

Introduction

Die Flucht aus der Zeit, Hugo Ball's diaries for the years 1910–21, has long enjoyed the reputation of one of the seminal documents of the dada movement. Hans Richter has written that of all the dadaists only Ball has so precisely expressed the inner conflicts of that period, and that he knows “of no better source of evidence of the moral and philosophical origins of the Dada revolt.”^{1*} And Hans Arp noted that “in this book stand the most significant words that have thus far been written about Dada.”² Ball is widely acknowledged as a major dada figure in his own right. His founding of the Cabaret Voltaire in February 1916 initiated the Zurich movement, and his involvement with sound poetry and with the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total art work) left a telling mark in dada circles. And yet, despite this reputation, Ball remains a shadowy figure in histories of dadaism, and his book is known only through those fragments that deal directly with the dada years.³ The major part of *Die Flucht aus der Zeit* is rarely studied (it has never previously appeared in English translation), and in consequence, Ball's true personality is little understood.

Ball was, to be sure, elusive by nature. When Richter recalled: “I never understood Hugo Ball very well,”⁴ he could have been speaking for almost all his contemporaries—and indeed, for most students of dadaism—for there is considerable difficulty in marshaling Ball's diverse aspects for analy-

* Superior numbers refer to the notes which start on p. xliii.

sis. In the course of his life he was a theatrical innovator, a peripatetic saloon pianist, a political activist, a modernist poet, and a student of early Christianity. He was as familiar with Bakunin's writings as with those of Dionysius the Areopagite and could be equally authoritative on vaudeville and on the German Reformation.

Ball's diaries do not offer any simple key to the enigma that he was. They are disjointed, sometimes obscure, and infuriatingly silent on some crucial issues. But they are also one of the finest products of the dada movement: a searching examination of a highly sensitive writer's mental state and philosophical development over momentous years in recent history. And they are the closest we can hope to come to Hugo Ball.

Ball had kept diaries since childhood. In 1924, when he began to revise for publication his entries for the years 1910–21, many of the events he had recorded were remote, not only in time, but more importantly in spirit; for Ball's image of himself in the last years of his life was very different from that of the youthful radical. In July 1920 he had adopted the Catholic faith and henceforward regarded all his activities, present and past, in the light of his religious conversion. In 1924 he rewrote his 1919 book on German culture, *Zur Kritik der deutschen Intelligenz* (Toward a Critique of the German Mentality), to conform to his new standards. He could do no less when reviewing his old diaries in that same year. Indeed, it was especially important to Ball that his life's work display a coherence and continuity in its philosophical development. His last years were by no means easy ones, either materially or spiritually; his work on *Die Flucht aus der Zeit* became something akin to an act of exorcism through which he hoped finally to achieve self-understanding and mental equilibrium. That this was not achieved in the work is both its fascination and its difficulty. Strangely, it does not read like a public document at all, despite Ball's considerable revisions to make it so; it is more like a private confession intended to give meaning to his earlier periods of aesthetic and political rebellion. We know that Ball expurgated much material,⁵ but this in itself does not make his book an unreliable record, for it was designed to illuminate his career, not to falsify it deliberately—or, certainly, to glamorize it. True, the absence of most personal details effects a picture of a Ball rather more sober than he must have been in daily life, despite his renowned “abbé-like earnestness.”⁶ But he was mainly interested in chronicling his search for a philosophical “method”; and the importance of this book is its obsessively detailed account of Ball's path to this goal. Its story is of a man extremely sensitive to the currents of his time and carried in their wake. He forces current attitudes in art and politics to ever extreme conclusions until he joins the vanguard crest

—only to discover that his “method” always eludes him. Finally he outruns himself, and flees from time itself.

The significance of the image Ball presents in “trying to unify and clear away the chaos of all these years”⁷ is examined later in this introduction. It should be noted, however, that this account is not intended to encompass all that Ball stands for. The issues that face us when considering his multipatterned career are far more numerous than can be discussed here. I seek mainly to amplify the gaps in Ball’s own representation of himself in *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*, with special reference to the context of his dadaism. Ball was active as a dadaist for only some nine months of the eleven years he chronicles, but these nine months have a far greater significance than their duration suggests. His dadaism was, in a very literal sense, central to his development; but dadaism does not represent its apogee—this came in his religion, which was in an important sense an eccentric consummation of his earlier unorthodoxy. His dadaism was, however, at once the climax of his commitment to an activist aesthetic and the point beyond which he dared not move. His later life, and the *Flucht* itself, might be understood as a personal act of explanation for what happened to him in Zurich in 1916 and 1917. And if dadaism is central to Ball’s development, Ball no less is crucial to our understanding of the dada movement, its contradictions and complexities, since he, more than anyone else, deserves to be thought of as its source.

I. Before Dada

Hugo Ball was born in the Rhineland Palatinate of Germany, in the town of Pirmasens, close to the French border, on February 22, 1886, the fifth of six children of Carl and Josephine Ball, devout Catholics in a predominantly Protestant community.⁸ His upbringing, from the little we know of it, seems to have been emotional and rather unstable: Ball’s head was filled with stories of saints and angels, and even at an early age he was troubled with the issues of his faith. At the age of fifteen he was apprenticed to a local leather factory (his father was a shoe salesman), since his parents were unable, or unwilling, to finance his further education despite his already obsessive interests in music and poetry. It was only in his spare time, therefore, that Ball was able to continue his studies, and during the four years spent at the factory he wrote his first extant poems and plays. One of these plays, *Der Henker von Brescia* (The Hangman of Brescia), begun when Ball was only seventeen, was later refined and published in 1914. At this early juncture in his life, Ball discovered the writings of Nietzsche; they

were to be crucial to his future development. But the strains of a double life—of tedious work and intensive study—brought on a nervous breakdown. His parents now allowed him to return to formal education.

In September of 1905, at the age of nineteen, Ball entered the Gymnasium in nearby Zweibrücken, where he succeeded in completing a three-year course in one year. Thus qualified, he was able to fulfill his ambition of entering a university. He went to Munich to study philosophy and became even more deeply absorbed in Nietzsche's work, while also beginning to read political theory, especially the literature of Communism and anarchism. Ball spent the academic year 1907/1908 in Heidelberg, and there he seems to have come in contact with anti-Semitic ideas: he had an operation to straighten his nose after having been mistakenly taken for a Jew, and he wrote the drama *Die Nase des Michelangelo* (Michelangelo's Nose), in which the sculptor Torrigiano is a symbolic victim of establishment persecution. Already Ball was casting himself in the role of an outsider. Back in Munich, he began preparing his dissertation—a study of Nietzsche seen as the renewer of German thought. So partisan was Ball's defense of Nietzsche's iconoclasm that it has been suggested that he found in it a model of action for his later life.⁹ Certainly by 1910 Ball's own rebellion against traditional and rational behavior was decisive enough to cause him to leave Munich (without his degree) for Berlin and for the theater, which seemed to him the perfect mode of expression for radical ideas.

In Munich, Ball had become friendly with the expressionist playwrights Herbert Eulenberg and Frank Wedekind. In Berlin he was to become a full member of the rootless expressionist world. He entered Max Reinhardt's drama school, first as a student and then as a part-time teacher, but it soon became obvious that he was unsuited to be an actor. Instead he concentrated on critical writing and stage management, and in the autumn of 1911 he accepted a post as stage manager at the Stadttheater in Plauen. In that same year *Die Nase des Michelangelo* was published by the Rowohlt Verlag in Munich, which gave him a five-year contract to write plays. But Ball seems to have done little new writing; *Der Henker von Brescia* was the only other play by Ball that Rowohlt published. He was concentrating instead on promotional and educational activities.

Around September of 1912 he returned to Munich, disappointed by the unreceptiveness of Plauen society to his reformative ideas, and by June of the following year was employed as *Dramaturg*—critic-playwright—at the Munich Kammerspiele.* During his theater period, we know that Ball

* This was very much in the nature of an experimental theater, with uncertain resources, and Ball's position was not a secure one.

directed productions of Gerhart Hauptmann's *Helios*, Franz Blei's *Die Welle* (The Wave), and Leonid Andreev's *Life of Man*, as well as contributing poems and articles to the periodicals *Die Aktion*, *Die Neue Kunst*, and *Phöbus*. But however intense, and even fanatical, was Ball's obsession with the theater, he seems to have had difficulty coping with its daily routines. Although he met and knew other expressionist writers such as Carl Sternheim, Leonhard Frank, Franz Blei, and Alfred Henschke, in general his social contacts were far from successful. His dreams of aesthetic regeneration through theater proved more difficult than he had imagined, and instead of giving him direction, Ball's work in the theater increased his restlessness. He did, however, find close sympathy with four people, all of whom were to be crucial to his career.

Ball met Emmy Hennings, his future wife, at the Café Simplizissimus in Munich in the autumn of 1913. A year older than Ball, she was an itinerant actress and night-club performer with a highly unorthodox background that had included travels in Russia and Hungary, a broken marriage, a term of imprisonment, and a suspected homicide. Very different in temperament from the withdrawn Ball, she was to remain his companion (though not, one suspects, always as faithful as her accounts suggest)* right up to his death, some fourteen years later.

In Munich in 1912 Ball had met Richard Huelsenbeck, six years his junior, and founded what was likewise a long-lasting friendship. They shared common interests in literature and in activism, and shortly before Ball left Germany, he collaborated with Huelsenbeck in an *Expressionistabend* (expressionist soiree) in Berlin's Harmoniumsaal, on May 12, 1915, which was organized to show German solidarity with Marinetti and futurist experimentation. This was the prelude for their close cooperation in Zurich, at the Cabaret Voltaire, a year later.

In 1913 also Ball met Hans Leybold, a young student radical only twenty years old, who introduced Ball to Franz Pfemfert's left-wing journal, *Die Aktion*. But Ball and Leybold favored revolt that was more aesthetic than political (although in expressionism the two are not easily separated), and in October 1913 they formed their own, more experimental, mouthpiece, *Revolution*. The first issue was confiscated by the censors.† Four more numbers appeared, the last in September 1914. Soon afterward Leybold

* Hans Richter tells an amusing story of Emmy's affair in Zurich with a Spanish journalist, Julio Alvarez del Vayo, when Ball followed the couple around with a revolver in his pocket. Tzara and Richter finally persuaded Emmy to return to Ball (*Dada: Art and Anti-Art* [bibl. 158], p. 70).

† Ball's poem "Der Henker" (The Hangman; bibl. 66) was judged obscene, according to a notice appearing in the third issue of *Revolution*.

was drafted into the army and died on active service in Belgium. His example of vociferous committed rebelliousness, and early death, had no small influence on his elder colleague.

The fourth of these seminal figures was Wassily Kandinsky, the greatest of the Munich circle of expressionist painters, whom Ball met in 1912. Ball's relationship to Kandinsky—of which little is known—seems to have been in the nature of admiration for the creator of an aesthetic philosophy that saw spiritual regeneration emerging from the hands of artists. Ball called Kandinsky a priest rather than a painter, and he remained in debt to his example. With members of Kandinsky's Blaue Reiter (Blue Rider) circle, Ball formulated plans for a revolutionary Künstlertheater that sought to combine all artistic media in an emotional *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

In October 1913, Ball visited Dresden (to make an unsuccessful application for directorship of its Stadttheater) and was deeply affected by an exhibition of futurist paintings there. He found in futurism a heightened representation of the modern and mechanistic world—a representation he applauded for its truthfulness but abhorred for its content.¹⁰ He felt his task was to change materialism; and with the outbreak of war his conviction of the need for a new spiritualism deepened. His writings denounced rationality and the machine as being responsible for the destruction of Europe.

But first Ball volunteered for military service, three times—only to be rejected on medical grounds on each occasion, although he was never given a permanent discharge. Impatient to see the war, he made a private visit to Belgium in November 1914 and was so appalled by what he saw that he abandoned his theatrical career, which now seemed too far removed from reality. Instead of returning to Munich, he went to Berlin and obtained a job as editor of the paper *Zeit im Bild*. There he was joined by Emmy Hennings, recently released from imprisonment for forging passports for those who wished to avoid military service. In the next six months Ball immersed himself in political philosophy, especially in the writings of Kropotkin and Bakunin, but he began also what he called his "fantastic novel," which was to occupy him on and off for the next six years. On New Year's Day 1915, he was involved in an antiwar protest in Berlin. Now unwilling to participate in what he understood as German folly, he determined to flee the country. By the end of May, with Emmy Hennings, he was in Zurich, carrying forged papers and living under an assumed name.

Ball, or "Willibald" (which was now his pseudonym), spent the first seven or eight months in Zurich in an abject poverty and disillusionment hardly hinted at in his published diaries. Unable to obtain regular employment, because they were unregistered aliens, he and Emmy were reduced

to menial part-time jobs while Ball tried to continue his studies. The Swiss police discovered that he was receiving mail under two names, and probably fearing extradition, he fled to Geneva to escape them. On his return to Zurich, he was imprisoned for twelve days until his true identity was established—and then released because the Swiss authorities were not concerned about his avoiding German military service. By August, however, Emmy and Ball were destitute—forced to sell their few possessions, sleep in the open, and scavenge for food. An obscure and metaphorical diary entry at the beginning of October is the only indication of what was very likely a suicide attempt around that time (Zurich.X.1915).^{*} Soon afterward Ball was able to find employment as a pianist for a vaudeville troupe called the Flamingo. He destroyed a draft notice just received from Germany, assumed another pseudonym, “Géry,” and accompanied the troupe in an engagement at Basel. Through these early months in Switzerland, Ball began drawing up plans for his book on German culture (to be published as *Zur Kritik der deutschen Intelligenz*), in which he vehemently attacked Prussian militarism. He was now a convinced pacifist, but he could no longer believe in the utopianism of the anarchist movement. He became more interested in mysticism and experimented with narcotics. His obsession with fantasy in language led him to begin a correspondence with the futurist leader, Marinetti, from whom he received a copy of *Parole in Libertà* (Free Words), and he published poetry in René Schickele’s journal, *Die Weissen Blätter*, and in the Zurich periodical *Der Revoluzzer*. But by the end of 1915 the strains of a double career were telling on his physical and mental health; he left the Flamingo troupe and returned to Zurich.

II. Zurich in 1916

Those whom we now call dadaists were by no means the only antitraditionalist intellectuals in Zurich during the period of the war. Zurich in 1916 was a center for expatriates of many countries and of many different persuasions. The most prominent of these were strongly individualistic—and any discussion of groups or circles must keep this in mind—but it is useful to distinguish at least the principal constellations. Four main groups have been proposed: Russian Socialist exiles, including Lenin and Zinoviev; established writers, such as Wedekind; pacifist German expressionists, Leonhard

^{*} According to Emmy Hennings (*Ruf und Echo* [bibl. 109], p. 67), Ball first took a formal coat he had been saving in the hope of getting a waiter’s job and started to throw it into Lake Zurich. After a policeman had intervened, they tried to sell this coat in a night club, and it was there that they encountered the Flamingo troupe.

Frank, Ludwig Rubiner, et al.; and the younger German and East European expatriates who formed the dadaists.¹¹ The membership of these groupings is to a considerable extent interchangeable. Only the dadaists came to separate their group by name;¹² and even this did not isolate them from the others. The Café de la Terrasse, for example, was popular with many. Lenin played chess there. Tzara claims to have discovered the word "dada" there. And it was at this spot that Hans Richter had arranged to meet his expressionist friends, the poets Ferdinand Hardekopf and Albert Ehrenstein, after they were freed from war duties. And of course, others outside the dadaist group attended the Cabaret Voltaire, for this was its purpose: to serve the broader intellectual community Zurich now represented. Nor was traffic restricted to Zurich alone. There was contact especially with Bern, a city also full of wartime refugees—spies as well as intellectuals—where in 1917 Rubiner founded the political broadsheet *Zeit-Echo* and Heinrich Schlieben *Die Freie Zeitung*, for which Richter designed the letterhead and for which Ball worked as a political journalist.

Given the loose and fluctuating nature of the community, who exactly constituted Zurich dada is not so anomalous a question as it seems. Besides the five principal founding members (Ball, Arp, Janco, Tzara, Huelsenbeck), we recognize participating girl friends (Emmy Hennings and Sophie Taeuber), Janco's brother Georges, the mysterious Walter Serner (who had been producing a modernist journal, *Sirius*, before dada started), and the latecomers Hans Richter and Viking Eggeling,¹³ and, just as Zurich dada was ending, Francis Picabia, en route to Paris. But there were others too: foreign painters, writers, musicians, the "Laban girls" (from Rudolf von Laban's ballet school), and at this fringe level of the group, where dada ended and Zurich at large began is sometimes hard to determine. But we can agree on the five principals, and before proceeding further it is useful to tell something of the backgrounds and characters of the protagonists around whom Ball's dadaism was enacted.

Huelsenbeck, as we have seen, had met Ball in Germany in 1912. Born in Frankenau in 1892, he studied medicine and became interested in psychology, to which he was to return after his dada years. Angry and insolent in the public soirees, he was, with Tzara, the most pugnacious of the core dadaists, and his obsession with primitivism in language was to be central to their work. Like Ball, to whom he was closest in interests and style of writing,* Huelsenbeck brought to dada an involvement with specifically German problems, upon which he believed dada could exert a positive cul-

* Ball once suggested that each one draw up a glossary of his most common phrases so that the other would not use them (15.VI.1916).

tural influence as a necessary intellectual shock, against the background of a world war.

Tzara, though easily the match of Huelsenbeck in provocative potential, was small, sharp, and witty where Huelsenbeck was heavy and insolent. Born Sami Rosenstock in Moinesti, Rumania, in 1896, he possessed prodigious energy and enthusiasm. At the age of sixteen he was in Bucharest, the Paris of the Balkans, calling himself S. Samyro and, with Marcel Janco, contributing to the modernist journal *Simbolul*, run by Ion Vinea. In Zurich in 1916 he soon became the tireless impresario of dadaism; making contacts with French and Italian artists, he brought futurist techniques to the movement; he assumed full responsibility for editing the magazine *Dada*; ambitious and aggressive, he was the most prolific member of Zurich dada.

Janco, born in Bucharest in 1895, was closest to Tzara in background and his natural colleague. If there were two separate camps within Zurich dada, Tzara and Janco formed one, Ball and Huelsenbeck the other. But it was not so simple as that. Janco was considerably quieter than Tzara and seems to have avoided a partisan stance. He was close to Ball at times; and Huelsenbeck has written warmly of him, as "a tall friendly man from Rumania . . . a man of many talents, but without arrogance and never interfering with other persons' ambitions."¹⁴ (Unlike Tzara, Huelsenbeck seems to be implying.) Before coming to Zurich, Janco had been a student of architecture for four years and in painting was firmly committed to cubo-futurism (Arp called it "zigzag naturalism").¹⁵ Possibly the most broadly talented of all the circle (he made paintings, posters, the cabaret decorations, those famous primitivist masks, and he danced and recited as well), he nevertheless seemed to live also a separate life from dada, in a small bourgeois apartment with his French wife, their child, and his two younger brothers.

Where Tzara and Huelsenbeck took dada's public life seriously, for Hans Arp it was an insane joke. Born in Strasbourg in 1887, he was, with Ball, the most experienced of the dadaists. What Ball was to literature and the theater, Arp was to the visual arts. From 1905 to 1907 he studied at the Weimar Kunstschule and then spent a year in Paris at the Académie Julian. In the years preceding the war he had been in contact with the advanced circles of German art—the Blaue Reiter and Sturm groups—and with artists such as Delaunay, Kandinsky, and Marc. In 1914 he met Max Ernst in Cologne, the same year that saw his first wooden reliefs. With this background Arp was by far the most advanced visual artist of the dadaists and the most committed to his own art, a magnet for painters coming later

to dada in Zurich. Friendly and polite to an almost ironic degree, he avoided involvement with the power struggles of the movement.

When the Cabaret Voltaire opened in February of 1916, there were no alliances except those of background: Ball, the eldest at thirty, and Huelsenbeck at twenty-four, from expressionist Germany; Tzara and Janco, the two youngest (only twenty and twenty-one), from Bucharest; and Arp, at twenty-nine, closest to Ball in age and experience. The history of Zurich dada is the history of these personalities, their interrelations and changing alliances. "There are five of us," Ball wrote, "and the remarkable thing is that we are actually never in complete or simultaneous agreement, although we agree on the main issues. The constellations change. Now Arp and Huelsenbeck agree and seem inseparable, now Arp and Janco join forces against H., then H. and Tzara against Arp, etc. There is a constantly changing attraction and repulsion. An idea, a gesture, some nervousness is enough to make the constellation change without seriously upsetting the little group" (24.V.1916). This was written in May of 1916, when things had hardly begun.

The founding of the Cabaret Voltaire was the beginning of Zurich dada, but it was only one of five fairly distinct phases through which the movement passed. All chronological divisions are to some extent misleading, because they assume firm breaks in continuity—and that was not quite the way it happened. But to treat Zurich dada as one coherent event would be an even greater mistake. Over the four years of its existence (1916–19) there were important modifications and reassessments of position and changes in the kind of activity produced. The group did not suddenly spring into existence with the founding of the cabaret; not for some months did Ball and his friends frankly accept a group status, much less agree on what they had in common. Moreover, as the months passed, the pre-eminence of different members inevitably meant that the guiding philosophy itself changed. Zurich dada was, in an important sense, not a single action but several related episodes. Of the five episodes I distinguish below, Ball himself was present at only two—at the Cabaret Voltaire and Galerie Dada. Accordingly I concentrate on these.

III. The Cabaret Voltaire

Ball has explained how the Cabaret Voltaire was founded.¹⁶ He approached Jan Ephraim, the owner of the Holländische Meierei café at Spiegelgasse 1, which had a small stage, piano, and space for tables to seat forty or fifty

people, and he suggested that a cabaret with "artistic entertainments" would be popular with the intellectuals who inhabited this old quarter of Zurich and would help increase business. Ephraim agreed, and Ball advertised for support. On February 5, 1916, the café was decorated with "futuristic posters"; Arp, Tzara, and Janco appeared; and the Cabaret Voltaire began. A week later Huelsenbeck arrived, and the group was complete.

Ball's diaries give a good indication of what the nightly performances comprised, so there is no need to describe them here. Possibly the most vivid impression of the mood of these events is provided by Janco's famous painting *Cabaret Voltaire*. Arp describes what is happening:

On the stage of a gaudy, motley, overcrowded tavern there are several weird and peculiar figures representing Tzara, Janco, Ball, Huelsenbeck, Madame Hennings, and your humble servant. Total pandemonium. The people around us are shouting, laughing, and gesticulating. Our replies are sighs of love, volleys of hiccups, poems, moos, and miaowing of medieval *Bruitists*. Tzara is wiggling his behind like the belly of an Oriental dancer. Janco is playing an invisible violin and bowing and scraping. Madame Hennings, with a Madonna face, is doing the splits. Huelsenbeck is banging away nonstop on the great drum, with Ball accompanying him on the piano, pale as a chalky ghost. We were given the honorary title of Nihilists.¹⁷

But they were not so nihilistic as dada was to become later, nor in fact "antiart" in any real sense. The Cabaret Voltaire was an artistic enterprise, albeit an unconventional one, and it was only the propriety of ordinary Zurich society that made the affair seem so extremely irregular.* This is not to minimize the obvious wildness of the performances or the provocativeness of their intentions—Huelsenbeck has recently written of the violence and drunkenness that the cabaret generated¹⁸—but as a reminder that shock effects have such a violent impact only on conservative audiences. And it is worth remembering also that many performances presented items that can hardly be called avant-garde: readings from Chekhov and Turgenev, Liszt's Thirteenth Hungarian Rhapsody, and "Under the Bridges of Paris"! At this stage, dada (if it can yet be called this) was an essentially eclectic affair. There was no certain direction, and nearly all brands of modernism were equally welcomed, although, inevitably perhaps, most of the material came from French and German sources: pieces by Lautréamont, Jarry, Kandinsky, Wedekind; paintings by Macke, Modigliani, Picasso. But futurism

* An evening at the cabaret was reserved for the Swiss, but Ball notes that they were too cautious to make proper use of it (7.III.1916).

became increasingly important to the movement, and its performances in particular owed much to Italian models. To explain the balance of artistic and provocative intent at this point, perhaps Huelsenbeck put it best: "We wanted to make the Cabaret Voltaire a focal point of the 'newest art,' although we did not neglect from time to time to tell the fat and utterly uncomprehending Zurich philistines that we regarded them as pigs and the German Kaiser as the initiator of the war." To favor modernism was itself a provocation. The Cabaret Voltaire was for art because "there were artists and bourgeois. You had to love one and hate the other."¹⁹

Certainly the cabaret was viewed as a disrespectful "gesture" against what Ball called "this humiliating age," and modernism as an opportunity to criticize it. This was best achieved in the depersonalized, primitivist, and even demonic incantations that the group performed, dressed often in fantastic costumes or bizarre masks. The simultaneous readings, "Negro chants," and Ball's own magicoreligious "verse without words"—accompanied by hypnotic sound effects and ritualized movements—combined to effect a kind of intoxicating madness in the circle. And it was in this group inebriation that the five different players coalesced to become dada. Inside their masks, as Ball described it, they lost possession of themselves and became unconscious agents of the frenzy of their times. Within less than a month, the cabaret had become this "playground for crazy emotions." But it was a peak of intensity that could not be sustained for very long. Ball soon recognized that it was both debilitating and somehow dangerous, that they risked physical and psychological collapse. And by the middle of March he was feeling the strain of the daily performances and was ready to take a rest. Of course, not everything they did was so strenuous (many soirees seem to have been fairly relaxed affairs), but at least for Ball, who had to do all the organizing, the pressure was becoming too great.

In early April there were plans to form a Voltaire Society. It was decided that the money raised by the performances would be used to publish an anthology of their work. Ball and Huelsenbeck were against the idea of making an "artistic school" of what they were doing (II.IV.1916), but Tzara especially wanted a publication, so plans went ahead for the anthology, *Cabaret Voltaire*, which appeared two months later, at the beginning of June. It was also decided that the group should produce a regular periodical (to be advertised in *Cabaret Voltaire*), and it was to this that Ball referred in his now notorious note of April 18: "Tzara keeps on worrying about the periodical. My proposal to call it 'Dada' is accepted." This diary entry, the first mention of the word "dada," locates its discovery somewhere in the preceding week.²⁰ And despite Tzara's rival claim, it

seems most likely that it was Ball and Huelsenbeck together who found the word—in a French-German dictionary that Ball was using to research his *Zur Kritik der deutschen Intelligenz*.

By the time the periodical *Dada* appeared (July 1917), Ball had left the group, but Cabaret Voltaire, anthology as well as night club, was chiefly the result of his own work. Given his exhaustion with the cabaret itself, he seemed glad of the opportunity to turn to something else, and it appears that during May of 1916 most of his time was spent in preparing *Cabaret Voltaire* for publication.²¹ Printed by Julius Heuberger, an anarchist printer who spent as much time in jail as outside it, the anthology comprised an introduction by Ball, the catalogue of a Cabaret Voltaire exhibition, a chapter of Ball's "fantastic novel," the simultaneous poem "L'Amiral cherche une maison à louer" (The Admiral Is Looking for a House to Rent), and contributions from the same range of modernists as had characterized the cabaret productions (Apollinaire, Picasso, Kandinsky, Marinetti, Cendrars, et al.), as well as from the dadaists themselves.

Once the anthology was on press, Ball returned to the cabaret, only to realize that his absence had not changed his mind about wanting to abandon it. Emmy Hennings's daughter, Annemarie, had arrived in Zurich following the death of Emmy's mother, with the news of a small inheritance, which promised an escape from the trials of cabaret life. Privately Ball prepared a final performance in which he would concentrate his poetic researches, and on June 23 his sound poems, or "Verse ohne Worte," were premièred. Dressed in a fantastic cubist costume reminiscent of a bishop's vestments and crowned by a sorcerer's hat, he intoned a group of heavy rhythmic words which climaxed in a liturgical chant; this not only alarmed the audience but also so unnerved Ball himself that he had to be carried off the stage when the performance ended. It was the finale of his first dada period. Jan Ephraim had received complaints about what was going on in the Cabaret Voltaire. Ball was tired from his efforts and no longer wished to continue. The cabaret was closed.* Ball left Zurich and by the end of July was living in the Swiss countryside, in the village of Vira-Magadino.

IV. "The Word"

"The word" was of such central importance to Ball's ideas that one might well say that his last Cabaret Voltaire performance was the summit of his

* According to a recent statement by Huelsenbeck, the cabaret was bankrupt because no one bothered to collect the admission fees, and visiting students had destroyed all the furniture ("Dada," *Studio International*, January 1972, p. 27).

active dadaism. Reading his diaries, one soon realizes that for him language was far more than a tool for discourse or a medium for public provocation. Arp noted that Ball's language is "a magic treasure and connects him with the language of light and darkness. Through language too man can grow into real life."²² Though seemingly overpoetic, this is not too far from Ball's own interpretation.

If we tend to think of dadaism in general as a kind of aesthetic anarchism, then Ball's unique version deserves the name aesthetic mysticism.²³ Not the mysticism of those within Christianity, whose "reality" is far removed from the sensuous world and who deny its importance, but more akin to such magicospiritual philosophers as the alchemists and theosophists and to such subjectivist thinkers as Novalis, whom Ball admired, and Kandinsky, whose symbolist antimaterialism was an important early influence on him. Both Novalis and Kandinsky posited a *Totalwissenschaft*, a synthesis of all knowledge, to be achieved in poeticized form, and Ball sought this too, promoting art as a mediumistic faculty to reveal a common denominator of human expression: in painting, the image as a magical sign preserved in an age of total disruption; in poetry, the word as the absolute abstraction; and in the performances, word and image together, combined with music and dance, in a frenzied *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

Ball's ambitions were not unique in his generation; a wave of irrational feeling and concern for wholeness had swept Europe in reaction to nineteenth-century scientism and materialism, and was intensified by World War I. For late-nineteenth-century symbolist thought, the materialists' insistence on utility had been a challenge to art's function. The symbolists' reply was that art could indeed be more "useful" than science in explaining things outside the domain of sensible experience. Kandinsky's principle of "inner necessity," stressing art's function of expressing spiritual realities, is the most direct link to Ball's ideas.

In *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (*Concerning the Spiritual in Art*), Kandinsky makes only a brief mention of literature,²⁴ but it is a very significant one. Just as images are the outward containers of spiritual truths, he writes, so words have two functions: to denote an object or notion, and to reflect an "inner sound" ("*innerer Klang*"). The inner sounds of words are dependent upon the words' denotive context—but the poet's task is to manipulate his material so as to efface this outer meaning, or at least to permit other meanings to emerge in "vibrations" that will affect the audience on a spiritual level. Repetition of a word can "bring out unsuspected spiritual properties . . . [and] deprives the word of its external reference. Similarly, the symbolic reference of a designated object tends to be forgot-

ten and only the sound is retained. We hear this pure sound . . . [which] exercises a direct impression on the soul." Kandinsky concluded that this has "great possibilities for the literature of the future." Did the young Ball read this as an open invitation for his own art? His interpretation of the function of poetry is very close, even to determining its form "solely according to the values of the beginning sequence," which was repeated and improvised upon to create hypnotically sounding "vibrations" (23.VI.1916).

But the "words" Ball used in his advanced poetry had no apparent denotive function. They were not, however, entirely abstract but were conceived of as meaningful by being *reminiscent* of other words or, rather, sounds, in the manner of a magical incantation: "touching lightly on a hundred ideas without naming them," as Ball put it (18.VI.1916). Here again, he may have learned from Kandinsky—not from Kandinsky's own (misleadingly titled) *Klänge* (1912), which were not phonetic, but from Kandinsky's familiarity with Russian futurist verse. The poet Velimir Khlebnikov had created a "transrational" poetic language, "zaoum," by collating folk and mystical language elements into a kind of etymological sonorism. Whether or not Ball knew of Khlebnikov,²⁵ he was similarly concerned that his word units be containers of archetypal and magical essences, thus mediating toward an "incomprehensible and unconquerable sphere."²⁶ He writes of his admiration for the "wonderfully plaintive words" of ancient magical texts and of using "grammologues" ("Sigeln") of such resonant sounds to imprint mental images on his audience. This idea of the energy-loaded word image appears time and again in the diaries. He relates it to the Evangelical concept of the "logos" as a "magical complex image," and he observes that the "power" of words necessitates care in their use and that art generally is something irrational, primitive, and complex that speaks "a secret language." Even "dada" itself, he once suggested, was a code, hiding mystic significance in its component letters.* Ball best expressed this idea of esoteric meaningfulness when speaking of the "innermost alchemy of the word."

Even when reading verse by others at the Cabaret Voltaire, Ball had found that the act of recitation itself tested a poem's quality and determined its impact. Basic to his interpretation of poetry was his conviction

* I.e., that it stood for "D.A.—D.A.," a repetition of the initials of Dionysius the Areopagite, one of the three saints who were to form the subject of his book *Byzantinisches Christentum* (see 18.VI.1921). This, however, is most likely Ball's hindsight fantasizing in the light of his subsequently developed interest in early Christian theology. Yet Huelsenbeck once wrote that the choice of the word "dada" was not entirely accidental, but rather "selective-metaphysical," and had associations for Ball and himself far different from the "nonsensical" ones commonly ascribed to it (*En Avant Dada*, in *Dada Painters and Poets*, ed. Motherwell, p. 31). It would indeed be strange if hidden in the alchemy of letters that denote the most scurrilous of modern movements lies a saint who dreamed of a hierarchy of angels!

that it had far more aspects than its written words—that the sounds of language had precedence. Moreover, in his search for essences and an “absolute” expression, he seems to distinguish between language and mere discourse. Ball sought a kind of universalist tongue. No “secondhand” words could be used since they had become mere commodities. Literary language had to be “invented all over again,” just as painters were inventing new visual languages for themselves. And like the visual artists, Ball was interested in the plasticity of his medium, even if this meant abolishing the word itself, at least as it had previously been known. This was not simply fantasy; rather it was the world that was fantastic. And although artists belonged to their age, they hoped to create “real” images, free from time.

Ball’s aesthetic mysticism was irrevocably bound up with his conception of his times, and his utilization of language was designed to “reform” the shortcomings of the times. But he recognized also that his poetry was an attempt to exorcise his personal demons. One entry reads: “Sometimes I feel as if I have already been irretrievably enslaved by black magic; as if even my deepest sleep were filled with such a threatening nightmare that I could not see the innocence of things any more. . . . Is there so much death in me or in my environment? Where does my motive force come from? From darkness or from light?” (13.X.1915). Like Novalis responding to the Napoleonic wars, Ball had turned to magic “in order to become truly mortal”²⁷ and to anarchy as a path toward a spiritual recovery that had an unmistakably religious tone. Although he had long abandoned the Catholicism of his childhood, the forms of his poetry—especially the sub-consciously released poems of his last Cabaret Voltaire performance—made overt reference to liturgical themes. Dadaism, he said, was “both buffoonery and a requiem mass” (12.III.1916). And at the last performance the fact that his voice “had no alternative but to take on the ancient cadence of priestly lamentation” seems to have disturbed him—by recalling his uneasy childhood—to an extent for which he was not prepared. Later he regretted this “lamentable outburst.” And when he returned to dada the following year, it was to avoid such traumatic encounters with his past.

V. Entr’acte

Ball had left Zurich not only because of the strains of running the cabaret but also because of certain indications of how dada was developing. He was, as we have seen, opposed to the idea of creating an artistic “organization,”