

# The “Mama of Dada”: Emmy Hennings and the Gender of Poetic Rebellion

*The world lies outside there, life roars there.*

*There men may go where they will.*

*Once we also belonged to them.*

*And now we are forgotten and sunk into oblivion.*

-“Prison,” Emmy Hennings, 1916

trans. Thomas F. Rugh

The Dada “movement” of early twentieth century Europe rejected structure and celebrated the mad chaos of life and art in the midst of World War I. Because Dada was primarily a male-dominated arena, however, the very hierarchies Dadaists professed to reject actually existed within their own art and society—most explicitly in the body of written work that survives today. By focusing on the poetry born from Zurich’s Cabaret Voltaire, this investigation seeks to explore the variances in style that exist between the male members of Zurich Dada, and the mysterious, oft-neglected matriarch of Cabaret Voltaire, Ms. Emmy Hennings. I posit that these variances may reveal much about how gender influenced the manipulation of language in a counter-culture context such as Dada, and how the performative

qualities of Dada poetics further complicated gender roles and power dynamics in the Cabaret Voltaire.

Before beginning a critical analysis of the text, it is important to first acknowledge, as Bonnie Kime Scott does in her introduction to The Gender of Modernism, the most basic difference between male and female artists of the early twentieth century: “male participants were quoted, anthologized, taught, and consecrated as geniuses...[while] Women writers were often deemed old-fashioned or of merely anecdotal interest” (2). Modernist critics have largely overlooked the significance of Hennings’ poetry and instead make tangential reference to her work and “usually focus on her personality” (Rugh 2). The discrepancy in documentation between Hennings and her male counterparts existed during the group’s early days as well—husband and “co-founder” Hugo Ball didn’t credit his wife along with the other performers—Huelsenbeck, Janco, Tzara and Arp—although newspaper reviews cited her as an integral part of formative performances (Gordon 13). The dearth of scholarly and artistic attention then, becomes a kind of evidence in and of itself, and the first marked gap between Hennings and her male peers.

Perhaps this general disregard for her work finds its root in the simple fact that Hennings’ poems were dissimilar enough to almost relegate them to an altogether different category of art. In her book, Chance: A Perspective on Dada, Harriet Watts writes of famous manifesto-ist Tristan Tzara:

[He] insists upon finding some way of circumventing the mind’s tyranny

of organization, the categorical cages of reason...the spontaneous moment

when all exists in a state of chaos, untouched by the mind's inevitable

imposition of order, is the instant that Tzara tries to perpetuate in the work of art. (139)

When that frame of Dada “method” is applied to the opening quote from Hennings’ poem, “Prison,” the inconsistency between theory and practice is readily apparent. Her partner, Hugo Ball, also strove to sever the link between order and art, “I have invented a new genre of poems,” he wrote, “*Verse ohne worte* (poems without words)” (qtd. in Riese 526). In every record of Dada performance I have found, from film to text to secondary reportage, this rejection of linear language structures is universally consistent—except of course, in Hennings’ poetry.

### ***Gefängnis* (Prison): A close reading in translation**

The original program of the first Cabaret Voltaire performance in July of 1916, lists Emmy Hennings reading several poems, among them, “Prison.” In one of the most comprehensive articles on Hennings, Thomas F. Rugh surmises that the poem pre-dates her participation with Dada, and was most likely inspired by her earlier prison term (3). Dada’s rejection of the non-spontaneous (though not always literal, of course, as their documentation and publications make clear) is not evidenced in this work then, and its clarity suggests it is the product of careful crafting and revision.

As Rugh dutifully points out, the poem voices a dark pessimism that certainly served as the undercurrent for the Dada movement, but the affiliation with Dada as a whole ends there. The poem is rife with sensuality and longing, two elements that are generally absent from much Dada writing: “Often quiver our unknissed lips. / Swooning loneliness, you are supreme”

(ll. 3-4). Read literally, the piece is about imprisonment, deprivation of comfort and freedom, and looking forward to the release of death. Each line is end-stopped with punctuation—with the exception of the bitter urgency of lines twelve and thirteen: “And have nothing more to lose / But our life, which God gave us.” Overall, the poem has a slow, lurching feel where each word carries its own sluggish weight—very different from the hummingbird-like quality of Ball’s consonant driven, translation resistant “poems”: “gadjama tuffm I zimzalla binban gligla wowolimai bin beri ban / o katalominai rhinozerossola hopsamen laulitalomini hoooo” (ll. 4-5). Even the most cursory, literal reading of “Prison” would distance it from the Dada body of work—it is too clear, too heartfelt, too intent on understanding a problem while simultaneously acknowledging its cause. It is the kind of poem Tzara disparages in his manifesto when he rails:

Writers who like to moralize and discuss or ameliorate psychological bases have, apart from a secret wish to win, a ridiculous knowledge of life, which they have classified, parceled out, canalized; they are determined to see its categories dance when they beat time. (“Cabaret” 47)

More interesting than the previous superficial reading and comparison, however, is a look at this poem through the eyes of a feminist critical reader, a method broadly defined by Lois Tyson in her comprehensive essay of feminist literary criticism as seeking to “increase our understanding of women’s experience, both in the past and present, and promote our appreciation of women’s value in the world” (100). In this new frame, “Prison” becomes less a literal work about Hennings’ time behind bars, and instead, a meditation on her role as a female artist in a male-dominated arena.

The textual evidence corroborates a feminist reading, if one replaces the literal meaning of prison with a psychological state of mind: “There outside lies the world, there roars life” (l. 5). This could refer to her relative outsider status as a female writer even though she had long

practiced her craft, since, as Renee Riese Hubert writes, “Hennings had published poetry as early as 1913” (520). The poem continues, “There men go where they will. / Once we belonged to them. / And now we are forgotten and sunk into oblivion” (ll. 6-8). A somewhat prophetic passage, these three lines could refer to the fraternity and relative exclusion of the modernist art world, detailed by Andreas Huyssen as a “suppression of everything that might be threatening to the rigorous demands of being modern and at the edge of time”—namely, femininity, a concept patriarchally identified as ancient and cyclically located within time (55).

The next three lines continue the motif of creative suppression and frustration: “At night we dream miracles on narrow beds. / By day we go around like frightened animals. / We peep out sadly through the iron grating” (ll. 9-11). Implying a total exclusion from male society, sexually (“narrow beds”) and socially (“we go around like frightened animals”), the “iron grating” could be interpreted thusly as a kind of turn-of-the-century artistic glass ceiling, prohibiting her entrance to the male world. The last three lines detail the darkness noted by Rugh, but could also serve as an allusion for Hennings’ brief career as a female artist in a male world: “Only death lies in our hand. / The freedom no one can take from us: / To go into the unknown land” (14-16).<sup>[1]</sup> The “unknown land” is literally death, but also, perhaps, Dada and the Cabaret Voltaire.

### **The Problem of *Verse Ohne Worte***

Mel Gordon writes, in his introduction to the section on Zurich in Dada Performance, “Cabaret Voltaire produced few literary texts” (37). The few texts that do exist do not lend themselves to the kind of analysis performed above. In fact, several of them even challenge the reader who is searching for simple comprehension, like Ball’s sound poems, which he

inaugurated on that first July night wearing a homemade, cylindrical costume. In the film Germany-Dada: An alphabet of German Dadaism, an aged Richard Huelsenbeck, one of the original members of the Zurich group, reads his work in German while English subtitles scroll across the screen in very small print. The work of several other Dada poets is read, including the aforementioned sound poetry, whose content is as indecipherable to the listener as Huelsenbeck's performance is to the English speaker.

How then, can one compare the obviously disparate work of Hennings and her fellow (male) artists? This is the question I kept butting up against during my initial research for my annotated bibliography, and this is the question that has fueled much of my further exploration. Robert J. Belton's commentary on the gender of discourse in Surrealism begins to articulate my frustrations when he discusses the problem of interpreting female art in a patriarchal, pseudo-objective context: "the work of female artists requires a double interpretation...a forked tongue. This tongue is both that of the artists involved and that of the interpretive community" (51).

The interpretive community of Dada poetics however, is not an easily defined or accessible milieu in which to begin linguistic discourse. Our lack of texts, the Dadists' scorn for criticism and general contextualization, and their antagonistic relationship with the basic requirements of ordinary communication don't so much create problems with literary interpretation as comprehensively inhibit the entire process. In his essay on Dada Language, Robert A. Varisco describes Tzara's defining attitude towards communication thusly:

His intentions were anarchist and twofold. He was exercising anarchism against the tyranny of realism and naturalism in the arts, yes, but he was also rebelling against

*communication* and, further, the possibility of communicating Dada creativity and desperation to the rest of the world. (282)

My method then, in comparing the actual texts of the Cabaret Voltaire, will be to look at how each piece *can* be defined in terms of traditionally gendered language systems. Borrowing adjectives from Leonard Shlain's provocative (though certainly not flawless) text, The Alphabet Versus the Goddess, I'll define, for the purposes of this discussion, traditional masculine thinking in language as "linear, sequential, reductionist, and abstract," and feminine thinking as "holistic, simultaneous, synthetic, and concrete" (1). Using this terminology, I'll redefine—possibly re-*gender*—Hennings' writing and have a new frame of reference to compare and contrast her work with that of her male peers.[\[2\]](#)

## **A Gendered Comparison**

In "Prison," one of the explicit themes is decidedly abstract—death. It is referred to at the beginning and end of the poem, not as a natural state of decomposition and change, but as a destination the speaker is pulling herself towards, at the end of a "cable of hope" (1). Making death the aim of the poem highlights a linear structure—the speaker takes the reader through a sequential, linear progression of thought that focuses on death as an imminent event. As mentioned in the earlier analysis, Hennings also uses punctuation to draw focus to each word by end stopping lines with punctuation. This process is described by Shlain thusly, "break[ing] each sentence down into its component words, or each word down to its component letters, is a prime example of *reductionism*" (5). He goes on to describe the alphabet itself as a fundamentally abstract tool since letters are images which convey no inherent, concrete meaning other than

those meanings with which we imbue their specific arrangements (words) and the subsequent groups of said arrangements (sentences).

Needless to say, by this definition all written language is inherently reductionist, and so, inherently masculine. This is getting to the heart of Shlain's thesis, but for the purposes of this paper, I'm unwilling to support such a radical claim. Instead, I'd like to look at how the poetry of male Dada artists sought (intentionally or not) to free language from reductionism and abstraction and to return to a concrete, "primitive" language structure.

An example of traditionally feminine language characteristics in Dada poetics is *simultaneity*. Defined by Shlain as basically the opposite of reductionist, simultaneous perception of language is more holistic, and thus, more traditionally feminine. The Dada male artists collaborated on more than one occasion to create what Ball defined as a simultaneous poem: "a contrapuntal recitative in which three or more voices speak, sing, whistle, etc., at the same time in such a way that the elegiac, humorous, or bizarre content of the piece is brought out by these combinations" (qtd. in "Cabaret" 37). The main point here is that the process of combination communicates content; the combination is in fact *necessary* to communicating the specific content.

In Varisco's discussion of Tzara's anarchist view of language and theatrical communication, he makes reference to Tzara's *The Gas Heart*, a play whose characters are mostly devoid of human identifiers, and are instead characterized by the most basic and *concrete* physical descriptions: Gas Heart, Eye, Mouth, Nose, Ear, Neck, and Eyebrow. As Varisco writes, "Alienating audience, meaning, and authority in this way was the first step in overturning traditional theater...identity is rejected as an ordering and controlling tool" (286). As identity and



structured language are rejected, so then are the resulting systems of hierarchy, which are, as Claude Levi-Strauss writes, “the only phenomenon which, always and in all parts of the world, seems to be linked to the appearance of writing...is the establishment of hierarchical societies” (qtd. in Shlain 3). This rejection of order and hierarchy seems in accordance with a writer of feminine language values, a writer removed from and critical of dominant male society.

### **Appropriation vs. Navigation: Various Motivated Rebellions**

As the above analysis begins to illustrate, it is definitely *possible* to view Emmy Hennings and the other artists of Zurich Dada as a kind of gender-reversed community. Their status as counter-culture artists would, on first examination, seem to substantiate this logic, as I originally thought in my early research. Because Dada was so anti-society, the gender roles within their own sub-society were neatly reversed, making male poetics feminine and Hennings’ writing masculine—right?

Wrong. The above discussion is useful as a means of providing comparison between Hennings and her peers, but to simplify the dynamics at work in Dada poetics as a mere reversal of gender would be a serious misstep—as Huyssen writes, “the wholesale theorization of modernist writing as feminine simply ignores the powerful masculine and misogynist current within the trajectory of modernism” (49). Now that the main differences between Hennings’ linear, traditional work and the anarchist work of Ball, Tzara, and the others have been outlined, the original question remains—why the great disparity? Or, maybe more directly, if such a variance existed between Hennings and her contemporaries, why is she not only included as a member of the group, but even referred to as one of the co-parents of the entire movement? The fact that Hennings works are uniquely coherent among poems attributed to Dadists, but at the

same time they are listed as part of the Dada “canon,” indicates a tension in the global Dada worldview related to a greater question of men and women's roles in modernist art. One way of understanding this question may be to look to traditional gender roles once again, and see how Dada can be viewed as a point of convergence between female navigation of the male art world, and male appropriation of feminine values.

Some traditional roles occupied by women in early 20<sup>th</sup> century performance share a natural linkage with the nature of Dada performance. Cabaret Voltaire after all, found its template in the variety show inspired cabarets of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These cabarets emphasized a level of play that traditional theatres lacked and sought to “reclaim the theatre for sensuality and mirth” (Senelick 8). Like the Dadaists of Cabaret Voltaire, “the first propagandists for cabaret wanted the spectator to smoke, drink, comment, and join in the chorus” (8). The casual elements of cabaret invited a broader audience to participate, and by staying open late to audiences of both sexes, cabaret was especially liberating to “young urban women of all classes [who] demonstrated their yearning for personal freedom and self-expression in...late-night cabarets” (Glenn 70).

The importance of cabaret for women as a means of finding identity in an artistic scene is twofold; women participated meaningfully in cabaret as both spectator and performer, and, in doing so, found a kind of self-reflection that was not a part of many earlier theatrical traditions. As Alisa Solomon notes in her introduction to Re-dressing the Canon: Essays on Theater and Gender, dramatic traditions in Western theater frequently excluded women from participation while simultaneously relying on female impersonation: “women were not deemed worthy of representing themselves, or, frequently, of spectating” (2). Female performance then,

especially in early European cabarets, was a means of gaining entrance to the ongoing tradition of performance and play that limited inclusion to men and masculine tradition.

In cabaret also, “the components of pop art were to be the medium of high art” (Senelick 8). This destruction of barriers between “pop” and “art” was a goal of the Dada cabaret, but this aim becomes complicated when considered in the context of Huyssen’s discussion about the gendering of pop art as feminine in modern art, and “modernism’s fear of being sphinxed”:

The nightmare of being devoured by mass culture...is the fear of the modernist artist, who tries to stake out his territory by fortifying the boundaries between genuine art and inauthentic mass culture...the problem is not the desire to differentiate between forms of high art and depraved forms of mass culture...the problem is rather the persistent gendering as feminine of that which is devalued. (53)

Zurich Dada’s use of cabaret then, could be viewed as a move to embrace femininity in art, but in the critical feminist lens of this paper, it can also be said to be a mass *appropriation* of traditionally feminine values for an esoteric art system whose “art is for everyone” rhetoric belied an exclusive shared vocabulary of resistance.

This vocabulary of resistance—the ways in which Dada artists sought to free themselves from the traditional language structures of their time—is a system Hennings never really employed in her work. I posit that this is because one needs to first be a part of something in order to reject it, and perhaps, due to the relative outsider status exemplified in Hennings’ work,

she never felt as if she'd "arrived" in the traditional world of theatrical poetry and performance. Dadaist poetry then, in its rejection of traditional order and structure, wasn't necessarily forming an entirely new mindset, but instead, adopting a worldview already well known to women artists who, by virtue of the cultural values assigned to their biology, were already natural outsiders to the modernist art world.

To their credit, the male artists of Zurich Dada most likely had the best of intentions. Their casting off of the normal pretenses assigned to art was indeed a rejection of the male privilege that separated them from Hennings—whether they acknowledged their inherent privilege or not. They claimed few ideals and tenets in their work, instead preferring a broad, and generalized rebellious attitude of bring art to the "people," but I argue that ideals *did* in fact exist: they were just ascribed as "universal" because they came from a dominant—*male*—perspective. By contrast, Hennings stuck with her established commitment to poetry and performance, making her participation in the movement less a manifestation of her dissatisfaction, but simply another context for her to work in: "[while] Ball may have encouraged her to adopt a new style, he by no means awakened her talent as a writer" (520).

Ignoring the influence of traditionally gendered attitudes when attempting to understand the variances in content and form of Dada poetry would limit the complexity of rebellion evidenced by the work that has survived. Both Hennings and her contemporaries, by the generous definitions they used, were certainly "DADA." They created work that was not already being created—in the case of Tzara and Ball, this meant non-linear, highly experimental work, but for Hennings, the simple act of creating art as a sexual minority was a continuous act of rebellion, no matter how precise her rhyme structure, how sequential her logic.

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# **Appendix: the translation of “Prison”**

## **analyzed in this paper**

On the cable of hope we pull ourselves towards death.

Envious of prison yards are the ravens.

Often quiver our unkissed lips.

Swooning loneliness, you are supreme.

There outside lies the world, there roars life.

There men may go where they will.

Once we also belonged to them.

And now we are forgotten and sunk into oblivion.

At night we dream miracles on narrow beds.

By day we go around like frightened animals.

We peep out sadly through the iron grating.

And have nothing more to lose

But our life, which God gave us.

Only death lies in our hand.

The freedom no one can take from us:

To go into the unknown land.

-1916

trans. Rugh, Woman's Art Journal.

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1 Hennings also published a prose autobiography titled *Gefängnis* or *Prison* (Berlin: Erich Reiss, 1919).

2 The author acknowledges the potential flaw in making such a broad generalization/definition of gender as it relates to language. This step in logic is meant to further the discussion of how female artists operate differently than male artists in counter-culture art movement and give a means of discourse for an otherwise discourse resistant language system. The author would also like to make clear that gender, as defined in this paper, relates to masculine and/or feminine traits, not biologically assigned sex.