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HUGO BALL AND THE “POEMS WITHOUT WORDS” ON THE BIRTH OF DADAIST ART FROM THE SPIRIT OF DISSONANCE

Abstract: This article offers a reinterpretation of Hugo Ball’s creative work through the lens of *dé-coïncidence*, understood not as an isolated concept but as part of a broader semantic constellation –including dissonance, dissensus, *Zerrissenheit* and *shevirat ha-kelim* – that finds its culmination in Dadaism as an art born of discordance. The analysis unfolds in three main sections. The first one examines Ball’s 1916 performance at the Cabaret Voltaire, focusing on his recitation of the *Six Sound Poems* and the appearance of the “magical bishop,” interpreted as an echoed liturgy. The second one explores Ball’s notion of “flight out of time” (*Flucht aus der Zeit*) in relation to the kairotic temporality of performance and the sonorous medium as a site of primeval memory. The third one turns to his critique of instrumental language, which gives rise to an aesthetic alternative grounded in childhood and the playful handling of linguistic remnants. Ultimately, Ball’s work is presented as one of the earliest and most original artistic forms born from the spirit of dissonance. His Dadaist practice emerges as a poetic and philosophical response to the collapse of modernity, fusing linguistic mysticism with both theological reflection and political critique.

Keywords: Hugo Ball, Dadaism, *dé-coïncidence*, dissonance, phonetic poetry, performance, primordial language, divine language

Introduction

In a journal entry dated 12 June 1916, Hugo Ball wrote: "The dadaist puts more trust in the honesty of events than in the wit of people. He can get people cheaply, himself included. He no longer believes in the comprehension of things from one point of view, and yet he is still so convinced of the unity of all beings, of the totality of all things, that he suffers from the dissonances [*Dissonanzen*] to the point of self-disintegration"¹. A few months later, in December of the same year, he added: "The dissonances [*Mißtöne*] horrify me. I sometimes feel as if I were being torn apart [*zerrissen*] and beaten limb by limb"². The desire for reconciliation expressed here and elsewhere – the hope for salvation in harmony, to be realised both existentially and politically – stands in striking contradiction to Ball's artistic practice, born of the spirit of dissonance. While his notes reveal a longing for unity and consonance, his creative work centres more on the experience of fragmentation than on that of wholeness or fulfilment. Hans Richter, a significant witness to and participant in the events at the Cabaret Voltaire, highlighted early Dada's immersion in the political-historical context of the First World War and its artistic response to the collapse of all structures – a response carried out through non-classical, spontaneous, ephemeral and performative forms of expression: "Dada is involved in this progressive disintegration of reality. The fact that Dada desired this disintegration, wanted to be destructive, counts for little. But Dada's emphasis on chance, on absolute spontaneity, indicated that Dada put its trust only in the fleeting moment"³.

Indeed, Dadaism manifested itself through continuous artistic provocations that radically severed form from content and word from meaning. Walter Benjamin wrote about a similar impossibility of reconciling form and meaning, highlighting the brutality of the Dadaist gesture:

The Dadaists attached much less importance to the commercial usefulness of their artworks than to the uselessness of those works as objects

¹ H. Ball, *Flight Out of Time: A Dada Diary*, ed. J. Elderfield, transl. A. Raimés, University of California Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London 1996, p. 66; H. Ball, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*, Limmat Verlag, Zürich 1992, p. 99. (All quotations from *Die Flucht aus der Zeit* are cited from the official English translation, *Flight Out of Time*. German words and longer phrases inserted in square brackets within these quotations are the author's additions, taken directly from the original German edition. Except where otherwise noted, quotations from Hugo Ball are taken from existing English translations. Translations provided by the author have been used only when no published version in English is available.)

² H. Ball, *Flight Out of Time...*, p. 94; H. Ball, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*, p. 138.

³ H. Richter, *Dada. Art and Anti-Art*, transl. D. Britt, Thames & Hudson, London 1997, pp. 91-92.

of contemplative immersion. They sought to achieve this uselessness not least by thorough degradation of their material. Their poems are “word-salad” containing obscene expressions and every imaginable kind of linguistic refuse. The same is true of their paintings, on which they mounted buttons or train tickets⁴.

The resulting discrepancy between the “thing” and the “intellect,” which became a hallmark of Dadaism, was expressed by the artists associated with Ball’s cabaret in visual forms (collages, cut-outs, posters and abstract paintings), linguistic forms (manifestos, almanacs, phonetic and simultaneous poetry) and performative forms (performances, dance choreographies, theatrical spectacles, public recitations and readings). Ball, who created primarily in literary and performative modes, was the initiator, ideologue, philosopher and informal artistic director of the earliest Dadaist circle. As Richter recalls:

He belonged to the “nation of thinkers and poets,” which was engaged, at that time, in quite different activities. Ball, however, had remained both a thinker and a poet: he was philosopher, novelist, cabaret performer, journalist and mystic. [...]. It is impossible to understand Dada without understanding the state of mental tension in which it grew up, and without following in the mental and physical footsteps of this remarkable sceptic⁵.

By studying the testimonies and documents that record the artistic antics of the creators associated with the Cabaret Voltaire – above all, the recollections of Richter and Ball himself – one may conclude that Dadaist art, and especially Ball’s iconic and enigmatic performance as the “magical bishop”⁶, constitutes a unique and remarkably early enactment of *décoïncidence*. The author of this category, François Jullien, associates it with the notion of “aporia” and with the “fissure of adequacy” (*fissuration d’une adéquation*)⁷, understood as a condition for rescuing art from the deadness of identification – that is, from the illusion of complete coincidence between form and meaning, between thing and intellect:

⁴ W. Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Reproducibility*, in: W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*. Volume 3. 1935-1938, ed. H. Eiland, M. W. Jennings, transl. E. Jephcott, H. Eiland and others, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts-London 2002, pp. 118-119.

⁵ H. Richter, *Dada...*, pp. 12-13.

⁶ H. Ball, *Flight Out of Time...*, p.71.

⁷ F. Jullien, *Dé-coïncidence: d’où viennent l’art et l’existence*, Grasset & Fasquelle, Paris 2017, digital edition (EPUB), no page numbers (chapter II: Le fortuit ou l’adapté).

Or rather, one could contrast two logics here. On the one hand, the speculative, theoretical logic, in which coincidence founds truth: the famous “adequation of a thing and an intellect” [*adéquation de la chose et de l'esprit*], according to its classical definition, where one completely overlaps the other and finds its justification therein. And on the other hand – or rather, on its reverse side – the logic of actual life or of living life (which is why it also concerns art), in which coincidence proves to be a dead end, since it allows for no unfolding, and is ultimately fatal⁸.

Fissura, a Latin term meaning “crack,” “fissure,” or “split,” in Jullien’s interpretation refers to a moment of rupture in continuity – a loosening of completeness, or a break in the superficial adherence of form and meaning. In other words, *fissuration d’une adéquation* becomes the condition for authentic creativity and for life itself – one that presupposes the breakdown of the former identification between representation and reality, and a departure from the classical understanding of truth as “adequation” (*adequatio rei et intellectus*). Only in the loosening of unity brought about by the medium of unreconciled art can an alternative logic – a logic of aesthetic emergence – unfold; and only through such unfolding does a space open up for what is truly new: for life, art and existence.

As one of the artists associated with the Cabaret Voltaire, Richard Huelsenbeck recalled the word Dada – like “the child’s first sound” – “expresses the primitiveness, the beginning at zero, the new in our art”⁹. This gesture of beginning from zero aptly captures the intention of Dada: art as an act of creative incision, of interruption. Yet, contrary to popular conceptions of Dadaism, not all of its leading figures pursued an agenda of anti-art, nihilism, or pure nonsense. In particular, Ball’s aesthetics did not exhaust themselves in the sphere of *provocatio or rebellio*¹⁰ – he was not drawn to the “idea of revolution as art for art’s sake”¹¹. Ball’s mystical Dadaism did not aim at the absence of meaning, but rather at the possibility of its spiritual renewal, of a radical reconfiguration – one made possible only through the rupture of the false coherence offered by rationalist philosophy, bourgeois taste culture, or traditional figurative art. If, then, the concept of *dé-coïncidence* indicates a potential for opening – for a *kairotic* event or a creative impulse that manifests in the moment of disjunction, of the ungluing of meaning and form – Ball’s art reveals this process with

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ R. Huelsenbeck, *Dada Lives*, cit. in: J. Elderfield, Afterword, in: H. Ball, *Flight Out of Time*, p. 246.

¹⁰ For an interpretation of Ball’s aesthetics centred on the concept of provocation, see O. Ruf, *Zur Ästhetik der Provokation. Kritik und Literatur nach Hugo Ball*, Transcript, Bielefeld 2012.

¹¹ H. Ball, *Flight Out of Time*..., p. 22.

exceptional intensity. Through the detuning of language in phonetic poetry, the play with remnants of words, and the incongruity between quasi-liturgical form and content purged of reference, his art does not merely illustrate but enacts the very "fissure of adequacy."

The present article is structured in four parts: the first one serves as a conceptual introduction, while the subsequent three develop an interpretation of Hugo Ball's creative work. Part one introduces a set of concepts drawn from the modern philosophical tradition – dissonance, dissensus, *Zerrissenheit*, and *shevirat ha-kelim* – which, alongside the categories of "fissure" and *dé-coïncidence*, form a shared semantic field that logically leads to Dadaism as an art born of discordance¹². In this way, *dé-coïncidence* is presented not as an isolated idea, but as a link within a conceptual trajectory that extends from Hegel through Ball, who anticipates postmodern aesthetics (or the aesthetics of fragmentation), to Benjamin, Adorno and Lyotard. Parts two, three and four are devoted to interpreting Ball's work and thought as a complementary whole, forming an aesthetic grounded in the spirit of dissonance. Part two analyses Ball's artistic practice, with particular attention to his performance as the "magical bishop" during the recital of his *Six Sound Poems* (*Sechs Laut- und Klanggedichte*) on the stage of the Cabaret Voltaire. Part three focuses on the existential and temporal dimensions of his art, showing that it is not solely concerned with the dissolution of linear structures, but also with the attempt to reach into the depths of childhood memory – into deep ontogenetic and phylogenetic layers that can be accessed only through an artistic *kairos*. Part four concentrates on his critique of instrumental language, whose primary medium is Dadaist art of sound and dissonance. It demonstrates that the idea of "poems without words" (*Verse ohne Worte*) does not amount to the destruction of existing language, but carries an affirmative proposal of an alternative idiom, rooted in Dadaist infantilism and the playful handling of linguistic remnants. The overall interpretation, encompassing performance, the experience of time and memory and reflection on language, leads to the thesis that Hugo Ball appears as an original dramaturge of *dé-coïncidence*.

¹² For historical details concerning the origins of the Dada movement in Zurich, see: D. Lewer, *Dada's Genesis: Zurich*, in: *A Companion to Dada and Surrealism*, ed. D. Hopkins, John Wiley & Sons, Chichester 2016. For more on Ball's intellectual biography and artistic activity, see the following monographs: G. E. Steinke, *The Life and Work of Hugo Ball. Founder of Dadaism*, Mouton, Hague 1967; P. Mann, *Hugo Ball. An Intellectual Biography*, Institute of Germanic Studies, University of London, London 1987; E. W. White, *The Magic Bishop. Hugo Ball, Dada Poet*, Camden House, New York 1998; Ch. Schmidt, *Die Apokalypse des Subjekts. Ästhetische Subjektivität und politische Theologie bei Hugo Ball*, Aisthesis Verlag, Bielefeld 2003.

1. *Dé-coïncidence* as a Figure of Rupture

The idea of dissonance expresses the same aesthetic logic of rupture that we encounter in Jullien's thought. For Theodor W. Adorno, dissonance is the language of truth in an age of suffering and an element of form – or rather of formlessness understood as the negativity of form – that resists the assimilation of pain into harmony¹³. In Ball, prior to Adorno, dissonance becomes a component of an avant-garde language that abandons the illusion of representation. His “poems without words” are a manifestation of “fissure” – that is, of the non-coincidence between representation and reality – and as such do not aim at communicable meaning, but at resonance through the disjunction, or even the tearing apart, of traditional language. Ball's dissonance thus appears as a Dadaist manifestation of *dé-coïncidence*.

The rupture in question here – or more broadly, the hiatus between form and meaning – has other names within the philosophical tradition. Lyotard's “dissensus” (the conflict between modes of expression and modes of understanding, an aesthetic aporia), Hegel's *Zerrissenheit* (the torn condition of modern consciousness, which must pass through negativity before arriving at reconciliation), or *shevirat ha-kelim* as adapted by Benjamin (“the breaking of the vessels” – according to Lurianic Kabbalah, the world was created through the shattering of vessels, and meaning exists only as the task of tracing and redeeming the scattered shards of vessels, i.e., material beings from which God had withdrawn his presence¹⁴) – all these figures correspond to Dadaism as an art of remains. If the aim of Ball's poetry is not to reconstitute wholeness, but rather to indicate that this rupture is the site of new meaning, then the ritual enactment of fragmentation and the prayer in a broken language – performed on the stage of the Cabaret Voltaire – fulfil the criteria of an aesthetic marked by the “fissure of adequacy.”

According to the characterisation of “consensus” and “dissensus” found in the writings of Jean-François Lyotard, these concepts delineate the fields of two opposing aesthetics¹⁵. The first, an aesthetics of consensus and form, conceives of aesthetic experience as a coherent event – one that reinforces subjectivity, fits within the horizon of expectations, and realises the ideal of

¹³ See W. S. Allen, *Adorno, Aesthetics, Dissonance. On Dialectics in Modernity*, Bloomsbury Academic, New York-London-Oxford-New Delhi-Sydney 2023, p. 13.

¹⁴ See A. Bielik-Robson, *Introduction. An Unhistorical History of Tsimtsum: A Break with Neoplatonism?*, in: *Tsamtsum and Modernity: Lurianic Heritage in Modern Philosophy and Theology*, ed. A. Bielik-Robson, D. H. Weiss, Walter De Gruyter, Berlin-Boston 2021, p. 8.

¹⁵ See B. Adams, *Aesthetics*, in: *The Lyotard Dictionary*, ed. S. Sim, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2011, pp. 10-12; G. Browning, *Dissensus*, in: *The Lyotard Dictionary*, pp. 57-58.

wholeness and concord. The other one, an aesthetics of dissensus and formlessness, treats experience as discordance: destructive of subjectivity, disruptive of the continuity of expectations, and occurring as the intrusion of a detail – something incongruent with the whole. Consensus-based art acts in a calming and affirmative manner; the art of dissensus provokes anxiety, disorientation and suffering. The former presents the order of reality; the latter documents its disintegration and crisis. Consensus reveals “truth” as the concordance of intellect and thing; dissensus disrupts this concordance. Consensus gives rise to a feeling of reconciliation; dissensus, to a sense of separation and mourning. The consensual work leads us toward the concept and thematises the object; the dissensual work breaks figuration and operates through the unrepresentable (the sublime).

For Lyotard, the idea of aesthetic justice is founded on dissensus: “[...] the principle of consensus as a criterion of validation seems to be inadequate”; “Consensus has become an outmoded and suspect value. But justice as a value is neither outmoded nor suspect. We must thus arrive at an idea and practice of justice that is not linked to that of consensus”¹⁶. As Wolfgang Iser notes, following Lyotard: “The aim of postmodern knowledge is defined not by consensus [*der Konsens*], but by dissensus [*der Dissens*]”¹⁷. According to Lyotard, the aim of postmodern aesthetics is thus the recognition and affirmation of difference. The desire to establish consensus, as well as its acceptance, stands in contradiction to the aesthetics of dissensus. This consensual paradigm is not only problematic, but also unjust, since every perspective is discontinuous and no common, agreed-upon mode of expression exists. Incompatible perspectives, as revealed through the art of dissensus, resist clear articulation within a shared language. Dissensual aesthetics thus captures the very impossibility of expressing an uncommunicable force – an aesthetic force born of *le différend*¹⁸.

It is worth emphasising that both the words “dissensus” and “dissonance” express the idea of discord, tension, or divergence, although they derive from different Latin roots. Dissensus comes from the Latin *dissensus*, formed from the verb *dissentio* – “I disagree, I hold a different opinion” – and refers to a lack of agreement or unanimity. Dissonance, by contrast, originates from the Latin *dissonantia*, derived from *dissonō* – “to sound discordant, to be out of tune” – and originally denoted an inharmonious combination of sounds, later acquiring a metaphorical meaning: tension, clash, contradiction. Although

¹⁶ J.-F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, transl. G. Bennington, B. Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1984, pp. 60, 66.

¹⁷ W. Iser, *Unsere postmoderne Moderne*, Akademie Verlag, Berlin 2008, p. 228.

¹⁸ J.-F. Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, transl. G. Van Den Abbeele, Manchester University Press, Manchester 1988.

the two terms are etymologically based on different verbs (*sentire* – “to feel, to think,” and *sonāre* – “to sound”), they share the common prefix *dis-* (signifying separation or divergence) and a semantic proximity: both describe situations in which individuals, voices, or elements do not resonate in harmony – whether acoustically (“dissonance”) or intellectually and politically (“dissensus”). The phonetic resemblance between the two – their similar rhythm and sound structure – further reinforces their associative proximity and fosters a metaphorical interplay between the concepts in critical discourse, particularly in contexts where divergence of positions takes the form of a conflict over tone, voice, or representation.

This shared logic of resonant discord can also be found in the aesthetics of dissonance, particularly in the thought of Theodor W. Adorno, for whom acoustic dissonance becomes a vehicle of resistance to both social and artistic convention. In Adorno’s work, sonic tension not only reflects but also articulates dissensus – a rupture inscribed in modern aesthetic experience. In *Aesthetic Theory*, we read: “The concept of tension frees itself from the suspicion of being formalistic in that, by pointing up dissonant experiences or antinomical relations in the work, it names the element of ‘form’ in which form gains its substance by virtue of its relation to its other”¹⁹. Dialectical thinking must break apart totality in order to expose the unifying function of rationalist consciousness (particularly in its Enlightenment mode) and the systems it produces, and thereby to preserve that which is other and particular – i.e., dissonance. For that which resonates in harmony tends inevitably toward the elimination of dissonance by resolving it into consonance. For Adorno, harmony constitutes a totality that conceals – and even neutralizes – the “fissures” represented by dissonances: “Harmony that, as a mere result, denies the tensions that have entered into it, becomes something disturbing, false, and effectively dissonant”; “What appears in art is no longer the ideal, no longer harmony; the locus of its power of resolution is now exclusively in the contradictory and dissonant”²⁰. Thus, a just relation between the subject of aesthetic experience and its object can never be one of reconciliation or consensus.

Dissensus, as a condition of irreducible discord or dissonance, may also be read as one of the contemporary transformations of Hegelian *Zerrissenheit* (“torn-to-pieces-hood,” “disruption,” “fragmentation,” “conflicted being”) – being existentially torn, which reveals the contradictory structure of subjectivity and culture. Wherever contradiction appears, the deeper drama of modernity is disclosed, inscribed in Hegel’s dialectic of rupture and reconciliation. As we

¹⁹ T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, transl. R. Hullot-Kentor, Continuum, New York 1997, p. 292.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 46, 84.

read in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in contrast to the non-dialectical ("noble-minded") consciousness – which relies on clear language and common sense, and perceives the world as fixed and simple – the "disintegrated consciousness" is also a "rebellious" self-consciousness:²¹ one that is aware of its own torn state and of the fracture that permeates reality as a whole, and also bears witness to it acoustically. An outstanding example of this is the figure of Diderot's *Rameau's Nephew*, performing his inner fracture in Hegel's interpretation found in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*²².

In Hegel's aesthetics, fragmentation finds expression in "collision" – a violent clash of spiritual forces. In a passage from the *Aesthetics*, we read: "In this respect, the collision has its basis in a transgression, which cannot remain as such but must be superseded; it is an alteration of the state of affairs which was otherwise harmonious and is itself to be altered"²³. Hegelian collision is thus not merely a scene of conflict but a moment in which internal tension ruptures the form, demanding a dialectical resolution – a sublation (*Aufhebung*) that restores lost unity:

But the beauty of the Ideal lies precisely in the Ideal's undisturbed unity, tranquility, and perfection in itself. Collision disturbs this harmony, and sets the Ideal, inherently a unity, in dissonance and opposition. [...] [T]he task of art can lie here only, on the one hand, in preventing free beauty from perishing in this difference, and, on the other hand, in just presenting this disunion and its conflict, whereby out of it, through resolution of the conflict, harmony appears as a result²⁴.

Hegel's aesthetics of collision presents art as a space in which the internal contradictions of spiritual life are staged so that they may be overcome in the form of reconciliation. Conflict here is not the negation of beauty but its dialectical moment – an indispensable stage on the path toward reconstituting a higher harmony. This inevitably reconciliatory *telos* of Hegelian discordance is recognised by Jacob Taubes, who in *Occidental Eschatology* quotes a passage from the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* and writes: "Hegel finishes

²¹ G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, transl. A. V. Miller, Oxford University Press, Oxford-New York 1977, p. 560. "But the language which truly expresses its *Zerrissenheit*, its torn state, is one which makes diremption its essence, which in all its judgements unites terms in an utterly irrelevant, external fashion." Ibid.

²² Ibid., pp. 297-307. See also: D. Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew*, in: D. Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew and Other Works*, transl. J. Barzun, R. H. Bowen, The Bobbs-Merrill Company, New York 1964.

²³ G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. 1, transl. T. M. Knox, Oxford University Press, Oxford-New York 1975, p. 204.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 205.

‘with a discord’ [*Mißton*] which blows apart the whole system, [...] ‘To speak of decay would be to finish on a discordant note. But what can be done? This discord exists in actuality [*Wirklichkeit*].’ [...] However, it is Hegel’s aim to remove this ‘discord’ in philosophical knowledge. The purpose of his lectures is precisely to reconcile reason with religion [...]”²⁵. In contrast to Hegel’s drive to sublimate dissonance, modern sensibility – as represented by Lyotard, Adorno, and Ball – treats rupture as an irreducible condition: not a point of departure toward reconciliation, but a situation to be endured through art.

Within the constellation of concepts describing discord, rupture, and fragmentation, the Kabbalistic idea of *shevirat ha-kelim* – the primordial shattering of the vessels that could not contain the divine light – resonates with a peculiar echo. This metaphysical catastrophe (preceded by the act of *tsimtsum*, that is, God’s radical withdrawal and concealment) marks not only the breakdown of order but also the beginning of dispersion, traces of which the Kabbalists discerned even in the fragmentation of what was once the sacred language²⁶. Following this line of thought in *The Task of the Translator*, Walter Benjamin presents a vision of translation as a careful, redemptive tracking of the vessels’ remnants²⁷. This is a form of translation that may never reassemble the shattered fragments, yet through linguistic reconfiguration allows an “other” meaning to resound – one that eludes both convention and the rules of ostensibly pellucid semiosis.

In this spirit – as an art of tracing linguistic fragments, as an enactment of *dé-coïncidence*, dissensus and irreconcilable rupture – Ball’s artistic practice, as realised on the stage of the Cabaret Voltaire, can be interpreted. As Jullien writes:

Modern poetry practices *dé-coïncidence*; it enacts it and does not merely celebrate it. Thus, reading this poetry amounts to engaging in “practical

²⁵ J. Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, trans D. Ratmoko, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2009, p. 163.

²⁶ According to Kabbalistic theology, the world exists in a state of ongoing crisis or rupture: its origin lies in a cosmic catastrophe – the shattering of the sephirothic vessels, from which remnants (*reshimu*) of the Shekhinah’s light were released and fell into the material world as sparks, traces and residues. Inextricably tied to this notion of shattered vessels is the concept of *tikkun* – a redemptive effort that does not aim at restoration or reassembly but consists in attentively seeking out and rescuing scattered sparks. For the Lurianic doctrine of *shevirat ha-kelim* (“breaking of the vessels”) and its relation to the doctrines of *tsimtsum* and *tikkun*, see G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, Schocken Books, New York 1995, pp. 265–273.

²⁷ W. Benjamin, *The Task of the Translator*, in: W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*. Volume 1. 1913–1926, ed. M. Bullock, M. W. Jennings, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts–London 1996, p. 260.

exercises” in *dé-coïncidence*, which once again have both an ethical and a poetic value: that of detaching from normalized constructs of the mind that hinder the flourishing of life and consciousness²⁸.

Although as a political thinker and philosopher of history Ball longed for reconciliation²⁹, as a Dadaist artist he expressed rather a “disintegrated consciousness” – one that, through its own art, had to document the fractured nature of wartime reality and radicalise the disintegration of contemporary language. As if in the spirit of the Kabbalistic breaking of the vessels, Ball showed that the task of the artist is not to reconstruct totality, but to move attentively among the fragments – linguistic, political and spiritual ones. In this sense, his Dadaism did not aim at overcoming discordance, but at intensifying it – at revealing a condition in which neither language nor form can function any longer as vehicles of reconciliation. Performance, in this context, became not a construction but a decomposition: a sonic exposition of broken language, no longer capable of being reassembled into coherent meaning, but still open to the aesthetic reconfiguration of fragments. Ball’s art was precisely such a testimony to the impossibility of linguistic or conceptual harmony – and it is in this very impossibility of pellucid meaning that his own “rebellious” self-consciousness is most fully revealed.

2. Hugo Ball’s Experiment with Form: Sound, Costume, Ritual

On the evening of 23 June 1916, Hugo Ball solemnly recited to the audience a series of phonetic poems from his *Sechs Laut- und Klanggedichte*. This performance – considered the pinnacle of the poet’s artistic activity – was

²⁸ F. Jullien, *Dé-coïncidence* (Chapter IX: Modernité).

²⁹ Ball’s political engagement found expression in numerous articles published in anarchist journals such as *Die Aktion* and *Die Revolution*, as well as in anti-war and anti-Prussian periodicals like *Die Freie Zeitung* and *Die Weißen Blätter*, culminating in his scathing 1919 pamphlet, *Critique of the German Intelligentsia*, which denounced the Prussian military spirit. A diary entry dated 22 October 1915 combines the political-messianic dimension of Ball’s reflections on the need for Germany’s spiritual renewal with a mode of thinking grounded in harmony and the redemptive nature of sound: “We Germans are a nation of musicians, full of an unbounded faith in the omnipotence of harmony. [...]. Whether we begin with major or minor and strike the most daring dissonances [*Dissonanzen*], we still believe that at the end, in the fugue, the darkest, most brittle discord [*Zwietracht*] must give way and yield. It can be said, then, that harmony is the Germans’ Messiah; it will come to deliver its people from the multiplicity of resounding contradiction [*Vielfalt des tönenden Widerspruchs*]” (H. Ball, *Flight Out of Time...*, p. 37; H. Ball, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*, p. 57). Music, traditionally understood by Ball as a language of unity, is here framed in terms of political theology—“harmony” symbolising the awaited saviour who will overcome the chaos of the German Empire and restore order.

realised in an extraordinary costume: a cardboard cape, two large orbicular trouser legs, claw-like gloves and a tall, striped headdress (named “witch doctor’s hat [*Shamanenhut*]”³⁰). They formed a bizarre, slightly asymmetrical whole, governed by the geometry of cylindrical shapes. The stage performance took place at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich, founded by Ball himself, which at the time had become the centre of the newly formed Dadaist movement. It is therefore no surprise that the ritualistic, quasi-liturgical elements of this one-man spectacle were interwoven with the spirit of seemingly joyful destruction typical of the early avant-garde. In Ball’s diary, where the performance is described in detail, we read:

On all three sides of the stage, I had set up music stands facing the audience, and I put my red-penciled manuscript on them; I officiated at one stand after another. [...] Everyone was curious. I could not walk inside the cylinder, so I was carried onto the stage in the dark and began slowly and solemnly:

gadji beri bimba
glandridi lauli lonni cadori
gadjama bim beri glassala
glandridi glassala tuffm i zimbrabim
blassa galassasa tuffm i zimbrabim...

The stresses became heavier, the emphasis was increased as the sound of the consonants became sharper. Soon I realized that, if I wanted to remain serious (and I wanted to at all costs), my method of expression would not be equal to the pomp of my staging. [...] Then I noticed that my voice had no choice but to take on the ancient cadence of priestly lamentation, that style of liturgical singing that wails in all the Catholic churches of East and West.

I do not know what gave me the idea of this music, but I began to chant my vowel sequences in a church style like a recitative, and tried not only to look serious but to force myself to be serious. [...] Then the lights went out, as I had ordered and, bathed in sweat, I was carried down off the stage like a magical bishop³¹.

In Ball’s Dadaist performances, experiment becomes a creative principle. His phonetic poems do not conform to any scheme or representational intent –

³⁰ H. Ball, *Flight Out of Time*..., p. 70; H. Ball, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*, p. 105.

³¹ H. Ball, *Flight Out of Time*..., pp. 70-71.

they are events of the voice that transcend the boundaries of language, challenge perceptual habits, and confront the audience with an unpredictable novelty. The artist wrote about this as follows: "Our attempt to entertain the audience with artistic things forces us in an exciting and instructive way to be incessantly lively, new and *naïve*. It is a race with the expectations of the audience, and this race calls on all our forces of invention and debate"³².

Hans Richter's account of Ball's performance in the role of the "magical bishop" reveals the intensity of the audience's reaction: unprepared for such an unheard-of and strange spectacle, they responded to the "serious" Dadaist ceremony with loud laughter:

This was too much. Recovering from their initial bafflement at this totally new sound, the audience finally exploded. In the midst of the storm Ball stood his ground (in his cardboard costume, he could not move anyway) and faced the laughing, applauding crowd of pretty girls and solemn bourgeois, like Savonarola, motionless, fanatical and unmoved³³.

The event of "fissure" between Ball's performance and the audience's expectations undoubtedly stemmed from the Dadaist approach to form. Ball did not conceive of artistic creation as a *creatio ex nihilo*. For him, forming (*die Gestaltung*) was an act of dismantling and reconfiguring fragments of pre-existing material – regardless of whether the artist was working with painterly or linguistic substance: "The artist who works from his freewheeling imagination is deluding himself about originality. He is using a material that is already formed [*gestaltet*] and so is undertaking only to elaborate [*Klitterungen*] on it"³⁴.

The verb *klittern* literally means "to tear from context," "to falsify," or "to distort." However, the noun *Klitterungen*, as used by Ball, is significantly more ambiguous. *Klittern* implies both *zerteilen* ("to divide," "to tear apart") and *zusammenstellen* ("to assemble," "to form"). Thus, in the context of Dadaist poetry, *Klitterungen* should be understood as a dialectic of separating and combining sublexical units. Additionally, in earlier usage, the verb *klittern* referred to acoustic activity and was synonymous with what today would be expressed as *klappern* ("to rattle," "to clatter") or *klatschen* ("to clap," "to splash") – in other words, "to produce indeterminate sounds or noises [*Geräusche*]" – The destruction of language – this pre-existing artistic material – as a creative principle of phonetic poetry is also articulated in Ball's diary entry from 16 Au-

³² Ibid., p. 54.

³³ H. Richter, *Dada...*, p. 42.

³⁴ H. Ball, *Flight Out of Time...*, p. 53; H. Ball, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*, p. 82.

gust 1916: "Language as a social organ can be destroyed without the creative process having to suffer. In fact, it seems that the creative powers even benefit from it"³⁵.

Ball does not conceal that his inspiration for "poems without words" comes from the Futurist poetry of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. Under the banner of his program *parole in libertà* – "words in freedom" – the leader of the Futurists advocates for the emancipation of the *verbum* from the constraints of linguistic tradition, which he sees as inadequate for the progress and technologisation of twentieth-century reality. Marinetti's Futurist manifestos, driven by a revolutionary desire to dismantle Western grammar (a symbol of the old order), call for the elimination of the comma, adverb and adjective, and for the creation of a new language composed of syntactically unconnected nouns and infinitives³⁶. This idea greatly appealed to Ball: "With the sentence having given way to the word, the circle around Marinetti began resolutely with 'parole in libertà.' They took the word out of the sentence frame (the world image) that had been thoughtlessly and automatically assigned to it"³⁷. Although the Futurist revolution of the word served as an inspiration for Ball, his own project fundamentally surpassed its premises, as clearly indicated by a diary entry made just a few days before the "bishop" performance (18 June 1916): "[The Futurists] nourished the emaciated big-city vocables with light and air, and gave them back their warmth, emotion, and their original untroubled freedom. We others went a step further"³⁸. Indeed, Marinetti's art does not go beyond the destruction of syntactic order – words themselves remain untouched. In contrast, the Dadaist's radical project spares not even the word, which, in the phonetic poems recited on the stage of the Cabaret Voltaire, is literally split open into resounding fragments of speech. The verbal images of the poem, Ball writes, gain energy only through destructive action: "at the expense of the rational, logically constructed sentence"³⁹. The use of fragmentation – breaking the word into sublexical elements (vowels, phonemes, morphemes) – is explicitly declared in the *Dada Manifesto* (*Das erste dadaistische Manifest*) of June 1916: "It's a question of connections, and of loosening them up a bit to start with. [...] I let the vowels fool around. I let the vowels quite simply occur, as

³⁵ H. Ball, *Flight Out of Time...*, p. 76.

³⁶ See F. T. Marinetti, *Destruction of Syntax – Wireless Imagination – Words in Freedom*, in: R. J. Pioli, *Stung by Salt and War. Creative Texts of the Italian Avant-Gardist F. T. Marinetti*, Peter Lang, New York-Bern-Frankfurt am Main-Paris 1987, pp. 45-53.

³⁷ H. Ball, *Flight Out of Time...*, p. 68.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 67.

⁴⁰ H. Ball, *Dada Manifesto*, in: H. Ball, *Flight Out of Time...*, p. 221.

a cat meows... Words emerge, shoulders of words, legs, arms, hands of words. Au, oi, uh"⁴⁰.

This emblematic *Dada Manifesto* – part of the core canon of foundational texts of the twentieth-century avant-garde – was read aloud by Ball just before the recitation of his sound poems. The manuscript states: "I shall be reading poems that are meant to dispense with conventional language, no less, and to have done with it"⁴¹. Ball refers here to his own "poems without words," which he also designates in his diary as *Klanggedichte* ("resonance poems" or "tone poems") and *Lautgedichte* ("sound poems" or "phonetic poems"). On the day of the performance, he notes: "I have invented a new genre of poems, '*Verse ohne Worte*' [poems without words] or *Lautgedichte* [sound poems], in which the balance of the vowels is weighed and distributed solely according to the values of the beginning sequence"⁴². The following day (24 June 1916), he outlines the deeper ideological significance of his artistic project:

Before the poems I read out a few program notes. In these phonetic poems [*Klanggedichte*] we totally renounce the language that journalism has abused and corrupted. We must return to the innermost alchemy of the word, we must even give up the word too, to keep for poetry its last and holiest refuge. We must give up writing secondhand: that is, accepting words (to say nothing of sentences) that are not newly invented for our own use⁴³.

The aims of Ball's sound poetry can thus be described in both negative and positive terms. The negative aim lies in the explosion of the boundaries of traditional poetry and literature, which are no longer capable of reflecting the "fissure" of reality – its rupture and disintegration under the conditions of war: "What can a beautiful, harmonious poem say if nobody reads it because it has nothing to do with the feelings of the times? And what can a novel have to say when it is read for culture but is really a long way from even touching on culture?"⁴⁴ And earlier: "The [sound] poem tries to elucidate the fact that man is swallowed up in the mechanistic process. In a typically compressed way it shows the conflict of the *vox humana* [human voice] with a world that threatens, ensnares, and destroys it, a world whose rhythm and noise are ineluctable"⁴⁵. The positive aim, on the other hand, is to preserve the unfallen,

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² H. Ball, *Flight Out of Time*..., p. 70.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 71; H. Ball, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*, p. 106.

⁴⁴ H. Ball, *Flight Out of Time*..., pp. 58-59.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 57.

“holiest” register of language from the degradation and profanation of the word as carried out in the press – in the diabolical yammer that the language of imperialist war propaganda had become. In *Critique of the German Intelligentsia* (*Zur Kritik der deutschen Intelligenz*), completed in late 1918, Ball notes: “The clerical *collegium de propaganda fide* has been replaced by a journalistic one *de propaganda bello*, and the joy and the pride with which this despicable system is being served illuminate an infernal dance of death in which what is left of the German nature is rotting away before our eyes”⁴⁶. Only the printing machine, writes Ball in the preface to *Flight Out of Time*, “tells more flagrant lies than any newspaper that it prints”⁴⁷.

The denunciation of this kind of mass-produced, mechanical and manipulative journalistic language – spouting, at best, nothing more than empty verbiage – constitutes only the first step on the Dadaist path toward the emancipation of an authentic language: “How can one get rid of everything that smacks of journalism, worms, everything nice and right, blinkered, moralistic, europeanized, enervated? By saying dada”⁴⁸. The next stage is the liberation of holy speech, which may be achieved as much through restoration (“we must return to the innermost alchemy of the word”) as through destruction (“we must even give up the word too”). In this way, the protest against fallen conventions – those second-hand words, mediated and inherited without reflection – is brought to completion by a kind of prophecy of linguistic redemption. If the poet renounces syntactic order, if he chooses to break apart the fallen words – on the one hand remaining at the level of pure phoneme, and on the other immersing himself in the alchemical depths of language – then speech may recover its lost sacredness.

Although Ball’s cardboard costume might at first glance appear to be a cubist, abstract and accidental assemblage of hastily gathered elements, in the context of the redemptive message of the *Lautgedichte*, its meaning proves to be much deeper and carefully considered. On the day of the performance, Ball writes:

I gave a reading of the first one of these poems this evening. I had made myself a special costume for it. My legs were in a cylinder of shiny blue cardboard, which came up to my hips so that I looked like an obelisk. Over it I wore a huge coat collar cut out of cardboard, scarlet inside and gold outside. It was fastened at the neck in such a way that I could give the

⁴⁶ H. Ball, *Critique of the German Intelligentsia*, transl. B. L. Harris, Columbia University Press, New York 1993, p. 20.

⁴⁷ H. Ball, *Flight Out of Time*..., p. 4.

⁴⁸ H. Ball, *Dada Manifesto*, p. 220.

⁴⁹ H. Ball, *Flight Out of Time*..., p. 70.

impression of winglike movement by raising and lowering my elbows. I also wore a high, blue-and-white-striped witch doctor's hat⁴⁹.

Two elements of this costume clearly allude to liturgical celebration. The cardboard cloak in shades of scarlet and gold, fastened in the middle with a small bow, can be interpreted as a prop parodying the bishop's *pellegrina*, while the comical tall hat – heightening the absurdity of the outfit – serves the artist as an equivalent of a mitre. Without doubt, Ball's performance was conceived as a liturgical enactment – peculiar in that the "prayers" of the Dadaist bishop consisted not of canonical or liturgical words, nor even of "words in freedom" (to use Marinetti's slogan), but of "word images" (*Wortbilder*), i.e. magical words (to evoke Ball's own *licentia poetica*)⁵⁰. His diary reads: "two-thirds of the wonderfully plaintive words that no human mind can resist come from ancient magical texts. The use of 'grammologues,' of magical floating words and resonant sounds, characterizes the way we both [together with Richard Huelsenbeck] write"; "We have loaded the word with strengths and energies that helped us to rediscover the evangelical concept of the 'word' (logos) as a magical complex image"⁵¹. The adjective "magical," which becomes part of Ball's self-characterisation ("I was carried down off the stage like a magical bishop"), clearly indicates that the performance aimed at a form of linguistic restitution: by liberating the word from the framework of logical and propositional constructions, by breaking the *verbum* into sublexical particles and reassembling them into a new linguistic whole, the hidden, magical potential of language is released.

It seems that the liberation of the magical power of the word – according to Ball's intention – could not be achieved without integrating the language of phonetic poetry with the poet's voice, costume, choreography and ritual. As early as March 1916, the Dadaist leader wrote: "Nowhere are the weaknesses of a poem revealed as much as in a public reading. [...] Reciting aloud has become the touchstone of the quality of a poem for me, and I have learned (from the stage) to what extent today's literature is worked out as a problem at the desk and is made for the spectacles of the collector instead of for the ears of living

⁵⁰ The first chapter of Ball's diary is titled *Romanticism: The Word and the Image* (*Romantizismen – Das Wort und das Bild*). The compound *Wortbilder* appears in the entry dated 15 June 1916. Ibid., p. 67. Although Ball never explicitly referred to the linguistic mysticism of Johann Georg Hamann in his writings, there is a striking affinity between the Magus of the North's conception of sensuous, sonorous, imagistic, poetic and divine words, and Ball's own notion of "word-images." See J. G. Hamann, *Aesthetica in nuce. A Rhapsody in Cabalistic Prose*, in: J. G. Hamann, *Writings on Philosophy and Language*, transl. and ed. K. Haynes, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2007.

⁵¹ H. Ball, *Flight Out of Time...*, pp. 66-67; 68.

⁵² Ibid., p. 54.

human beings”⁵². For Ball, the voice does not address reason as a cognitive-theoretical faculty severed from emotion and traditionally conceptualised through ocularcentric metaphors; rather, it speaks to the soul itself, to the deepest strata of memory, where the unconscious trace of a pure, untainted language has been preserved. The deliberate immobility on stage – as a choreographic principle of performance – lends the ceremony solemnity and dignity, while the costume of the “magical bishop” crowns the ritualistic, quasi-liturgical act of reclaiming and safeguarding the poetic sanctuary of language. Ball’s departure from conventional linguistic and literary forms is thus inextricably linked to the theatrical nature of his art, the roots of which can be traced back to the pre-Dadaist, expressionist phase of his creative work.

While living in Munich in 1912, Ball became acquainted with Wassily Kandinsky. It was from the Russian painter that he drew the idea of “inner sound” (*innerer Klang*) – the hidden, spiritual life of the word, independent of the instrumental use of language and of semantic conventions. In *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (*Über das Geistige in der Kunst*), Kandinsky wrote: “The word is an inner sound. This inner sound springs partly (perhaps chiefly) from the object to which the word refers. [...] Likewise, even the abstract meaning of the designated object is forgotten and the word is stripped bare, leaving nothing but pure sound”⁵³. From Kandinsky, Ball also adopted the concept of a modern *Gesamtkunstwerk*: a total work of art integrating word, sound, image, colour, costume, choreography, and more. In the introduction to *Flight Out of Time*, Ball underscores the importance of the theatrical and spectacular dimension to his entire aesthetic endeavour:

When I was considering the plan of a new theater in March 1914, this is what I thought: there is [...] a need for an experimental theater above and beyond the scope of routine daily interests. [...] The backgrounds, the colors, words, and sounds have only to be taken from the subconscious and animated to engulf everyday routine along with its misery⁵⁴.

One could argue that the carefree, mad, and nihilistic destruction commonly – and not without justification – associated with Dadaism becomes truly revolutionary only at the moment of Ball’s appearance on stage: it transforms into an inspired mystery, a one-man liturgy, a total work of art

⁵³ W. Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art (with a Focus on Painting) and The Question of Form*, transl. R. A. Kemp, Penguin Books, Dublin 2024, p. 23. For Ball’s recollection of meeting with Kandinsky, see: H. Ball, *Flight Out of Time...*, p. 8. For his encomium on Kandinsky, see: H. Ball, *Kandinsky*, in: H. Ball, *Flight Out of Time...*, pp. 222-234.

⁵⁴ H. Ball, *Flight Out of Time...*, p. 8.

(*Gesamtkunstwerk*) in which the pathos of the nebulous, utterly unintelligible speech of a fanatical prophet collides with the comedy of the artist's bizarre costume. The multi-layered *fissuration* of the Dadaist performance – unfolding on stage between the utterance of “magical” words and the absence of any conventional meaning; between the solemnity of the ceremony and the laughter of an unprepared audience; between the calming roundness of the costume's components and the aggressiveness of the claw-like gloves – becomes a resonant aesthetic dissonance: *Mißklang* or *Mißton*. It does not pretend (despite the poet's deep longing for harmony) that everything is in order, that reality constitutes an organised and consoling whole. On the contrary: the performance aims to show, to proclaim – through the voice of a disintegrated consciousness, of a rebellious self-awareness – that all structures of everyday life bear the mark of rupture; that Prussian absolutism and imperial militarism represent a profound violation of individuality. Thus, the concern for the “magical” single word – for the very particularity suffocated by the system of corrupted language – is transformed into a living aesthetic project, enacted on the stage of the Cabaret Voltaire. In doing so, it anticipates by decades the conceptual and philosophical demands for artistic justice towards that which is individual, dissonant, marginal, or excluded from the circle of totality.

3. *Flight Out of Time: Existence and Memory in Performance*

The title of Ball's diary, *Flight Out of Time* (*Die Flucht aus der Zeit*), was taken directly from St. Ambrose's treatise *De fuga saeculi*. The phrase *fuga saeculi*, which appears on the half-title page of the original German edition, literally means “flight out of time” or “escape from time” – though it is worth noting that *saeculum* denotes an “age” or “century”, and thus retains a temporal rather than purely metaphysical resonance. A poem entered in the diary under the date 30 June 1919 contains the verse: *Der Heilige steht über und außerhalb der Zeit* (“The saint stands above and outside the times”)⁵⁵. This Ambrosian formula pervades many passages of Ball's prose, which express a desperate longing to be liberated from the infernal, war-ravaged time of the twentieth century. In Ball's Dadaist lexicon, the figure of the “saint” conceals within itself that of the rebel – a new kind of artist, a poet-mystic (and ascetic). Hence, in the 1917 article *Kandinsky*, he writes: “The artists of this age face the world as ascetics of their own spirituality. They live deeply buried lives. They are forerunners, prophets of a new era. Only they can understand the

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 175.

⁵⁶ H. Ball, *Kandinsky*, p. 225.

tonalities of their language. They stand in opposition to society, as did heretics in the Middle Ages. Their works are simultaneously philosophical, political, and prophetic⁵⁶. Similarly, in the diary entry from 13 June 1916, Ball noted: "The dadaists are [...] babes-in-arms of a new age"⁵⁷. The identification of the Dadaists with the artists of a new time – prophets, ascetics, saints, albeit imprisoned within "this age" – suggests that it is precisely the Dadaist poet who is entrusted with a special role: to endure, and perhaps to overcome, the horror and disintegration of modernity.

In the entry from 14 April 1916, Ball wrote:

Our cabaret is a gesture. Every word that is spoken and sung here says at least this one thing: that this humiliating age has not succeeded in winning our respect. What could be respectable and impressive about it? Its cannons? Our big drum drowns them. Its idealism? That has long been a laughingstock, in its popular and its academic edition. The grandiose slaughters and cannibalistic exploits? Our spontaneous foolishness and our enthusiasm for illusion will destroy them⁵⁸.

On 12 June of the same year, Ball added: "The dadaist [...] knows that life asserts itself in contradiction, and that his age aims at the destruction of generosity as no other age has ever done before. [...] The dadaist fights against the agony and the death throes of this age. Averse to all clever reticence, he cultivates the curiosity of one who feels joy even at the most questionable forms of rebellion"⁵⁹. The titular "flight out of time" thus emerges in Ball's work as an artistic response to a time of war and pervasive destruction – a destruction that engulfed not only modern language but also the entire edifice of social and political structures. Hostility towards the Wilhelmine Reich – perceived as just as fallen and degenerate as the language of official propaganda⁶⁰ – infuses

⁵⁷ H. Ball, *Flight Out of Time*..., p. 66.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

⁶⁰ Ball expressed this hostility in some of the most acrimonious passages of *Critique of the German Intelligentsia*. For example: "It is the premise of this book that the new German regime [...] must fall, either through surrender of its weapons, through collapse of its economy, or through the united intellectual effort of its revolutionaries. [...] This state issued from a pietistic, compulsive militarism and a despotic penitentiary, setting itself up in opposition both to its own people and to the world, as moral judge and law, while at the same time making so bold as to break the laws and neutrality of other nations, inflicting wars, and annexing territories. This nation, in short, must be condemned and cast down if there are to be guarantees for the reconstruction of humanity, for a world republic, for the work of freedom on behalf of the salvation of afflicted peoples." H. Ball, *Critique of the German Intelligentsia*, p. 113.

Ball's art with an anarchic dimension: "Oppose world systems and acts of state by transforming them into a phrase or a brush stroke"⁶¹. At the same time, the Ambrosian *fuga saeculi* introduces a spiritual and mystical dimension into Ball's Dadaism: it is the saintly artist who, by virtue of spirited and poetic speech, transcends the temporality of a godless and decaying age.

In this context, the destructive strategies of Dada art acquire a still deeper significance. First, they serve to document the disintegration that marks "this age," and to counter the falsehood of bourgeois art, which, through its reassuring figurations and safe linearities, continues to feign the existence of social as well as spiritual order:

The image of the human form is gradually disappearing from the painting of these times and all objects appear only in fragments. This is one more proof of how ugly and worn the human countenance has become, and of how all the objects of our environment have become repulsive to us. The next step is for poetry to decide to do away with language for similar reasons. These are things that have probably never happened before⁶².

Dadaist art – in this sense – becomes a flight from convention: through authentic "word images," it seeks to emancipate the *verbum* from the constraining laws of tradition.

Secondly, poetry in a fragmented form – yet simultaneously resonating with a newly rediscovered, "magical" *logos* – opens the possibility of rupture within the circular cycle of inevitable destruction that marks the tragic history of the German nation. Ball, as a political journalist associated with anti-Prussian and anti-war periodicals (*Die Aktion*, *Die Revolution*, *Die Freie Zeitung*, *Die Weißen Blätter*), repeatedly emphasised the question of the German intelligentsia's guilt – its responsibility for the bloody assaults on innocent nations and for upholding the tradition of an absolutist, militarised, and violent state⁶³. In this light, the Dadaist poem – particularly in its "public" performance – becomes an act of protest, an expression of anti-militarist philosophy, and a redemptive gesture of atonement. In *Die junge Literatur in Deutschland*,

⁶¹ H. Ball, *Flight Out of Time...*, p. 56.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁶³ An example is the article *An unsere Freunde und Kameraden* (*To Our Friends and Comrades*), published in March 1919 in *Die Freie Zeitung*. In it, Ball writes: "Let us stick to the facts. Germany willfully and without considering the possibility of defeat unleashed the war. Germany has brought endless misery upon humanity. German statesmen have signed off on this responsibility. The entire nation becomes complicit if it does not hold them accountable. They must be prosecuted, punished, and condemned." H. Ball, *An unsere Freunde und Kameraden*, in: H. Ball, *Der Künstler und die Zeitkrankheit. Ausgewählte Schriften*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1984, p. 255.

⁶⁴ H. Ball, *Die junge Literatur in Deutschland*, in: H. Ball, *Der Künstler...*, p. 33.

published in *Der Revoluzzer* in August 1915, Ball wrote: "More important than verses, essays, or dramas of any kind is the articulation of certain thoughts *coram publico*, whether in the lecture hall, with a horsewhip, or in debate"⁶⁴. In his diary, the Dadaist poet further declared: "philosophy had been taken over by the artists"; "If language really makes us kings of our nation, then without doubt it is we, the poets and thinkers, who are to blame for this blood bath and who have to atone for it"; "It is with language that purification must begin"⁶⁵. This act of spiritual purification – commencing with the cleansing of language, restoring to it an original purity, when the word did not yet signify externally but revealed an inner sense in the form of a verbal image – takes on in Ball's work a distinctly kairotic character, as suggested by his phrase concerning the shattering of the "central clock":

We are now trying to find this origin and womb of things [*Grund und Mutterschoß der Dinge*]. The origin of symbols, where each image just illumines the next, and where it does not matter what assertions are made – because the assertions group together because they come from a common center, if only the individual himself has an axis. Perhaps the art we are seeking is the key to every former art; a Solomonic key that opens secrets. The central clock [*Normaluhr*] of an abstract epoch has exploded⁶⁶.

The performance of the *Lautgedichte*, as a destructive and sudden event – a moment of *kairos*, the violent "now" of performance – interrupts the linear, normative order of time understood as *chronos*, that is, the continuous and homogeneous succession of temporal instants. In this sense, it becomes a vehicle for "flight out of time": a mystical asceticism enacted *hic et nunc*, in direct defiance of the death-dealing machinery set in motion by the German Emperor – the anti-hero of "this age"⁶⁷. Yet this escape also harbours another layer of meaning, already intimated in the title of the final chapter of Ball's diary: *Flight to the Fundamental* (*Die Flucht zum Grunde*). Ball's *fuga* is thus not only a withdrawal from the historical present, but also a flight toward pre-time, conceived as an archaic, utopian, even fantastical realm of the word. It is at once an ecclesiastical "origin" (*der Grund*) – the "womb" (*der Mutterschoß*)

⁶⁵ H. Ball, *Flight Out of Time...*, pp. 7; 29; 76.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 108; H. Ball, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*, p. 156.

⁶⁷ See Ball's poem *Totentanz 1916* (*Dance of Death 1916*): *So sterben wir, so sterben wir / Wir sterben alle Tage [...], So morden wir, so morden wir / Wir morden alle Tage [...], Wir danken dir, wir danken dir / Herr Kaiser, für die Gnade* ("Thus we die, thus we die / We die every day," "Thus we kill, thus we kill / We kill every day," "We thank you, we thank you / Lord Kaiser, for your mercy.") H. Ball, *Gesammelte Gedichte. Mit Photos und Faksimiles*, Peter Schifferli Verlags AG "Die Arche", Zürich 1963, p. 21.

⁶⁸ H. Ball, *Byzantinisches Christentum*, Benziger Verlag, Einsiedeln-Zürich 1958, p. 10. For

of a renewed Catholic Church to which Ball returns in 1920 – and a linguistic “origin” (*der Ursprung*), which in *Byzantinisches Christentum* the poet evokes as the *Ursprache Gottes*, the primordial language of God⁶⁸.

The chapter on “divine language” (*Die Sprache Gottes*), included in Ball’s 1923 theological treatise on Byzantine saints and ascetics (notably John Climacus, Simeon Stylites and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite), casts new light on the Dadaist performance of 1916. It reveals that the poetic sanctuary of original language to which Ball had linked his sound poems was not merely a fleeting fascination. The idea of a primordial, sonorous *Sprache* receives its fullest articulation in the aforementioned theological work – although, as an unspoken intuition, it had already manifested itself on the stage of the Cabaret Voltaire. Ball’s late descriptions of the prayers of Christian hermits abound in phrases such as *der Sprachschatz* (“the treasury of language”), *Wortgewalt* (“the overpowering force of the word”), *Zauberklänge und -worte* (“magical sounds and words”), or *Lautgebilde* (“sound forms”)⁶⁹. His portrayal of divine language itself is steeped in the vocabulary of the acoustic register: *Laut, Vokabeln, Akzent, gehören, grollender, stammeln, berauschend*⁷⁰. By linking the figure of Pseudo-Dionysius with Egyptian and Persian Gnosis – and associating “gnostic magic” with the figure of the *Magos Philosophos*, as well as with the “alchemic process”⁷¹ – Ball not only presents the early Christian theologian as the archetypal “magical bishop.” He also attempts a retrospective philosophical synthesis that lends coherence to his earlier phonetic experiments and deepens our understanding of the mystical-Dadaist message of the Cabaret Voltaire era.

In light of the cited passages, the Dadaist search for what is “new” reveals itself simultaneously as an attempt to reclaim what is ancient, archaic, and forgotten. The prefix *Ur*, which Ball employs in reference to both the original, pure language (*Ursprache Gottes*) and the utopian “primeval homeland” (*Urheimat*) of musical speech, suggests that the artist locates the language of the prophets – the model for his own poetic glossolalia – beyond the bounds of historical time: in a space where history has not yet begun. In *Byzantinisches Christentum*, Ball writes of a “longing to return to all beginnings” (*Eine Sehnsucht zurück zu allen Anfängen*), of an immersion “in long-forgotten paradises of the beyond and the primordial world” (*in längst vergessene Paradiese der Über- und Vorwelt*), and of

the notion of *Ursprache Gottes* and its connection to the Dada-period in Ball’s life, see F. G. Bosman, “*Gottes Ursprache*”. *Hugo Ball’s Theology of Sound*, in: *God in Question: Religious Language and Secular Languages*, ed. M. M. Lintner, A. Weger Publishing, Brixen 2014, pp. 397-412.

⁶⁹ H. Ball, *Byzantinisches Christentum*, pp. 18, 278.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 215-217.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 116, 131.

a mystical experience made possible by attuning oneself to the tones of a primeval, songlike language: “a primitive mixture of animal and child sounds; a music that vibrates in long-lost cadences: all this shakes the soul and reminds it of its primeval homeland” (*ein primitives Gemisch von Tier- und von Kinderlauten; eine Musik, die in längst verschollenen Kadenzen schwingt: all dies erschüttert die Seele und erinnert sie an ihre Urheimat*)⁷². The sole condition for recovering this prehistoric realm seems to be the activation of the reserves of “primeval memory” (*Ur-Erinnerung*), as Ball describes in a diary entry from August 1916: “The childlike quality [...] comes from the belief in a primeval memory, in a world that has been supplanted and buried beyond recognition [*Unkenntlichkeit*] [...]. The primeval strata [*Ur-Schichten*], untouched and unreached by logic and by the social apparatus, emerge in the unconsciously infantile and in madness, when the barriers are down”⁷³. This “childlike quality” (*Kindlichkeit*), understood as a Dadaist artistic strategy, thus becomes a reservoir of memory’s deepest layers, still preserved from the encroachments of conceptual and cognitive language. The world of the child is a realm scarcely perceived or altogether disregarded – “a world that is hardly noticed” (*Sie ist eine kaum beachtete Welt*) – yet this utopian *Über- und Vorwelt* is precisely the *Kinderwelt*, the child’s world, whose laws are the foundation of art and of artistic rebellion. As Ball affirms: “No art can exist without the application of these laws, and no art can exist and be accepted without their religious and philosophical recognition. [...] To outdo oneself in simplicity and childlike thought [*Kindsköpfigkeit*] – that is still the best defense”⁷⁴.

Dadaist art, drawing inspiration from *Kindlichkeit*, primitivism and naïveté, fuses restorative intentions – such as the recovery and safeguarding of a primordial language – not only with a flight out of historical time but also with an escape from linguistic representation itself: “The prime concern is the fusion [*Verschmelzung*] of names and things”⁷⁵. Representation, tied to the linguistic order of the “adult world,” suppresses the childlike – magical and archetypal

⁷² Ibid., p. 118.

⁷³ H. Ball, *Flight Out of Time...*, pp. 73-75; H. Ball, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*, p. 110.

⁷⁴ H. Ball, *Flight Out of Time...*, p. 72; H. Ball, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*, p. 108.

⁷⁵ H. Ball, *Flight Out of Time...*, p. 109; H. Ball, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*, p. 157. (The German term *Verschmelzung* signifies not merely a “fusion” or “joining,” but a “melting-together” or “dissolution of boundaries.” In the context of Dada’s rejection of conventional linguistic representation, it implies the erasure of the distinction between the signifier and the signified – the reabsorption of names into the immediacy of things themselves.)

⁷⁶ H. Ball, *Flight Out of Time...*, p. 72; H. Ball, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*, pp. 107-108. (The original German term *figürlich* does not merely mean “symbolic” but rather refers to what is “pictorial” or “figurative” – that is, visually imagistic or emblematic in nature. The English translation, by rendering it as “symbolic,” risks losing the sensory, image-based connotations essential to the mystical-aesthetic context of Ball’s reflection and related to his key concept of *Wortbild* – “wordimage.”)

- images whose echoes persist in the deepest strata of memory: "Childhood as a new world; all the directness of childhood, all its fantastic and symbolic [*figürliche*] aspects, against senilities and the adult world"⁷⁶. Crucially, in his episcopal performance, Ball returns precisely to this world of childhood - to a deeply personal memory - which endows his stage presence with a profound existential charge. In a diary note dated 23 June 1916, devoted to the recitation of sound poems, he writes: "For a moment it seemed as if there were a pale, bewildered face in my cubist mask, that half-frightened, half-curious face of a ten-year-old boy, trembling and hanging avidly on the priest's words in the requiems [*Totenmessen*] and high masses in his home parish [*Heimatspfarrei*]"⁷⁷.

Singing his phonetic poems - stylised as an "ancient cadence [*uralte Kadenz*] of priestly lamentation, that style of liturgical singing that wails in all the Catholic churches of East and West" - Ball seeks to reenact, or even resurrect, the original, sonorous language. This deeply rooted need for repetition finds further confirmation in the diary entry from 7 December 1919, where Ball once again evokes a childhood memory imbued with liturgical and musical resonance: "This evening I suddenly sang the Creed as it has been running through my mind over and over in these last few weeks"⁷⁸. After citing several verses of the hymn ("*Credo in unum Deum, / Patrem omnipotentem...*"), he adds: "The words intoxicate me [*berauschen mich*]. My childhood [*Kinderwelt*] appears. There is a battling and a raging in me. I bow low, I fear that I am not equal to this life, this rapture." Ball recalls the splendour of the liturgical chant, the vowels of its words ("*Et in unam sanctam / Catholicam et apostolicam / Ecclesiam...*"), and their "resounding [*rauschendes*], eternal rendezvous"⁷⁹. In this evocation of the *Credo*, the experience of poetic rapture becomes inseparable from a return to the formative, sacred rhythms of childhood - a moment in which memory, language, and mysticism converge in a single performative utterance.

Summing up these scattered notes, it becomes evident that the abstract idea of the *Ursprache Gottes* assumes a concrete, sensuous form in Ball's reflections. First, the unlocalised "primeval homeland" (*Urheimat*) evoked in *Byzantinisches Christentum* reveals itself retrospectively as the local "home parish" (*Heimatspfarrei*) - the poet's childhood homeland - resonant with the lamenting cadence of the priest. Second, the "magical bishop" into whom Ball transforms on the stage of the Cabaret Voltaire emerges as an incarnation of the childlike parish priest, whose intoned liturgy the poet associates with the primordial, sonorous *logos*. Third, "the priest's words" - on which, according

⁷⁷ H. Ball, *Flight Out of Time...*, p. 71; H. Ball, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*, p. 106.

⁷⁸ H. Ball, *Flight Out of Time...*, p. 181.

⁷⁹ Ibid.; H. Ball, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*, p. 256.

to Ball's memory, the ten-year-old boy "hung" with rapt attention – reappear in the Dadaist performance as longed-for *Wortbilder* ("word images") and *Lautgebilde* ("sound forms"): linguistic configurations "untouched and un-reached by logic," drawn from the preverbal world of childhood, and revived through phonetic incantation and glossolalic repetition. In this light, the imagined primordial language – conceived at once as a theological ideal and as a trace of ontogenetic and phylogenetic prehistory – takes shape in Ball's work as an audible, affectively charged and liturgically inflected speech: the sacred idiom of a prelapsarian, pre-war childhood.

The question that must be asked at this point is whether Ball truly succeeds – on the stage of the Dadaist cabaret – in recreating the integrity, harmony and consensuality of the primeval, musical language. It seems that if any reconstruction or repetition of that language occurs, it does so not as *co-incidence*, but rather as *dé-coïncidence*: as "fissure," dissonance, mournful displacement. Even if *o katalominai* faintly recalls *Catholicam*, if *hopsamen* reverberates with the sacred *Amen*, and if *bimbala*, *binban*, and *bin beri ban* seem to ring like liturgical bells, these resonances from the poem *Gadji beri bimba* are no more than scattered fragments – vestiges, ruins of language – left behind in the wake of a daring rupture from semantic reference: an apocalyptic gesture that intensifies the very disintegration inscribed in a fallen language. In a letter from August 1916, written during Ball's retreat to the idyllic village of Vira-Magadino in southern Switzerland (where the poet sought repose from the Dadaist tumult in the Catholic sanctuary of Madonna del Sasso), we read of "desperate church bells" (*verzweifelte Kirchenglocken*), producing a "frightening music" (*erschreckende Musik*)⁸⁰. Even this Catholic *unberührte Landschaft*, in which Ball immersed his "naked white limbs in the silvery blue water"⁸¹ – this apparent paradise, functioning metonymically as a fantasy of the divine *Urheimat* – is marked by dissonance and unease. Despite all poetic and spiritual effort, the sought-after "flight out of time" (or, more politically, the "kingdom of God on earth"⁸²) remains unfulfilled. The bells of Vira-Magadino, which in the logic of a sacred aesthetics ought to have resounded with uplifting consonance, instead toll with the mechanical regularity of the *Normaluhr*. This very

⁸⁰ H. Ball, E. Hennings, *Damals in Zürich. Briefe aus den Jahren 1915-1917. Mit Fotos und Faksimiles*, Peter Schifferli Verlags AG "Die Arche", Zürich 1978, p. 87.

⁸¹ H. Ball, *Flight Out of Time...*, pp. 71, 72; H. Ball, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*, p. 107. (The English translator renders *unberührte Landschaft* as "untouched countryside," which does not fully capture the paradisiacal and romantic connotations of the original phrase. The German adjective *unberührt* denotes not only "untouched" or "unspoiled," but also "unsullied," "virginal," "primordial," or "pure.")

⁸² H. Ball, *Critique of the German Intelligentsia*, p. 116.

mechanism – frightening, automatic and fatal – becomes the temporal architecture of modern catastrophe, and the *chronos* of history asserts itself: the continuum of imperial time, dictating the rhythm of death and destruction. In Ball's vision, even the sacred soundscape is captured and subdued by a regime of automated repetition: the "musical clocks" (*Spieluhren*)⁸³ of Vira-Magadino are no longer instruments of praise, but of bondage – of sound enslaved by time.

If, then, the paradise found among the Swiss Alps offers no "flight out of time," neither does the performance on the stage of the Cabaret Voltaire, during which Ball stylises his phonetic poems as the "divine primal language" (*Ursprache Gottes*). The only thing that remains possible in this gesture is the repetition of a childhood experience – but not in the form of *coïncidence* or adequacy; rather as a "fissure" that breaks through, as a mournful dissonance.

This *Mißton* – which resounds as *dé-coïncidence* – bears witness to loss (of idyllic childhood, of the pastoral Church), but it certainly does not amount to a resurrection of the primeval language. Even if a moment of a temporal rupture briefly opens during the performance (as documented in the recollection: "For a moment it seemed as if there were a pale, bewildered face in my cubist mask, that half-frightened, half-curious face of a ten-year-old boy..."), it is a terrifying *kairos*. It reveals not the possibility of redemptive transcendence, but rather an insight into the impossibility of escaping the historical, war-ridden *hic et nunc*. Perhaps this explains why the bishop's performance turned out to be the first and last public recitation of "poems without words." Soon after, Ball abandoned the cabaret to devote himself first to journalistic and political activity, and then to solitary theological study. His personal notes from 1916 confirm the tone of mourning into which the poet had sunk: "What we are celebrating is both buffoonery and a requiem mass [*Totenmesse*]"; "I am preoccupied with my bishop's costume and my lamentable outburst [*lamentabler Ausbruch*] at the last soiree. The Voltaire-like setting in which that occurred was not very suitable for it, and my mind [*Inneres*] was not prepared for it"; "Will the one who clashes with things be the one to harmonize them? That is probably what is making me sad [*traurig*]"; "the crimes that the state and society are capable of when the chains fall are unnamable and sad [*unnennbar und traurig*]"⁸⁴.

In the end, if the performative gesture fails to achieve its resurrectional aim due to its mournful inadequacy, Ball's aesthetic – encompassing stage performances, personal notes, theological and political writings – offers a unique and pioneering critique of language: instrumental, conventional, subordinated to external purposes. This critique is articulated by Ball not only in writing,

⁸³ H. Ball, *Flight Out of Time...*, p. 76; H. Ball, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*, p. 111.

⁸⁴ H. Ball, *Flight Out of Time...*, pp. 56, 75, 77, 111; H. Ball, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*, pp. 86, 110, 113, 159.

but above all on stage: as performance, stylised prophecy, an avant-garde *Gesamtkunstwerk*. By creating the very matrix of a paradisiacal language of pure and liberated words, Ball reveals an image of how things might be (precisely by showing how they can never be) if justice and care for verbal particularity were to prevail in the realm of speech.

The Dadaist resistance to linguistic utilitarianism – in which the word is defiled, subordinated to the mechanisms of propaganda, power, and violence – demonstrates that Ball's legacy is not confined to the poetic or aesthetic domain. It also conveys an ethical message: a message marked by “fissure,” articulated in a post-secular idiom, and demanding, like the testimony of a prophet, the labour of decipherment.

4. Dadaist Critique of Language

Ball's critical – at times accusatory and condemnatory – remarks concerning contemporary language, whether literary, journalistic, or everyday, are found primarily in the *Dada Manifesto* and in the personal entries recorded in his diary. In the manifesto, we read, among other things: “dada literature, dada bourgeoisie, and yourselves, honored poets, who are always writing with words but never writing the word itself, who are always writing around the actual point”; “I don't want words that other people have invented. All the words are other people's inventions. I want my own stuff, my own rhythm, and vowels and consonants too, matching the rhythm and all my own”; “The word, the word, the word outside your domain, your stuffiness, this laughable impotence, your stupendous smugness, outside all the parrotry of your self-evident limitedness”⁸⁵. In a note dated 16 August 1916, the artist added: “Language is not the only means of expression. It is not capable of communicating the most profound experiences (to be considered when evaluating literature)”; “Spit out words: the dreary, lame, empty language of men in society”⁸⁶.

As we can see, Ball regarded contemporary language – literary, journalistic, and everyday – as barren, conventional, and compromised by social habits, moralising superficiality, and slave-like “parrotry.” He accused it of being incapable of expressing profound experiences and spiritual truth, calling instead for a language that would be primordial, personal, and rhythmic – one that would not be “dreary” or “empty,” but would emerge from within the individual. For him, the art of the word made sense only when it led to the creation of the word itself, rather than the reproduction of ready-made forms. Hence the

⁸⁵ H. Ball, *Dada Manifesto*, pp. 220, 221.

⁸⁶ H. Ball, *Flight Out of Time...*, pp. 76, 77.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

assertion dated 18 June 1916: "We achieved this [...] by abandoning documentary work (which is possible only by means of a time-consuming grouping of sentences in logically ordered syntax)"⁸⁷.

The alternative to such a corrupted and schematic language is Dadaist poetry: a poetry of sounds rather than words, modelled on an imagined, paradisiacal, and primordial language saturated with magical verbal images: "Such word images [*Wortbilder*], when they are successful, are irresistibly and hypnotically engraved on the memory, and they emerge again from the memory with just as little resistance and friction"⁸⁸. In this perspective, poetic images do not serve an illustrative or rhetorical function, but rather restore to language its performative potential: the capacity to activate cognitive and affective processes that are not subordinated to the communicative function of meaning, but instead reach toward pre-linguistic, somatic, and mnemonic registers of reception:

We tried to give the isolated vocables the fullness of an oath, the glow of a star. And curiously enough, the magically inspired vocables conceived and gave birth to a new sentence that was not limited and confined by any conventional meaning. Touching lightly on a hundred ideas at the same time without naming them, this sentence made it possible to hear the innately playful, but hidden, irrational character of the listener; it wakened and strengthened the lowest strata of memory. Our experiments touched on areas of philosophy and of life that our environment—so rational and so precocious – scarcely let us dream of⁸⁹.

The aforementioned "lowest strata of memory" evoke the category of "primeval memory" (*Ur-Erinnerung*), which appears in Ball's diary in conjunction with *Kindlichkeit*. Dadaist poetry employs a language that is childlike, primitive, and naïve – resembling "the child's first sound," a form of "the beginning at zero, the new in our art" (to use Huelsenbeck's phrase) – but at the same time reaching back to a distant past: to a state of linguistic innocence and inexpressibility. The ideal of a phonetic Eden is articulated by Ball in various ways, including references to the biblical motif of *lingua adamica*: "It was a magnanimous inclusion of Adam into the work of creation when God granted him the right to allot personality along with the names"; "Only what is named is there and has existence"⁹⁰. The imitation of such an imagined, paradisiacal language – in which the "fusion [*Verschmelzung*] of names and things" took

⁸⁸ Ibid.; H. Ball, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*, p. 100.

⁸⁹ H. Ball, *Flight Out of Time...*, p. 68.

⁹⁰ Ibid., pp. 91, 111.

place – is admittedly no remedy for the semiotic rupture of the word in conventional language, but it represents a form of atonement for that which is “unnamable and sad,” for that which has not been named (with proper dignity and respect) in instrumentalised language⁹¹. It should be emphasised that for Ball, the world is not only a reality constructed from linguistic substance, but above all a world that resounds. “Sharpen the mind for the unique specialty of a thing,” Ball wrote a few weeks before the spectacular recitation of his sound poems. “If things rumble, then let them rumble”⁹². The redemptive mission of Ball’s phonetic poetry thus consists primarily in giving voice to what is unnamed – or at the very least, in not drowning out, with idle chatter full of platitudes and empty words, that which simply sounds, and has the right to sound. For Ball, the struggle is against verbosity, against what is “talkative” or “empty” (*geschwätzig*), “useful” (*der Nützlichkeit*), “conventional” (*konventionell*), “enforced by society and the state, by habit and comfort, by property and family”⁹³.

However, it would be naïve to believe that Ball’s phonetic poetry accomplishes the longed-for *Verschmelzung* of names and things. This reconciliatory ideal – drawn from the biblical concept of a paradisiacal language, in which the name directly expresses the spiritual essence of a thing – collapses in the face of both Ball’s residual, patchwork artistic strategy and his self-consciousness regarding the nature of his own work: “What we call dada is a farce of nothingness in which all higher questions are involved; a gladiator’s gesture, a play with shabby leftovers [*schäbigen Überbleibseln*]”⁹⁴. The breaking apart of fallen words and their reconfiguration into sound constellations resembles more closely the strategy of translation described by Benjamin in *The Task of the Translator*, inspired by the Kabbalistic notion of *shevirat ha-kelim* (the breaking of the vessels). In that text, we read:

Fragments of a vessel that are to be glued together must match one another in the smallest details, although they need not be like one another. In the same way a translation, instead of imitating the sense of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original’s way of meaning, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel. For this very

⁹¹ The word, writes Ball in one of his poems, has been stripped of its dignity, betrayed and forsaken: “*Das Wort ist preisgegeben; [...] Das Wort hat jede Würde verloren*” (“The word has been abandoned; [...] The word has lost all dignity”). *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁹² *Ibid.*, pp. 59, 78.

⁹³ H. Ball, *Byzantinisches Christentum*, p. 27.

⁹⁴ H. Ball, *Flight Out of Time...*, p. 65; H. Ball, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*, p. 98.

⁹⁵ W. Benjamin, *The Task of the Translator*, p. 260.

reason translation must in large measure refrain from wanting to communicate something, from rendering the sense, and in this the original is important to it only insofar as it has already relieved the translator and his translation of the effort of assembling and expressing what is to be conveyed⁹⁵.

Ball's sound poetry, though inspired by the dream of a paradisiacal language, does not aim to restore the direct unity of name and thing; rather, it consciously works with "shabby leftovers" – fragments of language that have lost their former coherence and semantic force. Its gesture is not reconstructive but performative: it resembles the Kabbalistic act of seeking out the shattered vessels, in which the aim is not to reassemble but to reveal the structural rupture. Much like in Benjamin's concept of translation, Ball's linguistic experiment does not strive for the communication of meaning but instead exposes its untranslatability and delineates a new field of meaning-making potential. This poetry exists as a shard of a greater language – a lost language whose echo returns in rhythm, dissonance, and Dadaist "farce".

In this sense, Ball's poetry may be read as an aesthetic staging of *dé-coïncidence* – a "negativity that becomes a work": not through "correspondence with reality" but by means of the "internal rule of the game"⁹⁶ constituted by language play. As in Jullien's thought, this art can no longer "count on anything but itself," yet "can no longer be content with itself either." Its value lies not in harmony or beauty, but in its "capacity for withdrawal" – a kenotic renunciation of communicable meaning – and in its ability to "keep at a distance" from what is adequate and well-adjusted⁹⁷. It is precisely within this tension – between disintegration and form, between fragmentation and the pursuit of sonic meaning – that the Dadaist practice of language emerges as an act of radical listening: a gesture not so much of creation as of exposing the impossibility of reassembly.

In summary, Ball's Dadaist art appears as a protest against the artistic linearisation and violent functionalisation of language. The proclaimed call for "purification" leads to a phonetic asceticism culminating in the performance of "poems without words." Key concepts – such as *Wortbild*, *Ursprache*, *Urheimat*, *Ur-Erinnerung*, and *Kindlichkeit* – intertwine themes of ontogenesis, mysticism and childlike aesthetics in a longing to return to a primordial state which, however, can only ever be evoked – never recovered. The performative *kairos*, as a moment of revelation, is but a fleeting flash that immediately fractures, revealing "fissure," mournful displacement and the impossibility of fully

⁹⁶ F. Jullien, *Dé-coïncidence* (Chapter IX: *Modernité*).

⁹⁷ Ibid.

resurrecting speech. Language remains marked by loss, and Ball's prophetic gesture – singular and final – becomes a testimony to that *Mißton* or *Zerrissenheit*. It is telling that what was intended as the resurrection of language becomes instead a “requiem mass” (*Totenmesse*), a performative epitaph for a world that was never reborn.

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HUGO BALL I „WERSY BEZ SŁÓW” O NARODZINACH SZTUKI DADAISTYCZNEJ Z DUCHA DYSONANSU (streszczenie)

Artykuł oferuje reinterpretację twórczości Hugona Balla przez pryzmat kategorii *dé-coïncidence*, rozumianej nie jako pojęcie odizolowane, lecz jako element szerszej konstelacji semantycznej – obejmującej dysonans, dyssens, *Zerrissenheit* oraz *shevirat ha-kelim* – której kulminację stanowi dadaizm jako sztuka zrodzona z dysonansu. Analiza rozwijana jest w trzech głównych częściach. Pierwsza część omawia występ Balla w Cabaret Voltaire z 1916 roku, skupiając się na akcie recytacji wierszy z cyklu *Sechs Laut- und Klanggedichte* i występie w roli „magicznego biskupa”, dającym się zinterpretować jako powtarzana, rezonująca liturgia. Druga część koncentruje się na „ucieczce z czasu” (*Flucht aus der Zeit*), analizując tę koncepcję w odniesieniu do kairotycznej temporalności performansu, jak i do medium dźwięku, rozumianego jako sfera pierwotnej pamięci. Trzecia część poświęcona jest krytyce języka instrumentalnego, z której wyłania się estetyczna alternatywa: zakorzeniona w dzieciństwie i artystycznej zabawie językowymi pozostałościami. Ostatecznie twórczość Balla ukazana zostaje jako jedna z najwcześniejszych i najoryginalniejszych form sztuki zrodzonej z ducha dysonansu. Jego dadaistyczna praktyka jawi się jako poetycka i filozoficzna odpowiedź na rozpad nowoczesności, łącząca mistycyzm językowy z refleksją teologiczną i krytyką polityczną.

Słowa kluczowe: Hugo Ball, dadaizm, *dé-coïncidence*, dysonans, poezja fonetyczna, performans, prądy język, boży język

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