

The Poetry of Nothing

That a radical cultural change of some sort took place in the early 20th century is commonplace. Freud's "Interpretation of Dreams," published in 1900, was part of the change. However, the decisive change in science occurred in physics rather than psychology. It was the work of such figures as Maxwell, Rutherford, Planck, Bohr and Einstein. It can be dated symbolically by the publication date (1905) of Einstein's papers on special relativity, mass-energy equivalence, Brownian motion, and the photon theory of light. The moment was decisive because after it, the time-honored mechanistic view of Nature was no longer tenable. The external world was still there, but it had lost its comforting solidity and uniformity.

In fact, relativity had far more radical implications than the introduction of heliocentric astronomy in the Renaissance. If the heliocentric system undermined time-honored religious beliefs, it also vindicated the power of human reason and the rationality of Nature. Relativity, conversely, appeared to set limits to rational knowledge and to unsettle Nature itself. It was as though mankind had been lifted out of a secure two-bedroom house and dropped without warning into the hall of mirrors of an amusement park. Einstein's theory was ridiculed, misrepresented and ignored, but for those who understood Einstein, it was the beginning of a new era, and demanded new modes of thought and a new language to express them.

Dada is the most widely known of these movements. The key to dada is randomness. Achieving randomness, however, is more difficult than it sounds . . . A typical method of constructing a dada poem, for example, is cutting up phrases or words from a newspaper, stirring them in a hat, and pasting them on a piece of paper in the order in which they are withdrawn. Obviously, the words come from a natural language, and, being printed, they are in a visual medium (the Roman alphabet) that is opaque rather than transparent. Even if we ignore these objections, we still confront the fact that the words are an inadequate statistical sample of the words in the natural language of the journal from which they were clipped. They are not arbitrary.

The random quality of the front page of a newspaper is not accidental but essential. When we buy a newspaper, part of our interest may be in a particular story, but part of the charm of the newspaper is that it will introduce us to the unexpected. We know the newspaper will have a story on the latest plan for balancing the budget; but who can predict stories on a child falling into a well in Oklahoma, the production of human interferon from bacteria, a hurricane in Florida, the resignation of the superintendent of highways in North Dakota, a rebellion in Chad and the like?

The dada quality found in newspapers is also evident in art forms created by high technology. Movies are produced in 'takes' that ignore the cause-effect patterns of their plots, and they are often seen by viewers from middle to end to beginning, with short subjects, cartoons and previews coming between end and beginning, rather than in the familiar Aristotelian sequence of stage drama, from beginning to middle to end. This sort of discontinuity is minor, however, compared to the standard practice of American television which routinely cuts from the heroine watching her lover dying in the cancer ward to a commercial for toilet paper to a plug for underarm deodorants to a station break to a preview of the evening news and back to the heroine.

In the light of this, dada begins to look less like an eccentric aberration than an anticipation in the early years of the century of what was to become commonplace by its end. The dada poets were prophets and seers in the old sense of those terms. They were not magicians who could predict the future, but sensitive individuals who, by contemplating the obvious, were able to describe what most citizens could not see until many years later.

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