Translation, Typography, and the Avant-Garde's Impossible Text

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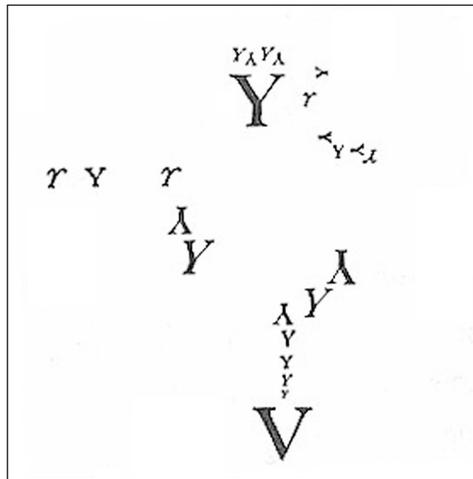### Tristan Tzara's Typographical Dance

Figure 1. Original image position, reprinted from Tzara's *Le Coeur à Gaz* (Paris: G. L. M., 1946), 33.

Contained within Tristan Tzara's Dada drama *Le Coeur à Gaz* (The Gas-Heart, 1923) is an odd illustration, without explanation or apparent function. In the middle of act 3, at the conclusion of a soliloquy by the character of Mouth, Tzara demarcates a section of the text with the title "DANSE" and describes it in a parenthetical note: "(*du monsieur*

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qui tombe de l'entonnoir du plafond sur la table)" (DANCE of the gentleman who falls from a funnel in the ceiling onto the table).[1] Following this description, Tzara places a series of letters that recreate the dance described in the stage direction. The dance appears as the letters "Y," "V," and an italicized *"r"* scatter down the page (fig. 1). The reader initially confronting the image may be unclear as to how the letters correspond to the stage direction that precedes them. At the top of the illustration, one sees four small capital Ys positioned on top of a larger capital Y; at the bottom, a series of Ys descend both in position and in size into a capital V. At first glance, the static image appears to contradict the previous stage direction. If the letters are meant to echo the objects described—the funnel, the gentleman, the table—then the large Y at the top of the illustration appears to correspond to the table. There is no funnel present, however, unless the reader of the text rotates the page, such that the V appears inverted at the top of the page (fig. 2).
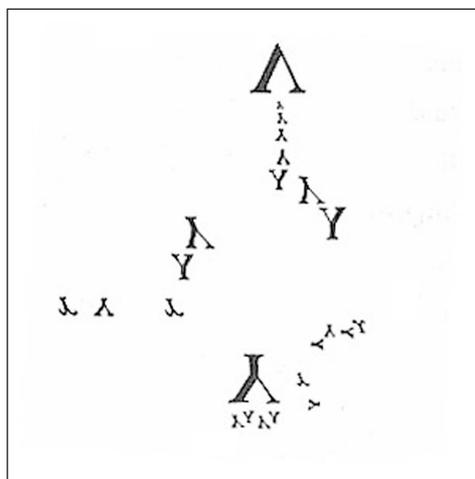

Figure 2. Inverted image position.

Read upside-down from top to bottom, the now-inverted V becomes the funnel in the ceiling, and the series of Ys suggests a figure falling out of the funnel, growing larger as he moves closer to the viewer or more fully into the textual frame of the action. In the center of the illustration, the letter appears to move across the page randomly, changing size and shape by transforming into an italicized *r*. This letter *r* resembles the small Y, suggesting the same letter now embellished. The close approximations of size between the *r* and Y suggest at least an affinity between them, if they do not represent the same character changing as he moves through his falling dance from the funnel. To complete the dance, the reader again must rotate the image to propel the dancing figure (Y) from the open center of the page to the top of the largest Y (fig. 3). It is surely no coincidence that the largest V and Y are exactly the same size. Both serve as static

[1] Tristan Tzara, *Le Coeur à Gaz* (Paris: G. L. M., 1946), 33. Written and first performed in 1921, *Le Coeur à Gaz* was first published in *Der Sturm* (March 1922): 33–42. Following the 1923 performance, Tzara revised the play significantly and the revised version appeared in May 1946. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of the play are mine.

set pieces to frame the smaller, active letters in motion. Once the rotation is complete, the little Y appears to flip over twice on top of the larger Y, as if concluding the fall with the dance on the table described above. Both the composition of the illustration itself and the movement of the page by the reader/viewer create the "dance" of the lettered gentleman as he falls from the funnel onto the table.

The physical engagement required of the viewer in *Le Coeur à Gaz* both animates and stalls the visually unruly text. Following the gentleman's dance to its conclusion only brings the reader back to the beginning. Rather than turn past the page of the image, the reader must follow the dance in a seemingly endless loop. As long as the reader obeys the text, the play cannot progress. Ironically, the reader's animation of the text suspends dramatic time by locking the reader/audience into an endlessly repeating, rotating moment. In this printed performance, Tzara's iconographic text not only divorces language from its linguistic meaning, but also violates its dramatic progression. His rebellious text interrupts and suspends the presumed performance of the play as a time-based, embodied enactment.
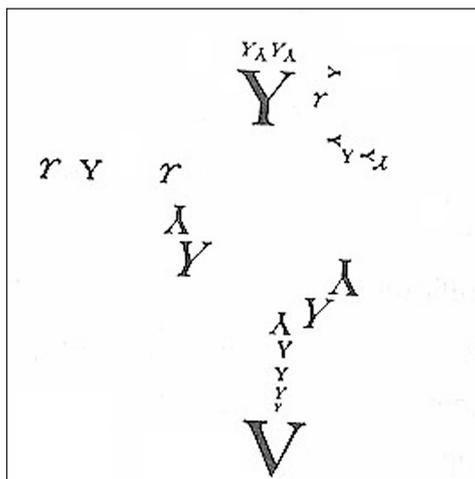

Figure 3. Original image position.

How then are we to read this illustration? It ought not to be dismissed; Tzara's revisions to the diagram in subsequent versions of the play are evidence of its importance. Significantly, his most extreme revision appeared only after the play's first performance in 1923 at the infamous Dada event *Soirée du Coeur à barbe* (Evening of the Bearded Heart).[2] This revision transformed a block of letters apparently chosen

[2] By most accounts, André Breton had broken from Dada before then, but the events of the evening were extreme even by Dada's standards. The performance was characterized by interruptions, a riot among the audience, and physical attacks on the actors. As J. H. Matthews reports, "Breton is said to have laid about [Georges Hugnet] with a cane, reportedly breaking Pierre de Massot's arm." See J. H. Matthews, *Theatre in Dada and Surrealism* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1974), 36; and Georges Hugnet, *L'Aventure Dada 1916–1922* (Paris: Galerie de l'Institut, 1957), 98. For corroborating descriptions, see also Annabelle Melzer, *Dada and Surrealist Performance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 156–60; Hans Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art* (New York: Thames and Hudson,

at random into a dynamic illustration of a typological character dancing across the space of the page. Although largely ignored among critical readings of Tzara and his plays, this illustration anticipates an intriguing issue for modernist and avant-garde drama studies: namely, the mutual dependence and antagonism between text and performance in the dramatic text itself.

As I explore in this essay, Tzara's typographical experiment in *Le Coeur à Gaz* and its resistant translation to the theatrical stage as embodied action challenge the relation between the written text and the spoken word and, as such, articulate a dimension to the avant-garde as not only antitextual, but also anti-body. To better understand Tzara's illustration and its theatrical purpose, I first consider the perceived opposition between text and performance and the complications Tzara's image raises within this dichotomy. In particular, I consider his dramatic text as a form of perverse translation, via Walter Benjamin's unending translation process, one that both presumes a semantic equivalence between the written text and the embodied action and simultaneously preempts any physical equivalence between the writing and its embodiment. I then analyze Tzara's typography as an autonomous performance within the dramatic text. Tzara's unique mode of dramatic writing raises as well as subverts the translation of textual bodies of the page to the stage's performing bodies and fundamentally breaks down the division between reader and performer, text and performance, paper and theatre. This breakdown suggests that the avant-garde may not only have been anti-textual, but also profoundly anti-corporeal—a direct attack on the performing body even within the milieu of the theatre itself.

Among the shifting dynamics of text, drama, theatre, and performance, it may be useful to define a few terms. For the purposes of this essay, I define "text" as the printed material on the page, including all visual impressions on paper, namely, the ready identifiers of drama—dialogue and didascalia—as well as what W. B. Worthen calls the "accessories" of drama,[3] including typography. Michael Vanden Heuvel's distinction between text and performance in his *Performing Drama/Dramatizing Performance* reflects much of what has been written regarding the relation between text and performance. Drama, according to Vanden Heuvel, is "that form of theatrical expression that is constituted primarily as a literary artifact, according to particular 'dramatic' conventions, and empowered as text."[4]

Conversely, "performance refers first to a theatrical medium that has traditionally acted to translate the dramatic text, but which in recent years has been ordained as an autonomous art form, as an alternative to 'literary' drama."[5] Although one could easily argue that Tzara anticipates this late-twentieth-century conception of performance—an alternative to text-based drama—his *Coeur à Gaz* is most productively read within

1997), 188–91; and Elmer Peterson, *Tristan Tzara: Dada and Surrational Theorist* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1971), 77–79. For slightly different versions of the evening, see Michael Benedikt and George Wellwarth, eds., *Modern French Theatre: The Avant-Garde, Dada, and Surrealism* (New York: Dutton, 1964), xxii; and Michel Sanouillet, *Dada à Paris* (Paris: Jean-Jacque Pauvert, 1965), 384.

[3] W. B. Worthen, *Print and the Poetics of Modern Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 29.

[4] Michael Vanden Heuvel, *Performing Drama/Dramatizing Performance: Alternative Theater and the Dramatic Text* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 2–3.

[5] Ibid., 5–6.

the tradition of drama that insinuates translation into theatrical performance. Indeed, throughout the play Tzara raises the expectation of embodiment (not coincidentally naming his characters after parts of a single body) only to undermine these same conventions by inserting a seemingly playable illustration into the play. His adherence to theatrical conventions suggests that the text can be performed—words made flesh—but he simultaneously subverts this expectation in an illustration that articulates text as a performer without a body.

Text/Performance in the Avant-Garde

Avant-garde theatre in general and Dada in particular frequently have been categorized by a rejection of authoritarian textual dictates and, as such, have remained crucial touchstones for theatre and performance studies seeking to reject the tyranny of the text. Julia Walker, for example, in her genealogy of what she calls the epistemological split between text and performance, locates the source of this split in the avant-gardes,

> where performance has often been the avant garde's favorite mode of resisting the status quo. Whether understood as abstract reason, the law, the law of the father, narrative logic, or conventional forms of representation, that status quo has often been figured as language—the defining limitation that performance strains against and seeks to explode.[6]

Among other considerations of the European avant-garde, critics repeatedly articulate this resistant mode of the avant-garde as antitextuality.[7] Many of the essays in James M. Harding's anthology *Contours of the Theatrical Avant-Garde: Performance and Textuality* make this point, with Harding himself arguing in his introduction that twentieth-century distinctions between text and performance, "though hard to maintain as clear binary oppositions, are grounded in an historical antagonism between text and performance that has been one of the avant-garde's greatest sources of vitality."[8] Such formulations follow closely the numerous works on Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, many of which have led to what Harding and John Rouse elsewhere refer to as "the common assumption . . . that the theatrical avant-garde was fundamentally at odds with text-based theater."[9]

While certainly a contested notion, this opposition between text and performance in European avant-garde theatre raises fundamental yet largely unanswered questions: What is text in drama, theatre, and performance? Is it the dialogue and didascalia? Is it any ink stamped onto paper, including page numbers, printing errors, and so on? In

[6] Julia A. Walker, "Why Performance? Why Now? Textuality and the Rearticulation of Human Presence," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 16, no. 1 (2003): 155.

[7] I write "European avant-garde" with full awareness that such a categorization is both arbitrary and incomplete. New work in avant-garde studies rightly has pushed for a global, transcultural context for the avant-garde not simply as a European creation, but as a multinational phenomenon with no single central origin. In my analysis of this play, however, Tzara specifically works against distinctly European realist theatrical conventions. For this reading, it is most useful, at least initially, to locate the play within a predominantly European context. I have no doubt, however, that more productive work may yet be done by locating the play in a broader global context, and I should look forward to such criticism.

[8] James M. Harding, "Introduction," in *Contours of the Theatrical Avant-Garde: Performance and Textuality*, ed. Harding (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 3.

[9] James M. Harding and John Rouse, "Introduction," in *Not the Other Avant-Garde: The Transnational Foundations of Avant-Garde Performance*, ed. Harding and Rouse (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 9.

their many experiments with print advertising, printed leaflets, collage art, and experiments in poster and book typography, the artists of the European avant-garde were opposed neither to the printed word nor to the page as a theatrical venue. In some instances, in fact, it was the printed letter or word that could become the performer. During the 1910s and 1920s, artists throughout Europe explored connections between printed textual and physical bodies, eventually constructing bodies as text. Italian Futurist prints, such as Carlo Carrà's "Graphic Rhythm with Airplane (Homage to Blériot)" (1914) and F. T. Marinetti's "words-in-freedom" (1915–1919), used typography to convey movement and embodied action. In 1923, Czech writer Vítězslav Nezval composed textual bodies in an alphabet of stylized human poses, and, in 1928, German Bauhaus artist Oskar Schlemmer articulated the human form as language in his drawing "Man in the Sphere of Ideas." English Vorticist Wyndham Lewis's play *Enemy of the Stars* (1914) constructed a performance entirely on the printed page, in what David Graver has described as "performing print"—a literary text that becomes a performance within itself.[10] Within the dynamic formation of experimental art, performance, and theatre, artists of diverse orientations and locations simultaneously began experimenting with the body as a kind of text, and with text as its own performing entity.

In his recent analysis of modern drama, W. B. Worthen has suggested that the material properties of print can be read as a "mise-en-page," a site of performance. Revisiting the infamous text/performance split, Worthen asks: "Can we consider the materiality of writing not in opposition to performance (or, much the same thing, as governing or determining performance), but as a more dynamic index to the shifting equilibrium between writing and performance in the conception of the drama?"[11] Although a complete answer may not yet be possible, Tzara's typographical dramatic experiment offers a useful context for engaging the question of the "dynamic index" and reevaluating the perceived opposition between text and performance in avant-garde theatre. As I explore here, Tzara uses his typography as actors within a playtext that otherwise appears to be written for embodied actors. Thus, to fully understand the play, one must engage this illustration both as a text that performs autonomously and as a text that requires translation into performance.

How then are we to interpret the illustration? The illustration itself is clearly not dialogue, although one could attempt to articulate sounds associated with the letters and to correlate their size and position on the page with volume and physical location onstage. The structure of the illustration, however, prevents any straightforward vocalization, since, in order to be read aloud, the image must be rotated, thereby creating a neverending repetition of sounds from which the rest of the play cannot escape; any attempt to embody this text would endlessly repeat it. Conversely, albeit introduced descriptively, the presumed dance of the gentleman clearly does not fall within the category of a stage direction. The illustration does not tell us what the performers do onstage—the letters perform it themselves. Unlike nearly all other aspects of dramatic text, the action of the illustration is literal; there is no implied action by a performer, only the explicit movement of the text. We must consider the illustration in a separate category from the accessories of drama that many scholars identify in the print of modern drama. Whereas Worthen, in his reading of George Bernard Shaw, identifies

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[10] David Graver, *The Aesthetics of Disturbance: Anti-Art in Avant-Garde Drama* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 179.

[11] W. B. Worthen, *Print and the Poetics of Modern Drama*, 11.

typography and layout as "the effort to render the book a distinctive platform for the play's realization," Tzara's use of typography occurs not to realize the play, but to undermine and destabilize the performance of the play as a text and to complicate the viewing position of its reader/spectator/viewer.

Translation from Text to Performance

Perhaps ironically, it is the metaphor of translation—often dismissed from theatre studies since the mid-1970s—that provides a suitable frame for the interpretation of Tzara's play and his deviations from dramatic and typographical conventions within it. I introduce the concept of translation here as a distinctly theatrical anticipation in which the dramatic text in print emerges onstage in the bodies of performers. Unlike Worthen's "dynamic index," translation suggests a semantic equivalent between the text on the page and the action on the stage. By following other dramatic conventions (such as consistent character names and performable stage directions), Tzara appears at first to reinforce conventional expectations in the early scenes. One must remember, however, that this is not exclusively the oft-mentioned linguistic metaphor that has been challenged since Anne Ubersfeld's influential *Lire le Théâtre* (1977).[12] The etymological roots of translation can be found not in change of text, but in the movement of bodies. In its earliest English-language usage (ca. 1350), translation was defined as the "removal or conveyance from one person, place, or condition to another," and by the mid-sixteenth century translation meant "Removal from earth to heaven, *orig.* without death, as the translation of Enoch; but in later use also said *fig.* of the death of the righteous."[13]

Tzara's illustration-as-translation requires both a literal and physical definition. The typographical dance of the gentleman falling from the ceiling positions itself both as a literal translation—a semantic equivalence between text and performance—and against metaphysical translation—the movement of bodies across a phenomenological divide from the page to the stage. Suspended thus between printed text and embodied performance, Tzara's text ensures its own destabilized theatrical role. To read the play, one must enact the performance of the typographical illustration; to perform the play, one must eliminate the illustration. Unlike other textual omissions that occur with embodied performance (rarely does anyone read the stage directions as printed), this illustration has no physical equivalent on the stage either in speech or movement. Character names imply which actor is speaking; stage directions suggest specific locations and movement; and punctuation guides the tempo and rhythm of theatrical speech. Tzara's illustration, arguably realized only on the page, has no physical equivalent in performance. To perform the play, it must be eliminated, with no trace of the action left behind. In this way Tzara realizes the dramatic equivalent of his infamous 1918 manifesto. If to be against Dada is to be Dada, then to perform the play is to destroy the play. Following Benjamin's theory regarding the impossibility of translation, Tzara's typographical Dada drama can be read as a perverse act of translation, one that suggests the equivalence between written language and performance, and the movement of bodies across a phenomenological divide, even as the text simultaneously subverts this effect.

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[12] See Anne Ubersfeld, *Lire le Théâtre*, vols. 1–3 (Paris: Editions sociales, 1977). The English translation of volume 1 appears as *Reading Theatre*, trans. Frank Collins, Paul Perron, and Patrick Debbèche (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999).

[13] *Oxford English Dictionary*, 1st ed., s.v. "Translation."

Translation, as a critical concept, has not fared particularly well in theatre studies. Arguably, since the 1970s, scholarship of theatrical performance has repeatedly rejected the metaphor of translation as an adequate reflection of the relationship between text and performance. There are two major objections to the idea that written texts can be translated into performance. The first, frequently appearing in semiotic studies of theatre, proposes that the characterization of theatrical performance as a translation of the script is reductive. To cite only one prominent example, Michael Issacharoff concludes his anthology, *Performing Text*, with the assertion that "[t]he playscript is in no way 'sacred'; performance is never merely a 'translation' of it to the stage. To exist, it is contingent on performance."[14] If, as Issacharoff suggests, the text is contingent on performance, then theatrical understanding requires the analysis of performance as a distinct realization of the text in a new form, not simply the linear analysis of text as the governing principle for performance. To speak of performance as a translation of text is to inaccurately characterize the dynamics of theatrical performance. The text is not simply translated—shifted between different sign systems—but conceptually reorganized. The second objection to performance as translation argues against the apparent privileging of the text. For example, Marvin Carlson dismisses the concept of translation as analogous to theatrical performance because "the written text is 'translated' into theatrical terms only in a very special sense. True, words are spoken instead of read, an important phenomenological shift, but they remain the same words. The original is in one sense changed, but in another it is literally embedded in its own presumed translation."[15]

Favoring instead Derrida's notion of the supplement for theatrical performance, Carlson rejects the concept of translation as fundamentally reliant on the text. Such conceptions of the relationship between text and performance inherently assume the persistence of what Vanden Heuvel has called the "presence" of text across the phenomenological divide from print into performance. "No longer can we accept a linear, Newtonian model that describes the text and its affects," he writes, "as the absolute reference for measuring theatrical work."[16] Much of the critical work of the last twenty years has attempted to redefine this relationship between text and performance. According to Vanden Heuvel, theatrical performance must be seen as a fundamental reworking of text in more complex relations, rather than the translation from the linguistic to the verbal.[17]

And yet, however outdated and perhaps even distasteful this linear textual dictate might appear, this is precisely what Tzara attempts to create in his typographical illustration. Typography as a kind of theatre necessitates the concept of translation precisely because the text demands a single, exact realization by the reader qua performer. Tzara's typography cannot remain the same words onstage, as Carlson suggests. The

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[14] Michael Issacharoff, "Postscript or Pinch of Salt: Performance as Mediation or Deconstruction," in *Performing Texts*, ed. Issacharoff and Robin F. Jones (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), 139.

[15] Marvin Carlson, "Theatrical Performance: Illustration, Translation, Fulfillment, or Supplement?" *Theatre Journal* 37, no. 1 (1985): 8.

[16] Vanden Heuvel, *Performing Drama/Dramatizing Performance*, 4–6, 7.

[17] This became a topic for many considerations of textuality in twentieth-century performance that sought to privilege the director over the playwright. See, for example, John Rouse, "Textuality and Authority in Theater and Drama: Some Contemporary Possibilities," in *Critical Theory and Performance*, ed. Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 146–58.

letters cannot be enacted; the textual dance cannot be replicated by human actors; and the sounds the letters might make as speech do not contain the presence to which Vanden Heuvel refers. Unlike most other aspects of dramatic text, the movements of the letters are not open to interpretation by either another body or another voice. The reader cannot make his or her own variation or interpretive reading or performance of the text. Simply to read the text is to be constrained by it. Of course, one can ignore it, read past it, or omit it from further reproductions. But these are all choices that require the elimination of the illustration—its nonperformance—not simply a different interpretation thereof. A reader might understand the positions of the letters differently, drawing different conclusions about the meanings of the images on the page, but there is only one possible enactment of Tzara's typography as it is written, because the actors are literally inscribed in their roles. Thus the reader/performer is left with two options: either perform the illustration by rotating the illustration ad infinitum, or reject it outright and cancel the performance.[18] Structured as a kind of mise-en-abyme, one cannot fully read through the illustration, let alone play it onstage.

In this sense, Tzara's play appears to follow Benjamin's conception in "The Task of the Translator," in which he describes translation as a continuing process that simultaneously reproduces and destroys text: "Finally, it is self-evident how greatly fidelity in reproducing the form impedes the rendering of the sense. Thus no case for literalness can be based on a desire to retain the meaning. Meaning is served far better—and literature and language far worse—by the unrestrained license of bad translators."[19] Instead of reproducing the literal translation, Benjamin suggests that translation instead must perform the original text, perhaps indefinitely. He writes: "On the other hand, as regards the meaning, the language of a translation can—in fact, must—let itself go, so that it gives voice to the *intentio* of the original not as reproduction but as harmony, as a supplement to the language in which it expresses itself, as its own kind of *intentio*."[20] Benjamin's phrasing of translation as its own kind of performance—giving voice to the original text—appears to frame translation as an interpretive and repetitive enactment of the original, one that develops in time, much like the performance of a play.

Of course, like Tzara's play, this is an impossible performance. In her analysis of Benjamin's translation theory, Carol Jacobs argues that Benjamin's "task" for the translator is ultimately one of surrender, what she terms a "monstrous loss."[21] Betsy Flèche takes this argument further when she turns the problem of translation inward from the translator to Benjamin himself. She argues that Benjamin eschews ideological criticism in favor of "performative criticism."[22] Flèche's notion of performative criticism suggests that Benjamin's text destabilizes itself as it goes, revising the meanings of words and resisting the translations of subsequent authors and critics. Significantly, Flèche's understanding of Benjamin's strategy is one that resists the authority of the original text. She

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[18] This nonperformance recalls an earlier Dada event, titled *Relâche* (or "no performance"). According to most accounts, potential spectators never entered the theatre, believing the performance had been canceled.

[19] Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 78.

[20] Ibid., 78–79.

[21] Carol Jacobs, "The Monstrosity of Translation," *MLN* 90, no. 6 (1975): 765.

[22] Betsy Flèche, "The Art of Survival: The Translation of Walter Benjamin," *Substance* 28, no. 2 (1999): 107.

states that for the reader of Benjamin, "There is no authority for the critic to rely upon. The essay produces interpretive crises, keeps its readers deliberately off-balance."[23] In other words, the text performs dynamically, even metonymically, and thereby resists efforts by others to contain it within other translations or secondary texts. It even, one might argue, continually redefines the relationship between the reader/translator and the text itself. Like Tzara's play, translation is an open-ended process that evades any final realization. Whereas other conceptions of translation attempt a kind of fixed or ideal lucidity, Benjamin's text evades meaning, prompting repeated (and unsuccessful?) attempts to comprehend and finally to translate the text. Although he suggests that the purpose of translation is to perform—to give voice—to the original's intention or gestural text, Benjamin's own writing presents the text as a perpetual activity that does not reach its conclusion. As commentators note repeatedly, one cannot adequately enact the performance of translation that Benjamin himself suggests. The text performs unendingly; the reader must either persist in the process or give up.

Typography as Performance

We might then consider Benjamin's translation theory as a useful model of text and action expressed in Tzara's typographical performance in *Le Coeur à Gaz*. To understand how Tzara manages both to command an exact translation and to subvert the text simultaneously, one needs to consider the role of typography in the illustration itself. I have thus far used the word "illustration" to describe what Tzara calls his typographical "dance," but illustration is perhaps a mistaken term. The image in Tzara's play is not drawn, but is created exclusively by the manipulation of printed letters, fonts, and their placements on the page. The image's ambiguous status within the text of the play makes even its definition difficult. Is it a diagram? An illustration? A textual performance? It is telling that these letters, like much of Dada's non-sense, remain unchanged in interlingual translations.[24] These images of text, turned iconographic on the page, exist outside the usual textual expectations of the play itself. To understand this textual performance, one must consider the typography as an autonomous object within the dramatic text.

Although Tzara's play is frequently referred to in studies of Dada and the European avant-garde and has been repeatedly anthologized in English translations, his dramatic typographical experiments have been largely overlooked in analyses of avant-garde drama. This omission is somewhat surprising given that literary studies of Tzara often note the performativity of typography in his poetry. For example, Johanna Drucker's examination of typography in modern art and poetry argues that Tzara's textual appropriations from advertising move his language from a private, personal context into the public domain of commodities, a domain seemingly aligned with the public performance of the theatre. This shift invites a public audience to view the language as a material object or, as Drucker puts it, an "object, with material properties, a life, a history, and a semiotic and economic function to perform in the cultural context of linguistic operations."[25]

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[23] Ibid., 105.

[24] See, for example, Benedikt's translation of the play in *Modern French Theatre*, 131–46.

[25] Johanna Drucker, *The Visible Word: Experimental Typography and Modern Art, 1909–1923* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 206. Surprisingly, Drucker does not discuss the typographical aspects of Tzara's plays.

In her influential essay, "Motion, Vision, and Coherence in the Dada Poetry of Tristan Tzara," Mary Ann Caws similarly describes Tzara's poetry as "a constantly varied spectacle" in which the reader is called to participate in the action of the text.[26] Through the textual spectacles of language, the Dadaist's poetry not only asserts itself as material social object, but further enlists the reader as a kind of spectator/participant who both witnesses and enacts the movement of language as a dynamic graphic image. Tzara's typography demands its own translation by the reader, but simultaneously destroys itself in the process. This destructive shift from the private to the public, from the literary to the embodied, transforms printed text from its standard role as the invisible bearer of linguistic meaning to a performing agent, one that explicitly rejects the human body as a viable performer.

As previously described, the central illustration commands the reader to physically rotate the text, thereby inhibiting the progression of the play. Closer inspection enables an understanding of the avant-garde as anti-body. Tzara's play enacts its translation as not only resistance, but also as a destruction of the mimetic human body in the theatre, much like the disintegrated face that appears in the play's other characters, Mouth, Nose, Neck, Ear, and Eye. Avant-garde drama in this instance becomes both a resistance to the words made flesh and, perhaps even more significantly, to the fleshy body itself. Indeed, like Benjamin's ironically untranslatable "Task of the Translator," the theatrical performance of Tzara's play is predicated on a radical distortion (the elimination of the illustration) of the text as written. This textual slippage reveals a gap between the original text and its subsequent enactment and the destructive potential of the move from the page to the stage.

At first glance, it may appear that nearly all of Tzara's *Coeur à Gaz* opposes embodied performance. The characters Mouth, Nose, Neck, Ear, and Eye are only parts of a face, and their incessant and repetitive non sequiturs eliminate any suggestions of character, motivation, or clear action. From the start, it is difficult to see how the characters could ever be fully embodied in the theatre. Like many of his contemporaries, Tzara denaturalizes stage language by playing with puns, obscene suggestions, and ridiculous groupings of words. But his most radical obstruction of performance is the stage direction and illustration that in their textual form are utterly contrary to performance and translation. Although this causes textual problems, the implications of Tzara's typography are more radical than the merging of text and action, or even than the destruction of text. Through the use of typography and visual placement, Tzara creates a theatrical moment in which textual performance of letters arranged on the page replaces human performance. The dance of the gentleman literally leads to his theatrical death. Tzara's textual bodies literally (and literarily) perform the mise-en-scène, or gestural undertext, of the original and thereby prevent their enactment by physical bodies. Tzara's dancing illustration aptly demonstrates that the resistant textual performances of Dada drama can be simultaneously antitext and anti-body.

Tzara's Typographic Bodies

In most criticism, typography in the avant-garde serves as the primary means for transforming the language into an art object. For example, in his theory of experimental

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[26] Mary Ann Caws, "Motion, Vision, and Coherence in the Dada Poetry of Tristan Tzara," *The French Review* 1 (winter 1970): 6.

typography, Jean-Gérard Lapacherie credits Dada in general and Tzara in particular with moving the "typographic cacophony" from the title page or poster to the body of the text itself. Experimental typography—that is, visual representations of language that violate the visual harmony of the text—radically destabilizes the text's role as the invisible conduit of linguistic meaning. According to Lapacherie, Dada's violation of the agreement between the appearance of the text and its original meaning "deindicalises" typography and turns language into "pure graphic signifiers."[27] Dada manipulations of the visual text create tension between the text as meaning and visual object. Typography in Dada, Lapacherie argues, does not follow any rule other than the arbitrariness of the authors, creating not new significations of typography, but rather reducing language to pure form. For his part, Timothy Benson sees the performing text in Dada as ultimately one of function. This new role for the text serves "to establish connections and to produce new meanings" rather than to enact text within the space of the page.[28] Like Worthen's mise-en-page, this is yet another interpretation of typography as performance, of which *Le Coeur à Gaz* is a particularly relevant example.

Although these poetic and graphic considerations of avant-garde typography culminate in the text as image, we might usefully extend avant-garde violations of typography beyond pure form to consider the ways in which typography performs within avant-garde drama and its ironic representation in performance. Whereas Tzara's poetry may articulate motion as objects propelled in visual space, the typographical interruptions of his drama, especially *Le Coeur à Gaz*, use pieces of text to create a performance within the play itself. Letters divorced from unified words become free-floating bodies within the play. Unlike Tzara's poetry, which creates the echo of everyday life and public spectacle by appropriating existing text, and his posters and manifestos, which reformulate individual letters and words as graphic images, Tzara's drama animates typography appropriated from graphic advertising into its own literal theatre.

Tzara's typographical interruption of the dialogue separates the dance itself from the preceding dialogue. Although most English translations of Tzara's play represent this section of the play as a simple stage direction connecting the graphic illustration to the dialogue, the version published by G. L. M. in 1946 and reprinted in *Oeuvres Complètes* (1975) visually separates the dance from the action of the play. The "DANSE" is announced in capital letters, parenthetically defined by the stage direction. In a widely anthologized translation, Michael Benedikt translates this stage direction into the past tense: the original "DANSE / *du monsieur qui tombe de l'entonnoir du plafond sur la table*" becomes "Dance of the gentleman fallen from a funnel in the ceiling onto the table."[29] But syntactically "*qui tombe*" is much more complicated than Benedikt's, or perhaps any English translation, suggests. The verb *tomber* carries numerous meanings and idioms associated with it, including the connotation of failure, the biblical fall of mankind from paradise, and falling in love. Indeed, the dialogue that follows the dance juxtaposes the active love of the Mouth ("J'aime" is repeated in each of the four sentences preceding the dance) with the language of loss immediately following the dance. As Eye confesses, "Imagine my dear friend I no longer love."[30]

[27] Jean-Gérard Lapacherie, "Typographic Characters: Tension between Text and Drawing," trans. Anna Lehmann, *Yale French Studies* 84 (1994): 71.

[28] Timothy O. Benson, "Conventions and Constructions: The Performative Text in Dada," in *Dada: The Coordinates of Cultural Politics*, ed. Stephen C. Foster (London: G. K. Hall, 1996), 87.

[29] Benedikt, *Modern French Theatre*, 143.

[30] Tzara, *Le Coeur à Gaz*, 34.

Whereas the dialogue immediately following the illustration suggests loss and past events, the phrase "*qui tombe*" of the stage direction implies that the gentleman described in the play falls, or is falling. Rather than describe a dance that occurs after the gentleman has already fallen, the phrase "DANSE / *du monsieur qui tombe*" suggests that the gentleman is falling and dancing simultaneously, or perhaps dancing as he falls. Following the Mouth's declaration, "I love the young man who makes tender declarations to me,"[31] the monsieur who falls and dances may be the young man falling (in love?) from the words of the Mouth. The Mouth itself acts as a kind of speech funnel, dripping language without logic.[32]

The following illustration, then, is not simply a redundant image of a stage direction—an image that might warrant omission from a printed version of the play—but rather a performance within the text of the play itself: the dance of the man who falls. The arrangement of letters suggests that, like the stage direction, the dance is not a past event, but is occurring in the moment, in front of the reader/viewer. Moreover, it is only through active engagement by the reader qua audience that the performance occurs.

The typography of the dance performs not only action within the play, but also a rebellion against the mimetic bodies of the human performers. It is significant that Tzara revised this section of the play only after its 1923 performance. Affected perhaps by the play's performance amid the volatile antics of Dada's *Soirée du Coeur à barbe*, his revision of this illustration reveals an antagonism toward both the audience and the live performer. In the first printed version of the play for *Der Sturm* in 1922, Tzara's interest in the typographic dance appears to be little more than visual. He represents the dance as a more or less random assortment of letters arranged in groups of one to three and collected in a compact block in the center of the page (fig. 4).[33] The impact of this mass of letters is clearly visual. The arrangement of letters resembles the 1920s craze of "word-cross" puzzles that were first introduced by the *New York World* in 1913 and popularized in Europe by Britain's version of cryptic word puzzles.[34] This configuration, with its similarity to contemporary word puzzles, tempts the reader to seek out linguistic meaning among the letters, perhaps suspending dramatic progression though hardly constituting a rebellion against the live actor.
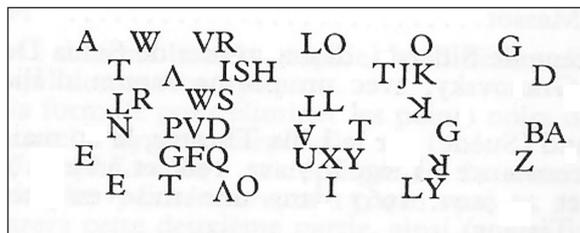

Figure 4. "Danse," originally printed in *Der Sturm* 3 (March 1922), here reprinted from Tzara's *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 1 (1912–24), ed. Henri Béhar (Paris: Flammarion, 1975), 670.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Tzara's other typographical image from the play suggests this idea as well. On the last page of the play, the usual "fin" is positioned above a diagonal arrow pointing down to the final word of the play, "L'Amour," as if the entirety of play has fallen into love.

[33] See Henri Béhar's notes on earlier versions of the play in *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 1, ed. Béhar (Paris: Flammarion, 1975), 670.

[34] See Roger Millington, *Crossword Puzzles: Their History and Their Cult* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975).

In Tzara's revision, however, the letters themselves threaten to replace the bodies of the actors. This displacement of the actor's body articulates the play's relentless resistance to the mimetic presence of the human actor. Throughout the play, Tzara attempts to undermine the integrity of the performing body. Characters are not granted physical unity, but are fractured into anatomical parts, each representing only a piece of a larger organic whole. The costumes designed by Sonia Delaunay for the 1923 production rendered the actors immobile behind large cardboard cutouts, threatening to decapitate them.[35] Although the title of the anthologized English translation (*The Gas-Heart*) bears the connotation of a kind of indigestion, the original French title, *Le Coeur à Gaz*, itself threatens to fundamentally undo the body's most central function. First translated into English by Leslie Singer in 1969 as *The Gas-Burning Heart*, the play's title produces a central image both of a heart dislocated from an organic whole and transformed into a kind of machine, and simultaneously that of a heart reduced to a less solid molecular state—the heart of gas.[36]

Yet neither title nor costume can fully displace the mimesis of the actor's human body within performance itself. Tzara's dramatic typography sows the seeds of its own destruction. The textual bodies cannot cross into performance; they resist translation. To perform the play, one must destroy these text-based figures, replacing them with inadequate human representations. To acknowledge the "intention" (as Benjamin calls it) of the text is to render enactment impossible. In this context of a body fractured and dismembered—the central organ of the body on life-support or evaporating—the actor's centrality is replaced by the physical presence of the dancing monsieur embodied as the letter Y.

Much in Dada and other related avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century argued against the authority of the human body and against the authority of the text, thus establishing a trend for later works. It is significant that the replacement of bodies with text began with the start of World War I, when actual human bodies were disintegrating and decomposing in the European theatres of war. In the midst of such realities, Dadaist Hugo Ball perceived the fragmentation in art as "one more proof of how ugly and worn the human countenance has become, and of how all the objects of our environment have become repulsive to us."[37] It should come as no surprise that Ball relates this attack on the integrity of the physical representation to language as linguistic representation. In response to the "ugly" human countenance, modern art eliminated visual representations of the human form. According to Ball, "The next step is for poetry to decide to do away with language for similar reasons."[38] Ball's juxtaposition hardly surprises, given typography's long history as a parallel to the human body. As early as 1529, Geoffrey Tory's *Champ Fleury* associated the visual appearance of letters with the proportionate form of the human body: "Our Attic letters (i.e., 'roman type') are so well proportioned to nature that they agree in measure and proportion with the human body."[39] Typography unified in meaning, syntax, and

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[35] Indeed, Peterson claims that these costumes prevented the actors from responding to the riot since "they were rigidly encased in cardboard boxes." *Tristan Tzara*, 78.

[36] Similarly, Peterson translates the play as *The Gas Operated Heart*, ibid.

[37] Hugo Ball, *Flight Out of Time: A Dada Diary*, ed. John Elderfield, trans. Ann Raimes (1927; repr., New York: Viking Press, 1974), 55.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Quoted in Lapacherie, "Typographic Characters," 66.

appearance echoes the integrated and well-proportioned human body. Just as avant-garde performance undermined the authority of text, so also could avant-garde text rebel against the inherent realism of the human body.

Dramatic typography replaces the performing body with performing text. By now, it has become commonplace to describe *Le Coeur à Gaz* as a parody of, or an attack on, theatrical performance. Most critical studies point to Tzara's use of lists, non sequiturs, and repetitions as examples of his critique of theatre's linguistic conventions. However, the use of typography and its usurping of performance as the exclusive domain of the human body advance a far more devastating critique than does his attack on language. Avant-garde dramatic typography suggests a dramatic text that is fundamentally at odds with embodied performance—an impossible theatre. In place of an autonomous human body, dramatic typography animates text; instead of human bodies performing in space and time, the repetitions of the typography interrupt and suspend the progression of the play. Most significantly, however, the typography of avant-garde drama renders the material body obsolete. In this way, Tzara echoes Edward Gordon Craig's *Übermarionettes* by suggesting a theatre composed independently of, even antagonistically toward, a live body. Like Benjamin's impossible process of translation, Tzara's play introduces an impossible theatre fundamentally opposed to the physical performing body: an anti-body theatre.

Impossible Text

This antiembodied, theatrically impossible text must become irrevocably at odds with the essential nature of performance. But this is neither the closet drama of the modernists nor the individually imagined theatre suggested by artists like Craig; rather, the anti-body theatre of Dada is an attack on the theatre as the mimetic articulation of the human body and the translation of word into body. It creates a theatre that is by definition incomplete and unperformable. Rejecting the theatre's ontology as a sacred space in Western civilization, Tzara seeks to undo the religious and ritualistic connotations of the live body by replacing this body with an unperformable text. Whereas most writing for the theatre outlines the presence of human bodies—where they stand, what they say, what they do—and awaits its fulfillment by the actor, dramatic typography stands for nothing but itself. Thus the perversity of Tzara's typographical translation. While live actors may attempt to enact the gestures illustrated in *Le Coeur à Gaz*, they are inadequate copies of the original perfect textual performance. Indeed, their physical bodies can sustain neither the endless repetitions nor the simultaneous positions possible in the performing text.

The dialogue following Tzara's textual dance further points to the impossibility of physical realization in the avant-garde theatre. Shortly after the dance of the falling gentleman, Eye—that essential organ of the theatre—describes the impossible physical excess of love and the lack of connection: "My blood trembles. Your eyes are blue. Why can't you feel it, Clytemnestra, the quiet laughter of my cells awaiting you, the violence of my breath and the sweet childish possibilities in store for us?"[40]

Immediately following this physical separation between Eye and the object of his affection, Neck and Nose recite a long list of adjectives describing an unidentified

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[40] Tzara, *Le Coeur à Gaz*, 34.

entity, possibly Clytemnestra, possibly Eye, who says nothing after the speech, but is described as falling (*tombe*).[41] Neck and Nose's list is contradictory (including descriptions such as "small," "short," and "feeble," and simultaneously "magnificent," "strong," and "fat"), but the visual layout of the list as a series of single word lines and the lack of additional information suggest that all the adjectives describe the same thing.[42] Tzara's lists, repetition, and non sequitur–dialogue foreground not meaning but rather the text of the play—the words—independent of the figures who speak. Although previous interpretations of the play attempt to find a rationale among the characters and a consistency within their speech, any of the lines of dialogue in the play could be readily assigned to any of the characters.[43] The words, not the physical actors, are the performing agents.

Tzara's implications for the text's translation to performance are radical in their disruptions to the theatrical integrity of the play. In order to perform, the text must be destroyed, since its dramatic typography is incompatible with the physical actions of human actors. Like Benjamin's task for the literary translator, the fundamental task of theatrical translation in Tzara's play is to destabilize the textual body in an unending and repetitive process that can never become fully realized. Typography, then, both ensures the disruption of text and undermines the possibility of performance itself. Tzara creates an unstable theatre, a theatre that actively resists the translation of text into action, even as it appears to create a textual action within the mise-en-page. Just as experimental typography undermines language as the conduit for linguistic meaning, Tzara's dramatic typography sabotages the human actor as the conduit for meaningful action. Even in the live performance of the theatre, Tzara contains and reduces the performing body, foregrounding the performance of avant-garde text as the essence of a nonmimetic, nonritualistic, and antiperforming theatre.

Why then did Tzara write a play? I conclude by returning to Worthen's question posed in the introduction to his *Print and the Poetics of Modern Drama*. "Can we," he asks, "consider the materiality of writing not in opposition to performance . . . but as a more dynamic index to the shifting equilibrium between writing and performance in the conception of the drama?"[44] As with most of Dada, one can imagine an emphatically negative response. Tzara's play undoubtedly pits text and performance against each other, but the implications of his text go beyond simple opposition. Like Benjamin's encounter between the translator and original text, the opposition between the text and its presumed performance in Tzara's play synthesizes into an ongoing force that is simultaneously productive and destructive. It is this tension—the impossibility and incompleteness of both text and performance within a play to be performed—that becomes the essential performance of the play. As the necessary animator for the performing text, the reader becomes embroiled in this conflict. By continuously rotating the textual image, simultaneously enabling the textual performance and thwarting the progress of the embodied play, the reader/performer unwittingly (and perhaps unwillingly) becomes trapped in the perpetual repetition of the performing text. Thus

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[41] Ibid., 35.

[42] Ibid., 35–38.

[43] For additional criticism of the play, see Katherine Papachristos, *L'inscription de l'oral et de l'écrit dans le théâtre de Tristan Tzara* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 83–102; and Robert A. Varisco, "Anarchy and Resistance in Tristan Tzara's 'The Gas Heart,'" *Modern Drama* 40, no. 1 (1997): 139–49.

[44] Worthen, *Print and the Poetics of Modern Drama*, 11.

the avant-garde's impossible text emerges like so many Dada performances: as an assault on its audience, one that breaks down the division between the creation and the audience and inserts its art into the praxis of life—in this case, into an act of reading. What is text? For Tzara, it is an attack both on the conventional notions of print and audience (reading or viewing) and a new kind of antitextual, antiembodied performance. Tzara deftly conscripts the unsuspecting reader into simultaneous service as reader, performer, spectator, and Dada destroyer of text and flesh.