

*From Dada to Infra-noir: Dada, Surrealism, and  
Romania*

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# The Education of Samuel Rosenstock, or, How Tristan Tzara Learned His ABCs

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# The Education of Samuel Rosenstock, or, How Tristan Tzara Learned His ABCs

Marius Hentea

After an absence of five years, when Tristan Tzara finally returned to Romania for a short visit in the summer of 1920, he wrote to Francis Picabia that “[l]es Balkans et la mentalité d’ici me dégoûtent profondément” (Sanouillet, *Dada à Paris* 484) ‘the Balkans and the mentality here disgust me profoundly’ (Sanouillet, *Dada in Paris* 420). Perhaps out of a desire to fully integrate into French intellectual life, or in response to accusations of being a “foreigner,” Tzara maintained few connections to his native land throughout his life. Trips back to Romania were rare, his letters to his family were written in French, and he made a point of not joining exile circles. But a sustained relationship need not happen in physical fact; the chains of memory may suffice: “Des rapports lointains ouvrent les tiroirs de ma mémoire” ‘The most distant relationships open the drawers of my memory,’ he wrote in *Faites vos Jeux* (Place Your Bets), an unfinished 1923 novel centering on his youth (*Œuvres complètes* 1: 251).

Although some interest in the Romanian context of Dada has surfaced recently, it has been limited, and if Tom Sandqvist’s *Dada East: The Romanians of Cabaret Voltaire* is a good starting point, more needs to be done, especially since Sandqvist makes certain elementary mistakes and admits to an “inadequate knowledge” of the language.<sup>1</sup> “Este greu de imaginat” ‘It is hard to imagine’ that Tzara had left Romania a “*tabula rasa*” (Dub 86). Serge Fauchereau has expressed the overwhelming need for a broader awareness of Tzara’s roots:

Il est remarquable qu’on ne se soit guère inquiet de savoir par quelle démarche et quel itinéraire intellectuel Tzara, qui était Roumain et avait vécu en Roumanie jusqu’au seuil de l’âge d’homme (1915), a pu être reconnu tout à coup aux alentours de 1918-1920 comme le leader

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<sup>1</sup> Sandqvist puts Tzara’s hometown of Moinești ten miles from Iași, the historic capital of Romania, when the distance is closer to one hundred (30), and also has Tzara arriving in Paris in 1921 (4), not 1920. But his is otherwise an admirable effort to supply vital information about the Romanian context of Dada.

incontesté de l'avant-garde poétique dans une langue qui n'était pas à l'origine la sienne. (417)

It is remarkable that no one is concerned with knowing by what means and by what intellectual itinerary Tzara, who was Romanian and lived in Romania until the cusp of maturity (1915), could suddenly, around 1918-1920, be recognized as the incontestable leader of the poetic avant-garde in a language not originally his own.

Scholars have supplied vital information about the literary context in which Tzara made his debut under the pen name "S. Samyro" in *Simbolul*, a "little review" he edited for four issues in 1912.<sup>2</sup> While this work on the Romanian literary context has been essential, in this article I focus on Tzara's formal education. Tzara's one-time collaborator and long-time foe, Richard Huelsenbeck, called Tzara an "auto-barbare" who, because he had grown up in the cultural backwaters of Europe, could never have felt the need for a grounded culture or understood what its disappearance would mean (102-04).<sup>3</sup> Tzara's education, in other words, was somehow incomplete, but this presumed lack was also a liberation from the "scruples" other dadaists held. Yet Huelsenbeck overstates the case, as I will show that Tzara received a fairly classical education closely modeled upon French and German models.

Although a precocious poet and editor in his youth, in his time in Romania Tzara was first and foremost a student. Though he left for Zurich at an early age, he had already experienced dislocation: in 1906, at the age of ten, he moved out of the family home to continue his education in the city of Focșani and then, starting in the autumn of 1907, in Bucharest. What kind of education was offered in the country, and how did the young Samuel Rosenstock respond to it? How did his Judaism affect his educational opportunities? In short, this article is an attempt to supply archival information about Tzara's educational background in order to better situate him biographically and to draw out the political and cultural ideologies that young Samuel Rosenstock had been exposed to as an impressionable student. The archive of the Schewitz-Thierrin Institute contains the titles of the textbooks young Tristan used in his courses, through which I reconstruct the ideological content of that material; I also examine his 1910 student essay on the subject of hygiene, and draw attention to the problems Tzara had at the university, where he lodged a formal complaint against a professor – and not just any professor, but Ramiro Ortiz, an Italian who wrote extensively about futurism in the Romanian literary press.

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<sup>2</sup> See Marin Bucur, Șerban, Pop, and Impey. The most comprehensive Romanian-language source is Paul Cernat's *Avangarda românească și complexul periferiei*.

<sup>3</sup> Sascha Bru largely restates Huelsenbeck's charge (141).

## I.

Tzara was born in 1896 in Moinești, a city in northeastern Romania situated between heavily-forested and steep hills at the foot of the Carpathians, about forty kilometers from the county capital, Bacău, and about 300 kilometers from Bucharest. At the time of his birth, Moinești was in the full throttle of demographic and economic transition because its oil industry had become the second-largest in the country; the city was among the leading petroleum centers in Europe (Ravaș 10, 95). Yet the city was traditional in other ways: Orthodox Jews comprised a little under half of the town's population of 3,800 souls, which gave the city the feel of a Jewish *shtetl* (Șapira 24; Rosen 11).

When Tzara began his formal schooling in 1902, the first lesson he learned concerned exclusion and identity: as a Jew, he could not freely attend the state elementary school and instead attended a private Jewish school (Macarie 102). It was the concrete beginning of Tzara's life as an exile: being Jewish, he was legally removed from the cultural life of the public sphere. This moment was also a lesson in the chasm between appearance and reality. Upon the founding of the independent Romanian state, free public education was touted as the panacea to modernize the country. With rural illiteracy at around 75% for males and 95% for females, one of the highest rates in Europe, there was a desperate need for it (Hitchins 171). But the introduction of free public schooling proved costly and difficult – 80% of the population were scattered in rural areas, which necessitated the opening of many small schools, a costly measure and an impractical one when qualified teachers were in short supply. When Moinești's first public school opened in 1864 (a school for girls followed three years later), there was only one teacher. At the turn of the century, four instructors were handling 192 students, many of them transients, enrolling at the beginning of the year but irregularly attending classes because their families needed them to work the fields (*Indrumător* 2: 302-03). The school was in a physically shoddy state, as the principal reported in 1893: "Astăzi copiii n'au apă, prin clase nu e cu ce se curăți diminețele fiind destul de reci și clasele trebuind încălzite nu e cu ce tăia lemne așa că toate aceste neajunsuri fac pe subsemnatul a nu putea administra conform regulilor acestă școală."<sup>4</sup> 'These days the children do not have water, in the classrooms there is nothing to be used to clean in the mornings, the classrooms are quite cold and they need to be heated, there is nothing to cut the wood with.' The school director and the mayor were frequently at loggerheads. Mayor Krupenschi, the principal complained, had repeatedly "nu a arătat de cât cea mai rea voință ori de câte ori a fost vorba ca să se facă datoria față de interesele școlaii" 'shown only the most mean-spirited intentions whenever the question of doing his duty to the school's interests was posed,' so the school suffered: its broken roof meant that "când plouă

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<sup>4</sup> Direcția Județeană Bacău a Arhivelor Naționale, 2242 (Școala generală nr. 1 Moinești) [hereafter cited as DJAN] 1/1893, f.23.

afară, plouă și în școală” ‘when it rains outside, it rains in the school’; if there was no firewood, the school could shut down for weeks (DJAN 1/1901, f.58, 1/1900, f.166, 2/1904, f.47).

The Rosenstocks would have been hesitant to send young Samuel to such a school, but their decision was made easier since they would have been forced to pay for it. In 1893 the state introduced taxes on “foreign” pupils, a measure many Jews saw as discriminatory since they were the community most affected by the law (Drake-Francis 151). In Moinești Jewish students were taxed at a rate of 20 lei per academic year (DJAN 1/1893, f.27). In 1900, out of 186 pupils in four grades at the public school, there were only three Jewish students (DJAN 1/1900, f.2, f.48). So while the Rosenstocks could have afforded the tuition fee, sending Samuel to the public school would have meant not only poor conditions but also exposing their boy to a classroom where he would have been an outsider.

The choice was made simpler because Moinești’s Jewish community had developed a number of private schools. In 1893, there were ten different Jewish schools educating 199 students (DJAN 1/1893, f.7). These schools were of varying quality and emphasis. Some establishments were little more than single unfinished rooms “mai populată decât Corabia lui Noe” ‘more crowded than Noah’s ark,’ with a master only providing religious instruction (Burah Zeilig, qtd. in “Moinești”). The Jewish school for boys Tzara attended was a different story. It was constructed in 1896 on a field donated by a local petroleum firm and from funds given by Baron Rothschild and administered by the Jewish Colonization Association. Within three years the school was educating over 180 students. Its curriculum was recognizably modern, with instruction in Romanian, Hebrew, modern languages, and science. Young Samuel’s sister would come to attend the Jewish school for girls, which was opened in 1900; it was only in 1910 that the two schools were combined into a coeducational Jewish school that is now the city’s judicial chambers.

The archive of the Moinești Jewish community does not contain the school records, so what information there might have been about the school itself is now lost and a reconstruction of the school’s curriculum beyond the subjects taught is impossible. Because Tzara’s school records in Bucharest contained copies of his elementary education files, though, it is possible to state that Tzara was a good student, with high marks in mathematics and the sciences. His marks for foreign languages were not as high as one might expect them to be. His schooling was complemented by private instruction in languages and music at home. But in Moinești the education offered ended after four grades, and so in 1906 Tzara had to go elsewhere for his schooling.

## II.

Tzara was only ten years old when he was sent in 1906 to a private school in Focșani for his first year of *gymnasium* (middle school), but it is not possible to

determine what motivated this choice, which was in many respects surprising. The only record which exists for this year in Focșani is an end-of-year certificate issued in September 1907 after Tzara passed a make-up exam in music, a subject he had failed.<sup>5</sup> Jews in Moinești typically continued their education in either Bacău or, if the family had more money, Bucharest. The Rosenstocks could have afforded sending young Samuel to Bucharest but refrained from doing so, yet they did not keep him close to home either, as Focșani was about one hundred fifty kilometers away. In this strange environment far from home, Tzara did not do well academically; his highest mark was in gym, his marks in French and mathematics were average, he barely passed religion, and he failed music (SMAN 336 861/1910).

More important than the content of his education for that year, though, was the 1907 peasant revolt, a nation-wide uprising that began in Tzara's home region, Moldavia, as a series of protests against local land managers (*arendăși*). As the uprising fanned out, peasants around Bucharest took up the call to arms, and a peasant army marched upon the capital, which was declared under a state of siege. As Austrian troops began to assemble along the Transylvanian border, King Carol I mobilized the national militia, and in a few days the 120,000-strong army killed thousands of peasants. All records of the event, including cabinet meetings and Ministry of War decisions, were burned by royal order ("Cei Uciși în 1907").<sup>6</sup>

For the Romanian elites, the uprising was "a thunderbolt out of a clear blue sky," for the country seemed to be modernizing and developing economically, becoming European (Stavrianos 488). In the earliest stages of the uprising there was a marked anti-Semitic element, as many of the *arendăși* were Jewish, and for this reason the Rosenstocks would have had reason to fear for their safety, especially since Samuel's grandfather was himself one of those despised land managers. The lesson of the revolt was that in an instant the comforts of bourgeois home could be overturned. For the country at large, that was also the lesson, as the contemporaneous diary entry of Alexandru Marghiloman, who later headed the Romanian Red Cross during World War I, noted: "Toată România trebuie refăcută, căci totul s'a înecat" (61) 'All of Romania has to be remade, because everything has sunk.'

For young Tristan, the peasant revolt brought to light the tenuous hold of law and order, of civilization itself. It also overturned the image the Romanian state had constructed of itself as a dynamic, industrializing European country. Just a year before, the Romanian International Exhibition of 1906 commemorated forty years of Carol I's reign by presenting a modern nation-state. Yet the peasant revolt

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<sup>5</sup> This certificate was presented by Tzara upon his enrollment in 1910 to Liceul Dimitrie Cantemir (Serviciul Municipiului al Arhivelor Naționale [hereafter cited as SMAN Bucharest], 336 (Liceul Dimitrie Cantemir) [hereafter cited as SMAN 336]: 861/1910, unpaginated).

<sup>6</sup> For more on the peasant revolt, see Otetea et al. and Tucker.

shook that self-confidence. Ion Caragiale, the country's most famous playwright, observed:

Europa era deprinsă de atâția ani să știe că tânărul Regat Român e cel mai solid element de civilizație între Statele balcanice. . . . În adevăr, poate că nici într-un Stat, din Europa cel puțin, nu există atâta extravagantă deosebire între realitate și aparență, între ființă și mască. (167)

Europe has been accustomed to thinking for many years that the young Romanian Kingdom is the most solid element of civilization among the Balkan states. . . . In truth, perhaps in no state, at least in Europe, does there exist such a huge discrepancy between reality and appearances, between actuality and pretense.

The ten-year-old far from home would probably not have understood much about the revolt, but he could not escape its consequences, as the revolt marked the Romanian psyche and played a crucial role in cultural self-definitions of the nation before the First World War. Writers and artists rallied to the cause of the oppressed peasant and sought to found an art based on peasant imagery and folklore. The backlash against "cosmopolitan" elements and "decadent" art dominated leading periodicals – and just as the peasants had started by revolting against mainly Jewish leaseholders, the cultural atmosphere within the country turned increasingly against Jewish writers and artists (Mansbach 536). Articles with titles like "Samică și 1907" (Samică and 1907) began to appear – "Samică" being a term used to refer to all Jews but also Tzara's nickname in childhood. Although the county of Bacău saw only twenty-five peasant deaths during the uprising, it was clear that sending young Samuel to Bucharest would have been the safest course of action (Chirot and Ragin 437).

### III.

At the age of eleven, Tzara arrived in Bucharest in the autumn 1907 to take up a place as a boarder at the Schewitz-Thierrin Institute, one of the premier preparatory schools in the capital. For three years he lived in the school's dormitories because his parents continued to reside in Moinești. Opened in 1847, the flourishing school was located on Strada Scaune in downtown Bucharest, about half a kilometer behind what is now the National Theatre (Iorga 224-26). In the academic year 1907-1908, when Tzara began in the second class, Schewitz-Thierrin had a total of 128 students in its four grades.<sup>7</sup> Over 80% of the students were boarders – even those students whose parents lived in Bucharest tended to live in the dormitories. While about half of the students were from Bucharest, the other half came from far afield in Romania, mostly drawn from the emerging

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<sup>7</sup> Serviciul Municipiului al Arhivelor Naționale, 46 (Liceul Schewitz Thierrin) [hereafter cited as SMAN 46]: 91/1907-1912, f.36.

professional classes. The Institute, unlike Samuel's previous schools, was not a Jewish school: in his class of thirty-three students, there was only one other Jewish boy, and in the entire school when young Tzara arrived, there were only twelve Jewish students (SMAN 46: 91/1907-1912, f.36). By the time he was in his final year, Tzara was the only Jewish student in a class of fifteen (SMAN 46: 8/1909-1910, f.113). Only about one-third of the students were from rural backgrounds, so Tzara as a rural Jew was certainly isolated from his classmates by religion and background. The language of instruction was Romanian, and young Samuel, probably because he pleaded with his parents, was exempted from the religion class (but only starting in his second year at the school) (SMAN 46: 7/1908-1909, f.115). The school had been founded by a Frenchman; its teachers were either foreigners with university degrees from abroad or Romanians who taught in the capital's elite high schools or the university. The students were also required to do military training under a sub-lieutenant; the mania for "luxurious uniforms with obvious military insignia" among the students led the Ministry of Education to request that the school prevent its charges from dressing in such a manner (SMAN 46: 91/1907-1912, f.44).

The curriculum was very broad, with courses in Romanian, French, German, Latin, religion, history, geography, mathematics, and natural and physical sciences, drawing, music, gymnastics, and calligraphy (SMAN 46: 6/1907-1908, f.82). Final-year students also took courses in civics and hygiene. The school program reflected the emphasis on foreign and classical languages: there were only three hours of instruction in Romanian language and literature per week compared to nearly twelve hours spread fairly evenly between French, German, and Latin (SMAN 46: 91/1907-1912, f.48). Both French instructors were native speakers, one of them the wife of the school director, while the German teacher was on the faculty at the University of Bucharest. The schooldays were long, starting at eight in the morning and having almost seven hours of instruction every day, and there was a full day of Saturday classes as well (SMAN 46: 91/1907-1912, f.48). Tzara was a strong but not spectacular student. His best marks that first year at Schewitz-Thierrin were in German, and he almost failed history (SMAN 46: 6/1907-1908, f.82). The following school year, Tzara had the highest marks in his class in German and was among the best students in French. Throughout his four years of gymnasium, in both Focșani and Bucharest, Tzara's grades fluctuated, indicating that as a student his ability depended in large part on his own motivation (or lack thereof) and on his personal rapport with the teacher – he was not, in other words, a consistently good student. In the same subject from one year to the next, he could go from failing to being top of the class. The only exception to this general rule was in modern foreign languages – although Tzara's marks in



German were always higher than in French – and in mathematics, where he did consistently well.<sup>8</sup>

Even though Tzara was studying at a private school, there was a fairly high degree of oversight by the Education Ministry. This scrutiny is explained by the fact that in Romania education had a civilizing and state-building mission.<sup>9</sup> Starting in February 1908, private schools were required to keep students' written work so that it could be inspected by state officials; there were also decrees instructing private schools to introduce Romanian-language music, to celebrate Romanian holidays, and to mandate church attendance on Sundays by students. Private-school students had to have their degrees validated by a state-run examination, for which they had to pay a substantial fee of anywhere from thirty to eighty lei. Tzara took such an equivalency examination in June 1910 (SMAN 46: 91/1907-1912, f.21, 88, 92, 138). The Schewitz-Thierrin Institute transmitted its curriculum, along with the titles of the textbooks used, to the Education Ministry. While not all of these records remain, the curriculum and textbooks used in Tzara's final year can be pieced together from Bucharest archives, offering a unique insight into the education young Tzara received.

The history and civics textbooks were ideologically charged with a narrow understanding of Romanian ethnic belonging combined with boundless optimism for the young country's future. The civics book was a primer in nationalist ideology, although it did pause to praise Swiss patriotism in terms that may not have come across as pure praise to a young boy already showing artistic inclinations: the Swiss, the text asserts, "sunt în stare mai curând să moară toți până la unu pentru neatârarea patriei lor, decât să trăiască sub jug străin" (Chirițescu 57) ('are more apt to die to the last man for their country's freedom than to live under a foreign yoke.' Young Romanians would do well to adopt a similar patriotism towards their own country:

E un lucru așa de mare, așa de sfânt patria, încât dacă într'o zi, părinții voștri, care vă iubesc atât de mult, v'ar vedea că vă întoarceți neatinși dintr'un războiu pentru ea, neatinși pentru că v'ați codit și v'ați cruțat viața de frica morții, atunci ei, părinții voștri iubitori, v'ar primi cu un suspin de jale; ei n'ar mai putea să vă iubească și ar muri de durere și de adâncă intristare! (18)

The nation is something so grand, so saintly, such that if one day your parents, who love you so much, were to see you come back unharmed from a war defending your country, unharmed because you shrunk from your duty and spared your life from the fear of death, then they, your

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<sup>8</sup> See SMAN 336: 861/1910, unpaginated, which contains a September 1910 letter by Tzara documenting his four years of gymnasium.

<sup>9</sup> Education Minister Dimitrie A. Sturdza stated in 1885: "we, more than other peoples, are to exist, to develop, to march forward through schooling." (Qtd. in Drace-Francis 147).

loving parents, would receive you with sighs of grief; they would no longer be able to love you and would die of heartache and deep sadness.

Tzara's history textbook identified the Romanian nation as the "Latin race of the Orient" and saw history as the means by which a nation could come to cultural self-understanding:

Căci prezentul nu este decât un produs al trecutului și o punte de trecere către viitorul la care o națiune aspiră. Dacă un popor nu'și cunoaște trecutul, e ca un strein în casa lui proprie; dacă el și-a pierdut simțul istoric, conștiință națională, este ca un mort între cei vii și osândit mai curând sau mai târziu ca sa piară. . . . Deșteptând mereu și întărind puternic simțul istoric al poporului românesc, pregătim *unitatea culturală și națională* a lui. . . . (Tocilescu 2)<sup>10</sup>

The present is nothing but the product of the past and a point of passage to the desired national future. If a people does not know its past, it is like a stranger in its own house; if a people has lost its historical sense, its national consciousness, it is like a dead man among the living. . . . Always seeking enlightenment and solidifying the powerful historical sense of the Romanian people, we are preparing its *national and cultural unity*. . . .

With a series of illustrated lessons on great figures in the country's history, the textbook contains a great deal about the War of Independence (1877-78) and the bravery of the Romanian army at Plevna. The concluding lesson assures its young readers of the nation's continuing forward march to progress:

Patria noastră, după atâtea lupte și suferințe seculare . . . astăzi este o țară liberă și neatarnată. În afară, ea se bucură de respectul și stima celorlalte state; în lăuntru, ea se bucură de toate libertățile, de legi bune și instituțiuni folositoare. Grație acestei situațiuni, România devine pe fiecare zi mai puternică și mai prosperă. (250)

Our country, after so much battling and suffering . . . is today a free and independent country. From the outside, she enjoys the respect and esteem of other states; internally, she enjoys all the liberties of good laws and useful institutions. Thanks to this situation, Romania is becoming every day more powerful and more prosperous.

But young Tzara, who was in a private school far away from home because of discriminatory policies, must have found this conclusion problematic, to say nothing of what the 1907 peasant revolt said of the country's presumed enlightenment.

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<sup>10</sup> Emphasis in the original.

The French-language textbook, by contrast, vaunted the glories of France. Filled with sections on various aspects of French life, as well as short stories from the pantheon of its literature, the book assumed a fairly high level of competence in the language. The chapter on letter-writing explains the different levels of formality in French salutations and offers a series of possible formulas. "Je te serre la main," which Tzara made use of extensively when sending out his Zurich Dada missives, is one of those suggested concluding phrases (Candréa and Teodoru 86). The book also contained a lesson on "Moyens de Correspondance," which Tzara evidently mastered, for he was primarily an impresario for Dada through postcards and letters. "[L]a nécessité de correspondre avec ses semblables" '[T]he need to correspond with one's peers' across frontiers, the textbook states, is an essential aspect of modern culture, and the international postal system is lauded as "le messenger rapide et fidèle des plus pauvres comme des plus riches; elle est devenue aussi nécessaire à notre civilisation que la circulation du sang dans les veines est nécessaire à la vie du corps" (124-25) 'the rapid and trustworthy messenger for the poorest as well as the wealthiest; it has become as necessary to our civilization as the circulation of blood in our veins is necessary to the body.'

#### IV.

At the end of his gymnasium, Tzara passed a state-run equivalency examination in June 1910. He also defended, in an oral examination in March 1910, a final-year essay, "The Importance, History and the Uses of Hygiene." As a progressive institution, Schewitz-Thierrin required final-year students to take a course in hygiene: "Salvați Copiii!" (Save the Children), one newspaper headlined, by requiring such courses ("Igienă în Școli"). Hygiene was a pressing national subject and "s'a scris o întregă bibliotecă în chestia aceasta" 'a whole library has been written upon the question,' a leading newspaper wrote earlier that year, and for good reason: schools were routinely shut down because of typhoid and diphtheria epidemics, Bucharest itself had yet another cholera epidemic that year, and the capital was one of the European leaders in tuberculosis deaths ("Reformă Sanitară"; Damé 316). There were systematic problems: "Abatoare murdare, hale de desfacere la fel, strade rău îngrijite, un serviciu de testabil de ridicarea gunoaelor, o complectă desinteresare de sănătatea și higiiena publică, iată constatări făcute în ultimele inspecțiuni, iată exemple vii pe cari cetățenii le au zilnic în fața ochilor" ("Educația Higienică") 'Dirty abattoirs and markets, unkempt streets, a detestable garbage pickup service, a complete disinterest in sanitation and public hygiene by authorities, that is the conclusion made in the latest inspection – these are the striking examples that citizens confront daily.' The lack of trained physicians was another problem – in 1906, there were only 215 doctors practicing in rural areas despite the fact that over eighty percent of the population lived in villages (Georgescu 177). "Publicul nostru e cu totul lipsit de o educație higienică" 'the public is entirely lacking an education in hygiene' a

leading daily wrote before commenting upon the sanitary reform project before parliament (“Educația Higienică”). Hygiene was an ideologically charged subject, with “polemici din ce în ce mai violente și mai pătimașe” ‘increasingly violent and fervent polemics’ arising, mainly because the government reform redefined the role of the state but also because hygiene was seen through the prism of cultural modernization (“Salubritatea Publică”). It was also linked to the Jewish question, as many city officials blamed epidemics on overcrowded and insalubrious Jewish neighborhoods. This governmental reform, which passed later that year just before the government fell, was the first major state intervention in the health field, creating doctor-run public health bodies with the basic mission of defining public health standards, providing education in hygiene, and coordinating responses to epidemics (Maria Bucur 25).

Tzara’s essay is interesting not only because of this larger social context but also because it is directly connected to the later avant-garde discourse of hygiene. “Dr. F.T. Marinetti” (as the founder of futurism signed his early articles) was a proponent of “la guerra, sola igiene del mondo” ‘war, the world’s only hygiene.’<sup>11</sup> (Marinetti was also known as *il Poeta Pink*, a name of a popular medicine at the time which was reputed to “restore the weak organism and provide the best cure against anemia, sclerosis and general fatigue.”) While the Dadas would refer to hygiene ironically, a band-aid charged with notions of progress and rationality that nonetheless failed to treat civilization’s deeper ills (in the “Manifeste Dada 1918” in particular), Tzara’s 1910 essay is a model of sincerity and thoroughness, treating the subject with an inflated schoolboy rhetoric. The essay begins,

Igiena este știința care se ocupă cu păstrarea și mărirea sănătății noastre. Este prin urmare știința care ne arată ce e bun și ce e rău corpului nostrum, și ne dă în același timp poveștile necesare pentru păstrarea sănătății noastre. Studiind diferitele cauze de îmbolnăvire, igiena ne arată cum putem înlătura acele cauze, pentru ca astfel să rămânem sănătoși; studiind diferitele mijloace de întărire ale corpului nostrum, igiena ne arată pe cele mai bune pentru a ne face cât mai voinici, cât mai sănătoși, și astfel, igiena ajunge să-și îndeplinească în total misiunea ei: păstrarea și mărirea sănătății noastre.

Acest studio, igiena, este unul din studiile cele mai importante și mai folositoare din câte se învață în școală, căci numai cunoscând și aplicând preceptele igienice ne vom putea prelungi viața și ține sănătoși până la sfârșitul ei. . . . Din zi în zi importanța igienei crește considerabil, din cauza descoperirilor no ice se fac. Sănătatea noastră este din ce în ce mai

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<sup>11</sup> Berghaus 38; Marinetti 279-80. One can also recall Lissitzky’s 1930 exhibition *Internationale Hygiene-Ausstellung* in Dresden.

puțin atacată și aceasta datorită măsurilor igienice ce se iau.  
("Importanța" 46)

Hygiene is the science that concerns itself with the preservation and improvement of our health. It follows that this science shows us what is good and what is bad for our body, and it gives us at the same time the edification necessary for maintaining our health. Studying the different causes of disease, hygiene shows how these causes can be removed, and thus our health can be maintained; studying the different means by which the body can be strengthened, hygiene shows the best ways for us to be stronger and healthier; and in this way, hygiene comes to fulfill entirely its mission, the preservation and improvement of our health.

This domain, hygiene, is one of the most important and most useful subjects that is studied in school, because it is only by knowing and applying the precepts of hygiene that we can prolong our life and keep ourselves healthy until its end. . . . Every passing day the importance of hygiene increases considerably because of new discoveries. Our health is less and less attacked because of hygienic measures that are taken.

Mentioning Hippocrates and Galen in the history of hygiene, Tzara writes that the history of hygiene, "[c]a orice știință . . . a trecut prin mai multe faze, faze de glorie și altele de decădere" (46) 'like any science . . . passed through many phases, phases of glory and others of debasement.' Christianity, he writes, stopped the progress of hygiene in medieval Europe because it "ocupându-se de suflet iar nu de corp" 'concerned itself with the soul but not the body, but then with the coming of "frumoasei perioade de înflorire a artelor și științelor - Renașterea - igiena începu iar sa înflorească" (47) 'the beautiful period of artistic and scientific flowering - the Renaissance - hygiene began to flower again.'<sup>12</sup> The essay then speaks of the more recent advances in hygiene and their application in Romania, information that Tzara mentions as having gotten from the textbook they used that year by a well-known hygiene reformer, Dr. Urechia. Tzara's later formulation, "la pensée se fait dans la bouche," could have been a reworking of Dr. Urechia's obsession with "flora noastră bucală" 'the flora of our oral cavity': "Aerul, apă și diferite alimente aduc în gura noastră o sumedenie de bacterii. Nu e deci de mirare că în gura, ca în saliva unui om, oricât de sănătos ar fi el, să găsim mii și mii de bacterii" (Urechia 29) 'Air, water, and different foods bring to our mouth a wealth of bacteria. It is no wonder that in the mouth and in saliva of any man, no matter how healthy, there are thousands upon thousands of bacteria. . . .')

By the end of the essay, Tzara launches a series of rhetorical questions that increasingly draws the modern reader into laughter:

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<sup>12</sup> Tzara returned to the Renaissance at the end of his life, in his studies of anagrams in Rabelais and Villon.

Bineînțeles, cui i se datorește acest bun lucru decât Igienei?

....

Cine se mai poate îndoi că am putea scăpa prin igienă de figuri tifoide, de moarte mai multe sute de oameni pe fiecare an?

....

Mai poate cineva nega marea importanță ce o prezintă Igiena? (47)

Of course, to what are these good things due but hygiene?

....

Who can still doubt that it is only through hygiene that we could eliminate typhoid, and avoid the death of many hundreds of people every year? (47)

....

Can anyone still deny the great importance that hygiene presents?

“Văzurăm importanța igienei” ‘Having seen the importance of hygiene,’ Tzara continues, “nu ne rămâne decât să ne ținem riguros de regulile ei” ‘nothing remains but rigorously keeping to its rules’:

“Omul nu moare, se omoară”, iar mie, eu care tratez despre Igienă, îmi veți da voie să adaug: da, într-adevăr se omoară, neobservând preceptele igienei. (47)

Man does not die, he kills himself” – yet in my mind, as I am writing about hygiene, please allow me to add: yes, truly man kills himself, but only when not following the precepts of hygiene.

This closing salvo of schoolboy logic today reads as ironic to the extreme; more importantly, it shows that one of the central themes and metaphors Tzara would use in Zurich Dada first germinated in Romania. But the essay young Samuel wrote was warmly received by his examiners; his grade in hygiene – an “8” out of “10” – was bettered that year only by his marks in German and music (SMAN 336: 861/1910).

After completing the four grades available at the Institute, Tzara enrolled in the prestigious private high school Dimitrie Cantemir for the academic year 1910-1911. The school archive does not have a record of Tzara’s curriculum or his marks that year, although one can surmise that he did not do very well since he stayed only one year. By the time Tzara began his sixth year of post-elementary-school education in 1911-1912, his family had moved down to Bucharest, no doubt to support their children’s education. Tzara enrolled at Sfântul (Sf.) Gheorghe [Saint George], a high school more popularly called “Gheorghe Lazăr” after one of Romania’s great pedagogical innovators of the nineteenth century. One of Bucharest’s most academically rigorous high schools, Tzara did not even complete his year at Sf. Gheorghe – there is no mention in the official registrar of his attendance for the final term, indicating that his father must have pulled the boy out to not throw good money after a hopeless cause, for it was clear that his son

would have to repeat the year. Samuel was failing three subjects – mathematics, physical sciences (physics and chemistry) and history. Given that Tzara was in the scientific track, failing both mathematics and physics was damning. He was barely managing a pass in natural sciences, and even in French his marks were just above passing. Exempted from the religion class, his best grades remained in modern foreign languages, of which students were required to take French and German and either English or Italian. No longer having to take Latin, Tzara excelled in German and English. His marks in French were quite poor, not much better than in Romanian, with marks of 7 and 6 (out of 10, with 5 as the lowest pass).<sup>13</sup> There was little excuse for such poor marks across the board: in both mathematics and physics, Tzara was innately talented, so it must have been a question of application. This may suggest that the small class size – ten students in his year – could have been a reason for his difficulties; in such a small class, the student-teacher dynamic is that much more determinative. There was a combustible mixture in play: Romanian teaching methods that most commentators from that period recall as heavy-handed, authoritarian and sometimes incompetently Ubuesque pitted against a naturally gifted student who was both stubborn and bored. Another explanation might be found in his family life. His parents had sent him down to Bucharest to live on his own, but now they had come to live there as well. For the boy who must have felt abandoned yet who had managed to secure a kind of independence, the adaptation required to live with overbearing parents once again must have rankled Tzara as he was on the cusp of manhood. As his grades started to flag, which must have resulted in his parents exhorting him to concentrate and meddling further by arranging private lessons, Tzara did the opposite: in this third and final term at Sf. Gheorghe, his marks in seven out of ten subjects failed to improve. This was hardly rebellion on grand terms – it would be another five years before Zurich Dada was launched, and another seven years until the “Manifeste Dada 1918” exploded the structural apparatus of bourgeois society – but it was a start.

## V.

The start of the European war in August 1914 did not interrupt Tzara’s schooling, as he enrolled in the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters at the University of Bucharest on 17 October 1914.<sup>14</sup> The university had expanded considerably since its founding in 1864, and by the time Tzara enrolled there were nearly 3,000

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<sup>13</sup> Serviciul Municipiului al Arhivelor Naționale, 43 (Liceul teoretic de băieți Sf. Gheorghe), 19/1911-1912.

<sup>14</sup> Serviciul Municipiului al Arhivelor Naționale, 1441 (Universitatea București, Faculty of Letters) [hereafter cited as SMAN 1441]: 139/1912-1914, f. 253.

students in six faculties (letters, science, law, medicine, pharmacy, and theology), with about 500 of those in the Faculty of Letters (“Statistica studenților”).

There is no record of the coursework Tzara took, and his name does not figure in the attendance sheets kept for that year or on the list of students in attendance for special seminars in philosophy, courses entitled “Despre fenomenele afective” (About Affective Phenomena) and “Durață și intensitatea sentimentului” (The Duration and Intensity of Sentiment).<sup>15</sup> But there were courses of interest that Tzara could have attended: Ovid Densusianu, the founder in 1905 of *Viața Nouă*, a literary review that was the major forum for Symbolism and French poetry in the country, held courses on French Symbolism (Densusianu 1: 176). Densusianu was a defender of *vers libre*, arguing that through it poets were able to “emancipându-se de tirania rimei” (1: 120) ‘emancipate themselves from the tyranny of rhyme,’ and according to Eugen Lovinescu, the preeminent literary critic of the period and also a faculty member at the time, Densusianu was the most strident supporter of new poetry in the country (*Istoria literaturii române contemporane* 1: 91). Constantin Rădulescu-Motru, who had written the first monograph on Nietzsche to appear anywhere in Europe, was on the philosophy faculty and was a literary figure of repute as the editor of the *Noua revistă română*, a journal that published some of Tzara’s poetry in 1915 (Afloroaei). Rădulescu-Motru’s January 1915 article “Războiul și cultura modernă” (War and Modern Culture) could well have appealed to Tzara: beginning with the principle that individual “personality” is the great achievement of modern culture, Rădulescu-Motru argues that war decimates everything civilization stands for:

Și nu numai principiul personalității se găsește în conflict cu războiul, dar multe alte principii cari se aflau de asemenea la baza culturii moderne. Principii de morală și de logică; principii de drept și de echitate internațională, fără a mai vorbi de acelea ale confortului, toate se știrbesc din cauza războiului! Iar în locul acestor principii, găsim practica barbariei și a minciunei, găsim distrugerea a tot ce era până aci respectat. (262)

And not only is the principle of personality in conflict with war, but so too are many other principles that are considered to be the basis of modern culture. The principles of morality and logic; principles of law and international justice, to say nothing of comfort; everything is diminished because of the war. Instead of these principles there is barbarism and deceit, the destruction of everything that has up to now been respected.

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<sup>15</sup> The attendance sheets are found in Serviciul Municipiului al Arhivelor Naționale, 1008 (Universitatea București, Rectorat), 5/1914.



Yet these two figures were otherwise isolated in a faculty that was parochial in its interests or openly anti-Semitic – the most decorated figure on the faculty was the history professor Nicolae Iorga, whose undisguised anti-Semitism was the subject of emulation among the student body (Ioanid). The student magazine, *Cuvântul studențimii* (The Students' Word), ran articles with titles like "Plutocrație și Jidovime" (Plutocracy and the Jews) and pleaded for the watchwords of politically engaged students to be "*dreptate, solidaritate, naționalitate*" 'justice, solidarity, nationality' – in other words, a realization that the state should be entirely "*Românului*" 'Romanian' and not in the hands of "jidanii" 'kikes' ("Să deschidem ochii!"). The other major student paper, *Viața studențească* (Student Life), reported on a March 1914 lecture by the president of the Society of Students in the Faculty of Letters, Paul Nicorescu (who later became a professor of archaeology at the University of Iași), where Nicorescu argued for linguistic purity in the country: "Conglomeratul de limbi într'un stat duce în mod sigur acel stat la o dezechilibrare a forțelor și mai târziu la peire"<sup>16</sup> 'The conglomeration of languages in a country inevitably leads that country to a disequilibrium of forces and eventually to destruction.' Given that in the Faculty of Letters which Tzara attended there were only twenty Jews out of a total of 500 students, it is quite clear that the university and its prevailing ethos marginalized Tzara.

And the one piece of archival evidence about Tzara's university career confirms that he was in many ways a marginal figure. In a formal letter signed 4 February 1915 by Samuel Rosenstock and Tamifil Popescu (but in Tzara's handwriting), the two students filed a formal complaint to the dean of the faculty:

In ziua de 23 ianuarie la seminarul de limba italiană al . . . profesorului Ramiro Ortiz, voind a ruga de dl profesor să mai repete un cuvânt pe care noi nu-l putusem reține am fost somați fără nici o explicație să părăsim sala. Surprinși de aceasta somație a dlui profesor, i-am cerut explicație, iar dl profesor drept răspuns ne-a aruncat cuvintele insultătoare de: măgari și obraznici.

On the date of 23 January at the Italian language seminar of . . . Professor Ramiro Ortiz, wishing to ask the professor to repeat a word that we could not hear, we were forced without any explanation to leave the room. Surprised by this request from the professor, we asked him to explain why, but the professor responded through insulting words like "donkeys" and "rowdy."

The students then note that "demnitatea noastră de student" 'our dignity as students' was offended and they requested that the dean ask the professor to "retragă cuvintele insultătoare la seminarul viitor" 'retract his insulting comments at the next seminar.' (SMAN 1441: 145/1913-1915, f.32).

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<sup>16</sup> *Viața studențească* 25 March 1914: 7.

There is no similar letter anywhere in the University of Bucharest archives; in many ways, the letter shows either a childish naïveté or was a deliberate provocation (but for what purpose?). Ramiro Ortiz had been teaching Italian language and literature at the University of Bucharest since 1909 and was named a professor in 1913 (*Omagiu lui Ramiro Ortiz*). With a doctorate from the University of Naples, Ortiz was a specialist in Renaissance literature whose first-year Italian seminar included grammar exercises, translations, but also – in the previous academic year – the reading of prose by Gabriele d’Annunzio (SMAN 1441: 144/1913-1914, f.51). If this might indicate a classical taste, Ortiz often wrote in literary journals about the political situation of Italy and literary developments in the country. While not an adherent of futurism, Ortiz certainly knew about it and contributed articles to the Romanian press about avant-garde reviews like *La Voce* and *Lacerba* (“Spre o nouă poezie”). In 1923 Ortiz noted that he saw in every student “un suflet frățesc” ‘a fraternal soul’ whose situation interested him and that seminars were the equivalent of “laboratorul” ‘laboratories’ in the humanities, where students are “în cea mai strânsă legătură sufletească, unde se formează acea atmosferă cordială și simpatică ce unești unii de alții . . . unde vedeți pe maestrul vostru la lucru” ‘in the closest spiritual bond, where that cordial and sympathetic atmosphere is created that unites everyone . . . where you see the maestro at work’ – but it was clear that a decade earlier young Tzara was not well-disposed towards the maestro’s methods (*Către studenți* 5, 9). There is no corroborating evidence of Tzara’s complaint, and if anything it backfired, as the Dean of the Faculty of Letters, linguist Ion Bogdan, marked up the letter with a note that seems to indicate that the two students were told to not spread false accusations (SMAN 1441: 145/1913-1915, f.32). Tzara’s position in the university was severely compromised. Several months later his parents sent him to Zurich, largely in order to keep young Samuel from being drafted (although neutral until 1916, it was rather clear that Romania would enter the conflict at some point), but also so that he could have a fresh start in his university studies.

## VI.

In a 1915 essay, literary critic Eugen Lovinescu bemoaned the cold, artificial cosmopolitanism that modernity had created:

Viața modernă cu ușurințele ei de legatură rapidă a creat o categorie de indivizi dezrădăcinați, fără patrie și fără naționalitate ... O astfel de viață dezrădăcinată a creat și o psihologie determinate în care individualul și etnicul tind să se șteargă. Viața modernă a creat de la sine o atmosferă de convenționalism, de politeță măsurată, de formule goale de înțeles, de artificialitate: e viața de salon. . . . Viața cosmopolită a mărit și mai mult această despersonalizare. Nu se mai întâlnesc acum doi oameni de aceeași clasa socială și de aceeași rasă, ci doi indivizi porniți din două puncte îndepărtate ale globului. Pentru a se înțelege încep prin a vorbi o

limbă streină, care, oricât ar fi de stapânită, rămâne totuși un mijloc rece și artificial de comunicație. ("Psihologia 'Exoticului'" 136-37)

Modern life, with its ease of communication, has created a category of deracinated individuals, without country and without nationality. . . . This kind of rootless life has also created a determinate psychology in which both the individual and ethnic belonging tend to be eliminated. Modern life has created inside itself an atmosphere of conventionalism, of polite proportion, of empty formulas without any interest, of artificiality: it is salon life. . . . Cosmopolitan life has extended even further this depersonalization. It is no longer the case that two people of the same social class or race meet each other, but rather two people who come from two different points of the globe. To understand each other they begin by speaking a foreign language, and no matter how well it is mastered, it remains a cold and artificial means of communication.

Zurich Dada was an attempt to prove Lovinescu wrong: in a Europe at war, it was only by moving beyond the claims of a particular individual or ethnic identity that a flourishing culture could thrive. Taking pride in being stateless, Dada moved beyond the conventionality of pre-war bourgeois internationalism by showing the emptiness of European artistic forms and the hollowness of the corresponding faith in progress and reason.

But if Tzara became one of those rootless cosmopolitans, it was largely due to his formal education, which made him proficient in foreign languages and the classics of European culture – even Huelsenbeck had to admit that Tzara "brachte aus Rumänien eine unbegrenzte literarische Versiertheit mit" ("brought with him from Rumania an unlimited literary facility").<sup>17</sup> His training in languages – in Romania he had studied English, French, German, Italian, and Latin – was also instrumentally valuable in terms of allowing him to correspond with artists across Europe but also influenced his aesthetics. His Romanian-language poem "Soră de caritate" ("Sister of Charity") takes its title from a Rimbaud poem of the same name, and other early poems have entire stanzas in French, showcasing how the educated bourgeoisie could easily shift from one language to another. His translations from Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself* were published in the December 1915 issue of *Versuri și proză* (Verse and Prose), and he worked on a series of poems inspired by *Hamlet* in Romania, which he later took up again in *Mouchoir de Nuages* (*Primele poeme* 92-98, 101; *Ceuvres complètes* 1: 341-45). He knew much more about contemporary Italian literature before arriving in Zurich than most critics have claimed (Lista 87). As a young poet, in other words, Tzara was fully convinced of the value of internationalism.

Although his education was comprehensive and in line with the great ambitions of classical humanism, Samuel Rosenstock had little interest in school.

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<sup>17</sup> *En avant Dada* 5 (p. 24 in the English translation).

His formal education was a lesson in the gap between appearances and reality. A series of restrictions were imposed upon him from an early age via formal education: exclusion from the public sphere, dislocation from the home, and ideologically charged instruction in the glories of the Romanian nation. It was perhaps outside the classroom that Tzara truly learned most: his extensive reading of French symbolist poetry, the books, like Apollinaire's *Alcools*, that his friend Ion Vinea passed on to him when serving as literary editor of *Facla*, and the experience of editing a magazine, *Simbolul*, that attracted some of the major figures in modern Romanian poetry.

Yet this reading could not have happened without the great emphasis placed upon language acquisition in Romanian schools. The other great impact of Tzara's immersion in the Romanian educational sphere was the obvious importance that formal models had within the country as part of a larger *mission civilisatrice*. There was a deeply-held belief that a national culture could only be drawn from literature and printed books; the incredible cultural importance of literature in Romania was the inverse of its actual presence in the country. Tzara felt the special mission given to literature as both a tool to educate the people as well as a means by which a culture could be given esteem and respect: "My heart soars: I read a learned book," he writes ironically in one of his early poems ("Sister of Charity"). Even if it was laughable to the young poet, it was inescapable: literature and criticism were not just passive reflections of society but were felt to be active agents of social change (Bădescu). The disconnect between the classical culture taught at school and the reality of exclusion from the public sphere because of one's birth, a bloody peasant revolt, or a continent at war showed the limits of literature. Yet the intimate connection between literature and a larger society and politics was not, in Romania, an academic question but a palpable reality; aesthetic forms were not autonomous creations but rather embodied social prejudices and political agendas, a lesson young Samuel Rosenstock learned throughout his various school episodes. Art could not be severed from society and life but had to be part of life itself.

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