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| Ball, Hugo (1886-1927) |
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| Born in Pirmasens on 22 February 1886, the German writer Hugo Ball is best known as the co-founder, with Tristan Tzara, of the Cabaret Voltaire and the Dada movement in Zurich. Active initially as an Expressionist playwright and dramaturge in Munich and as a journalist and literary critic in Berlin in the years leading up to World War I, Ball left Germany with his companion and future wife Emmy Hennings in 1915. They remained in Switzerland for the rest of their lives. Following his period of Dada activities in 1916 and 1917, Ball was a journalist for a centre-left newspaper for three years. Reconverting to the Catholic faith of his childhood, Ball spent the remainder of his life in relative seclusion in Ticino, where he wrote a series of religious books and revised his diaries for publication. |
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Enrolling at the University of Munich, he began work on a dissertation entitled *Nietzsche in Basel* (surviving fragments published in 1978), but this work, as well as his academic studies, remained incomplete.  The years 1910-1914 marked the period of Ball’s most active involvement in the theatre scenes in Munich and Berlin. It was during these years that Wassily Kandinsky became a key influence on Ball’s approach to the arts. The advent of the war prevented the two from realizing their project to found an ‘artists’ theatre,’ but the Russian artist’s philosophy of total theatre would inform the performances held in Zurich a few years later.  While Ball played a significant role in German theatre during this period, he achieved little success as a playwright. Although one play, *Die Nase des Michelangelo* (1911), and the first act of another, *Der Henker von Brescia* (1914), were published, none was produced in Germany in the author’s lifetime. Ball also contributed poems to several of the major Expressionist journals. One of these poems, ‘Der Henker’ (1913), published in the inaugural issue of *Revolution,* caused that journal to be seized by the authorities for obscenity (an action later reversed in court because the poem was deemed too obscure to be obscene). In addition, Ball wrote and published poetry pseudonymously in collaboration with Hans Leybold (signed ‘Ha Hu Baley’) and with Klabund and Marietta di Monaco (as ‘Klarinetta Klaball’).  Sharing with many youthful German intellectuals an initial enthusiasm for the war, and volunteering unsuccessfully for military duty, Ball leaned increasingly toward pacifism after witnessing the horrors of modern warfare during a visit to the front. More and more outspoken as a journalist and organiser of public events in Berlin, the author finally found it necessary to emigrate to Zurich in May 1915. There, he and Hennings barely managed to earn a living as members of a small cabaret company. In February 1916 Ball and Hennings, together with other artists who had taken refuge in neutral Switzerland, founded the Cabaret Voltaire, whose riotous, multilingual performances gave rise within a few months to the Dada movement.  Ball’s involvement in the movement was intense, but short-lived (1916-1917). He wrote and performed poems and sketches, lectured, and played piano. Ball’s most influential works stem from this brief Dada period. The best-known of these are his six sound poems of 1916, compositions comprised of apparently meaningless syllables but filled with onomatopoeic effects and occasional allusions to German vocabulary, intended for recitation at the Cabaret Voltaire and similar venues [Image 1, captioned: Hugo Ball’s sound poem ‘Karawane’ as printed in the *Dada Almanach,* ed. Richard Huelsenbeck (1920). Copy in the International Dada Archive, Special Collections, University of Iowa Libraries].  Ball’s two novels also stem from his Dada period. *Flametti* (1918) is the story of a mildly disreputable group of cabaret performers not unlike the members of the Cabaret Voltaire and its predecessor, the Maxim Ensemble. The posthumously published *Tenderenda der Phantast* (*Tenderenda the Fantast*) (1967) is a fanciful, allegorical reworking of Ball’s experiences from 1914 to 1920; ‘Dada’ appears as a character in the novel, which incorporates some of the sound poems. Also performed at the Cabaret Voltaire were the bitter, ironic anti-war poem ‘Totentanz 1916’ (‘Dance of Death’) and the short theatrical sketch *Ein Krippenspiel: Bruitistisch* (*A Bruitist Nativity Play)* (1986); the latter is an eclectic hybrid of a sound poem and a Christmas play (premiered in June 1916!).  Partly due to exhaustion from the intensity of the activity, partly because of disagreements with Tzara, Ball severed his ties with Dada in May 1917. There followed a three-year period of journalistic work, writing articles chiefly for the centre-left newspaper *Die freie Zeitung;* many of these articles have been collected in *Der Künstler und die Zeitkrankheit* (1984). In 1920, Ball and Hennings married and moved with Hennings’s daughter to Agnuzzo, Ticino.  *Zur Kritik der deutschen Intelligenz* (*Critique of the German Intelligentsia*)(1919) is a transitional work in which Ball traces Germany’s militaristic culture back to Luther and proposes that Russian anarchism and the French Revolution should serve as models for a post-war culture. His 1924 revision of the work as *Die Folgen der Reformation* eliminates the emphasis on revolution and anarchism and brings it into conformity with conventional Catholic teachings. Nevertheless, his religious writings were not particularly well-received by the Church authorities.  Ball’s return to Catholicism was marked by a strong leaning toward mysticism and asceticism. His own secluded life-style in Agnuzzo after 1920 is reflected in his biography of three of the early Orthodox Desert Fathers, *Byzantinisches Christentum* (1923). Ball and Hennings developed a close friendship with Hermann Hesse, who lived nearby; Ball’s *Hermann Hesse: Sein Leben und sein Werk* (1927) was the first published biography of that writer.  Although Ball’s edited diary *Die Flucht aus der Zeit* (*Flight Out of Time*) (1927) is considered one of the source documents of Zurich Dada, offering first-hand accounts of many of the key events of the initial phase of the movement, it is uncertain how reliable this account is, since the book constitutes the author’s interpretation of his life from the standpoint of his religious conversion. Unfortunately, the original diaries on which the book is based have not survived.  Hugo Ball died on 14 December 1927 in Sant’Abbondio, Ticino. List of Works *Flametti, oder, Vom Dandysmus der Armen* (1918, *Flametti, or, The Dandyism of the Poor,* 2014)  *Tenderenda der Phantast* (1967, *Ball and Hammer: Hugo Ball’s Tenderenda the Fantast,* 2002)  *Zur Kritik der deutschen Intelligenz* (1919, *Critique of the German Intelligentsia*, 1993)  *Die Flucht aus der Zeit* (1927, *Flight out of Time: A Dada Diary*, 1996)  *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe,* 2003- . Ten volumes planned. |
| Further reading:  (Mann)  (White) |