give a rush of images:

dimanche lourd couvercle sur le bouillonnement du sang  
hebdomadaire poids accroupi sur ses muscles  
tombé à l’intérieur de soi-même retrouvé  
les cloches sonnent sans raison et nous aussi  
sonnez cloches sans raison et nous aussi  
nous nous réjouissons au bruit des chaînes  
que nous ferons sonner en nous avec les cloches (*Oeuvres complètes* 2: 79)

sunday heavy lid on the seething of blood  
weekly weight crouched on its haunches  
fallen inside oneself, found again  
the bells ring for no reason and we too  
ring, bells without reason, and we too  
we will rejoice at the clank of chains  
that we will sound within us with the bells. (*Approximate Man* 25)<sup>3</sup>

Such breathless lines continue throughout the text and carry the reader along in their movement. The Baudelairean metaphor of the first quotation, above, creates a juxtaposition, where Sunday, a heavy, rather than joyous time, oppresses any kind of life force, whether physical (the seething of blood) or represented in time (weekly weight). More generally we see in this metaphor a conflict between the imposing and noisy exterior (Sunday, lid, the bells) and the repressed interior (blood, fallen inside oneself, chains within us) which can only echo the noise from the outside, as suggested by the repetition of "ring" and "we too." The evocation of interior depths invites a dreamlike state and this dialectic between the exterior and the interior continues throughout this poem.

Some images associate more subtly and metaphor becomes metamorphosis, as Herbert Juin has suggested (10). In the following lines,

même sous l'écorce des bouleaux la vie se perd en hypothèses  
sanglantes  
où les pics picorent des astres et les renards éternuent des échos  
insulaires  
mais de quelles profondeurs surgissent ces flocons d'âmes dam-  
nées  
qui grisent les étangs de leur chaude paresse (*Oeuvres complètes*  
2: 100)

even under the bark of birches life is lost in bloody hypotheses  
where the peaks peck at stars and the foxes sneeze insular echos  
but from what depths arise these flakes of condemned souls  
that intoxicate the ponds with their searing idleness (43)

many disparate subjects are introduced, but instead of negating each other and thereby stopping the movement of the text, as in earlier poetry, they work together to suggest a transformational universe, where life is presented in terms of "hypotheses," and where the interior (under the bark) has a movement of its own (literally 'loses itself'), capable of change. The lines that follow show the possible linking of the interior with the exterior, and outward movement is suggested by elements of the earth reaching the sky or the air (second verse) and things beneath the earth touching the surface

of water (last two verses). There is a mixture of plants (birches), animals (foxes), humans (condemned souls) and cosmic elements (stars, ponds). Even one word in the original French can show these possible transformations. Thus, in the phrase “where the peaks peck at stars,” either mountain peaks or pickaxes or woodpeckers (all of which are signified by the word *pics*) reach high enough to peck at stars. Once the reader accepts this transformational, oneiric world, it is possible to continue reading, undaunted by rapidly changing images.

An uninterrupted reading and dreamlike state is also supported by the use of repetition. Almost every one of the nineteen sections has a recurring phrase that reappears like a refrain (such as “the bells ring without reason and we too”), providing a familiar guidepost for the reader. Sometimes a refrain is carried through the entire text, the most obvious example being the phrase “et tant d’autres et tant d’autres” ‘and so many others and so many others’ which appears at the ends of sections III, IV, VII, XI and XVIII or at the ends of stanzas in sections XVII, XVIII, and XIX. There is also partial repetition of this refrain in section XVIII and variations in section XVII and in section X, which contains an enumeration constructed on *tant* ‘so many,’ and ends with the lines “et tant d’autres s’enflent et se dénouent / et tant d’autres se brisent secrètement” ‘and so many others swell and sink again / and so many others break in secret’ (63).

A related refrain universalizes incompleteness: “homme approximatif comme moi comme toi lecteur et comme les autres” (29) ‘approximate man like me like you reader and like the others.’ It first appears in section II and is echoed in sections VIII, XIV, and XVI, inviting us to incorporate all persons into this twentieth-century version of everyman who is approximate because, as Beitchman says, he has no definite entity (12). He is incomplete, being only a separate part of the universe and an unfinished part at that, since he cannot even integrate his experiences. It is this incompleteness that provides the conflict of the poem, a constant dialectic between gratuity and separation and the possibility of order and unity. On the one hand, approximate man seems a victim of some kind of numbers game: his head is compared to a number, albeit a luminous one (29) and his soul could be scattered in playing cards (90). He is

constantly reminded of his pettiness:

pauvre petite vie perdant pied chaque jour  
culbutée basculée précipitée pauvre vie  
pauvre vie harcelée par les présages fauves piétinée (*Oeuvres complètes 2*: 141)

poor little life losing ground each day  
overthrown toppled trampled poor life  
poor life harassed by wild portents trampled. (79)

His life is meaningless, since he has no escape: “all you have left from life is the despair of escape thwarted” (31). He seems no more than a sterile piece of material, “man amiable merchandise eyes open but tightly sealed” (30). The experiences he might have are merely commodities, and approximate man's passing through life is compared to a bewildered shopper going through a store, unable to buy anything (32-33).

Approximate man's eyes are “cheap lodging” (29) and his very existence is “rented” (59). His life is literally spent according to the adage of time is money:

ta jalousie jaillit de l'étroit simulacre  
qui serre le temps dans la bourse de ta vie (*Oeuvres complètes 2*: 85)

your jealousy bursts forth from the narrow semblance  
that stows time away in the purse of your life. (30)

These commercial references not only show the petty character of approximate man's individual existence but they also critique the supposed society he has created for himself. Indeed his effort at ordering his own kind has not only made him a commodity, but has narrowed his universe and crushed his sentiments. Areas of civilization, such as cities, are depicted negatively in “the city mud of our feelings” (44) or “another town like another sorrow” (89). Daily activities in society such as shops, concert halls, the hairdresser, are associated with death (32-33). Because approximate man has lived in the routine of his society, he cannot really understand his life or

time and thus death is a dark and incomprehensible perspective.

On the other hand, beyond approximate man's everyday society, a unity exists where the numbers of the game have "leveled out" (96). In spite of the fact that approximate man is "diverse," "misunderstood," and moves in the "almosts of destiny" (29), in spite of the multiplicity of his universe, there is the possibility of encounter:

berger qui mène nos destins dans tant de sens  
que parfois ils se rencontrent si souvent ils se côtoient (*Oeuvres complètes 2*: 117)

shepherd who guides our fates in so many directions  
that sometimes they meet so often they run side by side. (59)

Opposing the themes of chance and separation is the theme of relationships and correspondences. There exists "eternal coincidence" (67) and approximate man carries "locked in the secret of your entails the key to great coincidence" (39).

These relationships are shown in Tzara's imagery, typical from his Dada writings, which mixes animals, vegetables and minerals: bushes have fins (36), a poplar can fly (37), children change into grasshoppers (53), plants climb in the veins of approximate man (76) and in the pores of the skin one finds a garden and the "fauna" of sufferings (86). These difficult relations, hidden beneath external appearances, are in a continual metamorphosis, capable of extending themselves into infinity or extinguishing themselves in an eternal play of approximations:

et de si difficiles relations se nouent entre les apparences et architraves  
homme un peu animal un peu fleur un peu métal un peu homme  
les relations qui ont leur vie indépendante en dehors de celle des voix et des rives  
les relations qui s'agrandissent s'effilent planétaires (*Oeuvres complètes 2*: 162)

and such difficult relations are formed between appearances and

architraves

man slightly animal slightly flower slightly metal slightly man

relations independent of voices and of riverbanks

relations like planets that grow or slowly taper off. (97)

Religious references abound in this poem: god is placed among cells, (32), there are “eucharistic games” (102), and a “jesus of air,” (97), but the struggle is not to be found on a religious plane, for the real crisis of the poem is on another level: language. More consistently than any other images or allusions, references to language appear everywhere in *L'Homme approximatif*. The first section of the poem announces the crisis, where we see the meaningless sounds of the Sunday bells and the chains rung within ourselves, and the speaker next asks: “what is this language lashing us we start in the light” (25). There exists, then, a meaningful language whose brightness strikes us in our doubts and senseless activities. Then the speaker refers to “. . . the warmth spun by the word / around its center the dream called ourselves” (26). In the original French, the word for “center” is *noyau*, the pit or stone of a fruit. Just as the outer covering of a fruit can protect and nourish the seed, so the word weaves a covering around us and is thus our access to the exterior. However, the word is not a given, but something to be sought after. In contrast to approximate man's babbling and noises, associated with coldness and death, the word is associated with warmth and life, and the first section ends, reflecting back on the previous refrain.

Approximate man's everyday, noisy language is inadequate and prevents him from truly relating to his environment. Thus words are “our enemies” (34), approximate man is marked by “mortuary punctuations” (77) and if Sunday was a heavy lid in the first line of the poem, later we see a lid covering the “prison of voices” (75). Probably the most direct accusation of common language occurs in section XIV:

nous avons déplacé les notions et confondu leurs vêtements avec  
leurs noms

aveugles sont les mots qui ne savent retrouver que leur place dès  
leur naissance

leur rang grammatical dans l'universelle sécurité

bien maigre est le feu que nous crûmes voir couvrir en eux dans

nos poumons

...

et pourtant les objets sont là consolation côtoyant les sensations  
il n'y a que leurs noms qui soient pourris vermoulsus insalubres  
(*Oeuvres complètes 2*: 143-44)

we have displaced the ideas and confused their clothing with  
their names

blind are the words which from their birth can only find their  
place again

their grammatical rank in the universal safety

meager is the fire we thought we saw kindling in them in our  
lungs

...

and still objects are there, consolation bordering sensations  
only their names are rotted, decrepit unhealthy. (80)

Tzara is attacking the convention of words, which have become rotted because they are arbitrary signs, no longer applying to things but to their own grammatical system. He wants to bring words closer to reality.

What he longs for is a language where the meaning and reality of things would be transparent, and “the word alone suffices for seeing” (33). This situation would occur with a cosmic language, common to all existence. In a reconstruction of primitive times, the speaker reflects nostalgically on this language, an “alphabet of birds,” and notes that “we are made of mirrors and air,” that is, we should reflect rather than transform things by our thought (44). In contrast to the attack on approximate man’s language, we see a language that participates in the mixture of cosmic elements. There exist “multiple languages” (51), the sky has tongues (98), there are “flying words” and “spinning words” (49), rain is described as “continuous writing” (54) and there is an “indescribable theory of vocabularies and of thorax” (66), an “alphabet of your necklace of teeth” (76), a “grammar of eyes” (101), and mollusks have hieroglyphics (90).

The speaker’s struggle, then, consists of a search for this cosmic language, and with this language we presume he might decipher the “illegible sun” (33). The significance of the dream sequence in sec-

tions IV and V is an escape from ordinary language. The speaker fears the “black bands of marauding maxims” which are always in the environs of sleep (37) and he notes that “suspicious sentences” are always there upon awakening (41). Respite and the end of the search are found beyond ordinary reality, and the allegorical wolf of the ninth section has a particular strength, which is a “seeker of undiscovered freedoms” (58). In the original French, these freedoms are *inédites*, literally unpublished and by extension undiscovered. Redemption is to be found in language, and at the end of the ninth section, where the wolf finds his “shepherd of the holy constellation” (58), he rises to emigrate “toward the celestial pastures of *words* (60, emphasis added).<sup>4</sup>

It is important to note that the only sections of the poem that really represent liberation are those of explicit dreaming (sections IV and V) or of allegory (section IX). There is no resolution to approximate man's conflict, and his struggle continues from the beginning to the end of the poem. The unity desired is not readily available and synthesis is depicted as an “unruly tonic” (44). Moreover, approximate man's closed situation is associated with the impenetrability of rocks, and in the absence of light he feels the “despair of granite” (93). These obstinate opposing forces make effort and searching the constant action of the nineteen sections of the poem and ultimately render heroic this courageous but neverending quest.

The last section, XIX, begins with an apocalyptic rupture: mountains have the whooping cough, the sky is compared to a common trench, the rain is rapid and “oblivions of essences” are drowned (100). Before the final repetition of the refrain that ends the poem, the speaker compares approximate man to a “slow furnace” and implores fire to come, rejecting harmony. The only element that seems to remain untouched is approximate man, although in his rock-like closure, he awaits expectantly his own rupture, and four times we see slight variations of the final powerful refrain:

et rocailleux dans mes vêtements de schiste  
 j'ai voué mon attente au desert oxydé du tourment  
 au robuste avènement de sa flamme (*Oeuvres complètes* 2: 171)

and stony in my clothing of schist  
 I have pledged my waiting to the oxidized desert of torment

to the unshakable advent of its flame. (104)

Critics have pointed out the immobility of this final image. For Caws, this ending is unexpected, contrasting with all that is approximate, and it highlights the speaker's "heroic solitude" (274). Tison-Braun, more radically, calls the speaker's immobility "voluntary" and relates this "volcanic myth" to "contemporary metaphysical nihilism" (37-38). Neither interpretation is particularly optimistic. However, the hard stone and dry desert are in contrast with other images that imply movement in this refrain. Schist, after all, is metamorphic rock, the result of change under pressure. The desert is oxidized, that is subjected to the releasing of free radicals to form something else. The advent of fire is dramatic and violent, but it guarantees transformation, if not purification. The speaker is calling for dramatic change and by ending his epic poem in this way, Tzara draws on a long tradition of association between fire and poetic creation, an apt conclusion to the search for a language seen throughout the poem. *L'Homme approximatif* is indeed Tzara's masterpiece, a summative work that could be considered his *De rerum natura* in which he sets forth ideas about poetic expression and the place of humans in the universe.

Although Tzara continued to publish a large body of work after this epic, critics have tended to make two sorts of observations about it: the meaning of the poetry is more accessible and it has a strong political orientation. It is understandable that Tzara's writing should reflect his political activities, for they were numerous. In 1935, Tzara participated in the International Congress of Writers for the Defense of Culture (*Congrès International des Ecrivains pour la Défense de la Culture*), which was organized by The Association of Revolutionary Writers and Artists (*AEAR, Association des Ecrivains et Artistes Revolutionnaires*). As a delegate from this group, Tzara went to the front and to Madrid during the Spanish Civil War. He wrote in clandestine magazines in the south of France during the Resistance, and after the liberation of Toulouse he helped found the *Institut d'Etudes Occitanes* 'Institute of Occitan Studies,' hoping to integrate Occitan sources into the national French literature. Tzara's political activities did not end with World War II, and in 1947 he both became a French citizen and joined the Communist Party. He continued to be involved in politics until his death in 1963, by

which time he had had the occasion to criticize the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956, and France's relation to its ex-colonies.<sup>5</sup>

However, the relation of politics to poetry in Tzara's later work has not been studied at length or with impartiality. René Massat, referring to Tzara's poem *Une Route seul soleil* (1943) 'One Road, Single Sun,' called the anagram of the title, URSS (USSR in English) *lourd de signification*, 'heavy with meaning' (2). In an early edition Lee Harwood, defending Tzara against another translator, Franklin Rosemont, emphasizes that Tzara was "not a communist party hack as Rosemont so stupidly claims" (Tzara, *Destroyed Days*, 3). Tison-Braun calls Tzara a great lyricist but a "detestable theoretician" (72). However, Beitchman suggests that Tison-Braun separates poetry and theory "a little too neatly" and relies on a definition of humanity owing more to Malraux than to Tzara, for whom the human is yet to be created (245).

The study of a representative text might better illustrate the relation between poetry and politics in Tzara's writing. *Sans coup férir* 'without striking a blow,' written in 1947, published in 1949, and read on Paris radio in 1950, has received virtually no critical comment. The text is a narrative poem with three different kinds of actions. The first action involves the pianist, introduced at the beginning of the poem, and catches the reader's attention immediately by its first line:

ne tirez pas sur le pianiste  
j'ai fait ce que j'ai pu  
laissez-moi aussi dire la vaste prairie de mes jours de raisins  
et le vin condamné des années que voici  
troupeaux d'hommes de zinc embrochés en une seule croyance  
(*Oeuvres complètes* 4: 29)

don't shoot the piano player  
I've done what I could  
let me also describe the vast prairie of my grape days  
and the doomed wine of these years that here's  
herds of zincmen skewered on a single belief. (*Chanson Dada*  
95)<sup>6</sup>

The pianist seems intent on telling what he has to say: the urgent

first line is repeated three other times in the text in a context of violence and it indicates a desire to be allowed to continue the story. This introduction also suggests that the story has a bad ending, for the “vast prairie of my grape days” becomes the “condemned wine” of the present and we see that the narrator has little respect for his audience or people in general, which he ominously compares to animals like sheep who end up on a skewer.

After an evocation of a dreamlike state of sleep, night and silence, in which the pianist recalls youthful memories, the second action of the poem appears as a simple refrain: “un taureau vend sa peau / en quelque Espagne” (*Oeuvres complètes* 4: 31). Deliberately obscure and disparaging in its brevity and imprecision ‘a bull sells its skin in some Spain,’ the refrain appears three other times in the text as a counterpoint to the main story. The last refrain occurs at the end of the poem in a modified and more precise version: “Quelque part en Espagne / un taureau vend drôlement sa peau / pour de bon” (*Oeuvres complètes* 4: 36). This sentence, ‘Somewhere in Spain / a bull really sells his skin / for good,’ with its emphasis on what is final and serious (“really,” “for good”), doubtless refers to the defeat of the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War and ends the poem in an abrupt, somber and concrete way.

The first and last appearances of this refrain encompass the main action, the love story between Anaïne and Intrinsic. As the pianist’s own story stops, that of the two young lovers begins. After their exchange of vows in a pastoral setting, the two embark on a dream trip which eventually carries them to the sea and beyond the earth. However, there are less than pleasant oneiric visions in the text. Aside from the somber, realistic refrain, recalling the brutality of the Spanish Civil War, there are references to the vulgar activities and escapes of urban life. A wasteland of seaside advertisements and trinkets disrupts any lyrical sentiment that the lovers’ journey might convey. The pianist interrupts to say that he has not yet said everything, and evokes a kaleidoscope of bourgeois interests in shopping, conspicuous consumption and lack of concern for the outside world. The two lovers eventually pass from the forest to life, which might suggest awakening from a dream. However, images of light fade into images of darkness and also loss of language and thus of memory and history, as if they were facing “un seul écran / dans la nuit

qui les comprend," (*Oeuvres complètes* 4: 34) 'a single screen in the night that includes them.' This reference sets up the final cascade of images in the poem, in which the world's miseries flash by as they would before spectators at the cinema. The various images suggest several disparate films, involving lovers, children, a detective and cowboys, interrupted by the inevitable Eskimo ice cream and caramels of French intermissions in the movie houses of the fifties and sixties. The piano player, appearing in this context, seems to suggest the era of silent films, which, although anachronistic in conjunction with the allusions to the Spanish Civil War, corresponds to the distance of the narrator from the subject, emphasizing the narrator's difficulty in telling the story, and Tzara's own search for a language.

The easy arrival of incidents in the poem is insidious. The line "aucune arme n'est partie" (*Oeuvres complètes* 4:35) 'no weapon fired a shot,' recalling the poem's title, and followed by the death of Asian elephants, suggests that destruction does not always depend on physical violence, but can result from sheer lack of concern and passivity on the part of the conquered. The poem abruptly ends with the loss of love. The pianist asks, "Anaïne et Intrisaire / qu'avez-vous fait de vos amours / qu'avez-vous fait" (*Oeuvres complètes* 4: 35) 'what have you done with your love / what have you done' and concludes with the final refrain of the bull that sells its skin in Spain. Recalling Tzara's love of word play, which exists throughout his work, particularly in titles, one can see how the end of the poem casts a new, ironical light on the title: *Sans coup férir* 'without striking a blow' is a homophone of *Sans coup fait rire* 'without a blow is laughable,' that is to say it is a bitter joke that such loss can occur when people do nothing to stop it.

A gloss spoken at the beginning of the radio script clearly states the subject and the movement of the poem: "Deux amoureux à la campagne gaspillent la joie de leur amour pour rêver des plaisirs de la ville et tandis que l'on tue un taureau en Espagne leur amour se meurt" (*Oeuvres complètes* 4: 581) 'Two lovers in the country waste the joy of their love in order to dream of the pleasures of the city and while a bull dies in Spain their love dies.' It does not explicitly state what relationship exists between the lovers, the bull, and the narrator. The theme of deception, however, links the three actions in an implicit way. Just as light is lost for the speaker in the poem, so

the bull sells its skin and the young couple lose their love. All three instances suggest the perils of dreaming of an easier life while ignoring the harshness of reality. Thus Tzara complicates the surrealist notion of dream, defining onirism as an escape that is not always positive. The poem's final lines make it clear that this is a call for political action. But the call is delivered only through the negative example of what happens if people are complacent, and it is all the more effective.

This poem is one of the most politically intentioned that Tzara wrote and yet there are no direct references to war or political ideologies. Tzara combines his relatively recent experiences in Spain (in the refrain) with his Dadaist as well as communistic hatred of bourgeois mentalities (in the references to commercialism). He combines a traditional pastoral narrative and the simple language of his later period with remnants of earlier techniques, such as dream-like visions, simultaneity (in the juxtaposition of the story of the lovers and that of the Spanish bull) and a cascade of images. Some of these recall the Dadas' interest in advertisement and the cinema as well as a general relationship between film and oneiric activity. *Sans coup férir* is a significant text in the whole body of Tzara's work for it represents a continuity as well as evolution of techniques and political themes and suggests that for Tzara, poetry and politics are inseparable, just as dreaming should not be an excuse for absence of thought.

As he said in *Le surréalisme au service de la Révolution 4* (1931), poetry can no longer be classified among *moyens d'expression* 'means of expression' which is only descriptive of ideas or feelings. Rather it is the "la poésie-activité de l'esprit" (*Oeuvres complètes* 5: 9) 'poetry-activity of the mind.' This poetry arises from surrealism and is produced out of such activity as dreaming while awake. It is an expression of complete freedom, devoid of forms, directions or ideologies. Although this kind of poetry was not the dominant form in his society, throughout his writing career Tzara searched for this new and different language. In his texts, he may disturb the reader or comment wryly during this search; alternatively he leads the reader into a transformative dreamscape. At the same time, Tzara expresses his political commitment, but does so in a visually charged way that makes the reader react, and participate in this making of thought.

Looking over Tzara's poetical production ranging from 1918 to 1961, we see that despite his refusal to use poetry merely to express ideas, his poetic visions bring to life ongoing problems in western culture still evident today. Dada began in a context of protest against the absurdity and hypocrisy of world war, and Tzara's poetry continued to reflect this concern. Also, from Dada through *L'Homme approximatif* and beyond, he consistently critiqued the dehumanizing aspect of commercialism as well as the inability of all our technology to improve communication and our use of language. In a prescient formulation of current ecological problems the imagery of *L'Homme approximatif* points to our lack of understanding of the natural world and yet of our profound connection to it. In all his poetic texts, Tzara uses ironic and oneiric images in the heroic effort to make us truly see and redefine the human situation, despite the seeming impossibility of this task.

## Notes

1 For Beckett see Bradby 17-46, for Ginsburg see Hathaway 243, and for Radiohead see Tate, 195.

2 All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

3 All English translations of *L'Homme approximatif* followed by a page number will refer to the Caws edition and translation, *Approximate Man and Other Writings*. However, an exception is line 5, which is my translation, since for some reason the line was not included in her edition. Often, for the sake of concision and the flow of the argument, I will quote only from the English translation and save the original French for longer passages.

4 The significance of this wording may be seen by comparing the original manuscript, which reads: "...les célestes pâturages de la nuit" (*Oeuvres complètes* 2: 428) 'the celestial pastures of the night' (60). When Tzara changed this ending, he removed any hesitation a reader might have in interpreting liberation as a liberation of language. Similarly, in the line "Les langues du ciel fauchent les cheminées des usines maigres" (*Oeuvres complètes* 2: 163), 'the sky's tongues mowing down the chimneys of narrow factories' (98), Tzara changed to "the sky's tongues" from the original "les instruments agricoles du ciel" (*Oeuvres complètes* 2:438) 'the sky's farm instruments.' By substituting words with clear references to language, Tzara remains consistent with the theme of a cosmic language, the unattainable object of the speaker's quest.

5 See *Oeuvres complètes* 1: 15-23 for a chronology and *Oeuvres complètes* 5: 654 on Vietnam. Harwood, 8-11, gives further explanation of Tzara's activities in

the 1940s and Roach 16-17 notes Tzara's work with Occitan scholars. Codrescu 56-60 and 208-15 explores Tzara's identity as a Jew and his revolutionary activities.

6 These opening lines of *Sans coup férir* are translated by Harwood, but other translations from this text are my own.

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