J. Evola talks about Dadaism

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In this article which appeared in the "Roma" at the end of 1958, Evola recalled his youthful artistic experience within Dadaism. Thirty-five years later, the baron observed how " the recurrence of the same themes and orientations " in terms of rupture, protest, rebellion, evasion, took on very specific characteristics after the Second World War, compared to the first: by now the openings were only towards the low, in the sign of “ a significant drop in level ”.

We have dwelt abundantly on the meaning that Evola attributed in his youth to abstract art and, in particular, to Dadaism, and on how this interpretation, extremely sophisticated and elitist, inevitably had to collide with a very different reality, in fact even in the first post-war period. In certain extreme positions " it was not possible to linger for long " without there being an immediate subsequent development, functional to openings towards the top: in the absence of this, the radical negation of the form (and, even earlier, of the content) would have opened up the gates of the abyss, to what lies below the form itself, and not to what transcends it. “Dada burned out, and we had to move on to something else. The so-called «surrealism» derived to a large extent from Dadaism, however taking a problematic path: it became interested in psychoanalysis, turned towards the unconscious and mistook regressive forms for upward openings (…)” wrote Evola . Perhaps with a pinch of "melancholy" (as a spirit like that of the baron could perceive it) for those years of sincere, youthful "experimentation"; certainly with a good dose of precious realism.

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by Julius Evola

Taken from the "Roma", 29 November 1958

First international Dada exhibition in Berlin, 1920. We are already under the period of the Weimar Republic, which was also characterized by a violent phase of artistic degeneration at every level. Despite Evola's ambitions, Dada under Weimar was also an integral part of this dissolutory process

Anyone who makes a comparison between the first and second post-war periods cannot fail to notice the recurrence of the same themes and orientations, however close to a significant drop in level . In the typical phenomena that followed the Second World War in the sense of crisis, of confused impulses to rebellion and escape, spiritual tension and radicalism are much less. The correspondences are presented in much grayer and more flaky terms. Furthermore, in the place of genuine expressions there are often complacent and exhibitionistic forms, even when, in the artistic domain, one has not even gone over to craft. A typical case is, in this regard, that of current abstract art.

Among the currents that in the first post-war period anticipated attitudes of the kind of existentialism of today and related, nonconformist and anti-rationalistic tendencies, however bringing the experience to the bottom, one of the most interesting was undoubtedly Dadaism . Dadaism is rarely mentioned. We are, in a certain way, self-consumed , because it was not possible to dwell for a long time, sincerely, on the positions of radical negations , of a freedom affirmed through the aggressive dissolution of every limit and every order, every agreed value and every rationality , not only in art but, according to the original instance, in individual existence itself.

Born in Zurich, in the Cabaret Voltaire , Dadaism was defined with a first manifesto in 1918 and immediately took the form of a movement, which was joined by various writers and artists, especially French. However, the creator of Dadaism was a Romanian, Tristan Tzara , an interesting and singular figure who we ourselves knew personally. As for the designation – «Dada» – it was declared that it meant nothing – or everything. Double affirmation in Russian and Romanian, it was the symbol of a gaze for which everything is similar and everything is without similar, of the irrational absoluteness of life in its pure state, to be activated in forms which, through contradiction, incoherence and absurd, they blew up every superstructure. «Dada is a virgin microbe» – is an expression of Tzara. Born "in those who have known the thrills of awakening", it "is the simple activity, the impossibility of discerning between the degrees of light".

“There is a great destructive work to be done – declared the Dada manifesto of 1918 – sweeping away, cleaning up. The purity of the individual is affirmed after the state of madness , of an aggressive, complete madness, without purpose, without design, without organization…»

“A demon of the elementary and chaotic pervaded Hans Arp's black and white woodcuts”

"To demoralize everywhere is to throw the hand of heaven into hell, the eyes of hell into heaven, to re-establish the fruitful wheel of a universal circle in the real powers and in the imagination of each individual." "What is divine in us is the awakening of anti-human action", by human here we mean every sentimentality, every weakness, every intellectual or social construction . «We seek straight, pure, firm, unique strength, we seek nothing, we affirm the vitality of every instant» – he added. The dissolution, the anarchy, the contradiction were valid here, therefore, both as proof stone ("the strong ones of word and action will survive"), and as a method.

However, the characteristic of Dadaism was to drop the romantic forms of rebellion, to move on to drastic, paradoxical and cold forms of negation. Thus he did not hesitate to proclaim: «Dada works with all his strength to establish the idiot everywhere, but consciously. Dada is terrible: he doesn't soften over the defeats of intelligence.' And if you asked yourself why, in the end, you got busy, wrote, said something, the answer was: «To show that opposite things can be done together, in a fresh breath. I'm against action, for the constant contradiction, but also for the affirmation, I'm neither for one thing nor the other, and I don't explain anything». We went, on this line, to the end. «If there is a system in the absence of a system - writes Tzara - I never apply it. Which means I'm lying. I lie by applying it, I lie by not applying it, I lie by writing that I lie because I don't lie". Freedom, «the scream of contracted colors, the embrace of opposites and all contradictions, of grotesques, of inconsequences – Life» – was what Dadaism proclaimed .

The madness of surrealism (“the lugubrious game” by Salvator Dalì, 1929)

Thus it was not a question of launching a new art in the proper sense : Futurism, Cubism and the like were considered by the Dadaists as academies, and derided. Art was valuable to the Dadaists as a tool to ironize, upset, disturb or evoke a chaotic or abstract element. Hence expressions in poetry and painting, which if on the one hand anticipated abstract art, on the other implemented the method of the absurd. Like a Dadaist painting Picabia exhibited a reproduction of the Mona Lisa with an added mustache. A demon of the elementary and chaotic pervaded Hans Arp's black and white woodcuts. A Dadaist poem consisted of the simple repetition, throughout a page, of the word: "Scream." Another, in words mixed with arithmetic operations. Here is the recipe for making a Dadaist poem: «Take a newspaper, some scissors and choose an article having the length you intend to give to your poem. Cut out the article and then, accurately, all the words that compose it. Put the clippings in a bag. Shake gently. Extract each word one after the other. Copy them conscientiously, in the order they came out of the bag. The poem will resemble you – and here you are a writer of infinite originality and of an exquisite sensibility, though not yet understood by the common man.' There was, of course, a joke in this – but also something more. Paradoxically, it meant that, in absolute freedom, one can find oneself everywhere, and on an aesthetic level one can be able to animate even the most casual and chaotic associations, taking to the limit what the French symbolists had called the "alchemy of the verb" . But even strange moments of illumination did not leave out of some Dadaist compositions.

As we said, it was not possible to stay long in similar positions . Strictly speaking, they did not admit a "later", but either ending up like Nietzsche, or throwing themselves into the fray, ceasing to write, living simply, as did a Rimbaud. Dada burned out, and we had to move on to something else. The so-called "surrealism" derived to a large extent from Dadaism, however taking a problematic path: it became interested in psychoanalysis, turned towards the unconscious and mistook regressive forms of mere mental associations and confused sensations of the strange and disturbing you arouse with the technique of the incoherent. Poets, such as Aragon, Soupault, Bréton, who had already adhered to Dadaism, today have made a name for themselves and have returned more or less to normality. Tristan Tzara has retired from the stage. What appeared analogous to Dadaism after the Second World War, in different contexts, is a much more superficial phenomenon, it attests more to a renunciation and a collapse than an eruptive force and that radicalism which in some cases, after the dissolution, could even start towards a positive transformation of being.