Within the canons of western art history Dada is generally represented as the most blatantly nihilistic moment of the modernist avant-garde—an antirationalist, anarchist, even misanthropic revolt against western social values. And in fact there is much to commend this view: there are numerous examples and proof-texts one might cite to convey the extent to which dada “radiated a contemptuous meaninglessness,” to borrow Hal Foster’s memorable phrase.1 Within Christian circles dada usually functions as an epitome of modernism at its theological worst, a tragic convergence (or inverted apotheosis) of everything that is most problematic about the post-Christian avant-garde. The prevailing view in these circles still generally accords with Hans Rookmaaker’s description of dada as “a nihilistic, destructive movement of anti-art, anti-philosophy … a new gnosticism, proclaiming that this world is without meaning or sense, that the world is evil—but with no God to reach out to…”2 And while this accurately describes some of what dada was, there is much else that it doesn’t account for. The historical unfolding of dada, especially from its origins in Zurich, is much more variegated and interesting than its typical relegation to nihilism—and in fact much more theologically substantive.

The academic literature on dada has swelled over the past few decades, and in the process it has become increasingly clear that, as Debbie Lewer puts it, “there are almost as many ‘Dadaisms’ as there were Dadaists.”3 There was remarkable intellectual diversity and difference of purpose not only between the various dada groups—Zurich dada had a very different sense of itself than did Paris dada, for instance—but also among the original dadaists4 themselves, who
continuously struggled with each other over the meanings and implications of what they were
doing. These meanings were deeply political, aesthetic, and philosophical, but they were also
intensely theological—and they were so from the beginning.

Though dada would later become strongly associated with influential artists in Berlin,
Paris, and New York (e.g. Hausmann, Picabia, Duchamp), its initial formation occurred in
Zurich among an international group of artists who fled to neutral Switzerland in the early
months of World War I. By all accounts Hugo Ball (1886–1927) stands at the fountainhead of
dada “activity” (he objected to calling it a movement or an -ism), and he was undoubtedly one of
its most articulate exegetes and commentators. Ball was raised in a devoutly Catholic home in a
predominantly Protestant part of Germany, shaping him in ways that would be deeply important
throughout his life. His renunciation of Christianity roughly corresponded to the beginning of
his studies at the University of Munich, where from 1906 to 1910 (with one year at the
University of Heidelberg) Ball studied philosophy and began writing a doctoral dissertation on
Friedrich Nietzsche. During this time he read voraciously in the fields of socialist and anarchist
political theory and (under the influence of Nietzsche’s philosophy of art) became deeply
interested in poetry and theater. In 1910 he left Munich abruptly, without finishing his PhD, and
moved to Berlin to pursue a career in theater. Over the next decade Ball would become a key
contributor to some of the most radical artistic experiments in the European avant-garde,
including the launch of dada in February 1916. Throughout this time, however, he was wrestling
with intensely theological questions and concerns, and by the summer of 1920 Ball had
reconverted to Catholicism and devoted the remaining seven years of his life to ascetic religious
practice and theological study.

And thus the question(s) that will orient the rest of this essay: How should we understand
Hugo Ball’s dadaism in relation to his Christianity? Was there a sharp discontinuity between the two, such that his conversion was a radical break; or was there in fact some kind of deep continuity throughout, such that the ostensible nihilism of his dadaism was actually underwritten by a deeply serious theological struggle? In short, what kinds of theology were in play in Zurich dada?^9

**Dada in Historical Context**

The birth of dada is often dated to February 5, 1916, the opening day for the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich. Ball’s advertisements for the cabaret announced “a group of young artists and writers … whose aim is to create a center for artistic entertainment,” featuring performances and readings at daily meetings. The young collaborators who joined Ball would become central to the life of dada (internationally) over the next few years, including Emmy Hennings (his partner and future wife), Hans Arp, Sophie Taeuber, Tristan Tzara, Marcel Janco (often accompanied by his brother Georges), Richard Huelsenbeck, and later Hans Richter and Viking Eggeling.

The numerous events and soirées that took place at the cabaret were notoriously transgressive and seemed to relish in the offensively nonsensical. Concerts were played on typewriters, kettledrums, rakes, pot covers, and often accompanied by an out-of-tune piano. Poems were recited in French, German, and Russian—languages spoken on both sides of the war—and soon the poems became indecipherable altogether. A common feature of the dada soirée was the “simultaneous poem,” consisting of three or more participants speaking, singing, whistling, or bellowing different “poems” at the same time. This simultaneity generally brought together a mixture of high poetry, popular songs, boring journalistic ramblings, and nonsense
word sequences; and these contrapuntal recitations were then often accompanied by an
assortment of inorganic noises: crashes, sirens, the beating of a giant drum, an \textit{rrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr}
drawn out for several minutes, and so on. The effect was abrasive and cacophonous, but Ball
argued that for the sensitive viewer the implications of these performances are actually
remarkably subtle, even heartbreaking:

The “simultaneous poem” has to do with the value of the voice. The human organ
represents the soul, the individuality in its wanderings with its demonic companions. The
noises represent the [material, cultural, and spiritual] background—the inarticulate, the
disastrous, the decisive. The 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 \textit{vox
humana} [human voice] with a world that threatens, ensnares, and destroys it, a world
whose rhythm and noise are ineluctable.\textsuperscript{12}

This motif of the vulnerable human person threatened by (and protesting against) the cool
violence of mechanized modernity is recurrent throughout Ball’s thinking and is central to the
concerns that drove development of dada—and the development of dada theology.

Whatever theological content that was in play in the Cabaret Voltaire was, however,
pivoting on a radically unconventional theory of art—one that relentlessly demeaned aesthetic
quality, craftsmanship, and professionalism. The effect—indeed the stated intention—was to
shift the hermeneutical center of gravity from the aesthetic character of the \textit{art object} to the
critical social consciousness implied in the \textit{artist’s activity}: “for us art is not an end in itself—
more pure naïveté is necessary for that—but it is an opportunity for true perception and criticism
of the times we live in… Our debates are a burning search, more blatant every day, for the
specific rhythm and the buried face of this age… Art is only an occasion for that, a method.”\textsuperscript{13}

The “age” in which dada emerged was that which had launched World War 1, precisely
as the logics of technological industrialization and philosophical idealism were converging with
unspeakably devastating effects. As European nations devoted themselves to industrialized
warfare at an unprecedented scale, the dadaists devoted themselves to sardonic “nonsense” and mean-spirited laughter. Ball understood this as an ethical maneuver, a means of establishing “distance” from which to stand “against the agony and the death throes of this age.” In a diary entry from mid-April 1916, when the Cabaret Voltaire was little more than two months old, Ball declared: “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.” And with this he launched into a series of deflationary taunts:

What could be respectable and impressive about it? Its cannons? Our big drum drowns them. Its idealism? That has long been a laughingstock, in [both] its popular and its academic edition. The grandiose slaughters and cannibalistic exploits? Our spontaneous foolishness and our enthusiasm for illusion will destroy them.

Over against the calculable mechanized efficiency of both the frontline machine gun and the backline munitions factory (and the rhetorical systems that held them together), Zurich dada mobilized itself into a theater of incompetence, confusion, and traumatized powerlessness. It protested against abusive cultural powers, and it did so through deliberately pathetic gestures. These gestures were tactical: “As no art, politics, or knowledge seem able to hold back this flood [of cultural pathologies], the only thing left is the practical joke [blague] and the bloody [or bleeding] pose.” In this way dada’s spectacle of unprofessional pranks and displays of weakness was meant to function as a desperate ethical refusal. As Hal Foster has put it: “Ball regarded the Dadaist as a traumatic mime who assumes the dire conditions of war, revolt, and exile, and inflates them into buffoonish parody.” But this was parody with principles: “Dada mimes dissonance and destruction in order to purge them somehow…”

Hans Arp once described the cabaret as full of people “shouting, laughing, and gesticulating. Our replies are sighs of love, volleys of hiccups, poems, moos, and meowing of medieval bruitists… We were given the honorary title of nihilists.” But this title is clearly a
misleading designation for many of the Zurich dadaists—particularly for Hugo Ball. Far from a
nihilistic embrace of “nothingness,” Ball asserted that “What we call dada is a farce of
nothingness [Narrenspiel aus dem Nichts] in which all higher questions are involved; a
gladiator’s gesture, a play with shabby leftovers, the death warrant of posturing morality and
abundance.” Ball’s characterization of dada as a farcical nihilism is thus coupled with a
disarming list of metaphors that do indeed call up high questions: (1) the gesture of a gladiator
whose life is at stake for entertainment (what is the value of human life?), (2) a playful recovery
of the detritus of consumer culture (what are our metrics of value?), and (3) the severest
indictment of false moralities designed to augment wealth (what is the good life, morally or
materially?). One might even say that Ball sought to invert the charge of nihilism, accusing the
established powers—“this age, with its insistence on cash payment, has opened a jumble sale of
godless philosophies”—of manifesting a nihilism far deeper and more death-oriented than any
“simultaneous poem” preformed at the Cabaret Voltaire.

In his most evocative summary of dada Ball announced: “What we are celebrating is both
buffoonery and a requiem mass.” This disorienting meld of images—an aggressive eschewal of
rationalism, professionalism, and politeness (buffoonery) comingled with formal liturgical
lamentation (requiem mass)—provocatively signals a theological self-understanding intertwined
with the social and political content of dada’s protests. Or, taking an even more disarming
religious image, Ball once compared dada to “a gnostic sect whose initiates were so stunned by
the image of the childhood of Jesus that they lay down in a cradle and let themselves be suckled
by women and swaddled. The dadaists are similar babes-in-arms of a new age.” Erdmute
Wenzel White is quite right to argue that in Ball’s case we mustn’t allow the apparent
foolishness and bombastic rebellion to “disguise the intense spiritual longing that informs all his
Religious Form and Content in Zurich Dada

Contrary to general perception, the events in the Cabaret Voltaire made surprisingly frequent references to religious images and motifs. On June 3, 1916—in the middle of the summer and amidst ongoing war reportage (most recently from the disastrous Battle of Jutland)—the cabaret presented a performance of Ball’s *Krippenspiel* (Nativity Play), a simultaneous poem and bruitist “noise concert” that corresponded to and accompanied readings from the Gospel accounts of the birth of Christ. Short adaptations of the biblical narrative were read aloud while actors performed the scenes behind a diaphanous screen, using non-word vocalizations and various objects to sonically construct the settings and activities of the nativity.

The *Krippenspiel* unfolded in a series of seven scenes. The first two scenes portrayed the annunciation to the shepherds and the setting of the stable in the rural “silent night”—which was in fact full of sound—and then the scenes run through the journey of the magi. The final scene jolts the narrative forward into a prophetic foreshadowing of the crucifixion, culminating in an uproar of all the characters and animals yelling, jeering, bellowing, mooing, wailing. The final crescendo gives way to “nailing and screaming. Then thunder. Then bells.” And (most likely) the last words spoken in the play had been handwritten into the otherwise already typed script: “And as he was crucified / much warm blood was shed.” Performed in the summer of 1916, the violence of this final scene would have had a twentieth-century referent as much as a first-century one. The *Krippenspiel* situated the brutality of the war within a theological framework, rendering a palpable image of human violence having “bloodied and soiled the good God.” Despite the occasionally cacophonous soundscape of this summer nativity, the
performance, according to Ball, had “a gentle simplicity that surprised the audience. The ironies had cleared the air. No one dared to laugh. One would hardly have expected that in the cabaret, especially in this one. We welcomed the [Christ] child, in art and in life.”

Perhaps the most renowned of the cabaret’s events occurred about three weeks later on June 23, 1916, with a performance that has come to be known as the “magic bishop.” Ball appeared on stage to perform a series of his new “sound poems” (Lautgedichte)—poems that were carefully constructed sequences of unrecognizable sound-words. He wore a costume of rigid, shiny blue cardboard cylinders, such that he stood on the stage “like an obelisk.” A cardboard cape (he called it “a huge coat collar”) hung off of his shoulders like a priestly cope, colored scarlet on the inside and gold on the outside; and on his head he wore a tall cylindrical blue-and-white-striped “shaman’s hat” (Schamanenhut). The handwritten texts of his poems were placed on three music stands that stood in a semicircle around him on the stage, emphasizing the musical status of the sound poems. Unable to walk in his costume, Ball was carried onto the darkened stage, and as the lights came up he began to read “slowly and solemnly:”

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gadji beri bimba
glandridi lauli lonni cadori
gadjama bim beri glassala
glandridi glassala tuffin i zimbrabim
blassa galassasa tuffin i zimbrabim…
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After delivering the entirety of this introductory poem from the central music stand, he turned to the stands on either side, delivering (at least) one poem at each, finally returning to the center for a second recitation of “gadji beri bimba.” At the stand on the right he performed the poem “Wolken” (Clouds) (or Labada’s Song to the Clouds), and then at the left stand he read “Karawane” (or “Elefantenkarawane” [Elephant Caravan]). The poems refused to coalesce into
recognizable words, but the sound effects made when read aloud were carefully constructed to correspond to the subject-matter alluded to in their titles: rain from heavy clouds soaks the earth with “gluglamen gloglada gleroda glandridi,” on the one hand; and the heavy “wulubu ssubudu uluwu ssubudu” plodding rhythm of a caravan of elephants, on the other.

Ball was determined “at all costs” to maintain composure and seriousness throughout the performance, and as he proceeded through the poems he found the performance taking a form he had not intended:

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 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. 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.

In this figure of the “magical bishop” Ball had encountered something of his Catholic childhood—the half-frightened, half-curious adolescent witnessing a requiem—but in a form that was strangely reclaiming his dada insurrections and reframing them as some kind of a priestly function. His sound poems suddenly became some kind of prayer by which he found himself both attending and presiding over religious lamentation.

John Elderfield has argued that the sound poems “were close in spirit to Catholic chants,” and according to Erdmute White one can trace “a direct line from plainchant to Lautgedichte [sound poetry].” The performance had followed a liturgical inclusio format, in which “gadji beri bimba” was recited at both the beginning and the end of the cycle with two “meditations” in between—one oriented toward the sky (clouds) and the other toward the earth (caravan). The first of these—the extremely beautiful poem “Wolken”—hinges on the phrase “elomen elomen lefitalominai” (with only slight variation, this forms the first line of both the
first and last stanza). As several commentators have pointed out, this phrase is a direct allusion to Christ’s cry from the cross: “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?”—“my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt 27:46; cf. Psa 22:1). Ball’s song to the clouds is structured around Christianity’s most tragic and profound address toward God.

Philip Mann has shown that Ball’s “magic bishop” performance was not only performed in June at the Cabaret Voltaire but was also repeated at the first “public” dada soirée on July 14, 1916, at Zurich’s Waag Hall. Ball prefaced this performance by reading his “Dada Manifesto” in which he flatly declared: “I shall be reading poems that are meant to dispense with conventional language” in the conviction that these poems “have the potential to cleanse this accursed language of all the filth that clings to it, as to the hands of stockbrokers worn smooth by coins.” Ball implored his audience to try to hear “The word, the word, the word outside your domain… The word, gentlemen, is a public concern of the first importance.” And not just a public concern; the “word outside your domain” is a theological concern of the highest order.

At the center of Ball’s philosophy of language was an acknowledgement of “the power of the living word,” which must be handled with the greatest care: “Each word is a wish or a curse.” He saw a deep and vital link between a society’s regard for the sacredness of language and the ethical treatment of others: “As respect for language increases, the disrespect for the human image will decrease… It is with language that purification must begin, [and] the imagination be purified.” And he believed that the power of language resides not only in the referential function of words but on a more intrinsic, ontological level. For him the relations between vowels and consonants are “heavenly constellations” that are in themselves potentially capable of wakening and strengthening “the lowest strata of memory.” The abjuring of everyday language in the sound poems was thus conceived as a strategy that was at once political
and theological: “In these phonetic poems 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.”

The “holiest refuge” of poetry was for Ball the sheer recognition of the astonishing miracle that language is intelligible at all—that sounds and markings are capable of mediating the meanings of a world. For Ball this recognition opened a realm of enchantment—he didn’t know how else to refer to the inexplicable link between word and meaning other than to call it “magical.” The true achievement of sound poetry, he argued, was that it “loaded the word with strengths and energies that helped us to rediscover the evangelical concept of the ‘Word’ (logos) as a magical complex image…. We tried to give the isolated vocables the fullness of an oath [covenant], the glow of a star [cosmos].” On this point Ball delved into Christian mysticism. He was, for instance, familiar with the mystical Lingua Ignota (unknown language) of the twelfth-century abbess Hildegard von Bingen. Hildegard’s lengthy indexes of indecipherable word formations—strikingly comparable to Ball’s sound poetry—were constructed for prayer and sacred speech. Perhaps we should take Ball quite seriously when he claimed that “we say the ‘gadji beri bimba’ as our bedtime prayer.”

In fact Ball increasingly foregrounded mystical theology in his contributions to dada events. The fourth public dada soirée on May 12, 1917 (repeated a week later), included a number of readings excerpted from mystical theological texts: Mechthild of Magdeburg’s Flowing Light of the Godhead (c. 1250–80), The Great German Memorial (1383–84) by the Alsatian mystic Rulman Merswin, The Book of the Seven Degrees (c. 1320) by the anonymous Monk of Heilsbronn, a selection from Jakob Böhme’s Aurora (1612), as well as a series of poems (probably written by Hennings) entitled “O You Saints.” Such a list makes manifest
Leonard Forster’s claim that “Dada was not merely the product of a certain set of circumstances, but also stood in a long tradition of mystical utterance.”\textsuperscript{53} And this tradition provided Ball with a theological framework for even the most bizarre experiments with sound poetry: “I realized that the whole world … was crying out for magic to fill its void, and for the word as a seal and ultimate core of life. Perhaps one day when the files are closed, it will not be possible to withhold approval of my strivings for substance and resistance.”\textsuperscript{54}

According to Philip Mann, Ball’s theory of language was increasingly a “theological Realism,” wherein both language and world are sustained and connected by the same logos that speaks and sustains all being. As Mann states, ultimately “It was in Christ, as the Word incarnate, that Ball found this fusion of sign and object…”\textsuperscript{55} Indeed as Ball later wrote: “The great, universal blow against rationalism and dialectics, against the cult of knowledge and abstractions, is: the incarnation.”\textsuperscript{56} Ultimately Ball’s attack on the “journalistic” word was undergirded and oriented by a wager that all words find their origin and telos in the Word made flesh.

Following his conversion in 1920, Ball devoted himself to the study of early Christian and medieval mystical theology, leading to the publication of his book Byzantine Christianity (1923), a study of the church fathers John Climacus, Simeon the Stylite, and Dionysius the Areopagite.\textsuperscript{57} The Christian apophatic theologian “Dionysius the Areopagite”\textsuperscript{58} was especially influential, prompting major shifts in Ball’s theology and in his (retrospective) understanding of dada. Pseudo-Dionysius was decisive in Ball’s movement away from Nietzsche, as he came to believe that “Dionysius the Areopagite is the refutation of Nietzsche in advance.”\textsuperscript{59} But Dionysius also clarified the meaning of dada for Ball: he would later claim that the term “dada” bore the double inscription of the Areopagite’s initials: “When I came across the word ‘dada’ I
was called upon twice by Dionysius. D.A.–D.A.”⁶⁰ Given the multiplicity of meanings assigned to the word “dada” this is almost certainly a revisionist narrative created after the fact, but it yet identifies an aspect of Ball’s dadaism that was there from the beginning.⁶¹ Indeed as John Elderfield writes, “it would be strange indeed if hidden in the alchemy of letters that denoted the most scurrilous of modern movements lies a saint who dreamed of a hierarchy of angels.”⁶²

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⁴ Whether dada can be understood in terms of dadaism or dadaists has been a matter of debate. See, for example, Michel Sanouillet, “Dada: A Definition,” in *Dada Spectrum: The Dialectics of Revolt*, ed. Stephen C. Foster and Rudolf E. Kuenzli (Madison, Wis.: Coda Press and University of Iowa, 1979), pp. 15–27.

⁵ Among Ball’s most important and brilliant writings is a collection of his diary entries from the years 1913–21. He began editing these diaries for publication in December 1923 and published them under the title *Die Flucht aus der Zeit* in January 1927, the last year of his life. It wasn’t until 1974 that this volume was finally translated into English: Hugo Ball, *Flight Out of Time: A Dada Diary*, ed. John Elderfield, trans. Ann Raimes (New York: Viking Press, 1974).

*Flight Out of Time* is a primary resource for this essay, though its controversial status needs to be acknowledged. Because Ball edited them after his conversion back to Christianity, some scholars regard these as “corrupted” versions of his diaries, arguing that Ball redacted them to modify some of his views and to show a clearer trajectory back to Catholicism than would have otherwise appeared in the original writings. Ball himself states that he conceived the book as a “diary from exile” but one “highly reworked” from the original writings; however, this reworking seems to have been an effort of distilling more than rewriting: “they are only extracts” (Ball, quoted in Erdmute Wenzel White, *The Magic Bishop: Hugo Ball, Dada Poet* [Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1998], pp. 179, 185). A simplistic relegation of the diaries to the status of a “corrupt texts” is problematic, given that (1) the texts were “corrupted” by the author himself from writings that were never meant to be published; (2) Ball did indeed convert back to the Catholic Church, rendering it unclear on what basis we should accuse Ball of constructing a false trajectory back to Christian belief; and (3) this criticism generally collapses into a projection screen for the reader’s assumptions about what Ball was “really” thinking during the dada years. For an overview of the controversy see the introduction to Philip Mann, *Hugo Ball: An Intellectual Biography* (London: Institute of Germanic Studies, 1987), pp. 1–14.

⁶ Ball’s childhood seems to have deeply structured his theological imagination. Throughout his published diaries he repeatedly refers to childhood as a time of unusual clarity and enchanted profundity; indeed he looked to childhood to provide resources for an authentic resistance “against the senilities and the adult world.” See Ball, Aug 5, 1916, *Flight Out of Time*, p. 72; cf. 66, 83, 105, 204, 214.

⁷ Begun while at the University of Munich (but never completed), Ball’s dissertation was entitled “Nietzsche in Basel: Ein Beitrag zur Erneuerung Deutschlands [A Contribution to the Renewal of Germany].” This dissertation was first published (in its unfinished form) five decades after Ball’s death as “Nietzsche in Basel: Eine Streitschrift [A Polemic],” ed. Richard Sheppard and Annemarie Schütt-Hennings, *Hugo Ball Almanach* 2 (1978): 1–65.

⁸ Tragically, Ball died of stomach cancer in 1927 at the age of forty-one.
and lamenting.” Ibid.

Christ’s birth with a loud “dorum darum dorum darum, dorum darum, dodododododo–” very painfully “uuhrrrrr uuhrrrr,” and the angel of the Lord arrives with the sound of a propeller, proclaiming

“Lord…” See White, repeated over and over: “But Mary and Joseph were on their knees in the stable at Bethlehem and prayed

in the stable among the noisy sounds of the ox, donkey, and sheep (mooing, hee

“sound of the holy night” vocaliz


Ball, April 14, 1916, Flight Out of Time, p. 61.

Ibid.

Ball, June 12, 1916, Flight Out of Time, p. 66. In a diary entry from four days later, Ball reinforces the sharp political intonations of such joking and posing: “They cannot force our quivering nostrils to admire the smell of corpses. They cannot expect us to confuse the increasingly disastrous apathy and coldheartedness with heroism. One day they will have to admit that we reacted very politely, even movingly. The most strident pamphlets did not manage to pour enough contempt and scorn on the universally prevalent hypocrisy” (June 16, 1916, p. 67).

19 The manifest weakness of dada was very much the point, and it proved to be strangely poignant as a form of lamentation: “Mountains are being displaced and cities lifted up in the air. So why shouldn’t the plaster around human hearts get splits and cracks in it?” See Ball, Oct 5, 1915, Flight Out of Time, p. 31.

20 Foster et al., Art Since 1900, pp. 136–137.


22 Ball, June 12, 1916, Flight Out of Time, p. 65.

23 Ibid., p. 66.

24 Ball, March 12, 1916, Flight Out of Time, p. 56.


27 For a helpful analysis of Simultan Krippenspiel see White, The Magic Bishop, pp. 87–100; and a full translation of the “score” is available on pp. 223–227. According to White, the noise concert and the narrative readings happened simultaneously, such that the work was actually “composed of two parallel scores” which “proceed alongside each other on an equal footing, like voices in early polyphonic song” (p. 89).

For reasons that she doesn’t explain, White dates the first performance of the Krippenspiel to May 31, 1916 (pp. 88, 227), whereas Ball’s only mention of the performance is in his entry for June 3, 1916 (Flight Out of Time, p. 65).

28 The play opened with a loudly vocalized “f f f f f f f f f f f f f f t t t t”—the sound of wind blowing across the landscape—which was accompanied by the cracking of whips, stomping of hoofs, shepherds shouting, and the “sound of the holy night” vocalized as an ongoing “hmmmmmmmmmmmm…” The second scene placed the audience in the stable among the noisy sounds of the ox, donkey, and sheep (mooing, hee-hawing, bahing, stomping, rattling chains, rustling straw). Amidst this din Mary and Joseph are heard praying: “ramba ramba ramba ramba ramba - m-bara, m-bara, m-bara, -bara- rambaamba,amba,rambaba-baba.” And simultaneously with all of this the narrator repeated over and over: “But Mary and Joseph were on their knees in the stable at Bethlehem and prayed to the Lord…” See White, The Magic Bishop, pp. 223–227.

29 The star speaks in a crackling “zcke zcke ptsch,” the caravan of magi moves through the space with an “uuhrrrr uuhrrrr,” and the angel of the Lord arrives with the sound of a propeller, proclaiming the good tidings of Christ’s birth with a loud “dorum darum dorum darum, dorum darum, dododododododoodoo–…” very painfully and lamenting.” Ibid.

This phrase is taken from Ball’s poem “Totentanz [Dance of Death] 1916” (1915–16), which was performed on the second night of the cabaret (See Feb 6, 1916, Flight Out of Time, p. 51). This poem was set to the tune of a military marching song (“with the assistance of the revolutionary chorus”); it is constructed as a scathing protest against the logic of World War 1 and as a lament for those who were dying at an alarming rate. The poem asserts that the suffering of the soldiers is in fact a terrible wounding of the divine image: the war has “bloodied and soiled the good God.” The poem is reproduced in White, The Magic Bishop, pp. 216–217. As White summarizes, the poem ends with “a lullaby [to Herr Kaiser] disturbed by the trumpet sounds of the Last Judgment” as the bodies of innumerable dead soldiers wait beneath the surface of the ground for things to finally be set right (p. 52).

Ball, June 3, 1916, Flight Out of Time, p. 65. Erdmute White goes so far as to argue that “In mood and subject matter, Krippenspiel was the cradle of Dada and its center of stillness. Rising up out of the soul, it was Dada’s ‘inner sound’ and ‘christening.’” See White, The Magic Bishop, p. 96.

The following description of the performance relies heavily on Ball’s entry for June 23, 1916, Flight Out of Time, pp. 70–71.

Ball also referred to these poems as “verse without words” (Flight, p. 70), but it would be more accurate (even if more clunky) to say that these are “verse with words of uncertain denotative function.” The words were not entirely abstract but were full of color and sound, “touching lightly on a hundred ideas without naming them” (Ball, June 18, 1916, Flight Out of Time, p. 68). For an excellent discussion of the sound poems, see Mann, Hugo Ball, pp. 87–91.

One of Ball’s most important influences in the development of the sound poems was Vasily Kandinsky. In late 1912 or early 1913 Kandinsky published Klänge (Sounds), a volume of thirty-eight prose poems paired with fifty-six abstract woodcut prints. Kandinsky’s Klänge proved to be very influential for Zurich dadaists, as inferred from the fact that they were read aloud in the Cabaret Voltaire on February 6, 1916, the second night of the cabaret’s existence, and at the second dada soirée (Apr 14, 1917). When the Galerie Dada was opened in 1917 the adjacent café was immediately named the Kandinsky Room. At the dedication of the café Ball delivered a lecture on the importance of Kandinsky’s work (Ball, “Kandinsky,” in Flight Out of Time, pp. 222–234), culminating with high praises for the “purely spiritual processes” of Klänge: “Nowhere else, even among the futurists, has anyone attempted such a daring purification of language” (p. 234). As far as Ball was concerned, the most important alternative to “Picasso the faun” was “Kandinsky the monk” (p. 226).

The possible influence of Russian modernist poetry should also be noted. The Berlin dadaist Raoul Hausmann claimed that Ball knew of the Russian zaum poets, especially Velimir Khlebnikov, through his interactions with Kandinsky. See Elderfield, introduction to Flight Out of Time, p. xlv n25.

The three poems presented that night in June 1916 were part of a larger cycle of six sound poems. In addition to “gadjir beri bimba,” “Wolken” (Clouds) (or Labada’s Song to the Clouds) and “Karawane” (or “Elefantenkarawane” [Elephant Caravan]), the series also included “Katzen und Pfauen” (Cats and Peacocks), “Seepferdchen und Flugfische” (Seahorses and Flying Fish), and “Totenklage” (Funeral Chant). In the words of Erdmute White, “Totenklage” is a mournful elegy that is simultaneously “hiccupping and whimsical” and yet deeply sorrowful and “prayerlike” (White, The Magic Bishop, p. 107). Philip Mann refers to “Karawane,” “Seepferdchen und Flugfische,” and “Katzen und Pfauen” as “playful, onomatopoeic animal poems and the other three as “somber and pessimistic” (see Mann, Hugo Ball, pp. 87–88).


Philip Mann persuasively identifies further references in the poem to the cross, to cries of lamentation, and to a river or deluge that perhaps flows from or envelops the cross. See Mann, Hugo Ball, p. 90.


Ball, “Dada Manifesto,” in Flight Out of Time, p. 221.

Ball, Nov 25, 1915, Flight Out of Time, p. 49.

Ball, Aug 13, 1916, Flight Out of Time, p. 76.

Ball, quoted in White, The Magic Bishop, p. 126.

Ball, June 18, 1916, Flight Out of Time, p. 68.

Ball, June 18, 1916, *Flight Out of Time*, p. 68.


52 For an account of the fourth dada soirée, see Ball, May 12, 1917, *Flight Out of Time*, pp. 112–113. See also Richard Sheppard, “Dada and Mysticism: Influences and Affinities,” in *Dada Spectrum*, pp. 94–95, 102–104.


55 Mann, *Hugo Ball*, p. 98.


57 According to Emmy Hennings, this immersion into early Christian thought was transformative for Ball: he “discovered the repressed and forgotten world of symbols.” See Ball-Hennings, forward to the 1946 edition of *Flucht*, in *Flight Out of Time*, p. lv.

58 Dionysius the Areopagite was the name of an Athenian philosopher who became a follower of St. Paul following his discourse on Mars Hill (see Acts 17:34). Most scholars, however, believe that the Greek writings attached to that name were written by a fifth- or sixth-century Syrian monk. Modern scholars thus generally refer to this person as “Pseudo-Dionysius.” For an introduction to his life and a complete collection of his writings, see *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987).

59 Ball, Apr 17, 1921, *Flight Out of Time*, p. 201. Philip Mann argues that for Ball the Areopagite functioned as an “orthodox Dionysius” over against the Nietzschean Dionysianism that had so attracted him in earlier years. Namely, Ball found in Pseudo-Dionysius the possibility of synthesizing what Nietzsche had put asunder: “instead of seeing irreconcilable opposites in Judaic and Hellenic thought, as Nietzsche had done, Pseudo-Denis had conclusively united them.” See Mann, *Hugo Ball*, pp. 152–155.


61 Richard Huelsenbeck also asserted that the word “dada” was neither accidental nor nonsensical: “To be sure, the choice of the word Dada in the Cabaret Voltaire was selective-metaphysical, predetermined by all the idea-energies with which it was now acting upon the world—but no one had thought of Dada as babies’ prattle.” See Huelsenbeck, *En Avant Dada*, in *The Dada Painters and Poets*, ed. Robert Motherwell (New York: Wittenborn, 1951), p. 31.