Words and Worlds: Dada and the Destruction of *Logos*, Zurich 1916

“If you are alive, you are a Dadaist,” Richard Huelsenbeck wrote in 1920. Huelsenbeck belonged to the now well-known group of poets and performers who came together in Zurich during 1916 under the name Dada. Whilst Dadaist movements appeared in other places, and took on different manifestations, the Zurich Dadaists were concerned principally with poetry and performance. And if Dada may be defined or understood in many ways, it is arguable that to those in Zurich in 1916 Dada was precisely about the ambiguity of language and its relation to the world, and this was not only demonstrated through performances and writing, but also in the attempt to resist the kind of identification that language, seemingly, cannot escape:

Spit out words: the dreary, lame, empty language of men in society. Simulate gray modesty or madness. But inwardly be in a state of tension. Reach an incomprehensible, unconquerable sphere.
Hugo Ball (Ball, 1996: 77)
Dada is elasticity itself.
Richard Huelsenbeck (Huelsenbeck, 1993: 11)

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Figure 1 Richard Huelsenbeck
(source unknown)
Figure 2 Hugo Ball (source unknown)

As the mediator of sense experience and as a regulator of ideas and concepts, the use of language—one may even say, of *words*—was extremely important to Huelsenbeck, Hugo Ball and the others (Figs. 1 and 2). And we may suggest that where Richard Huelsenbeck could claim that *being* itself was ambiguous (i.e., being, like Dada, was 'elastic'), he was aware that language both connects and disconnects the individual from a world of experience; and we may read what the Zurich Dadaists proclaimed as suggesting that life was a kind of Heraclitean flux, in which all objects, experiences and perceptions were fundamentally unstable. Life, in short is ever moving forward, whilst language (which, in its attachment to categories of understanding, always works in a backward direction), by contrast, masks a kind of immanent disorder. The problem with language was not only one of, say, referentiality, but also of the way in which it gives order, or 'makes' the world—and in this sense the uses of language can be nefarious: "Human beings," Huelsenbeck added, "are simply ideologues if they fall for the swindle perpetrated by their own intellects; that an idea, symbol of a momentarily perceived fact, has any absolute reality" (Huelsenbeck, 1993: 9-11).

1. Logos and Identity

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Figure 3
Poster for the first
evening at Cabaret Voltaire

In this essay I want to suggest that the play of identity in language and appearance that was a feature of the short-lived *Cabaret Voltaire* (Fig. 3), which the Dadaists established in Zurich in 1916, can be read as an attempt to destroy the idea of *logos,* by which I mean it was an attack on the idea that reason (through the mediating discourse of identity) reveals its own perfectibility in overcoming the shortcomings of the historical present, by reaching towards a future that would be evermore perfect. So whilst the word 'logos' translates as 'word' or 'speech' its associations are far richer than this, and in general terms *logos* refers principally to a series of developments within the philosophical tradition of the West, which taken together can be understood as an idea of perfectibility, or of the power of reason to attain such perfection. As Mark C. Taylor has written:

[t]he *Logos* has been interpreted in various ways: Platonic forms, the mind of the creator God, the son of God, the image of God, Reason, Spirit, Absolute Subject, creative archetypes, numbers, geometric forms, and so forth. In each of its incarnations, the *logos* forms the ground and provides the reason for all that exists. From a logocentric perspective, to under-stand anything, one must penetrate appearances and comprehend what stands under the surface (Taylor, 1992:

188-89).

Thus, any attempt to understand (*under-stand* as Taylor says), justify, or examine a 'reality' beyond appearance, or the relationship between language and such objectivity becomes part of this logocentric tradition, even, it is argued, when such understanding takes the form of a denial of *logos* (because to deny it is nevertheless to affirm a relation to it, even if it is one of unwelcome parentage, for example) (Rorty, 1991: 107-118). For our purposes the important aspect of this tradition is found in the way language and rational categories create connections between words and the world, and thus assume a principal role in the making of*identities.* It was the world as presented by such rational language around 1917 that Dada sought to question, with Hugo Ball in particular believing that only the spiritual reassertion of *logos* could destroy the claims of reason to reveal all—in other words, reason's claim to*logos* had to be destroyed.

Although the question of identity between appearance and reality has been problematic to an understanding of the world since the dawn of philosophical speculation, the problem of bridging the apparent gap between the two becomes more marked in modern society precisely because more aspects of our experience of the world are now mediated than ever before—from the fact that one can now 'experience' situations, lives, or cultures beyond our own (e.g., through film, fiction, etc.), to the commonplace act of, say, purchasing a carton of milk without any knowledge of how to obtain it without the mediation of commerce (this is the inevitable mediation of material life as a consequence of the division of the field of production). Couple that with the historical emergence of contrasting ways of thinking about Western assumptions about reality (anthropology, for example, revealed a variability in beliefs about the nature of the physical world), and the problem of identity becomes so overbearing that one can see by the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century the ease with

which the normally expansive curiosity of the Western mind is directed inwards. A retreat to safety, it seems, in an attempt to prevent philosophical speculation from making the gap mediated by language into an unbridgeable chasm.

In technical or formal terms this was reflected, for instance, in the development of a philosophy that advocated the abandonment of speculations about the nature of reality (the so-called Anglo-American analytic school of the first half of the twentieth century). Already, in fact, by the late 1890's, the groundwork for this withdrawal from metaphysics was found in Gottlob Frege's work on the sense, meaning and reference of language; although his attempt to elaborate the grounds for a firm identity between words or names and an external object that these referred to was of limited success—because he found that meaning had an unavoidable contextual determination that allowed for a degree of ambiguity (Frege, 1980: 56-79) [(1)]. In trying to make philosophy scientifically respectable, the philosophers of language who followed Frege, determined that, in language, every term must therefore be unambiguous, or rather, for talk of reality to avoid the charge of meaninglessness, words had to refer to one thing or another—word meanings must be 'tight' and not 'elastic'. This meant that a conception of language taken in such terms could be understood to have a backward directed referentiality function, which is to say that language itself was for the most part assimilated to already available categories of ordering experience. The important point about this with relation to Dada is that the 'proper' use of language reflected a version of the *logos:*that is to say, the philosophically respectable notion of language in the early twentieth century cannot easily be disentangled from associated ideas of referentiality and identity, which suppose a 'reality' to which language use, and representations generally (be they verbal/textual or material) should match up (Wittgenstein, 1953; Goodman, 1978). The reason for this was simple—words always refer to something. Dada, as we will see,

sought to say something about reality, but did not use language in this way. Of course, this was not entirely new with respect to Dada—certain uses of words (e.g., in verse or poetry) would never claim to reach for such strict conditions of use, but did this entail meaninglessness? Was the apparent gap between words and worlds not an aspect of the problem of language providing the grounds for different *kinds* of views of the world (e.g., scientific as against literary, etc.), that reason-as-*logos* had sought to overcome? As Richard Rorty has said, the basis of this problem is that the realist picture (which demands strict association, or a 'tight' application of words) ultimately cannot cope with the idea that there may be nothing below a surface that is 'made' by the connecting function of language—that actually there is no universal method for providing the means to de-contextualize words and language to get below the surface, and perhaps more importantly the *metaphors* that form such a large part of the representational practices of language do not have any meaning (Rorty, 1989: 19).

2. Worlds in Motion

The primacy of the logocentric tradition in Western thinking since the Enlightenment (i.e., in its association with the notion of the power of reason) ensured that any experience or phenomena that contradicted the idea of reason's perfectibility (or that suggested gaps in reason's applicability) was categorized in a more or less residual manner (the list could be endless—'nonsense', 'coincidence', 'chance', etc.), and thus an awareness of the deceptiveness of appearance, or of experiences of disorder in appearance or imagination were constituted in symbols of a sublunary world. A representation of this is found in the mythical figure of *Proteus* who was, according to the ancient Greek Lucian:

[n]o other than a dancer whose mimetic skills enables him to adapt himself to every character: in the activity of his movements, he is liquid as water, rapid as fire; he is the

raging lion, the savage panther, the trembling bough; he is what he will (quoted in Orgel, 1967: 9-10).

In other words, the sublunary is equivalent to some conception of base existence, and Proteus, like Dada (as we have seen) is not susceptible to fixed definition, and is thus elastic in terms of 'character'—which is to say *without* character. Thus, where *logos* is taken to be a reason that overcomes the appearance of deceptiveness, the cause of deception is itself associated with an unruly nature that is forever moving—or protean—in character. And for the Zurich Dadaists (and others) in the first decades of the twentieth century a world in motion was seen to demand new methods of interpretation, presentation, or other poetic re-enactment, as artists began to explore the centrality of disorder and deception to life as lived, and as portrayed in language and through the visual medium.

The Italian futurists, for example, were impetuous seekers of chaos and urged, simply, abandonment to the de-humanizing rush of the mechanized and rationalized industrial age. Zurich Dada, by contrast, was propelled by the need to take a long and hard look at where the consequences of modernity had taken humanity, and at the debasement of culture that was seen in the inevitability that young men would almost certainly be marching off to war with a volume of Goethe in their knapsacks [(2)]. And for Hugo Ball in particular war was nothing less than the destruction of the Word (logos), the 'magical' nature of which was in its connection to ancient texts that contained the 'plaintive words' that no human mind could resist (Ball, 1996: 66). The recovery of the Word was what was required, and it was to be achieved through the destruction of *words*, of language as conventionally conceived, to be replaced by 'vocables', or combinations of word voicings in the sound-poem (Richter, 1997: 31). The *poème simultané* for example was the result of several voices combined in recitation of discordant elements. Ball noted that:

[t]he subject of the poème simultané is the value of the human voice […] the noises represent the inarticulate, inexorable and ultimately decisive forces which constitute the background. The poem carries the message that mankind is swallowed up in a mechanistic process. In a generalized and compressed form, it represents the battle of the human voice against a world which menaces, ensnares and finally destroys it, a world whose rhythm and din are inescapable (quoted in Richter, 1997: 31).

Dada was then also an elaboration of something that was there for all to see, but which was largely obscured by language and conventions of meaning. By indulging in a series of hide-and-seek games, Ball and the others revealed that the protean world of uncontrolled movement and unforeseeable forms was within us all, a position that was simply reinforced by the mechanized military technology of the twentieth century; which had reduced society to some kind of Hobbesian state of nature where war, as the novelist J.G. Ballard has noted, seemed to affirm that the whole world was merely a stage-set that could be swept aside at a moment's notice [(3)]. The average individual, stripped of active power in times of industrial war, was merely a puppet, set into motion by the authorial hand of the objective and sovereign state.

In such circumstances a sense of self, and no less a sense of the world, was difficult to maintain in the face of the obvious slaughter of the war. Whatever this meant for the notion of a world governed by reason and objectivity, by the pursuit of *logos*, it said clearly that we could not be whom we are, or who we hoped to become, without accepting that the self is to a large extend an incidental—even *accidental* construct—and as such was part of a 'reality' to which it was difficult to reconcile oneself. The suspicion that one's being is not found in any self-determining or rationally autonomous fashion—as the words and aims of reason proclaimed—but by the apparent contingency of a being that is formed only insofar as

the immanent disorder within the heart of humankind (within society) is kept under control, was demonstrated by the descent into war.

The trappings of selfhood, from the 'construction' of subjectivity to the foundations underlying society and morality (in all their complex causality), emerge in consequence of the affirmation of some identity; an identity which, in withdrawing, or taking something (qualities, experiences, meanings, etc.) is something to itself—is rather *something* than some other thing. In simple terms identity is a claim of order, or of self-composition against the contingency of all other relations. The perfect banality of such an observation is evident in the most elementary of childlike assertions of categorical learning, necessary though they are to a growing awareness of the location of oneself in the world; that, for example, 'to be a man is to not be an animal,' or 'an animal is not a vegetable.' The antinomy of characteristics or qualities that provides the language of identity is, once again, a mask. It is the order of the world *thus* made, defined, and so on, that directs our view away from the artificiality of the categories that support it: no identity is simply extracted, or withdrawn from the world (and no order is simply made from disorder, and then end of story) without an implicit relationship or debt to the *what-is-not* of identity. A thumb, for example, is not a forefinger, yet at the same time it is only a thumb in respect of its relation to the forefinger. This is true simply in abstract terms (in terms of the words and their associations alone) but also true in every instance where an actual thumb can be identified. The point is that the relationship between words and worlds is simple—words 'make' or reveal worlds, and so words affirm identities, or even 'truths.'

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Figure 4
Sophie Tauber in masked performance. (source unknown)
Figure 5
Sophie Tauber (and unknown other) in masks. (source unknown)

But Dada was about the fakery of the language of reason, of a world divided and understood by such identities. It was about the essential truth of the idea that order can ever be really more than a neat arrangement of ‘things’ that could just as easily be displaced, or destroyed. This aspect of an identity that takes—extracts—itself, could be rationally autonomous in the sense that it is active; but it is also*acting,* or the metaphorical adoption of the mask that conceals a depth below the surface. Yet when the mask is actually utilized to point out, or make a reminder of how misleading appearances could be (as it was in the Cabaret Voltaire performances), the surface order of relations paradoxically vanishes under the confusion of what is presented being mediated through a symbol of deception (Figs. 4 and 5), as Hugo Ball noted:

What fascinates us all about the masks is that they represent not human character and passions, but characters and passions that are larger than life. The horror of our time, the paralyzing background of events, is made visible (Ball, 1996: 64).>

Similarly the use of words by the members of the Cabaret

served equally to disconnect, or untie such relations of identity: “Silk stockings are priceless,” Walter Serner wrote reasonably enough (its reason is demonstrated by the fact that one may disagree with it), but that was not all; identity is then destroyed in the novel declaration of broken categories that are only demonstrations of *unreason*:

A vice queen IS an armchair.World views are word mixtures.A dog IS a hammock.
L’art est mort. Viva Dada! (Ball, Huelsenbeck and Serner, 1995: 160)

click to enlarge



Figure 6
Tristan Tzara, Zurich 1917 (source unknown)

In a similar fashion, Tristan Tzara (Fig. 6), the most volatile character amongst the Zurich Dadaists declared that he aimed to disorder sensible relations—he “smashed drawers, those of the brain and those of social organization” (quoted in Richter, 1997: 34). Confronting such declarations at the time must have been equivalent to wandering into some unknown land devoid of any human differentiation in the organization of world and experience—into, in fact, a sublunary world of natural immediacy. Equally one may now may be reminded of the psychiatric typology which tells us that a mind lacking order also—in terms of personal characteristics at least—fails to realize the autonomy so valued as a proof of the triumph of modernity (but instead, in modern terms, displays pathological

tendencies): such a person becomes the ‘non-subject,’ threatened by whim, existing at the mercy of caprice. Such a ‘person’ is Proteus. A lack of order, then, is necessarily about the absence of means, or of efforts to affirm an identity (i.e., the failure to control the movement of forces beyond one’s control; the failure to differentiate oneself from the protean). What we see with Dada, and what lends credence to the claim (by Hugo Ball) that it demanded gestures that were bordering on madness is the contrast between one who is moved (disordered) and one that moves (ordered)[4].

3. The Destruction of Logos

With Dada, it is sometimes difficult to know how seriously the intentions of the participants were, mainly because it is clear that there were differences all along as to the purpose of a phenomenon that had ‘no programme’ (Richter, 1997: 34). However, Richard Huelsenbeck’s statements/ writings/ contributions to Dada literature allow one to suggest that Dada was established in opposition to what we might recognize as dualistic modes of conventional thinking, of the categorization of concepts, objects, and so on, in oppositional terms (e.g., subject/object; theory/fact, etc.). These “loving polarities” as Harvie Ferguson has called them “are so many ways of rendering experience accessible by dividing it against itself” (Ferguson, 1990: 7). But Dada, if one reads Huelsenbeck’s words in this way, recognized no such conceptual ordering, and instead proposed that the reinvigoration of language would see such polarities collapse. Dada, he said (and the demonstration is in the language) “blusters because it knows how to be quiet; it agitates because it is at peace” (Huelsenbeck, 1993: 10). In other words, Dada traded on the indeterminacy of ‘is-ness,’ on the elasticity of being where one quality is identified in terms *of* an opposite, rather than *in*oppositional terms.

In the varied responses of the members of the Cabaret Voltaire

between 1915 and 1919 one can plot the dissolution of Dada as anything resembling a coherent movement (Richter, 1997; Huelsenbeck, 1993). Hugo Ball, the principal founder of the Zurich Dada group, would have no truck with the issuing of manifestos, or with any other propagandist work (which seemed to emulate the activities of futurism), but this was eagerly taken up by others, such as Tristan Tzara, and then exported to a variety of other European cities [(5)]. One thing that did bind them was the idea that language had to follow painting in re-ordering the world, in making the sensible human image that language portrays equally as fragmentary as the abstract and cubist paintings of the time. Ball, for example, wrote in 1916 that:

The image of 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 (Ball, 1996: 55).

click to enlarge


KARAWANE
jolifanto bambla ô falli bambla
grossiga m'pfa habla horem
égiga goramen
higo bloiko russula huju
hollaka hollala
anlogo bung
blago bung
blago bung
bosso fataka
u uu u
schampa wulla wussa ólobo
hej tatta gôrem
eschige zunbada
wulubu ssubudu uluw ssubudu
tumba ba- umf
kusagauma
ba - umf

Figure 7
Text of Hugo Ball's 'Karawane'

The power behind the Dada destruction/reinvention of language was found in the belief that language and literature had

already been debased—in patriotic declarations of support for the war, and in the use of literature in providing moral sustenance for soldiers at the front. The point was that language had become abstracted from life to the extent that it was rendered worthless—for example, what value did words have when they could support butchery? And what of modernity? Did not the very 'nuts and bolts' of *reason* deliver war as a "vindication of modernity, violently completing the abstraction of the world"? (Conrad, 1998: 211) So, whilst Ball sought to situate language within the evident dissonance of the times, his aim was also to *create*, as Malcolm Green has said, "a field of words that bypassed the author's own associations and triggered new ones in the listener" (Fig. 7) as an aspect of regaining the world, and words, from such abstraction (quoted in Huelsenbeck, 1993: v). One important point that Dada had picked up from Italian futurism was the idea that art was created in the spatio-temporal dimension, rather than being produced merely in time, or in space. The printed word, as a possible medium for creation, was staid and fixed in both of these dimensions (although texts in Futurism and Dada experimented with font styles), and in books and newspapers, it was seen to abstract language from its real context, the context within which life takes place. What Ball and the others sought to achieve at the Cabaret Voltaire in 1916 was a way past this abstraction to a synthesis of the arts that would surpass the mimetic and representational limitations of mediation and traditional artistic practice (whether in writing, painting, or poetry).

This introduced the masked dances, and simultaneous recitals of poems (and so on) to combat the conventional trappings of performance in which the stage—'staging' suggesting a set of expectations—as the medium got in the way of substance and delivery: acting was a mask—a truth so obvious that it had become invisible. In the performances at the Cabaret Voltaire words were transformed, they became 'vocables'; not really words at all, but concretized combinations of sounds produced

by the performer voicing what can only be called a series of combined letters of the alphabet which had apparently been randomly jumbled into a new kind of vehicle for expression, and these then delivered without any regard to reference or identity [(6)]. This corresponded in some small way to Luigi Russolo's new idea of the human voice, the characteristics of which he listed as comprising one of six "families of noise of the Futurist orchestra," under the heading *Voices of Animals and Men*(Apollonio, 1973: 86). These he listed as, "Shouts, Screams, Groans, Shrieks, Howls, Laughs, Wheezes, Sobs," and the similarity between the two divergent movements with regard to the elevation of 'meaningless' sound in performance is shown if we compare the Dadaist Jean Arp's remarks about "automatic poetry," which he claimed "springs directly from the poet's bowels or other organs, which have stored up reserves of usable material. The poet crows, curses, sighs, stutters, yodels, as he pleases. His poems are like Nature" (cited in Richter, 1997: 30). Of course, this ideal could only be realized in certain kinds of performance, and consequently was considered a more laudable goal in some cases than in others. It is in this respect that Hugo Ball seems to have diverged from the others. In his introduction to Ball's diaries, translated as *Flight Out of Time,* John Elderfield writes that:

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 that it had far more aspects to it than its written words (quoted in Ball, 1996: xxvii).

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Figure 8
Hugo Ball in performance, 1917 (source unknown)

What the sound-poem had that was greater, according to Ball, was its connection to a realm of spiritual *logos* that was mediated through the performance and universal recognition of 'ancient mystical words' (which one takes to have been given form by the vocables). Not at all incidental to Ball's view that performance should converge upon new possibilities was the use of masks and costumes in the Cabaret, and these, it turned out, were to become an essential component in transcending the limitations of words and language, bringing Hugo Ball, in particular, to a startling realization of the possibility of renewing the Word (i.e. *logos*) through the sound-poem which, in connecting to the spiritual would unmask the fakery of ideas about language and truth. The accidental nature of this discovery reveals a serious point behind the use of masks, which seems only to have been realized after Marcel Janco had prepared the costumes and the participants in the Cabaret had taken up 'character' under the influence of these new appearances. The masks, in fact, only highlighted the protean nature of expression—which is to say, the elusiveness, the naked strangeness of the sound and motion of performance—and Hugo Ball in particular noted that a transformation had overcome the performers (Fig. 8). The mask, he observed, "Demanded a quite definite, passionate gesture, bordering on madness" (Ball, 1996: 64). The masks also brought home to Ball the deceitful nature of the phenomenal world, the ambiguity of appearances (of words, gestures, etc.) that taken

together provide a stage for meaningful life, and suggested the possibility that the only way to come to terms with this illusion was through the transforming power of a more serious kind of gesture:

Although we could not have imagined it five minutes earlier, we were walking around with the most bizarre movements, festooned and draped with impossible objects […] the motive power of these masks was irresistibly conveyed to us. All at once we realized the significance of such a mask […] they represent not human character and passions, but character and passions that are higher than life. The horror of our time, the paralyzing background of events, is made visible (Ball, 1996: 64).

The power of the mask lies in its relation to indeterminate play. In modern society play is not readily understood by the categorical mind (i.e., 'play' is a residual category), and certainly not as the route to truth—rather, in its frivolity and sensuousness, play is contrasted with reason and emerges as the source of error, which means it is an aspect of existence that reason-as-*logos* seeks always to overcome (Ferguson, 1991: 7-27). In archaic societies, on the other hand, play is taken as the return of an arbitrary cosmos to the divine lottery of Zeus—in other words, as an earlier way to divine truth, or we may say to the spiritual-as-*logos* (Spariousu, 1989). For Hugo Ball and the others the donning of masks and costumes upset the cozy familiarity of a modern world charmed into existence by the bending of language to suit the most grotesque ends. In the Cabaret Voltaire the liquidity, or protean quality, of the performance of bizarre movements and ecstatic recitation presented language (in the unstable form of the Dadaist vocables) 'draped' in the unrecognizable garb of meaninglessness. "We have now driven the plasticity of the word to the point where it can scarcely be equaled," Ball remarked on the success of performances:

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 […] touching lightly on a hundred ideas at the same time without naming them. (Ball, 1996: 67-68).

Thus, the notion of *logos* as reason's progress to perfection was destroyed by the impenetrable vocables and simultaneous poems, which were intended to drag the listener underneath the deceptive appearance of an industrial society that proclaimed the triumph of reason—to *touch on a hundred ideas at the same time*. And to return to the problem of appearance, what is crucial to our understanding is that performances like these, which employed disguise on several levels, dramatized the very problem of appearance and reality within the context of *change* (Napier, 1986: 2-3). This seemed to open the gap that had driven philosophy to strict terms of language association: what now was real, and what was fake, it asked. It said that change is found in unpredictable performance, but identity by contrast (as a kind of tautological redescription-of-the-same) only pertains in a state of*changelessness*. Yet, it is undeniable that things in the 'real' world (and not just in performance) do change—*be*ing is *be*coming—thus, the possibility that the world, or nature, may be ambiguous is rehearsed through the disguises of performance. Nevertheless, the potential disorder implied in such upsetting of certainties can hold a certain degree of danger, and the experience of Hugo Ball seemed to demonstrate this.

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Figure 9
Hugo
Ball in performance, 1917 (source unknown)

It was in June 1916, and barely a year after arriving in Zurich that Ball began to drift apart from the others involved in the Cabaret after one particularly harrowing performance. In his diaries he describes giving a reading of some of his sound-poems in a costume specially made for the event. The costume was so confining as to require many on the spot adjustments to the performance, and so it determined his movements in a particular way that he could not have foreseen, which in turn influenced the modulation and timbre of his readings. And having been carried on stage due to his immobility, Ball was left with only his arms free; the rest of his body, wrapped in a tightly fitting cylinder, was stiff (Fig. 9). Nevertheless, with arms free he found that he was able to "give the impression of winglike movement by raising and lowering [the] elbows," which he duly did by flapping them energetically between readings, at the same time furtively trying to work out how this thing might end:

I noticed that my voice had no choice but to take on the ancient cadence of priestly lamentation […] 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 and high masses in his home parish. Then the lights went out, as I had ordered, and bathed in sweat, I was

carried down off the stage like a magical bishop (Ball, 1996: 70-71).

This removal of self—a destruction of the world of self—is wrought by an incalculable plunge. In letting himself be taken by events he permitted the experience to become one where the world was, for him, transformed into a magico-religious sensorium. Delving deeply into the unknown—these were performances, remember, that were described as 'bordering on madness'—he becomes caught in the vertigo of the playful forces of denial and affirmation. He may have chosen the stage, but in the act, and through the mode of presentation he loses dominion over it. The audience witnessing this was equally unsettled; after initially being baffled, it 'exploded' (Richter, 1997: 42). The impact on Hugo Ball was no less emphatic—after this he "progressively disengaged himself from Dada" (Richter, 1997: 43). Tristan Tzara had begun to take a more prominent role in the presentation of Dada, nudging things in a more propagandist, pamphleteering, and confrontational direction, which seemed to be diverging sharply from the kind of activity Hugo Ball was involved in, one which aimed at the destruction of world and will, and seemed on this occasion to have been successful on at least one count, the destruction of his own will to continue: "I have examined myself carefully," Ball said, "and I could never bid chaos welcome" (quoted in Richter, 1997: 43). The truth was that he already had, and it proved disconcerting enough to draw him back from the abyss.

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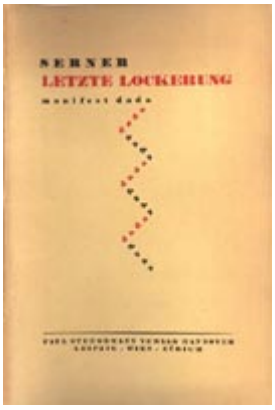




Figure 10
Cover of Serner's 'Letze Lockerung' (Last Loosening), Hanover: Paul Steegman, 1920.
Figure 11
Walter Serner, Zurich 1917.
By Hans Richter.

With Ball's disengagement Dada then spread out into other European cities (and was exported to New York), and what followed the Cabaret Voltaire was a continuation, if not repetition, of an ever more provocative tomfoolery (minus Ball's pursuit of a spiritual *logos*), and instead of Ball's declared intention to create a new fusion of arts, Dada became an attack on art itself. With a barely concealed hint of nihilism, Walter Serner, a latecomer to the Cabaret Voltaire, took the radical nominalism of Dada rhetoric to an extremity of meaningless and disintegration in his *Last Loosening* **(Figs. 10 and 11)**[(7)]. This riposte to good taste, executed to hilarious effect in a slim volume of fifty pages, displayed a keen sense of the ultimate profanity of things, of the obvious cosmetic re-ordering of filth and garbage that provides a basis for identity and meaning, and that no less provides the spur for art as well. Although it is not clear whether he included his fellow Dadaists in his disparaging appraisal of the artistic objective of appropriating the world (but a good guess would suggest it is likely), it is evident that he was reaching for the chaos that Hugo Ball recoiled from: "It is generally known that a dog is not a hammock; less so that failing to accept

this tender hypothesis would cause the painter's daubing fists to slump at their sides" (Ball, Huelsenbeck and Serner, 1995: 155). Ergo, painting is hamstrung by problems of identity and representation. He goes further, suggesting that the artistic impulse derives from an embarrassment at the thought of doing nothing, from a kind of impotence compounded by an inability to constrain oneself. And all this in the face of the gratuitousness of existence:

It's all just the same […] the desire to escape one's embarrassment by giving it (stylistic, ogodogodo) form. Dreadful word! Which is to say: to make something that is profitable out of life, which is improbable to the tips of its toes! To clap a redeeming heaven over this filth and enigma! To perfume and order this pile of human excrement! (Ball, Huelsenbeck and Serner, 1995: 156)

In short, art was evidence of an inability to get to grips with being, to refrain from fixing things—it was a manifestation of impatience: "all in all, my dearest," Serner wrote, "art was just a teething problem" (Ball, Huelsenbeck and Serner, 1995 : 156).

Notes

Footnote Return 1. E.g., "the meaning of the 'evening star' would be the same as that of 'morning star', but not the sense […] the designation of a single object can also consist of several words or other signs." Frege, 1980: 57.

Footnote Return 2. Richard Huelsenbeck had said in 1920, "none of

us had much appreciation of the kind of courage it took to get shot for the idea of a nation which is at best a cartel of pelt merchants and profiteers in leather, at worst a cultural association of psychopaths who, like the Germans, marched off to war with a volume of Goethe in their knapsacks, to skewer Frenchmen and Russians on their bayonets." Quoted in Greil Marcus (1989) *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge, MA: 194-95.

Footnote Return 3. I paraphrase here from comments made by J.G. Ballard in an interview with Tom Sutcliffe, broadcast on BBC television in the UK as *In Profile: J.G. Ballard,* November 2001. Ballard was actually talking about World War Two and the experiences that went into shaping his *Empire of the Sun,* but the point stands equally for war in general.

Footnote Return 4. See, for example, Michel Foucault (1999) *Madness and Civilization,* London. Here there are several examples of the importance of movement to autonomy. Foucault memorably begins by describing the 'ship of fools,' the madmen flung between ports, but detained at sea, in motion, but immobile, because of their lack of autonomous control. In other places he relates the idea that cures for madness and melancholia rested on the constraining of movement—for example, as a passenger on long sea voyages (174); and, as a passenger of an entirely different kind on the 'rotary machine,' a device that sought to redistribute the bodily humours of the patient. (177)

Footnote Return 5. See Hugo Ball (1996) ibid. Entry for 24.V.1916: "we are never in complete or simultaneous agreement" (63); and Richard Huelsenbeck (1993) ibid: "Whoever turns 'freedom' or 'relativity' including the insight that the contours of everything shift, that nothing is stable, into a 'firm creed' is just another ideologue, like the nihilists who are almost

always the most incredible, narrow-minded dogmatists. Dada is far removed from all that." (11)

Footnote Return 6. Tzara took this principle from performance into the printed word, and created the 'cut-up'. According to Hans Richter (1997) ibid: "he cut newspaper articles up into tiny pieces, none of them any longer than a word, put the words in a bag, shook them well, and allowed them to flutter onto a table. The arrangement (or lack of it) in which they fell constituted a 'poem'" (54)

Footnote Return 7. Huelsenbeck (1993) in the *Dada Almanac* describes him thus: "Dr. Walter Serner…extreme adventurer, nihilist and venereologist…The epitome of the 'gentleman burglar' (Arp), he was later the author of numerous sleazy crime stories." (92)

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