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# *Schliesslich ... Don't forget.* Richard Huelsenbeck, Cultural Memory, and the Genericity of (Dada) Historiography<sup>(1)</sup>

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It is astonishing to observe how an outright questionable historical account on occasion successfully manages to leave its mark on cultural memory<sup>(2)</sup>. Richard Huelsenbeck (1892-1974), with his autonymous *rapports* of the history of Dadaism, may well provide one of the most extreme examples of such an account. Huelsenbeck's role in Dada hardly requires an introduction. He was a central figure in the Cabaret Voltaire from February 1916 to January 1917. Famously, upon his arrival in Zurich, Hugo Ball noted in his diary: "Huelsenbeck has arrived. He pleads for an intensification of rhythm (Negro Rhythm). He would best love to drum literature into the ground<sup>(3)</sup>." Huelsenbeck's name is also inextricably tied to the Berlin outgrowth of Dada, which lasted until the early 1920s. The *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, in April 1919, called him the

(1) The author would like to thank Hubert VAN DEN BERG for his critical remarks and feedback while preparing this contribution.

(2) "Cultural memory", and its study "mnemohistory" (that is, "reception theory applied to history"), are terms which originated from the archeologist Jan Assmann. (Jan ASSMANN, "Kollektives Gedächtnis und Kulturelle Identität", in J. ASSMANN en T. HÖLSCHER, eds., *Kultur und Gedächtnis*, Frankfurt/M., Suhrkamp, 1988, p. 9-19; Jan ASSMANN, *Moses the Egyptian. The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1997. Quote is from p. 9 in the latter.) Historiography is one of several factors shaping cultural memory. Cultural historians, inspired by Assmann's anthropological approach, agree today that historiography is not about giving testimony of past events as accurately and truthful as possible, but about a meaningful interpretation of the past in a given cultural present, meaningful for the historian as well as his audience. (See, amongst others: Jonathan FRIEDMAN, "The Past in the Future: History and the Politics of Identity" in *American Anthropologist*, 4, 1992, p. 853-856; Lutz NIETHAMMER, "Die Postmoderne Herausforderung: Geschichte als Gedächtnis im Zeitalter der Wissenschaft", in W. KÜTTLER, J. RÜSEN & E. SCHULIN, eds., *Geschichtsdiskurs*, vol. 1: *Grundlagen und Methoden der Historiographieggeschichte*, Frankfurt/M, Fischer, 1993, p. 31-49). This paper zooms in on the reception of Dada in literary and cultural historiography, in an attempt to redirect Dada research in a meaningful way.

(3) Hugo BALL, *Flight Out of Time: A Dada Diary*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1996, edited by John ELDERFIELD and translated by Ann RAIMES, 274 p. (Vol. in the Documents of Twentieth Century Art Series). Note that in subsequent citations as well reference will be made to English translations. Where a translation was not available, quotations were translated by my own hand. Titles have been left in the original.

“leader of the Dadaist movement in Germany,” and the *Berliner Volkszeitung*, in December 1919, referred to “Huelsenbeck and his companions<sup>(4)</sup>.” As a key-player in Dada, Huelsenbeck published two collections of Dada poems in 1916 (*Schalaben, Schalabai, Schalamezomai* and *Phantastischen Gebete* – the latter was revised and expanded in 1920), two Dada novellas in 1918 (*Verwandlungen* and *Azteken oder die Knallbude*), a Dada novel (*Doktor Bilig am Ende*, 1920), and a significant number of articles, pamphlets and poems in avant-garde periodicals which disseminated the Dada spirit. More than a Dada writer, however, Huelsenbeck is remembered today as a *chroniqueur* of the avant-garde movement, because he was also the author of a large body of historical and autobiographic reflections on Dada, of which I can only mention some here. During the relatively brief period between Dada’s conception (in 1916) in Zurich and its demise in Berlin (in the early 1920s), Huelsenbeck published *En avant dada. Die Geschichte des Dadaismus* and *Dada siegt! Eine Bilanz des Dadaismus* (1920), and edited the renowned miscellany *Dada Almanach* (1920). These volumes were subsequently reprinted (often more than once) and translated into various languages. After World War II and after his move to the United States, Huelsenbeck published his memoirs, *Mit Witz, Licht und Grütze. Auf den Spuren des Dadaismus* (1957), later translated as *Memoirs of a Dada Drummer* (1991). In 1964, he also composed a second anthology entitled *Dada. Eine literarische Dokumentation*<sup>(5)</sup>.

To this day, Huelsenbeck’s various “documentary” accounts continue to shape scholarly assessments of Dada. Patches from his accounts, for instance, are occasionally still uncritically reproduced in more recent anthologies, we will see. A close reading of his chronicles reveals, however, that they are shot through with inconsistency. Many historians of the Dada movement appear to welcome this inconsistency as a sign of contradiction. According to Michel Sanouillet, for example, a scholarly interest in Dada is bound to end up in aporia, since Dada “escapes definition (... and) is the essence of contradiction<sup>(6)</sup>.” For Sanouillet, Dada, and its history with it, always escape critical domestication. For Greil Marcus, writing Dada history even resembles the practice of dreaming. “Choosing among versions,” he contends, “one has to make the story up<sup>(7)</sup>.” This paper questions the mystery Dada continues to be veiled in, by a close reading of Huelsenbeck’s accounts. This close reading will highlight some of the mechanisms operative in his chronicles. To bring out these mechanisms, I shall begin with laying bare a number of institutional *enjeux* that fostered Huelsenbeck’s writings. Such an institutional framing will reveal that Huelsenbeck engaged in Dada chronicling for at least two reasons. First,

(4) Quoted in Karin FÜLLNER, *Richard Huelsenbeck. Texte und Aktionen eines Dadaisten*, Heidelberg, Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1983, p. 157, my translation.

(5) For a more exhaustive bibliography of Huelsenbeck, see: Richard SHEPPARD e.a., *Richard Huelsenbeck*, Hamburg, Hans Christian Verlag, 1982 (Hamburger Bibliographien, Band 22).

(6) Michel SANOUILLET, “Dada: A Definition”, in Stephen C. FOSTER & Rudolf KUENZLI, eds., *Dada Spectrum: The Dialectics of Revolt*, Madison (Wi), Coda Press, 1979, p. 15-27. Here p. 26.

(7) Greil MARCUS, *Lipstick Traces. A Secret History of the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1989, p. 218.

his chronicles contributed to the consolidation of his own role in Dada. They served as a strategy for reputation building within the public sphere, a strategy that would not hear of any moral or ethical principle and was not concerned with veracity. Second, Huelsenbeck's accounts functioned as a confirmation of a number of popular, though inaccurate *idées reçues* on Dada, some of which prevail to this day in cultural memory. His writings consequently figure(d) as a mode of marketing the Dada movement as he circumscribed it. These two institutional aspects, we will see, ultimately draw attention to the genericity of his "historiography." For it will become rather apparent that his chronicles are very unreliable as historical accounts. Reading Huelsenbeck's *auto-historiography* as a genre in its own right will illustrate what textual devices mask (as well as foreground) its unreliability.

It is curious to observe that a genological study of histories of the avant-garde, written by prominent avant-garde authors, has not been performed in avant-garde studies so far, since it is widely recognised in the discipline that many other forms of writing, most notably the manifesto, are elevated to the status of a literary genre in the avant-garde<sup>(8)</sup>. Historical narratives are, moreover, legion in the so-called "historical avant-garde" (which, among others, also comprises the movements of Futurism, Expressionism and Surrealism) – we should but think of the numerous retrospective reports by other Dadaists, the memoirs of the Futurist F.T. Marinetti and the various Surrealist look backs. By exposing a number of recurrent properties of Huelsenbeck's accounts, this article thus provides the basis for a more encompassing, comparative enquiry of the genericity of the avant-garde's *auto-historiography*.

### A Historiography Beyond Value: The Allocation of Public Authority

The September 1922 issue of the Surrealist review *Littérature* contains an article entitled "En avant", written by one Raoul Huelsenbeck<sup>(9)</sup>. Not the German Dadaist Raoul Hausmann but his colleague Richard Huelsenbeck wrote the piece, and the somewhat clumsy conflation of names appears to be an editorial error<sup>(10)</sup>. Anyone familiar with Huelsenbeck's writings immediately observes the text is of his hand. It is a free translation of passages from his *En avant dada. Die Geschichte des Dadaismus* (1920), Huelsenbeck's most lengthy discussion of Dada's history. Tellingly, the French translation lifts a

(8) See especially Wolfgang ASHOLT & Walter FÄHNERS, eds., "*Die ganze Welt ist eine Manifestation*". *Die europäische Avantgarde und ihre Manifeste*, Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1997, 328 p.

(9) Raoul [Richard] HUELSENBECK, "En Avant" in *Littérature*, 1922, nr. 4 (New Series), p. 19-22.

(10) "En avant" is a near literal translation of pages 10-14 and pages 18-20 of Richard HUELSENBECK, *En Avant Dada. Die Geschichte des Dadaismus*, Hannover-Leipzig, Paul Steegemann Verlag, 1920. Remarkably, this translation is mentioned neither in the bibliography of Huelsenbeck's writings edited by Richard SHEPPARD et al. (*op. cit.*), nor the "Bibliographie", composed by Herbert KAPFER and Lisbeth EXNER, in *Idem, Weltdada Huelsenbeck. Eine Biografie in Briefen und Bildern*, Innsbruck, Haymon, 1996. I should like to thank Hubert Van den Berg for pointing this out to me.

paragraph from the German volume at its opening, which commences with the sentence: "To make literature with a gun in hand, had for a time, been my dream<sup>(11)</sup>." Indeed, like other chronicles of Huelsenbeck, *En avant dada* reads as a bullet fired from a handgun, aggressively seeking out not only the bourgeois philistine but fellow Dadaists as well. It is no coincidence, for instance, that passages of the volume figured in translation in the Surrealist periodical *Littérature*, in the same year André Breton, in Paris, definitively put aside Tristan Tzara (who had left Zurich for Paris, where he became a leading figure in French Dada) to make room for Surrealism. *En avant dada*, too, displays a dislike for Tzara. It refers, for example, to what is perhaps the most notorious altercation in the history of literary modernism: the debate between Tzara and Huelsenbeck on the origin of the word "Dada". As is well known, both Huelsenbeck (in Berlin) and Tzara (in Paris) claimed to have come up with it. Both called upon testimonials to substantiate their statements, and neither ever mentioned that a shop in the vicinity of the Cabaret Voltaire had been selling "'Dada' haarstärkendes Kopfwasser" since 1913<sup>(12)</sup>. Equally well known is Breton's (mis)use of this dispute in his polemical essay "Après Dada", which was published a few months before Huelsenbeck's "En avant", and which threatened Tzara with making public a number of letters by Huelsenbeck that allegedly proved Tzara was not the originator of the word "Dada" and thus had not played the pivotal role in Zurich he ascribed to himself<sup>(13)</sup>. Silly as this debate may look today, the French translation of patches of *En avant dada* was thus clearly intended to consolidate the fall of Tzara from the Paris avant-garde scene, so as to make way for Surrealism.

In brief, "En avant" contributed to a redistribution of power within the historical avant-garde, not, incidentally, just in Paris, for the translation allocated Huelsenbeck, then operating from Germany, with a more international authority on the matter of Dada as well. The article thereby reiterated the authoritative status Huelsenbeck had previously attributed to himself in *En avant dada*.



Afb. 1: Foto van Richard Huelsenbeck en Raoul Hausmann in Dada Almanach (Berlijn 1920)

(11) See the English translation "En Avant Dada: A History of Dadaism" by Ralph Manheim, in Robert MOTHERWELL, ed., *The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1986 [1951], p. 21-47. This passage is found on p. 28.

(12) See Greil MARCUS, *Lipstick Traces*, op. cit., p. 209, for a reproduction of an advertisement of this shampoo.

(13) For an extensive account of these events, see: Michel SANOUILLET, *Dada à Paris*, Paris, Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1965, chapitre XX, p. 319-347.

Notoriously, the volume argues that Tzara understood nothing of Dada's nature. It blames him for drawing Dada nearer to Expressionism, for limiting the movement to a purely (abstract) artistic phenomenon, and for commercialising it in the *Galérie Dada*. Against Tzara, it promotes a maximalist conception of Dada, which equates Dada with a *Weltanschauung*, with a collage of life in all its grotesque glory, "a mirror which one quickly passes by"<sup>(14)</sup>. Importantly, Huelsenbeck thus announced that the history of Dada would equal that of life. The chronicle does not fail to accentuate Huelsenbeck's personal role in all this. Only at the end of its extensive exposition on Berlin Dada, where true Dada was invented, does it mention Georg Grosz, John Heartfield, Wieland Herzfelde, Walter Mehring "and a certain Baader"<sup>(15)</sup>.

A look at Huelsenbeck's correspondence with Tzara of the same period brings out just how ambiguous he was in his self-promotion. In stark contrast to his public stabs at Tzara, his private correspondence with the Rumanian émigré suggests that both had a friendly relationship. Before the publication of *En avant dada*, they addressed and saluted each other as friends, and even after the publication of *En avant dada* and its partial French translation, Huelsenbeck sought contact with Tzara, as the following letter exemplifies:

Dear Tristan Tzara

[...] Arp told me you are very angry with me because of my attacks on you in my book 'en avant dada.' I had been convinced you would be broad-minded enough to remain my friend despite such attacks. [...] I assure you that they were neither ill-intended nor hostile. You should not make more of them than a playfull pleasure to create a brawl. After all, I would be the last to contradict your significant role in Dadaism. You were undoubtedly the first person outside of Germany to make the world understand what "Dada" actually means and what "Dada" wants. [...]

Hence, I greet you wholeheartedly  
Your old  
Huelsenbeck<sup>(16)</sup>.

Tzara's reply has not yet surfaced, but in a subsequent letter to Tzara, Huelsenbeck writes in crooked, near untranslatable French: 'Je te remercie beaucoup de ta lettre. Ell m'a fait de plaisir. Surtout, parce-que je vois, que te ne gronde plus a cause du Dadaisme. Encore une fois je t'assure, que je n'ai jamais oublié, que nous étions des amis. C'était seulement une espece de Boxing. ... Et ce n'est pas possible, que nous faisions quelquechose ensemble – quelquechose de grand ca va sans dire. Hein<sup>(17)</sup>?' Huelsenbeck's correspondence thus reveals that "Dada," as an equivalent of "life," is to be understood in

(14) Robert MOTHERWELL, *The Dada Painters, op. cit.*, p. 32.

(15) *Ibidem*, p. 45.

(16) Herbert KAPFER & Lisbeth EXNER, *Weltdada Huelsenbeck, op. cit.*, p. 87, my translation.

(17) *Ibidem*, p. 88. For obvious reasons, I chose not to translate this passage.

a very specific way, namely as “public life.” His correspondence rigidly differentiates between, on the one hand, a public sphere, a grotesque Cravonian boxing ring in which no pre-fixed moral or other code applies, and, on the other hand, a private sphere in which authors co-exist in amicability and trust.

Conspicuously, Huelsenbeck also inscribed his rigid differentiation between public and private life in his practice as a Dada chronicler. *En avant dada*, again, proves highly informative on this matter. In the volume, Huelsenbeck argues that Dada had little meaning in private life, and that it was not this part of existence Dada wished to reflect. Private concerns, after all, had been the subject of art all too long. Instead, what Dada aspired to mirror was public life, which is always in the making, fluid, indeterminate. Public life, according to Huelsenbeck, is also intrinsically amoral, in that it entails all moral and ethical angles simultaneously. A mirror of life, Dada was therefore to be equally amoral. Furthermore, life incites the Dadaist to “judge each case for itself<sup>(18)</sup>.” From this, it follows that Dada, as the acme of singularity and irrepeatability, can have no fixed teleological history. It is constantly in the making. Even after Dada’s eclipse in Berlin, Huelsenbeck contended, for instance, that Dada mirrored events it did not even witness. In 1936, he claimed that Dada (still) lived, “intimately connected with the events that are shaking the world today<sup>(19)</sup>.” Whoever looks at Dada at whatever point in time thus witnesses life. As long as there is life, there is Dada. Dada cannot be terminated nor fixed. Yet precisely the representation, the permanent registration of Dada’s history was one of Huelsenbeck’s favourite subjects. That this choice of subject was anything but innocent must be clear by now. What has perhaps not been highlighted enough so far, however, is that Huelsenbeck was extremely consistent with his assertion that Dada history is in essence always in the making, and, consequently, that, in historiography as well, Dada could change face overnight. Huelsenbeck, it seems, occasionally suffered from (not so) mild forms of memory loss. He was not afflicted with dementia, though. His apparent forgetfulness was always articulated with an institutional *enjeu*.

### **Beyond Fact: Revisionism Shaping Cultural Memory**

Already in 1918, with the publication of his novella *Azteken oder die Knallbude*, Huelsenbeck warned scholars that he was not to be trusted when it came to remembering dates, places and faces. It is unknown when precisely he wrote *Azteken*, but the back of its original title page explicitly mentions that “This novella was written in the Summer of 1912<sup>(20)</sup>.” Karin Füllner observes that the jubilee of the officers’ corps, a pivotal scene in the novellette’s plot, clearly echoes the twenty-fifth jubilee of Kaiser Wilhelm II’s government in 1913. Füllner also points at the occurrence of Berlin dialect in dialogues. Given the

(18) Robert MOTHERWELL, *The Dada Painters*, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

(19) Richard HUELSENBECK, “Dada Lives”, in *Transition*, nr. 25, Fall 1936, p. 77-80; also reproduced in MOTHERWELL, *op. cit.*, p. 279-281. Here p. 280.

(20) Richard HUELSENBECK, *Azteken oder die Knallbude*, Berlin, Verlag Reuss & Polack, 1918, my translation.

fact that Huelsenbeck never visited Berlin before 1914, it is more than likely that this *couleur locale* was introduced long after 1912<sup>(21)</sup>. The casual antedating of *Azteken* thus foreshadowed his rather dubious status as a chronicler. Antedating typescripts was, of course, not entirely uncommon at the time. Many Expressionists did so as well. Armin Arnold: "By doing so the author apologised for the fact that his book fitted so badly in the new *Zeitgeist*"<sup>(22)</sup>. Yet the antedating of *Azteken*, it appears, was meant as an apology for a very specific matter. In all likelihood, it was provoked by Huelsenbeck's fear of being labelled an Expressionist. The trouble with this label, from his perspective, was that (his) Dada fiercely rallied against Expressionism, in particular against the latter's voluntarist and ameliorist aspirations since they testified to a moralist stance. Yet Huelsenbeck, it seems, experienced difficulty in deciding which aesthetic features made his novella Dada, and what set it apart from Expressionism, other than its more deterministic worldview. The novella's plot, for example, clearly resembles that of Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck*. Naturally, it is by no means my intention here to question the novella's historical value, nor do I claim that it is impossible to distinguish Dada writings from those of Expressionism.<sup>(23)</sup> What I should like to stress instead is that Huelsenbeck had difficulties in making such a distinction on a purely literary or aesthetic level. The antedating of *Azteken* thereby also prefigures his re-definition of Dada (against Tzara) as an essentially anti-aesthetic movement.

Huelsenbeck's problem with differentiating Dada literature from that of other avant-garde movements' writings would prevail well into the 1930s. In 1936, for instance, he still asserted that "Dada as an artistic direction in ...

(21) Karin FÜLLNER, *Richard Huelsenbeck*, *op. cit.*, p. 207 and 214, Compare to Herbert KAPFER, "Nachwort", in Richard HUELSENBECK, *Azteken oder die Knallbude*, Giessen, Anabas Verlag, 1992, p. 48-56.

(22) Armin ARNOLD, *Prosa des Expressionismus. Herkunft, Analyse, Inventar*, Stuttgart, W. Kohlhammer, 1972, p. 6, my translation.

(23) Note that Huelsenbeck is not alone in having difficulty to circumscribe the precise aesthetic nature of Dada, though. *Verwandlungen*, Huelsenbeck's other novella from the same year, for instance, figures prominently in Eckhard Philipp's *Dadaismus* (1980) as well as in Karl Otten's classic anthology *Meistererzählungen des Expressionismus* (1963). It is thus canonised as Dadaist and Expressionist. His only Dada novel, *Doktor Billig am Ende*, has often been called Expressionist as well. Kurt Wolff, who released the novel in 1920, called it a "nicht-dadaistische Erzählung". Karl Riha compared it to Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. Hermann Hesse, in turn, called it "gar nicht dadaistisch" and praised Huelsenbeck's highly individual, expressive style. In addition, Huelsenbeck's Dada poetry displays affinities with Expressionism as well, according to Richard Sheppard and Clemens Heselhaus. (Reference matter: Karl OTTEN, ed., *Ego und Eros. Meistererzählungen des Expressionismus*, Stuttgart, Goverts, 1963, p. 372-416; Eckhard PHILIPP, *Dadaismus. Einführung in den literarischen Dadaismus und die Wortkunst des 'Sturm'-Kreises*, München, Fink, 1980, p. 220-233; Kurt WOLFF, *Autoren, Bücher, Abenteuer. Betrachtungen und Erinnerungen eines Verlegers*, Berlin, Klaus Wagenbach, 1965, p. 21; Karl RIHA, "Nachwort", in Richard HUELSENBECK, *Doktor Billig am Ende*, Frankfurt/Main, (1977 Reprint), p. 177; Hermann HESSE, "Doktor Billig am Ende", in *Vivos voco*, March 1921-June 1922 issue, p. 420-421; Clemens HESELHAUS, *Deutsche Lyrik der Moderne*, Düsseldorf, A. Bagel, 1961, p. 300. For a more exhaustive overview of Expressionism's influence on Huelsenbeck's poetry, consult Richard SHEPPARD, *Modernism – Dada – Postmodernism*, Evanston, Illinois, Northwestern University Press, 2000, p. 236-265).



literature could never be accurately defined<sup>(24)</sup>." Yet he did not always adhere to Dada's aesthetic indeterminacy. Ironically, this is best illustrated by two of the most marked cases of revisionism in the history of twentieth century literature. After World War II, Huelsenbeck revealed himself a master in rewriting his own histories. This can be brought to light by a comparison of his "Erste Dadarede in Deutschland, gehalten von R. Huelsenbeck im Februar 1918 (Saal der Neuen Sezession. I.B. Neumann)", which was published in his 1920 *Dada-Almanach*, to the same (though remarkably shorter) lecture, given a slightly altered title ("Dadarede, gehalten in der Galerie Neumann, Berlin, Kurfürstendam, am 18. Februar 1918") in his 1964 anthology *Dada*. The second version is followed by the curious acknowledgement "Typewriter manuscript. With the author's consent<sup>(25)</sup>." We can only wonder how Huelsenbeck could have taken up this document in his *own* anthology otherwise<sup>(26)</sup>. Astonishingly, the 1964 edition fails to mention any of the positive and constructive aspects of Dada's zeal that are adamantly underlined in the 1920 version of the text. Whereas in the 1920 version it holds that "Dada wants to be the forefront of the great international art movements,"<sup>(27)</sup> forty years later Huelsenbeck suddenly has it that "Dada was nothing, it wanted nothing<sup>(28)</sup>." In short, it was pure negation. A similar re-writing is encountered in his "Erklärung, vorgetragen im Cabaret Voltaire, im Frühjahr 1916", which is also included in his 1964 anthology. From a comparison of the latter with a press release Huelsenbeck wrote in 1916 to announce his Erklärung – the original speech has been lost, yet the release explicitly describes Dada as a constructive "new and great Art"<sup>(29)</sup> – we may deduce that Huelsenbeck plainly retyped his statement in the early 1960s, since the later version does not mention anything about Dada's purely artistic zeal. Dada, for Huelsenbeck, was thus by no means anti-aesthetic from the start. Before 1920, and thus before his definition of Dada as an anti-art, it appears he discerned in the movement a distinct (though ill-defined) artistic project. This highlights "Dada" is not a fixed concept in his writings, but a fluid signifier constantly adjusting itself to redefinition. It is also noteworthy that after World War II he substituted Dada's constructive (albeit now anti-aesthetic) endeavour of mirroring public life in all its grotesque grandeur by a Dada that wanted nothing and propagated absolute nihilism. One explanation for this revision is that Huelsenbeck, after World War II, became a fervent existentialist. Personal and private concerns thereby came to the fore again in

(24) MOTHERWELL, *The Dada Painters*, op. cit. p. 281.

(25) Richard HUELSENBECK, ed., *Dada. Eine literarische Dokumentation*, Reinbek bei Hamburg, Rowohlt, 1964, p. 299, my translation.

(26) The same question has been posed by Hubert VAN DEN BERG, *Avantgarde und Anarchismus. Dada in Zürich und Berlin*, Heidelberg, Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1999, p. 440.

(27) Richard HUELSENBECK, ed., *Dada-Almanach. Im Auftrag des Zentralamts der deutschen Dada-Bewegung*, Hamburg, Nautilus, 1987 [1920], p. 108, my translation.

(28) Richard HUELSENBECK, ed., *Dada. Eine literarische, op. cit.*, my translation.

(29) For the press release, see Richard SHEPPARD, ed., *New Studies in Dada. Essays and Documents*, London, Hutton, 1981, p. 98-99; and Raoul SCHROTT, ed., *Dada 15-25: post scriptum oder die himmlischen Abenteuer des Hrn Tristan Tzara*, Innsbruck, Haymon, 1992, p. 61.

his thinking. Hence, Dada, as a mirror of life, readjusted itself to become the equivalent of private life as well.

Despite the very unstable nature of Dada in Huelsenbeck's historical accounts, Huelsenbeck regularly makes his readers complicit in rewriting Dada history. Many scholars still treat his *Dada* miscellany of 1964 as authoritative, for example, since quite a few recent anthologies reproduce its two revised speeches<sup>(30)</sup>. It is not so difficult to see, then, where the popular conviction that Dada amounted to absolute negation (in part) stems from. Nor is it difficult to see why some scholars have it that "technically, Dada used *any* 'artistic' method to get its message across<sup>(31)</sup>." Huelsenbeck subtly managed to confirm some other popular *idées reçues* on Dada as well. It is interesting to learn, for instance, that he chose not to translate any passage from *En avant dada* for *Littérature* in 1922, which referred to Zurich Dada as a unique response to the Great War. *En avant dada* deals with this *in extenso* by describing how all performers at the Cabaret Voltaire had fled the monstrosity of war in various countries. In all likelihood, Huelsenbeck was silent about Dada's antimilitarism, because otherwise he could have elicited a counterattack by Tzara from Paris. Huelsenbeck, in fact, did not flee the war; he frequently returned to Germany to further his study as a physician and in the course of 1917 even worked as a field doctor in the German army. In publications after World War II, Huelsenbeck understated this. Instead, he contributed to the popular conviction that Dada in Zurich was one of the most dramatic cultural outcomes of the Great War's devastation.

In sum, Huelsenbeck's chronicles were not concerned with what actually happened. Rather, they were meant to function like bullets, as texts affecting history and its readers. (Literary) history, for Huelsenbeck, was part of a public, carnivalesque boxing match. History therefore was not a matter of some bookish meta-récit professed by litterati. If a writer wished to partake in history, he was to re-enact in his work the ongoing battle in the streets, with a total disregard for moral or ethical concerns. For Huelsenbeck, then, not the description of events, of Dada exploits, but the triggering of events, the production of (Dada) history, was the very objective of his chronicling practice. Ultimately, he thereby puts into question the nature of his "historiographic" texts, since we can only wonder how they proved this successful in shaping history.

(30) In Karl RIHA & Waltraud WENDE-HOHENBERGER, eds., *Dada Zürich. Texte, Manifeste, Dokumente*, Stuttgart, Philipp Reclam, 2002, p. 29; Hermann KORTE, *Die Dadaïsten*, Reinbek, Rowohlt, 1994, p. 37, 59; Wolfgang ASHOLT & Walter FÄHNDEES, eds., *Manifeste und Proklamationen der europäischen Avantgarde*, Stuttgart/Weimar, J.B. Metzler, 1995, p. 139-40.

(31) Herbert KNUST, 'Geroge Grosz: Literature and Caricature', in *Comparative Literature Studies*, XII, nr. 3, 1975, p. 218-241. Here p. 227.

### ***Auto-historiography: A Question of Genre?***

In *Critique of Cynical Reason* (1983), Peter Sloterdijk contends that “we must first gain experience with ironical-polemical ways of speaking in order to comprehend Richard Huelsenbeck [...]: He was trying out the [...] art of declaring oneself, in an ironic, dirty way, to be in agreement with the worst possible things [...] beyond good and evil<sup>(32)</sup>.” Morally, Sloterdijk argues, we will most likely never come to terms with Huelsenbeck, but that does not entail we cannot learn anything from him. Irony is of the essence in Huelsenbeck, according to Sloterdijk. *En avant dada*, indeed, foregrounds the importance of irony when it states: “Where have these gentlemen who are so eager to appear in the history of literature left their irony? Where is the eye that weeps and laughs at the gigantic rump and carnival of this world<sup>(33)</sup>?” Not all scholars appreciate Huelsenbeck’s irony. His differentiation between the public and the private, his astute ability to regard people simultaneously as public fiends and private friends, for some scholars, suggests he was a shrewd opportunist whose actual contributions to Dada have been blatantly overestimated<sup>(34)</sup>. For others, his awareness of the fact that events can have different repercussions in the public and the private sphere makes him the prototype of counter-hegemonic figures ranging from Guy Debord to Johnny Rotten<sup>(35)</sup>. Whatever the significance of such value-laden debates might be, they prove that scholars are at least becoming aware of the irony in Huelsenbeck, and of the untrustworthy if not shady character of his accounts. Nevertheless, it is surprising to observe that little effort has gone into a closer reading of his accounts, a reading geared at laying bare what characteristics in them made scholars in the past relatively blind to their irony<sup>(36)</sup>.

Once we embark on a close reading of his “historiographies”, the question of genre comes in. In *Palimpsestes*, Gérard Genette posits that genres cannot be parodied, they can only be imitated.<sup>(37)</sup> In the same vein, Jonathan Culler states that genres must be compared to scientific paradigms making

(32) Peter SLOTERDIJK, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, Michael Eldred (trans.), Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, [1983]1988, p. 392.

(33) Robert MOTHERWELL, *The Dada Painters*, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

(34) Andréi B. NAKOV, “Dada ist eine Geisteshaltung”, in Eva ZÜCHNER, ed., *Der Deutsche Spiesser ärgert sich. Raoul Hausmann 1886-1971*, Ostfildern, Hatje, 1994, p. 33-54. Here p. 50.

(35) Greil MARCUS, *Lipstick Traces*, *op. cit.*, p. 218.

(36) That many scholars in the past took his accounts for more or less reliable eyewitness reports, can in part be explained by their desire to become “insiders” to Dada, to actively revive its exploits by viewing them “through the lens of the movement’s own philosophy.” (Berret E. STRONG, *The Poetic Avant-Garde. The Groups of Borges, Auden, and Breton*, Evanston, Illinois, Northwestern University Press, 1997, p. 256). Yet precisely this ambition short-circuits when we try to view Dada through the lens of Huelsenbeck’s philosophy. Dada, as we saw, is always. From this it follows that one specific vantage point from which its exploits could be viewed in an authentic manner is lacking. Whether cultural historians of Dada like it or not, they are thus always outsiders, in the present, shaping cultural memory.

(37) Gérard GENETTE, *Palimpsestes: La littérature au second degré*, Paris, Seuil, 1982, p. 91-92.

(past) experiences valid and significant.<sup>(38)</sup> In line with Tzvetan Todorov, literary sociologist Bart Keunen furthermore argues that genres must be regarded as institutions in their own right, which not only follow certain horizons of expectation and models of writing, but also create and produce such expectations with readers in the public sphere.<sup>(39)</sup> Indeed, as we saw, an institutional framing of Huelsenbeck's accounts reveals that they are untrustworthy when it comes to facts, yet nevertheless they manage(d) to produce the authority allocated to eyewitness reports. Ultimately, then, it may prove useful to look at his "historiography" as a genre, which could be labelled *auto-historiography*. In what remains I would like to isolate of number of factors producing the genre's authoritative effect as well as some aspects which, on closer inspection, put this authority into question. Evidently, given the limited scope of this paper, I can only highlight some characteristics of his "historiographies". The findings I will present here result from a close reading of Huelsenbeck's autonymous "Geschichte", such as *En avant Dada* and *Dada siegt!*, and of the (introductions to) his anthologies, which always briefly sketch the history of Dada as well.

First, and most obviously, most accounts of Dada by Huelsenbeck's hand are first person narratives. Second, they usually open in a very thetic, impersonal manner, defining Dada in either of three ways: by summing up facts (*En avant Dada*, for instance, dryly begins with "Dada was founded in the spring of 1916 ...<sup>(40)</sup>"); by way of a sophism (*Dada siegt!* opens with "Dada has no beginning, at least not in the way one begins to build a house or begins to write a book<sup>(41)</sup>."); or by a combination of both (his introduction to the *Dada Almanach* commences: "One must be Dadaist enough to put one's own Dadaism in opposition to a dadaist statement. There are mountains and lakes, houses, plumbing and tramways<sup>(42)</sup>.") Third, like the manifesto, Huelsenbeck's chronicles always create oppositions between Dadaists and non-Dadaists as well as among Dadaists themselves. This way, his chronicles are articulated with disputes on poetics elsewhere. Fourth, Huelsenbeck nearly always reproduces other texts predating his accounts. This anthologising technique is, naturally, most obvious in his Dada miscellanea. Yet *En avant Dada*, too, includes a manifesto, "What is Dadaism and what does it want in Germany?", written by Huelsenbeck and Haussmann and previously published in the review *Der Dada*. (The manifesto thus forms a sub-genre in his auto-historiography.) *Dada siegt!* as well contains four documents predating its publication. One of them is signed by a certain Alexander Sesqui, even though, in the paragraph preced-

(38) Jonathan CULLER, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1975, p. 11.

(39) Bart KEUNEN, *De verbeelding van de grootstad. Stads- en wereldbeelden in het proza van de moderniteit*, Brussel, VUB Press, 2000 (Tekst en Tijd, Vol. 4), p. 63-64.

(40) Robert MOTHERWELL, *The Dada Painters, op. cit.*, p. 23.

(41) Richard HUELSENBECK, *Dada siegt! Eine Bilanz des Dadaismus*, Berlin, Malik-Verlag, 1920, p. 5, my translation.

(42) Richard HUELSENBECK, ed., *Dada Almanach. Im Auftrag des Zentralamts der Deutschen Dada-Bewegung*, Berlin, Erich Reiss Verlag, 1920, p. 3, my translation. Note that the 'Zentralamt' mentioned in the title was lead by Huelsenbeck himself.

ing the document, Huelsenbeck claims to have written it himself<sup>(43)</sup>. Hence, in many cases we find Huelsenbeck reproducing texts of his own hand, often signed by an alias. In some cases, pseudonyms are not made explicit. His *Dada Almanach* (1920), for instance, contains a short piece (“Eine dadaistische Privatangelegenheit”) by one Hans Baumann, which announces the death of Dada (after, again, attacking Tzara). Although the text is accompanied by a note stating that the editor of the *Dada Almanach* does not share Baumann’s conviction,<sup>(44)</sup> the text is written by Huelsenbeck. This highlights that the author, fifthly, also leaves room for (self-created) contradictions in his accounts.

In contrast to the five foregoing characteristics, which provide his chronicles with a sense of veracity, Huelsenbeck also frequently includes more prosaic patches, however, closely resembling his literary works. An illustration from *En avant Dada* should suffice:

“In the evening the band plays by the lakeshore, and the whores tripping along on their high heels laugh into your face. [...] You walk aimlessly along, fixing up a philosophy for supper. But before you have it ready, the mailman brings you the first telegram, announcing that all your pigs have died of rabies, your dinner jacket has been thrown off the Eiffel Tower, your housekeeper has come down with the epizootic. You give a startled look at the moon, which seems to you like a good investment, and the same postman brings you a telegram announcing that all your chickens have died of hoof and mouth disease, your father has fallen on a pitchfork and frozen to death, your mother has burst with sorrow on the occasion of her silver wedding (maybe the frying pan stuck to her ears, how do I know?) That’s life, my dear fellow. The days progress in the rhythm of your bowels and you, who have so often been in peril of choking on a fishbone, are still alive. You pull the covers up over your head and whistle the “Hohenfriedberger.” And who knows, don’t gloat too soon, perhaps the next day will see you at your desk, your pen ready for the thrust, bent over your new novel, *Rabble*. Who knows? That is pure Dadaism, ladies and gentlemen”<sup>(45)</sup>.

The instrumental value of prosaic patches like this one is obvious. They give evidence of the frequent shifts in perspective in Huelsenbeck’s accounts, which bring in the (mostly male) reader as a witness to Dada. The quoted passage’s final sentence, moreover, accentuates the frequent direct address in his narratives. Yet, more importantly, the above quotation points at the heterogeneity of Huelsenbeck’s “historiography”. Not only does it introduce various sub-genres like the manifesto and the miscellany. Like the historical avant-garde manifesto itself, with its frequently prosaic introductions followed by the positing of a new aesthetic agenda opposing the status quo in art, Huelsenbeck’s chronicles, by way of such prosaic patches, also expose their constructedness and *literariness*. On the one hand, they thus clearly display features that explain why a reader may mistake them for authentic *rappports*. On the other hand, they

(43) Richard HUELSENBECK, *Dada siegt!*, op. cit., p. 17 and 19.

(44) Richard HUELSENBECK, *Dada Almanach*, op. cit., p. 29ff.

(45) Robert MOTHERWELL, *The Dada Painters*, op. cit., p. 29.

undercut this status by passages as the one above, patches which bring out the irony in Huelsenbeck most explicitly. Indeed, "who knows?"

### By Way of Conclusion

A more encompassing study of (retrospective) *rappports* by avant-garde authors on their exploits will one day perhaps conclude that avant-garde auto-historiography, like the avant-garde manifesto, is better served when viewed as a hybrid *literary* genre. For although the genre clearly has an institutional function (similar to that of the manifesto), Huelsenbeck's many revisions of *res gestae* bring to the fore the genre's almost improvisational character. That Huelsenbeck loved to improvise stands beyond doubt. When in 1967, *Aspen Magazine* asked him to recite a few poems from his *Phantastische Gebete* for a recording, Huelsenbeck read the poem "Chorus Sanctus" from the collection. The 1920 version of the poem reads: "a a o / u u o / ha dzk / ha haha / a e i / u u e / drr en / hihhi / i i i / u i e / obn br / lilili / o i i / a a i / buss bum / leiomen."<sup>(46)</sup> In the recording of 1967, Huelsenbeck proved that the literary text may require changes when read aloud to an audience. For some reason, he pronounced the seventh line as "drr bl" and the thirteenth as "o lil".<sup>(47)</sup> Historical texts and facts were not sacred to Huelsenbeck. A good writer, in his mind, uses texts and facts, rewrites them to make up his own version as he sees fit. 1967 marked the hey-day of neo-Dada. During neo-Dada in the 1960s, Huelsenbeck's assertion that Dada lives forever (momentarily) materialised. Residing in the United States at that time and witnessing Dada's revival, he did not refrain from continuing writing about Dada, ever ambiguous, ever accentuating his own role in Dada's historical emergence and lasting afterlife. During the early 1920s things had looked very different, though. The young Huelsenbeck appears to have gambled *in* history. Gambling seems to have been one of the favourite pass-times of the young Huelsenbeck. His Dada literary works are filled with references to gambling, especially at the horse tracks. Horses are encountered in all of his collections of poems, and both *Azteken* and *Doctor Billig* contain a scene situated in the vicinity of the horse tracks. Aware of the fact that not all horses cross the finish line simultaneously, and that occasionally a horse even loses her sense of direction altogether, the author-chronicler took a gamble in the 1920s. He knew his role as an artist in Dada (important as it is) was by no means more significant than that of Tzara or his Berlin colleagues. Defining Dada as an *anti*-aesthetic movement invented and led by himself, Huelsenbeck the chronicler thus shifted grounds, perhaps hoping that no one would notice revisions as the ones found in his *Dada* anthology of 1964. Morally, we will perhaps never come to terms with Huelsenbeck, but precisely this impossibility guarantees his lasting fame.

(46) Richard HUELSENBECK, *Phantastische Gebete*, Berlin, Malik-Verlag, 1920, p. 13.

(47) Richard HUELSENBECK, "Four poems from *Phantastische Gebete* (1916)", in *Aspen Magazine*, nr. 5+6, November 1967 (8 inch, 33-1/3 rpm, monaural recording on flexible plastic).