

HUGO BALL'S RELIGIOUS CONVERSION

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ABSTRACT

This essay investigates the German ex-Dadaist Hugo Ball (1886–1927) and his 1920s work on religious conversion from Paul, Augustine and Francis to writers and poets in modernity. This intense engagement was rooted in Ball's own radical conversion, or 're-conversion', to an austere form of the Catholicism of his childhood in 1920, just a few years after breaking with the Dada movement he had helped found in Zurich in 1916. In letters, books, his edited diaries and essays such as 'Die religiöse Konversion' of 1925, Ball wrestled with the phenomenon of conversion. He traced it in religious culture, monasticism, psychiatry and politics. This article explores Ball's imaginative emphasis on the condition of chaos that precedes resolution into 'order' in the convert. It considers his model of conversion not only as salvific but also as remedial and therapeutic. Further, it interrogates his connection of conversion with the breakdown of language in mysticism and in Dada. Ball's intensive study of the mystical theology of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and others provided much of the epistemological ground for this work. More provocative was his imagined possibility of collective national 'conversion' to Catholicism – for the whole of Germany.

Dieser Aufsatz untersucht den deutschen Ex-Dadaisten Hugo Ball (1886–1927) und seine Arbeit der 1920er Jahre über die religiöse Konversion – von Paulus, Augustinus und Franziskus bis hin zu Schriftstellern und Dichtern der Moderne. Dieses intensive Engagement wurzelte in Balls eigener radikalen Konversion, oder 'Rekonversion' zu einer strengen Form des Katholizismus seiner Kindheit im Jahr 1920, nur wenige Jahre nach seinem endgültigen Bruch mit der Dada-Bewegung, die er mitbegründet hatte. In Briefen, in Büchern, in seinen edierten Tagebüchern sowie in Aufsätzen wie 'Die religiöse Konversion' von 1925 hat Ball mit diesem Phänomen gerungen. Er verfolgt es in religiöser Kultur, Mönchtum, Psychiatrie und Politik. Dieser Aufsatz untersucht Balls schöpferische Hervorhebung des Chaoszustands, der der Auflösung in 'Ordnung' im Bekehrten vorausgeht. Der Aufsatz untersucht, wie sein Bekehrungsmodell nicht nur als erlösend, sondern auch als heilend und therapeutisch betrachtet werden kann. Er hinterfragt auch seine Assoziation von Konversion mit dem Zusammenbruch der Sprache sowohl in der Mystik als auch im Dadaismus. Balls intensives Studium der mystischen Theologie des Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita und anderer lieferte einen beträchtlichen Teil der erkenntnistheoretischen Grundlage für diese Arbeit. Provokanter war seine Vorstellung der Möglichkeit einer kollektiven, nationalen, katholischen 'Konversion' – für ganz Deutschland.

Around 1920, the German ex-Dadaist Hugo Ball (1886–1927) experienced a radical religious conversion, or 're-conversion', to an austere and ascetic form of the Catholicism of his childhood. From the period of the war of

1914–18 until his premature death from cancer of the stomach in 1927, he thought and wrote extensively about conversion. For Ball, it was more than a mere object of disinterested investigation, it was intimately part of his lived experience. Conversion was the conceptual means for him to frame a wide range of political, personal and theological imperatives. This intense engagement was rooted in Ball's often irascible political journalism, in his deep study of ascetic mysticism, in his growing attraction to sacramental theology, in his own personal transition to faith and in his short-lived experience with the Dada movement he had helped found at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich in 1916. In letters, books, in his edited diaries and in articles – especially his long essay 'Die religiöse Konversion' of 1925 – Ball reflected on the faith of others and his own by wrestling with the concept, the science and experience of conversion, individual and collective. He sought out international experts in the field. He traced the varieties of conversion in Catholic culture, history, monasticism, and in psychiatry. He and his partner, the poet Emmy Hennings, framed his own life story as one of the convert's resolution of chaos into order. There are therefore good grounds for considering in Ball's case what has been called 'die Geschichte der vielgestaltigen Konversionen eines Intellektuellen'.¹ 'Conversion' was a pliable concept for Ball. It became a means by which he could variously negotiate ambivalent ideas about freedom and order, personal and collective. It was in religious conversion and the asceticism it implied for Ball that he sought the conditions *both* for the psychic liberation of the individual subject *and* for what he saw as the necessary political subjection of the modern German nation to authority. Questions of guilt, penance, innocence and transformation were entangled in both.²

Ball is most widely known in the context of Dada, as one of its initiators. Dada has been thoroughly theorised – by the seminal work of the late Peter Bürger and others – into a prototypical agent of the avant-garde.³ Its qualifications are exemplary. There is its programmatic break with tradition, its challenge to the autonomy of art, its preference for rupture over wholeness, montage over the organic work of art. There is its attempt to overcome the division between art and life, its blurring of boundaries between high and low, its political engagement, its sexual fluidity and more. Commonly added to this has been the attribution to Dada of a radical scepticism towards all religion, a natural fidelity to blasphemy and an emphatic materiality. But there is a fluidity and an abundance of theologically inflected operations in Dada too. However carnivalised, they are there at Dada's origins. Its incorrigible chronicler, Tristan Tzara,

¹ Bernd Wacker, 'Nachwort', in Hugo Ball, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, 10 vols, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*, ed. Eckhard Faul und Bernd Wacker, Göttingen 2018, III, pp. 625–80 (p. 625).

² On the importance of asceticism for Ball, see Debbie Lewer, '"The Uncorrupt Image": Hugo Ball, Zurich Dada and the Aesthetics, Politics and Metaphysics of Asceticism', in *Virgin Microbe: Essays on Dada*, ed. David Hopkins and Michael White, Evanston 2014, pp. 91–116.

³ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Minneapolis 1984.

wrote that Dada was born at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich in 1916 as the 'cosmopolitan mixture of God and brothel, the crystal and the fattest woman in the world'.⁴ In a lesser-known retrospective account, the former Dadaist Richard Huelsenbeck claimed that at the very moment that he and Ball found the word 'Dada', meaning hobby-horse, in a French-German dictionary, Hennings was 'busy erecting an altar in another corner of the room'.⁵ Dada's congress with religious ideas and sources was as prodigious as that with much else – sex, politics, technology or the mass media. At the same time, the avant-garde project can readily seem to involve, wholesale, emancipation from all religion. In the case of Ball, his deep immersion in Catholicism, doctrine and theological study indeed took him away from the avant-garde and all things Dada. Hennings was not the only one to stylise Ball's life as one of spiritual ascent, or his 'Weg zu Gott', to quote the title of her biography of him.⁶ The *telos* of religious conversion became an organising narrative principle for his own autobiography as much as for the polemics of his cultural and political studies – including some of the most disturbing and problematic. But it is also too easy to dismiss this as a regrettable lapse into tradition by a former radical. The contemporary epistemologies that Dada so pointedly sought to disturb and throw into question were rooted in secular rationalism and materialism. Along with other spiritual traditions, Christian mysticism offered a potent and subversive source for Dada's cultural critique as well as the components for an alternative spiritual heritage – however pristinely imagined – than that which had led to the catastrophe of 1914. At a prominently publicised evening of 'Alte und Neue Kunst' staged on 12 May 1917 at the Galerie Dada in Zurich and repeated a week later, Ball, Hennings, Hans Arp, Marcel Janco, Hans Heusser and others read from early Christian mystical texts. They included Mechthild of Magdeburg's *Das fließende Licht der Gottheit* and readings from the medieval Franciscan poet Jacopone da Todi, from the fourteenth-century mystic known as the Monk of Heilsbronn, and from Jakob Boehme.⁷ Ball noted that a 'psychological debate' took place after these readings. The event was an early instance of his developing interest in the interplay between psychology and religious, especially mystical, experience. Dada was the early critical framework in which Ball asked himself precisely the aesthetic and political questions that he would later increasingly answer theologically, sometimes militantly so. By integrating more fully theology and psychology as well as politics into any consideration of Ball's development, a fuller understanding of his turn towards religion becomes possible. A different picture also emerges of the

⁴ Tristan Tzara, 'Zurich Chronicle' (1920), in *The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology*, ed. Robert Motherwell, Cambridge, MA 1981, pp. 235–42 (p. 235).

⁵ Richard Huelsenbeck, 'Dada Lives!' (1936), quoted in English translation in Nicola Behrmann, 'Scenes of Birth and Founding Myths: Dada 1916/17', *The Germanic Review*, 91 (2016), 335–49 (337).

⁶ Emmy Ball-Hennings, *Hugo Balls Weg zu Gott. Ein Buch der Erinnerung*, Munich 1931.

⁷ Ball, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit* (note 1), pp. 140–1.

avant-garde project to redeem art, life and critical consciousness. For Ball, the sources for such redemption included and surpassed the limits of art. They could be partially traced in the long traditions of the radical rupture represented by the experience of religious conversion.

This essay explores how Ball theorised his own aesthetics and politics and gave a theological cast to his own biography by recourse to models of religious conversion. In this I diverge from those historians of the avant-garde who have sometimes glossed over as an embarrassing aberration Ball's apparent turn from the radical emancipation of Dada and to the orthodox and ordering structures of the Catholic Church. They echo several of Ball's perplexed contemporaries who could explain his re-conversion only in prosaic terms. His fellow Dadaist Richard Huelsenbeck detected and bemoaned Emmy Hennings' influence, while the philosopher Ernst Bloch, with whom Ball worked and associated in Bern around 1918, attributed it waspishly to 'Enttäuschung über die Erfolgslosigkeit seines künstlerischen und publizistischen Engagements.'⁸ A more nuanced reading of Ball's attraction to the particularly hierarchical theology of the Catholic Church has been outlined by Philip Mann, who observes:

Nietzsche's pronouncement of the death of God was both liberating and inhibiting for Ball. For the 'expressionistic' Ball, God's death provided release from the restraints of authority and the ultimate father-figure. For the orthodox Ball, God's death left an awful vacuum whose chaos and irrationalism contained no immanent order whatsoever.⁹

The search for 'immanent order' was to lead Ball to the intellectual position most provocative to his contemporaries: his imagined and polemically proclaimed possibility of collective national 'conversion' to Catholicism – for the whole of Germany.¹⁰ His intensive study of the mystical theology of three early Church theologians (John Climacus, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and Simeon the Stylite), published in 1923 as *Byzantinisches Christentum*, laid further ground for this conviction.¹¹ Through this work Ball became engrossed in the psychiatry, psychology and phenomenology of religious experience. Closely related was his exhaustive – and, we can infer, exhausting – study of the spiritual practices of exorcism.¹² In Ball's religious thinking, grace and demonology, God and the devil, were proximate and inextricable from one another. They underpinned his

⁸ Martin Korol, 'Dada, Präexil und Die Freie Zeitung', PhD Dissertation, Bremen-Tartu-Sofia 2001, p. 18. Korol's comment is based on a conversation he had with Ernst Bloch in 1976.

⁹ Philip Mann, *Hugo Ball: An Intellectual Biography*, London 1987, p. 138.

¹⁰ See especially Hugo Ball, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe* (note 1), *Die Folgen der Reformation. Zur Kritik der deutschen Intelligenz*, ed. Hans Dieter Zimmermann, Göttingen 2005, V.

¹¹ Ball, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe* (note 1), *Byzantinisches Christentum. Drei Heiligenleben*, ed. Bernd Wacker, Göttingen 2011, VII.

¹² See Magnus Wieland, 'In Teufelsküche. Hugo Balls ungeschriebenes "Exorzismusbuch"', *Hugo-Ball-Almanach. Studien und Texte zu Dada*, Neue Folge 13 (2022), 89–113.

GERMANY'S 'CONVERSION' IN 1920

In this context, around the very time of his own return to faith, a significant development took place in Ball's political thinking about conversion. It took the form of a public lecture, titled 'Abbruch und Wiederaufbau', that he gave to the Hamburg regional group of the Deutsche Friedensgesellschaft on 1 July 1920. Both Ball and Hennings associated its themes with Ball's return to the Church. It is an example of a tendency Ball noted as early as 1915, if his published diaries are taken to be accurate: 'Ich neige dazu, meine privaten Erlebnisse mit denen der Nation zu vergleichen.'¹³ After the war, Ball's sense of national German guilt had become a personal issue, tied to his own mounting personal need for penance. There was an inevitability about Ball's conclusion as a political journalist and a lapsed Catholic: that both conditions might find resolution in conversion. In the lecture, Ball presented a damning account of a German war driven by brutality and barbarism and waged without conscience. Reprising many of the arguments of his recent book and articles, he sought to trace the roots of 'der deutschen Kultur, der deutschen Ideologie, dem deutschen Satanismus'¹⁴ in a history of shameful destruction of everything that was spiritually and morally worthy reaching from Hermann the Cherusker right up to 1918. What had been lost from Germany, in Ball's eyes, was everything from Catholicism to Socialism to European civilisation itself. As Ball insisted in so much of his other polemic writing, the protestant Reformation of Martin Luther and the

¹⁴ Hugo Ball, 'Abbruch und Wiederaufbau' (1920), in Hugo Ball, *Der Künstler und die Zeitkrankheit. Ausgewählte Schriften*, ed. Hans Burkhard Schlichting, Frankfurt a. M. 1984, pp. 273–96 (p. 276).

moral 'Indifferenzphilosophie' of G. W. F. Hegel were two decisive contexts for the emergence of a depleted spirituality, a barren materialism and a malevolent militarism that for Ball constituted the 'preussische Weltseele' and root of the German catastrophe. He summarised his argument thus:

Untergrub Luther die Autorität des Priestertums durch Vermenschlichung der göttlichen Dinge und Einsetzung des Laienpriestertums, so suchte Hegel die Hierarchie der Mysterien des Mittelalters zu ersetzen durch eine Hierarchie der Wissenschaften, und in Deutschland wenigstens ist die Deifikation der Natur, der Wissenschaft, der Kraft, des Geldes, der Technik etc. auf Hegels Einfluss vorzüglich zurückzuführen. Die Vergöttlichung der Kriegsschemie unter der Vorherrschaft Preussens war dann der letzte Ausläufer dieses Sturzes der moralischen und theologischen Wissenschaften.¹⁵

For Ball, such idolatrous tendencies had led 'ins Reich des apokalyptischen Tieres, das wir erlebten'.¹⁶ At this significant time of his preoccupation with personal questions of morality and religious conversion, the uncompromising eschatological terms in which Ball now conceived of the persistent German 'Schuldfrage' suggested a conflation of psychological experience, both individual and corporate, religious and secular. 'Es geht', he then wrote:

[u]m die Wiedergutmachung unserer Schuld. Schuld und Sühne: das sind eminent christliche Begriffe. Es handelt sich um die Christianisierung Deutschlands, wenn wir Wiedergeburt und Versöhnung finden wollen. Das ist die metaphysische Bedeutung der Schuldfrage, ihre tiefste Bedeutung, die wir nicht umgehen können, in die wir uns deshalb aus ganzer Seele stürzen sollten; aus der Erniedrigung, aus dem tiefen Fall wird unsere neue Grösse, eine wahrhafte, menschliche Grösse erstehen müssen, wenn wir überhaupt uns wieder errichten wollen.¹⁷

The nation's experience of war and revolution had been one of 'das Reich Satans'. It was therefore ripe not merely for 'Wiederaufbau', but for re-birth in conversion: 'Nicht durch ein neues Blutbad ist unsere Geistesverfassung wieder herzustellen, sondern nur durch die innere Umkehr'.¹⁸ Ball's use of the language of affect in his extensive polemics for the conversion of Germany underscores their confessional quality. But, at this time, according to his last diary entry before the lecture in Hamburg, he was also reflecting in highly personal terms on the moral distinction between public assertions of collective guilt and the prayers of a penitent before God:

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 285.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 280.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 294.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 295.

Ich sprach und schrieb einmal gar viel von Rechtsverletzung und Schuld. Und habe doch, wie ich erkennen muss, meinen dereinst der Kirche gegebenen Treueid gebrochen. [...] Nun suche ich zurück zur Kirche und ein Leben voller Verfehlungen liegt dazwischen. [...] Domine, peccavi.¹⁹

In retrospect, Hennings reflected on the futility of the attempt to pin down a moment of Ball's conversion as if it were any other incident. Yet in keeping with the implications of Ball's remark, she too suggested that the words of the Hamburg lecture, coupled with religious experience, played some part in the process:

Kann man die Entscheidung eines Menschen auf einen Tag, auf einen bestimmten Termin festlegen? Wohl nur, wenn die Erwägung 'was soll ich tun?' dem Entschluss voranging. Aber die plötzliche Umkehr eines Menschen, seine spontane Verwandlung, das blitzartige Einschlagen eines gewissen Weges, auf dem es keine Umkehr, keinen Rückblick mehr gibt, das ist etwas, das unerklärbar bleibt. Vielleicht wird meine Unsicherheit, die nichts zu erklären vermag, schwerer wiegen als ein kühner Bericht, den ich nicht wagen darf. [...] Es ist denkbar, dass der Vortrag in Hamburg, seine eigenen Worte Tiefen in ihm aufgewühlt, eine neue Quelle in ihm freigemacht hatten, aber es muss Einer sein, der den Fels berührt und die Quelle strömen lässt, was in einem Augenblick geschehen kann.²⁰

Hennings's evasiveness appears elsewhere too, preserving and underlining the ineffable character of Ball's religious experience: 'Seine Konversion zur Kirche, der er als Katholik eine Weile entglitten war, ist, obwohl ich dies miterleben durfte, nicht leicht erklärbar, wie eben die göttliche Gnade rein menschlich sich nie deuten lässt.'²¹ That Ball and Hennings were unwilling or unable to recount in conventional terms the affective content of an individual experience of conversion is itself suggestive of how such interior dimensions surpassed the limits of language. It was easy enough to assert the immanent aspects of Ball's return to the Church, far less so the transcendent.

Almost two years later, just after his thirty-sixth birthday, Ball travelled to Munich to make a General Confession (that is, a formal confession of contrition over a lifetime of sins). Though Hennings's memoirs place Ball's 'Generalbeichte' in July 1920, it is more likely to have been in February or March 1922, a date which has therefore been proposed as the culmination of Ball's conversion process.²² The act was significant. Ball retained, long after this time, a profound sense of the necessity of sacramental penance, or 'zweite Taufe', for the ascetic life he saw as so foundational for the

¹⁹ Ball, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit* (note 1), entry for 12 June 1920, pp. 226–7.

²⁰ Emmy Ball-Hennings, *Ruf und Echo. Mein Leben mit Hugo Ball*, Frankfurt a. M. 1990, pp. 147–8.

²¹ Ball-Hennings, *Ruf und Echo* (note 20), p. 23.

²² For details of the discrepancies in the dates Ball and Hennings gave of the 'Generalbeichte', see Wacker, 'Nachwort', in Ball, *Byzantinisches Christentum* (note 11), p. 520.

Church.²³ Indeed, in Catholic theology, the sacrament of penance is 'the sacrament of re-conversion', the rite that 'gives the sinner "back to the altar"'.²⁴

It is noteworthy how often Ball regarded his own faith as if from the outside. In several contexts he expressed a sense of external agency in the process of conversion, including through the act of his own intellectual labour. For example, in March of 1921, living with Emmy in Agnuzzo, he was deeply engrossed in study of the influential and controversial theologian, mystic and Neoplatonic philosopher of the early Christian Church known today as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. Dionysius became the most substantial focus of Ball's hagiographic study of the early Church Fathers, *Byzantinisches Christentum*. Ball wrote to Joseph Englert, a new friend he had met through Hermann Hesse:

'Dionysius' hat mir das Priestertum und seine Metaphysik, die Lehre von den Engeln, erschlossen. Mir wird mein eigenes Unternehmen immer seltsamer. Das Buch ist für mich ein Abenteuer, von dem ich nicht absehe, wohin es mich führt. Dass ich darin mit Früherem völlig breche, und *eigentlich eine Konversion schreibe*, mag der Grund sein, weshalb ich mich gerade gegenwärtig so isoliert fühle und es wohl auch bin ... (punctuation original, emphasis added).²⁵

Not long after this, the following entry in *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*, from 1921, years after Ball had left Dada behind, is even more striking:

Als mir das Wort 'Dada' begegnete, wurde ich zweimal angerufen von Dionysius. D. A. – D. A. (über diese mystische Geburt schrieb H. .k; auch ich selbst in früheren Notizen. Damals trieb ich Buchstaben- und Wort-Alchimie).²⁶

Ball's study of this early mystic and other early Christian ascetics seems to have offered him not only a chance for some linguistic mischief but also a hermeneutical key to his own life and to his work – including Dada – which, as a convert, he was attempting to resolve. Ball understood conversion as a radical disruption. Yet he also saw it very clearly in terms of remedy. If anything, as he researched, he became more interested in the remedial than in the redemptive aspects of conversion – the therapeutic over, or perhaps even *in* the salvific.²⁷

²³ Hugo Ball, 'Der Künstler und die Zeitkrankheit' (1926), in Ball, *Der Künstler und die Zeitkrankheit. Ausgewählte Schriften* (note 14), pp. 102–49 (p. 149).

²⁴ Bernard Häring, 'The Characteristics of Conversion', in *Conversion: Perspectives on Personal and Social Transformation*, ed. Walter E. Conn, New York 1978, pp. 213–23 (p. 223).

²⁵ Hugo Ball, letter to Joseph Englert dated 21 March 1921, in Hugo Ball, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe* (note 1), *Briefe 1904–1927*, Göttingen 2003, X/1, p. 335.

²⁶ Ball, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit* (note 1), entry for 18 June 1921, p. 254. 'H. .k' is Richard Huelsenbeck.

²⁷ See, e.g., Ball's letter to Hermann Hesse from a date in June 1921, in Ball, *Briefe*, (note 25), X/1, pp. 338–9.

BALL'S PERSONAL THEOLOGY OF CONVERSION AND CONFESSION

It is worth looking more closely at how Ball's theology of religious conversion informs his autobiographical understanding, most notably in the structure of his own edited and published diaries. In October 1922 Ball retrieved his old diary notes from where they had been stored and began working on them to produce the heavily edited version that would eventually be published, not long before he died, as *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*. Today it is the best known and most widely translated of his books. The text was intentionally arranged in the form of a conversion story. He later spoke of his *Tagebuch*, 'dem ich den Titel "Konversionen" geben könnte'.²⁸ At the very time when he began preparing the manuscript, Ball found the quintessential model, the most venerable possible prototype for the story he needed to tell. He was immersed in the close reading of the *Confessions* of Augustine of Hippo. The profound religious conversion narrated by this theologian provided, above all other precedents, the model for Ball's own 'confessions' and *Die Flucht aus der Zeit* was published with a Latin epigraph quoting Augustine.²⁹ Hennings recalled:

Es gibt beinahe keine Zeile, die Ball in den augustinischen Bekenntnissen nicht angestrichen hat [...]. Das einzige, was ihm [bei] Augustinus problematisch war, nachdenklich machte, war, dass dieser weder Zeitgenossen noch Strömungen nennt, obwohl das zur Gestaltung eines Lebens doch nötig gewesen sein wird.³⁰

The latter remark is explained by the prominence of 'Zeitgenossen' and 'Strömungen' in Ball's own 'confessions' in *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*. It has been noted that his unpublished and partially indecipherable notes reveal that his reading of Augustine's *Confessions* focused especially on the vivid second chapter,³¹ the part dealing with the saint's adolescence, his 'past foulness and carnal corruptions'.³² Ball's focus on Augustine's contrite recollection of the 'unbridled dissoluteness' of his youth suggests that his own reading of the text resonated with the retrospection of a past moral destitution and a newly transformed desire for 'the supreme Good'.³³ At much the same time, in the autumn of 1922, Ball also became interested in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and in Wilde's essays, which he read in German translation.³⁴ Traces of this interest found their way into *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*. Wilde and Augustine became for him a potent,

²⁸ Ball, *Briefe* (note 25), X/2, p. 257. The letter dates from 14 March 1926.

²⁹ 'Frontosus esto, prorsus frontosus esto. Quid times fronti tuae, quam signo crucis armasti?'

³⁰ Emmy Ball-Hennings, quoted in Faul, 'Nachwort', in Ball, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit* (note 1), p. 633.

³¹ 'Kommentar', Ball, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit* (note 1), p. 462.

³² Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, tr. Henry Chadwick, Oxford 2008, p. 24.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 28, 34.

³⁴ 'Kommentar', Ball, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit* (note 1), p. 415. Among the essays by Wilde that Ball read (in German translation) and made notes from was 'The Critic as Artist'.

initially unexpected but strangely apt combination. For Ball, penitential self-examination, dissolution of the self, renunciation of the ego and the overcoming or sublimation of erotic excess were central to the experience of a convert as well as being more universal palliatives for an enervated and individualistic present. His focus on such dynamics helps to account for his growing interest in the psychology of conversion.

In the autumn of 1924 Ball embarked on a more concrete exploration of these aspects of conversion. He went to Rome and spent some months there working in the laboratory for experimental psychology run in the Faculty of Medicine by a leading professor of psychology and expert on the psychology of religious conversion, Dr Camillo Sante de Sanctis. Sante de Sanctis's book, *La conversione religiosa*, became a standard work of reference in the field, along with those of William James and Edwin D. Starbuck.³⁵ By recourse to the newest developments in psychological and psychiatric research, Sante de Sanctis examined the processes by which – as he phrased it in a line quoted by Ball – ‘conversion presents itself as a concentration of affective energy on the object of faith’.³⁶ A substantial part of his work developed the hypothesis that the sublimation of erotic and other unruly impulses was a core part of the religious convert's psychological experience. Ball's most extended discussion of the phenomenon, the long article ‘Die religiöse Konversion’, was the outcome of his stay in Rome. It was also, loosely, a review of de Sanctis's recently published book. Indeed, several parts of Ball's essay closely paraphrase it. The Catholic magazine *Hochland* published the essay in 1925. In it, Ball brought the interest in what he saw as the ‘seelenärztliche’ theories of the monks together with his interest in the modern psychology of conversion.

Along with all other major commentators on conversion, Ball notes in this essay that conversion happens at different speeds in different people, so it may be slow, or sudden. For Ball, since the Church conceives of conversion as the loss and regaining of paradise, a paradise that is also ‘ein Vaterhaus’, every sinner who repents is a convert. All humanity outside the Church can thus be compared with the prodigal son of Jesus's parable (in the Gospel of Luke) who loses and regains the father's house, ‘seine Heimat’.³⁷ In the light of this idea about conversion as a return to or the regaining of home, Hennings's interpretation of Ball's conversion and her own is noteworthy: ‘Wir hatten den Grund gefunden, der uns hielt. Wir fuhren zwar in die Schweiz, ins Exil zurück, aber Heimat und das Gefühl ewiger Zugehörigkeit lag in uns, um uns nie wieder zu verlassen.’³⁸

³⁵ W. Lawson Jones, *A Psychological Study of Religious Conversion*, London 1937, p. 18.

³⁶ [Camillo] Sante de Sanctis, *Religious Conversion: A Bio-Psychological Study*, tr. Helen Augur, Abingdon 2007, p. 127. First published in 1927.

³⁷ Hugo Ball, ‘Die religiöse Konversion’, in Ball, *Der Künstler und die Zeitkrankheit. Ausgewählte Schriften* (note 14), pp. 336–76 (p. 345).

³⁸ Emmy Hennings, ‘Vorwort’, Hugo Ball, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*, Lucerne 1946, reprinted in Ball, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit* (note 1), pp. 322–35 (p. 327).

In the conversion essay, Ball traces his topic once again to Augustine and the psychological gravity of the *Confessions*, more resonant and more constitutive of true conversion for Ball than a sudden Damascene moment. In contrast to the brief biblical accounts of the conversion of St Paul, Ball finds that 'Erst mit der psychologischen Lebensgeschichte des hl. Augustinus beginnt der Konversionsprozess eine Rolle zu spielen...'.³⁹ Elsewhere, echoes of the militancy of Ball's political writing persist. He insists that it is only possible to speak of conversion as conversion to *Catholicism*. It is a part of his totalising vision of conversion as 'eine Umkehr zur Kirche, und zwar zur Grosskirche'.⁴⁰ Once again, not only individuals but also nations can and must be converted. Using the first-person plural, Ball claims that 'we' (he is speaking of Europeans) owe our spiritual life to a particular tradition that kept us 'ungestört' under the influence of Catholic sacraments and dogma, until Protestantism ushered in an era of catastrophic rationalism. Thereafter, as Protestants:

Wir waren Entwicklungsmythologen und Fatalisten. Wir glaubten, dass der Mensch mechanisch und nach den Gesetzen der materiellen Energie funktionierte, und lobten damit ein Gespenster- und Totenreich. Wir suchten alle höheren Erscheinungen auf die Intelligenz, auf den Körper, auf die Chemie zurückzuführen und bewiesen nur immer mehr, dass wir unfähig geworden seien, die höheren Werte hervorzubringen.⁴¹

Here again, the only true source of resistance to the suffocating relativism of the age is the Catholic Church. But as his argument unfolds, Ball makes clear that he sees in religious conversion not only the necessary corporate submission to the supremacy of the Church but also the necessary potential for a remedial psychiatry. Theology and the religious conversion it demands are, for Ball, the therapeutic answer to epistemological crisis, social dislocation, national decay and overflowing 'Irrenhäuser'. The dysfunctional and dystopic conditions of the unconverted subject are also those of Protestantism. Conversion is now less a private matter, more 'ein Zeitproblem von universaler Bedeutung'.⁴²

Logically enough, Ball frames his discussion of the findings of Sante de Sanctis within the context of the developing psychology of religion. This was a branch of study that, after much controversy, had finally been recognised at the 1909 Psychological Congress of Geneva.⁴³ Its proponents had made the psychology of religion more palatable to the scientific world by defining it broadly as a field investigating religious *experience*, as opposed to religious *phenomena* or the transcendent. Having constituted it

³⁹ Ball, 'Die religiöse Konversion' (note 37), pp. 346–7.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 336.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 337.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 338.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 339–40; Lawson Jones, *A Psychological Study of Religious Conversion* (note 35), p. 21.

as such, as Ann Taves has observed, 'psychologists of religion construed it as an objective "fact" amenable to psychological study'.⁴⁴ Through his engagement with the scientific field, Ball sought and partially found the conceptual means to delineate his own and others' experiences. Where science fell short, as it did for him, Ball turned to the murkier fields of spiritual conflict – to demonology and the theory and practices of exorcism.⁴⁵ Writing about his own personal conversion as well as about conversion as a general phenomenon, Ball was concerned to emphasise the condition of chaos that precedes resolution into order. He quotes Sante de Sanctis: 'Der Schmerz ist der einzige zur Konversion notwendige Faktor, wenn er auch zur Konversion nicht genügt.'⁴⁶ Ball then immediately emphasises the conclusion:

Auch für die kollektiven Konversionen gilt dies: der Krieg mit seinen Trostlosigkeiten, die ökonomische und moralische Depression, der Wertumsturz bei den Völkern sind mächtige Beweggründe für die Rückkehr zum Glauben.⁴⁷

Ball's essay surveys a range of prominent converts. St Mary of Egypt, the desert penitent living in the fourth and fifth centuries, is 'die Mutter aller Konvertiten'.⁴⁸ Francis of Assisi only matures as a convert after a series of humiliating failures and trials. Ball is especially interested in those prominent clerical converts from Anglicanism to Catholicism of his own era – John Henry Newman and Frederick Joseph Kinsman. The section of the essay surveying these cases culminates in a particularly arresting passage:

Willenskrisen, das Bedürfnis nach geistiger Direktive und nach moralischer Zucht, nach einem sicheren Standort inmitten der Zusammenbrüche und der Konfusion; Heilung von schweren geistigen und seelischen Wunden, Lösung aus einer ephemeren Situation, ein sich überstürzender Lebenswille: all dies können Motive sein, die aus Rationalisten Mystiker, aus Reformern Reformierte, aus Widersachern der Kirche Apologeten und aus Lästern Lobsänger erstehen lassen. Es gibt Konvertiten der Farbe, des Tons, des Wortes, ja der Kriminalität. Eine Dame konvertierte, als sie die engelhaften sixtinischen Chöre vernahm; ein Maler, als ihm das Wesen des Bildes aufging; ein Dichter, als er die letzten Gründe des Wortes in seine Wurzel verfolgte und sie im Logos des Evangelisten beschlossen fand. (emphasis added)⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Ann Taves, 'A Tale of Two Congresses: The Psychological Study of Psychical, Occult, and Religious Phenomena, 1900–1909', *Journal of the History of the Behavioural Sciences*, 50/4 (2014), 376–99 (377).

⁴⁵ Ball considered writing a book under the title *Die Therapie der Kirche*, but never did so. For the fullest view of his published work in this direction, however, see especially the latter half of Ball, 'Der Künstler' (note 23).

⁴⁶ Quoted in Ball, 'Konversion' (note 37), p. 342.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 342–3.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 343.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 345.

Ball's artistic and religious subjectivity was shaped over many years by his profound belief in and concern with the medial power of the word. There is a significant affinity between the passage in the conversion essay and, in *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*, an entry dating to the midst of his involvement with Dada at the Cabaret Voltaire:

Wir haben die Plastizität des Wortes jetzt bis zu einem Punkte getrieben, an dem sie schwerlich mehr überboten werden kann. [...] Wir haben das Wort mit Kräften und Energien geladen, die uns den evangelischen Begriff des "Wortes" (logos) als eines magischen Komplexbildes wieder entdecken ließen.⁵⁰

In the passage from the 'Konversion' essay quoted above, Ball's survey of the phenomenology of conversion culminates in a pointed reference to himself as 'Dichter'. It is highly suggestive of the Dada performance in Zurich, dated to 23 June 1916, of his 'Lautgedichte' when dressed 'im kubistischen Kostüm' as a 'magischer Bischof'. It is instructive to re-visit this passage – the most widely quoted and discussed passage within studies of Dada and the avant-garde – while bearing in mind that Ball prepared *Die Flucht aus der Zeit* for publication when he was reading Augustine's *Confessions*. It relates the Dadaist's experience of performing the "Verse ohne Worte" oder Lautgedichte' while wearing 'ein eigenes Kostüm ... aus blauglänzendem Karton'.⁵¹ That the episode seems to have been a cathartic experience for Ball is often noted. But there are more specific reasons for considering the soteriological elements in the description of dissolution and resolution, the narration of 'Abbruch und Wiederaufbau'. They align the episode – intentionally, no doubt – with the structural dramaturgy of religious conversion. This is part of his long account of this decisive event at a Dada evening:

Alle waren neugierig. Also liess ich mich, da ich als Säule nicht gehen konnte, in der Verfinsterung auf das Podest tragen und begann langsam und feierlich:

gadji beri bimba
glandridi lauli lonni cadori
gadjava bim beri glassala
glandridi glassala tuffin i zimbrabim
blassa galassa tuffin i zimbrabim

Die Akzente wurden schwerer, der Ausdruck steigerte sich in der Verschärfung der Konsonanten. [...] Da bemerkte ich, dass meine Stimme, der kein anderer Weg mehr blieb, die uralte Kadenz der priesterlichen Lamentation annahm, jenen Stil des Messgesangs, wie er durch die katholischen Kirchen des Morgen- und Abendlandes wehklagt. [...] Einen Moment lang schien mir, als tauche in meiner kubistischen Maske ein

⁵⁰ Ball, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit* (note 1), entry for 18 June 1916, p. 87.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, entry for 23 June 1916, p. 90.

bleiches, verstörtes Jungengesicht auf, jenes halb erschrockene, halb neugierige Gesicht eines zehn-jährigen Knaben, der in den Totenmessen und Hochämtern seiner Heimatspfarrei zitternd und gierig am Munde der Priester hängt. Da erlosch, wie ich es bestellt hatte, das elektrische Licht, und ich wurde vom Podium herab schweissbedeckt als ein magischer Bischof in die Versenkung getragen.⁵²

Here, and in other, often sacred contexts, Ball senses an excess, a burdening of the word to a point at which language can go no further. In the guise of a 'bishop' – for which retrospective image Augustine himself was plausibly the inspiration – the limits of language are reached with the 'saturated phenomenon' of the *Logos*.⁵³ It was an important complex in Ball's thought, one intimately connected with his own struggles with the word, the image and abstraction. Ball's thinking about experience at the limits of language is, I suggest, more intimately tied up with his understanding of conversion than has been commonly noted. After Dada, his interest in the medial and remedial power of the word did not cease but was rather extended. The passage in *Byzantinisches Christentum* that introduces Simeon the Stylite is one of the most aesthetically vivid in the book. I would suggest that it can be read as a development of the themes of the above diary passage recounting the 'magical bishop' episode. Ball writes:

Die Sprache Gottes bedarf nicht der menschlichen Sprache, um sich verständlich zu machen. Unsere vielgepriesene Seelenkunde reicht nicht hierhin. Eher noch die versunken ächzende Stummheit der Fische. [...] Ihre Vokabeln sind über Laut und Schrift. Ihre Lettern zucken in jenen Kurven des Schicksals, die plötzlich mit einer Lichtflut durch unser Bewusstsein schneiden. [...] Die Dunkelheit dieser Sprache vergisst alle Zwischensätze. Der Akzent ihrer Kühnheit kann nicht begriffen werden. Wo sie den Menschen erfasst, wird sie Sturm wider Willen und oft ein Geißel des von ihr Betroffenen; Überschwung des Erlebens, ein Tränenmeer, oder grollender Blitz. / Aus ihrem Hauche besteht der Gewand der Cherubim auf dem Seidenvorhang vor dem Tabernakel. In ihrer Syntax verschlingen sich Himmel und Erde. Durch Tod und Geburt streicht ihr Zeilenmass. Ihr Abglanz sind Feuer und Licht; ihr Stammeln die Wunder.⁵⁴

Ball's evocation of divine vocalising and its proximity to a shattering and inchoate experience can thus be read alongside how his ideas around the *Logos*, the voice and 'die letzten Gründe des Wortes' were worked out in his own 1916 Dada performances, or, more accurately, in the recounting of them. We find that Ball also makes a connection with the psychology and theology of conversion.

⁵² *Ibid.*, entry for 23 June 1916, pp. 90–1.

⁵³ The phrase is from a longer discussion of the *Logos* and body of Christ as 'the excessive body *par excellence*', in Graham Ward, *Christ and Culture*, Oxford 2005, p. 128.

⁵⁴ Ball, *Byzantinisches Christentum* (note 11), pp. 223–4.

A minor, but perhaps telling detail is that Ball seems to have retained an affectionate attachment to his own image as 'magical bishop' after he left Dada behind; even in his most 'political' phase, in 1918, the bishop figure reappears in Ball's childish doodles as an angelic flying lover, a large heart emblazoned on the cylindrical body, in a letter to Emmy in 1918.⁵⁵ This apparently whimsical identification opens up a final perspective from which Ball's concept of conversion can be considered. Ball consistently saw the child, or the childlike moments of adult subjectivity, as a kind of emancipatory innocence that was integral to the true artist and true convert in the world. This element is easily missed in those readings of Ball that chiefly see the militancy of his post-1920 dogmatics. Hesse likened Ball's writing to the drawings of saints and angels done by his young stepdaughter, Annemarie. There is also in Ball's thought a tension around the ludic and ascetic self as artist and as convert. This is, if not resolved by Ball, then at least repeatedly worked out in his ideas about the child and states of childlikeness. He called childhood: 'eine kaum beachtete Welt mit eigenen Gesetzen' and contrasted: 'alles kindlich Phantastische, alles kindlich Direkte, kindlich Figürliche gegen die Senilitäten, gegen die Welt der Erwachsenen'.⁵⁶ But Ball's image of the child was not one of mere sweetness or simplicity. It is also eschatological. 'Das Kind wird der Ankläger sein beim jüngsten Gericht, der Gekreuzigte wird richten, der Auferstandene verzeihen'.⁵⁷ In 'Die religiöse Konversion', Ball remarks that 'Der Konversionsprozess besteht in einer Befreiung der gläubigen Infantilkomplexe'.⁵⁸ 'Wenn ihr nicht werdet wie die Kinder',⁵⁹ quotes Ball from Jesus's words in the Gospel of Matthew (18:3). And we may remember how Ball wrote of his momentary confrontation, in that pivotal performance, with 'ein bleiches, verstörtes Jungengesicht [...] jenes halb erschrockene, halb neugierige Gesicht eines zehn-jährigen Knaben'.⁶⁰

A key element of the work of de Sanctis, emphasised by Ball, is to distinguish religious experience from forms of mental illness. This work is necessary, as Ball sees it, to defend religious feeling and mystical experience from the suspicion of a suppressed eroticism at its root, of pathological hallucination and schizophrenic dissociation. Against such 'Einwände', both Ball and de Sanctis differentiate between 'unrein' and 'geläuterten' mysticism.⁶¹ Substantial parts of Ball's essay are thus concerned with challenging real or potential misdiagnosis by 'Irrenärzte' of psychological disintegration in the religious subject. Ball concludes:

⁵⁵ Ball, *Briefe* (note 25), X/1, p. 251. The date of the letter is given as 'nach dem 7. April 1918'.

⁵⁶ Ball, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit* (note 1), entry for 5 May 1916, p. 92.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Ball, 'Konversion' (note 37), p. 354.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Ball, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit* (note 1), entry for 23 June 1916, p. 91.

⁶¹ Ball, 'Konversion' (note 37), p. 369.

das Gottbegnadetsein und die echte Devotion sind nicht 'spezifische' Symptome einer Krankheit oder eine Anomalie des Gehirns, noch ist die Nerven- oder Geisteskrankheit ein Stimulus der wahren Religiosität. Wohl aber ist es möglich, dass der Mystiker und der Konvertit in seinem Sublimationsprozesse alle Phasen der körperlichen oder seelisch-geistigen Irrung streift, schneidet und zu überwinden hat, ehe er sein Ziel der Vollendung erreicht.⁶²

CONCLUSION

Ball continued his investigations into the psychological aspects of religious experience at the end of his life. Even as he became terminally ill, he was taking it further, working on a detailed study of psychoanalysis and exorcism. Religious conversion fits awkwardly into the biography of any agent of the radical avant-garde. Dada's disruption of congruent patterns of development, such as in its embrace of chance, would seem incompatible with the *telos* of religious conversion. As Maria Stavrinaki has put it: 'Chance, the ahistorical principle par excellence, streaking into life like a comet, expresses the absurdity of teleology'.⁶³ Yet integrating Ball's ideas about conversion, attending to how such ideas retrospectively shaped his own understanding of experience, illuminates the post-Dada life and critical work of this most original and idiosyncratic thinker. A vital dialectic between Ball's avant-gardism and his theological interests becomes more apparent. In the realm of language and religious experience, as understood by Ball, this is especially so. Specialist scholarship can do more to connect Ball's Dada linguistics, his study of 'Byzantine Christianity', his cultural politics *and* his understanding of the radical rupture of religious conversion – his own and as a psychological phenomenon. Ball's concern with religious conversion is one of many theological developments out of Dada that throw into question Paul Dermée's quip in Paris in 1920 that 'Dada is an utterly a-religious attitude, like that of the scientist with his eye stuck on his microscope'.⁶⁴ The connections between art, early Christian experience and therapeutic psychology were crucial lines of enquiry for Ball – before, during and after the time he was a Dadaist.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 376.

⁶³ Maria Stavrinaki, *Dada Presentism: An Essay on Art and History*, tr. Daniela Ginsburg, Stanford 2016, p. 78.

⁶⁴ Paul Dermée, 'What is Dada!' (1920), in *The Dada Reader: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Dawn Ades, London 2006, p. 248.