

**Dada East. The Romanians of the Cabaret Voltaire** by Tom Sandqvist  
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When Hugo Ball told the story of the founding of the Cabaret Voltaire for the first time only a few months after its opening on 5 February 1916, he was keen to emphasise its international character.<sup>1</sup> He mentioned Emmy Hennings singing in French and Danish, the presence of a Russian balalaika orchestra and also made specific reference to Tristan Tzara reciting poems in Romanian. In his diary Ball described how Tzara had arrived at six o'clock that very evening as part of an 'Oriental-looking deputation of four little men,' two of the others being Marcel Janco and his brother George.<sup>2</sup> Tom Sandqvist speculates as to whether the fourth member of the party was Janco's other brother, Jules, or the painter Arthur Segal. Whoever it actually was, he implicates them all in the scene and uses their contact with the Cabaret Voltaire to justify his assertion that 'half of the first Dadaist group was Romanian.' This is his springboard to an extensive analysis of the connections between Zurich Dada and the Romanian avant-garde of the early twentieth century.

In charting this new territory in Dada historiography, Sandqvist opens up a world that the successive forces of Nazism and Communism did their best to bury without trace. In highly evocative language he conjures up a vision of Bucharest fully deserving its nickname of 'Little Paris of the Balkans,' where groups of intellectuals and artists were totally plugged into the major currents in European culture of the day. Although the idea that Tzara and Janco arrived in Switzerland having already begun their artistic and literary careers is not exactly a new one, where Sandqvist's account differs from previous examinations of Tzara's early Romanian poems is that he treats them seriously rather than quickly passing over them as derivative juvenilia. More importantly he finds in them elements of something the book finds almost as hard to define as Dada, something we might call Central and East European culture. Ball's description of the Romanians as 'oriental' is telling. Romania was at the nexus of three competing empires: Ottoman, Russian and Austro-Hungarian. Much closer to Istanbul than Rome, Bucharest desperately looked to the Mediterranean but was decidedly on the Black Sea. The five Romanians of the Cabaret Voltaire were also five Romanians from Jewish families, caught up in the maelstrom of massive population movements in Eastern Europe and the rise of virulent nationalism and anti-Semitism which left them stateless within a state. The transformation of 'Samuel Rosenstock' into 'Tristan Tzara' is not treated here as a renunciation of his past, but the product of it.

The book is structured around five biographical chapters accorded to the three main protagonists, Janco, Tzara and Segal, and bracketed by a further eight contextual chapters in which a few major themes are worked through. The first is the encounter with modernity. A large amount of space is given over to modern Romanian history, a vivid description of the emergence of Bucharest as a modern city and detail of the economic opportunities of the late



nineteenth and early twentieth century which permitted the rapid rise of a wealthy middle class. Although sometimes digressive, this material is helpful to readers of this book, such as me, who are thoroughly unfamiliar with the social and political history of Romania. Sandqvist does his best to tie it in by arguing that modernity was experienced most powerfully at the margins, in places where old and new faced each other most dramatically and resulted in a particularly potent form of modernism. Thus he informs us that at the time, 'one hour by automobile from Bucharest, you come upon a village where people live in burrows in the ground,' but 'the ground in which the burrows are dug is owned by a boyar who keeps a racing stable in Paris.' It is only fitting that in such circumstances absurdist writing found a true home.

If Romania was at the margins economically, it was also positioned so geographically, presenting itself as a Romance culture strangely displaced amongst Slavs, Turks and Magyars. While looking often to France for inspiration, Bucharest was simply too far away from the source to become a mere satellite of Parisian modernism. Sandqvist presents an interesting claim made by the Romanian poet Ion Vinea in 1924 that the Romanian avant-garde was an 'export phenomenon' rather than one 'imported' from outside. By suggesting this through Vinea's mouth, Sandqvist is able to avoid fruitless discussion concerning the originality of Romanian modernism and instead highlights important issues concerning contemporary perceptions. Certainly by the time Vinea was writing, after the First World War when Romania had established itself as an independent nation with expanded boundaries, there was definite recognition of its avant-garde on the international stage; many key networkers, the likes of Theo van Doesburg and Kurt Schwitters, were keen to establish contacts there. However, Sandqvist also highlights the presence of these kinds of cultural exchange networks well beforehand using the intense interaction between Romanian writers such as Alexandru Macedonski and the Futurist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti as an example. Dada is left hovering somewhere in the middle of this history. We are told twice that Janco was a 'spider in the web' of the avant-garde. Tzara's networking ability was legendary. At certain points Sandqvist deploys a centre/periphery model of cultural transformation, suggesting that its impetus often comes from what happens 'on the borders of traditional hegemony.' Although he never develops the point, one might speculate in this regard on the 'failure' of both Tzara and Janco when they made a bid for the centre and tried to make it in France.

That being a stateless Romanian, assimilated but not a citizen, was a recipe for feeling dislocated is well and truly portrayed in this book and might have been used more penetratingly as a means of describing Dada's polyglot, multivalent character. However, in the final chapters Sandqvist takes an alternative route and explores a strand in Romanian modernism that sought solace in its folk traditions and oral peasant culture. Perhaps one of the book's most compelling sections gives a rich account of the *colinde* festival celebrated



around the New Year in certain parts of Romania. Songs and plays were important part of these festivals and so was carnival mummery and masked performance. Sandqvist contrasts Hugo Ball's stupefied reaction to the costumes Janco devised for the performers at the Cabaret Voltaire to the familiarity that 'the maker of the grotesque masks and puppets' had with those he 'must have known very well from his childhood.' He then turns his attention to the varieties of Jewish mysticism that flourished in Eastern Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, such as the Cabala and Hasidism, drawing connections between the approaches to divinity through the annihilation of the ego expressed in these thought systems, and Dada's rhetorical stances of self denial and paradoxicality.

Often Sandqvist struggles to pin his Romanian context firmly onto Dada practices. Where the reader is presented with lots of fresh, exciting, new material in the former regard, the account of Dada itself is pretty familiar. The same well-trodden sources are used, no doubt through necessity: Ball's diary, Richard Huelsenbeck and Tzara's memoirs and the trusty Hans Richter. The one big surprise is the rebranding of Arthur Segal as a Zurich Dadaist, done it seems because he provides the firmest connection between Dada and Jewish mysticism, a link made explicit in his theory of *Gleichwertigkeit* ('equivalence') first published in 1919. However, this is where my most significant criticism of the book lies. In trying to make a case for the Romanian context, Sandqvist sweeps others under the carpet. Segal spent around twenty years in Berlin before moving to Switzerland during the First World War. His concept of equivalence was indebted and deeply connected to Salomo Friedlaender's notion of 'creative indifference,' a theory also highly influential on Raoul Hausmann and Hannah Höch among others. In trying to keep Paris and 'Dada West' at arms length, Sandqvist ignores the fact that Berlin could easily be incorporated into his notion of Central and Eastern European culture. Many of the Berlin Dadaists hailed from the city's eastern hinterlands, such as George Grosz who grew up in Pomerania and Franz Jung who was Silesian. Hausmann was born in Vienna to Hungarian parents and later took Czech nationality. I make this point not to claim a different priority for Dada but to suggest that further research is required to explore how the instability of national and ethnic identities in this part of Europe was manifested in Dada's incessant questioning of borders, its inherent internationalism and multilingualism. But, as the author points out in his introduction, it requires a bold and determined researcher to overcome the linguistic and bureaucratic challenges to recover this kind of material and Sandqvist must ultimately be applauded for the contribution he has made here to our understanding of those I will always be obliged think of now as 'the Romanians of the Cabaret Voltaire.'

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<sup>1</sup> Hugo Ball, *Cabaret Voltaire*, unique issue, 1916, 5.

<sup>2</sup> Hugo Ball, *Flight out of Time: A Dada Diary*, ed. John Elderfield, trans. Ann Raimés (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1996), 50.

