A Cultural Revolution for the “Free Spirits”: Hugo Ball’s Nietzschean Anarchism

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Abstract: The present paper inquires into the writings of Hugo Ball (the major intellectual figure of the Dada movement, along with Richard Huelsenbeck) to find his opinions on artistic anarchism related to a cultural revolution. Actually, Ball’s writings show a deep concern for the fate of Western culture at the beginning of the XX-th century and also a commitment to take action on this issue through the invention of a new artistic phenomenon: the Dada movement. The paper analyzes the deep-seated involvement of Ball in the study of Nietzsche’s works and its effect: a new understanding of the role of anarchism as artistic viz. cultural utopia.

Analyzing Dada: Methodological Concerns

Addressing this kind of issue, the general issue of Dadaistic anarchism by taking the case of Hugo Ball’s writings, in an international conference on aesthetics, finds a major motivational support in the confidence on the actuality or the timeliness of Dada. At the beginning of the last century, Dada was not only an artistic, but also an intellectual phenomenon. In its development, Dada reached a certain point, from which we are still essentially not further. Questions such as: what can we build if we cannot hold on God, the State, and the good reason? Is the only positive value in this life tied to the noise of life itself? Is there an inherent structure of the world or is this the sheer chaos? And what is really art good for, if it isn’t beautiful anymore?1 are questions that keep haunting us one century after. In aesthetics, Dada shares with us a radicalism of questions and problems that is becoming more and more acute in the wake of this long postmodernist age: the lack of a coherent understanding of the world, the alienation of the artist from its audience, the incomprehensible character of his art – these are questions that have been increasingly resounding in recent times.

However, the specter of incomprehensibility still lurks not only in the contemporary artworld itself, but also behind the interpretations that have been shaping the outline of Dada as we see it today. And when I say interpretations, I refer to all kinds of receptions, from academic reviews to the widespread use of the term Dada in the pop-culture of the 1960’s and 1970’s. A presence in the last decades of the XX-th century of a rich secondary literature on the subject of Dada has not always informed on the significance of this artistic phenomenon for 20-th century art. There are still

1 Braun, 1995.
methodological barriers which have kept us and are still keeping us from having a clearer view on the meaning(s) of Dada. Even the name *Dada* itself has been a commonplace for debate, as several opposing theories still quarrel over the name’s origins and over its basic meanings. Nevertheless, starting in a conference on Dada from the issue of Dada’s reception and not from original Dadaistic texts is not without its benefits. First, we are continuously aware of the fact that even this research is only one act of reception among others, striving for objectivity. Second, by keeping in mind the history of Dada’s reception we are cautioned against monopolizing interpretations that are still shaping our contemporary views on this matter.

Generally, the name of *Dada* is widely used today, formally, in academic circles, as well as informally, as a general term describing artistic nonsense, anti-conventional art, and creative activity. As an undertone, the term reads out a “harmless nonsense” or a playful activity directed against dry rationalism, almost inevitably involved in positive connotations².

Among the artists, Dada has been best represented in the visual arts contexts, often traditionally connected to Futurism or Surrealism. A distinctive technique related to Dadaism is the widespread *collage* (although the collage was first discovered by Picasso and Braque in 1912). In the 1960’s, the Dadaistic collage has been widely embraced by many neo-avant-garde movements, such as Pop-Art and Op art. Usually, the expansive concept and the techniques of Dada were better understood by the neo-avantgarde artworld than the real ideological context in which the Dadaists grew. This re-reading of the term Dada sometimes created huge misunderstandings. The fact is that the Dadaists did not see their art as “harmless nonsense”, but even as an “appendage of a great religion” or as a kind of intense “suffering”, in Hugo Ball’s own terms:

“Dadaism was only an appendage of a great religion. We suffered not only at the time, but we suffered mainly on ourselves (...) You will understand that the deeper meaning of our work was suffering. Only in suffering at the time and suffering on ourselves, we had the opportunity to go beyond our own borders, because only the suffering gives you a passport to leave yourself.”³

Besides the plain misunderstandings, there is also the mystification problem. The later memoirs of the ex-Dada (Huelsenbeck, Tzara, Ball) - such as the journal we will be quoting from, *Flight out of Time*, published by Hugo Ball only in 1927, way after his Dada years – deal with the Dada years in a form of an anecdotic storytelling, eliminating some issues and overemphasizing the greatness and the mystery of Dada, often in superficial remarks.

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Research on Dada nowadays has to fight on several fronts. First, against the old interpretations, which rely too much on the artists’ personal accounts. Second, against the mainstream, informal interpretations, which misunderstand and also trivialize the subject to the point of commodifying “Dada” into a brand name for all “avant-garde”-like art. Third, against the new interpretations, which start either from neo-Marxist or from historical-hermeneutical positions, in the end showing the same incomprehensibility towards the phenomenon as such.

Another difficulty in research is the interdisciplinary character of Dada, which constitutes an advantage as well as an obstacle. Poets and painters, musicians and philosophers are usually one and the same person: one cannot discuss Dadaism without an interdisciplinary approach. Also, Dadaist texts are written in German, French, Italian, English. The backgrounds of different Dadaist artists are very different and very informing of the achievements of the persons themselves.

A further obstacle is the fact that Dada was often commented on not by scientists or researchers but by artists. It is possible that the author of the commentary does not make a clear difference between object and meta-language. His research was not scientific, but “dada”\(^4\): using its own sympathies in serious debates does not help in furthering our understanding of Dadaism. This is a clear sign that the sheer explosion of Dada studies in the second half of the XX-th century does not necessarily guarantee scientific distance or strive for objectivity.

Is there a Dada worldview?

I consider it necessary that a particular issue such as Hugo Ball’s involvement with Dada should be preceded by a larger explanation about the aesthetics of Dada. A preliminary question raised by this attempt is concerned with the existence of a general notion of Dada. Studies have shown that the notion of Dada has been in itself a much debatable issue. However, there is still a set of general characteristics identifiable when speaking of Dada. First, Dada is represented by a strong social criticism, which can be summarized in five points\(^5\): anthropomorphism, as directed against creationism; world dynamicity, simultaneously destructive and productive; anti-progressive thinking, favoring the Nietzschean cyclical model of Eternal Recurrence; a vitalism directed against utilitarianism and rationalism; criticism against the rationalist-utilitarianist view on language.

Secondly, in a philosophical way, Dadaism is concerned with a larger metaphysical issue: is there, albeit hidden, a certain structure in nature, a structure with or without God, or is there nothing but chaos? Here positions differ: German Dadaists presume a structured universe, not harmonious, but contradictory and inexplicable. Hans Arp’s image of the universe as a complementarity between form and chaos is revealing on this point. On the other hand, the French-speaking authors glorify the chaotic nonsense of everything instead of a (more or less) structured world.

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\(^4\) Ibidem.

\(^5\) According to Sheppard, 1979.
Dadaist aesthetics follows roughly the same pattern offered by the general worldview: it criticizes symbol; it integrates chance as an important element in the construction of reality; it emphasizes the transience of one’s own work in contrast to the monumental aura bestowed upon the work of art by tradition. This generates a propensity of Dadaist art towards an immediate, provoking effect on the public, through manifestations such as posters, performances, happenings. Techniques such as collage criticize the old myth of the artist as an extraordinary, out-of-this-world genius, by emphasizing the idea that art is available to and achievable by everyone. In the end, Dadaists stress the fact that artistic experience is purely a subjective experience, thus making any criticism of their art - including ours - obsolete.

The first Dada: Hugo Ball in Zürich

Keeping in mind the methodological concerns related to the general study of Dada, we will try to sketch out at this point Nietzsche’s influence upon Dadaism. Hugo Ball has been chosen as the example in this case, because of his prominent ties with German Expressionism before and during First World War. I will not refer here to his early career before the Dada, neither will I mention his intellectual biography in detail, which is a very sinuous one: from a cabaret musician to an Expressionist poet and writer, from a visionary anarchist to a Christian mystic during his latest period, his career and life has always pendulated between extremes. Is is credible enough to say that without the First World War the first Dada group, the “Zürich Dada” of 1916, made of artist refugees from the war in Europe, often considered deserters by the people in their own lands, probably would not have been born. Various artists with quite different backgrounds, such as Hugo Ball, Richard Huelsenbeck, Emmy Hennings, Hans Arp, Marcel Janco, and Tristan Tzara have envisioned Zurich as an opportunity to manifest themselves creatively against all the war madness that surrounded them. Hugo Ball above all saw the War as a natural result of calculated, technological, and ideological state-power. In his view, borrowed, to a certain degree, from the 19th century Russian anarchism, he perceived war as a final, nihilistic stage of modern state-power. Following this logic, modern state power driven by warfare becomes nihilistic because of its own desire for domination, which is, in the end, self-destructive. Ball, who was the intellectual leader of the group in the first phase of the “Zürich Dada”, fused these anarchist ideas about the State with a nihilistic vision of modern politics in general, a vision which is very much resembling to Nietzsche’s own nihilistic vision of modern politics.

As well as Nietzsche, Ball, who had been, for a long time, starting from his teenage years, a devoted reader of Nietzsche, was skeptic and even hostile to politics.

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6 See Bakunin (Statism and Anarchy, 1873), who recognizes the state’s necessity for military domination as being unavoidable, but not nihilistic: “The modern State is by its very nature a military State; and every military State must of necessity become a conquering, invasive State; to survive, it must conquer or be conquered, for the simple reason that accumulated military power will suffocate if it does not find an outlet. Therefore the modern State must strive to be a huge and powerful State: this is the indispensable precondition for its survival.”
Perhaps the core of Ball’s later choice for a cultural or artistic utopianism instead of a political utopianism, a cultural utopianism which also includes a vision of a new man shaped by a new form of culture – an aspect which will be later discussed - is very well reflected by one of Nietzsche’s comments from his early *Untimely Meditations* (III: 4):

> “Every philosophy which believes that the problem of existence is touched on, not to say solved, by a political event is a joke- and pseudo-philosophy. Many states have been founded since the world began; that is an old story. How should a political innovation suffice to turn men once and for all into contented inhabitants of the earth? (...) Here, however, we are experiencing the consequences of the doctrine, lately preached from all the rooftops, that the state is the highest goal of mankind and that a man has no higher duty than to serve the state: in which doctrine I recognize a relapse not into paganism but into stupidity. It may be that a man who sees his highest duty in serving the state really knows no higher duties; but there are men and duties existing beyond this and one of the duties that seems, at least to me, to be higher than serving the state demands that one destroys stupidity in every form, and therefore in this form too. That is why I am concerned here with a species of man whose teleology extends somewhat beyond the welfare of a state, with philosophers, and with these only in relation to a world which is again fairly independent of the welfare of a state, that of culture. Of the many rings which, interlocked together, make up the human community, some are of gold and others of pinchbeck”.

Hugo Ball’s own personal reaction to the experience of war is memorable: “It is the total mass of machinery and the devil himself that has broken loose now. Ideals are only labels that have been stuck on. Everything has been shaken to its very foundations”. In June 1917, towards the end of the first Dada adventure, he noted that he was amazed of the fact that Lenin used to live a few steps away from the *Cabaret Voltaire*:

> “He must have heard our music and tirades every evening: I do not know if he enjoyed them or profited from them. And when we were opening the gallery in Bahnhofstrasse, the Russians went to Petersburg to launch the revolution. Is Dadaism as sign and gesture the opposite of Bolshevism? Does it contrast the completely quixotic, inexpedient, and incomprehensible side of the world with destruction and consummate calculation? It will be interesting to observe what happens here and there”.

Here, Ball seeks to picture a difference between his idea of artistic anarchism as the opposite of anarchic Bolshevism. Actually, as David Weir explains, this opposition is an indirect allusion to anarchist authors such as Mikhail Bakunin and Fritz Brupbacher, who wrote a biography of Bakunin. The first had been a fierce opponent of any kind of

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7 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1997, 147-148. See also *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* I:11 (On the New Idol), where Nietzsche perceives the state as “the coldest of all cold monsters” and considers that “the state... whatever it may tell you, it lies ...Everything about it is false”. Loyal to his early views, he concludes that “There, where the state ends, only there begins the human being who is not superfluous” (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2006, 34-36).

8 Hugo Ball, *Flight out of Time*, 11.

Statism, including Marxist Statism\textsuperscript{10}. The second, Brupbacher, identified Bakunin with the literary figure of Don Quixote, explaining that Bakunin was quixotic in his rebellion against “all scientific and manmade systems”. By their approach, Communist anarchists, such as Bakunin, were entirely opposed to Bolshevik-type revolutions, which, in their view, meant not real revolutions, but power overthrows, through the means of a dictatorship of the working class\textsuperscript{11}.

In particular, political anarchism had preoccupied Hugo Ball even before the emergence of Dada, in mid-1915, when he was concerned with expressionist theater in Munich. Ball wrote in revolutionary journals such as \textsl{Die Aktion}, \textsl{Der Sturm}, \textsl{Die Revolution}. He read anarchists such as Bakunin, Kropotkin or Merezhkovsky\textsuperscript{12}. Notes from his 1915 journal deal with subjects such as nihilism and Russian anarchism. One particular entry from June 15-th 1915 comments extensively on the subject of anarchism:

“The anarchists say that contempt for laws is their main principle. Against laws ... any methods are permitted and are just. To be an anarchist means then to abolish rules in every connection and case. The prerequisite is the Rousseau-like belief in the natural goodness of man and in an immanent order of primitive nature left to its own resources. All additions (guidance, control) are, as abstractions, evil. The citizen is deprived of his civil rights. He is unnatural, a product of his uprooting and of the police who have perverted him even more. With such a theory the political haven is shattered. The stars go haywire. God and the devil change roles.

I have examined myself carefully. I could never bid chaos welcome, throw bombs, blow up bridges, and do away with ideas. I am not an anarchist. The longer and farther I am away from Germany, the less I am likely to be one.

Anarchy is attributable to the overstraining or corruption of the idea of the state. It will show itself more clearly where individuals or classes have grown up in idyllic circumstances, with close ties to nature and religion, and are then kept under strict political lock and key. The superiority of such individuals to the constructions and mechanisms of a modern monster-state is obvious. About the natural goodness of man, we can say that it is possible, but it is certainly not a rule. This goodness feeds mostly on a more-or-less known store of religious education and tradition. Viewed without prejudice and sentimentality, nature has for a long time not been so totally benevolent and orderly as one might wish it to be. (...) As a theory of the unity and solidarity of total humanity, anarchism is a belief in the universal, natural, divine childhood, a belief that an unconstrained world will produce the maximum yield. Allowing for the moral confusion and catastrophic destruction that centralizing systems and systematized work have caused everywhere, no sensible man will reject the idea that a South Sea community (...) is superior to our vaunted civilization. As long as rationalism and its

\textsuperscript{10} See: Bakunin, \textit{Statism and Anarchy}, 1873: “(...) No state, however democratic – not even the reddest republic – can ever give the people what they really want, i.e., the free self-organization and administration of their own affairs from the bottom upward, without any interference or violence from above, because every state, even the pseudo-People’s State concocted by Mr. Marx, is in essence only a machine ruling the masses from above, through a privileged minority of conceited intellectuals, who imagine that they know what the people need and want better than do the people themselves (...)”.

\textsuperscript{11} See, Bakunin’s \textit{Critique of the Marxist Theory of the State} (1873).

\textsuperscript{12} Hugo Ball, \textit{Flight out of Time}, 14.
quintessence, the machine, continue to make progress, anarchism will be an ideal for the catacombs and for members of an order, but not for the masses, however interested and influenced they are and presumably will remain.”

The question whether Ball was a committed anarchist is answered by his personal confession:

“... And yet ideals should be identical with the person who advocates them; the style of an author should represent his philosophy, without his expressly developing it. Basically it is an adventure that I am not really taking part in. ... I am an observer, I only dabble. What kind of cause would I participate in body and soul? With all my varied interests in beauty, life, the world, and with all my curiosity about their opposites?”

We see that the importance of political anarchism will quickly fade away towards the end of 1915. From this year on, Ball slightly turned towards a form of pacifist anarchism, where the anarchist becomes the “brainworker”, the Kopfarbeiter, a creator of new life through new forms of art and a destroyer of the old “basis of belief”: “Perhaps it is necessary to have resolutely, forcibly produced chaos and thus a compete withdrawal of faith before an entirely new edifice can be built up on a changed basis of belief”. He began to believe in the idea that art had to manifest itself more directly in society. Along with his new Zurich friends, Ball opened the Cabaret Voltaire in February 1916. Ball chose the name “Voltaire” not by chance, but with a belief that Voltaire was the symbol for the beginning of a revolution (Voltaire had been indeed the precursor of a Revolution). In fact, fragments from Voltaire were read aloud on the first night of the Cabaret. In the first review of the cabaret, published in May 1916, Ball explained the intent of his protests:

“[The review] is intended to present to the public the activities and interests of the Cabaret, which has as its sole purpose to draw attention, across the barriers of war and nationalism, to the few independent spirits who live for other ideals.”

“Free Spirits”

Ball hints to one of Nietzsche’s famous terms, the “free spirit” (Freigeist). According to Nietzsche, the kernel of the “free spirit” resides in its relation to belief. As opposed to the “free spirit”, the “fettered spirit” is in a constant need for certitude and stability. By contrast, the “free spirit” is defined by its independence and its capacity to detach itself from the authority of traditional values and also by its ability to question these values. Therefore, in Nietzsche’s view, the “free spirit” is always capable of living with values different or even opposite to the values put into question:

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13 Hugo Ball, op. cit., 19-20.
14 Hugo Ball, op.cit., 22.
“Once a human being arrives at the basic conviction that he must be commanded, he
becomes ‘a believer’; conversely, one could conceive of a delight and power of self-
determination, a freedom of the will, in which the spirit takes leave of all faith and every wish
for certainty, practised as it is in maintaining itself on light ropes and possibilities and dancing
even beside abysses. Such a spirit would be a free spirit par excellence.”

When speaking of “independent spirits” in his manifesto, Ball is especially alluding to
another meaning of this term: Nietzsche’s definition of the “free spirit” as “the good
European”, an expression which is sometimes interpreted as a political suggestion. In
reality, Nietzsche spoke of a detachment from any political partisanship when he used
the term “the good European”. In his notebooks, he used the term “supranational”
when he spoke of the “good European”. He also defined “good European” as
“vagabond, stateless, voyageur”. Also, Nietzsche uses “free spirit” when referring to the
“legislator”, or to the creator of new values.

These different meanings of the “free spirit” are all alluded to in Ball’s program-

It is also worth mentioning that the first edition of Nietzsche’s Human All too
Human (subtitled A Book for Free Spirits), issued in 1878, was dedicated to Voltaire,
marking Nietzsche’s shift from Romanticism and the break-up with Wagner. The “free
spirit”, which first appeared in its mature form in Human All Too Human, was an heir of
the Enlightenment, and the actor of an uncompromising, sober philosophical
undertaking of examining the possibility of a “higher humanity” in the absence of any
transcendent meaning.

Nevertheless, in Nietzsche’s opinion, the “free spirit” is still connected, although
not observably, to its backgrounds, the Romantic model of a spiritual community
created by intellectuals. As Olivier Ponton has shown, Nietzsche’s “free spirit”,
appearing in the subtitle of his Human, All to Human of 1878, is closely connected to
one of Nietzsche’s personal experience from the summer of 1876, when, disillusioned
with Wagner’s Bayreuth, he joined some of his closest friends, Malwida von Meysenbug,
Paul Rée and Albert Brenner, in Sorrento, for a communal experience of “mutual
learning” (gegenseitiges Lernen) and “friendly living together” (freundschaftliches
Zusammenleben). Actually, it was Malwida who came out with this idea of an
educational venture, a venture which Nietzsche baptized as “a kind of monastery for
free spirits” (eine Art Kloster für freie Geister) in a letter to Reinhart von Seydlitz. In the
same letter, Nietzsche confessed that this project could still be a path to creating a real
“school for educators”, where the educators would educate themselves. He also

206. See also Human, All Too Human, I, § 225: “He is called a free spirit who thinks differently from what,
on the basis of origin, environment, his class and profession, or on the basis of the dominant views of the
age, would have been expected of him. He is the exception, the fettered spirits are the rule (...)”, in:
19 See Richard Schacht’s Introduction to Nietzsche’s Human, All Too Human (Cambridge, Cambridge UP,
1996), vii-xxiii.
20 See: Olivier Ponton, Nietzsche - Philosophie de la légèreté, Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 2007, esp. 254-
316.
21 Cf. Olivier Ponton, op. cit., 263.
named this venture a “modern monastery, an ideal colony, a free university” in a letter to his sister, dated January 20, 1877. Nietzsche’s adherence to this project is also very close to his earlier intellectual preoccupations with Greek culture and with the foundation of a new educational model, a contemplative way of life based not on “learning from”, but on “self-learning”. It is the same educational impetus revealed by the expression “Be your self!”,[22] which appears as a kind of motto in his early Schopenhauer as Educator. In Nietzsche’s view, this is the moment where, paradoxically, the “free spirit” can be your “educator”. Because every man has an intrinsic nature that is basically individual, irreducible, therefore uneducable,[22] the “free spirit” cannot be the educator per se. The “free spirit” as an educator acts more as a “liberator”. The only real education is a self-education, but the “free spirit” can set the example[23]. And the only way this education, i.e. “liberation” becomes possible is through culture. “Culture is liberation” declares Nietzsche in a famous fragment; therefore, culture is education and the only possible way for the self-emancipation of man.[24]

Surely, the figure of the “free spirit” is not a real, but a utopian response[25] to a crisis of modern European culture, a crisis that Nietzsche identifies, lucidly however, with an “atomistic chaos”. He perceives this “chaos” as a result of the dissolution of a higher form of authority into individual forces. This dissolution is largely related to a long process of weakening of religious authority that first began with the advent of Christianity. Nietzsche perceives the modern political authority of the state as an heir to the former spiritual authority of the Church. But he also witnesses his contemporary world, which, in his view, is indisputably a world made not for the state, but for the individual. To Nietzsche, this aspect has its dangers as well as its opportunities. A world

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[22] Friedrich Nietzsche, Untimely Meditations, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1997, 127: “In his heart every man knows quite well that, being unique, he will be in the world only once and that no imaginable chance will for a second time gather together into a unity so strangely variegated an assortment as he is (...). The man who does not wish to belong to the mass needs only to cease taking himself easily; let him follow his conscience, which calls to him: ‘Be your self! All you are now doing, thinking, desiring, is not you yourself.’”

[23] Friedrich Nietzsche, Untimely Meditations, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1997, 129: “Your true educators and formative teachers reveal to you that the true, original meaning and basic stuff of your nature is something completely incapable of being educated or formed and is in any case something difficult of access, bound and paralysed; your educators can be only your liberators”.

[24] Ibid., 130: “And that is the secret of all culture: it does not provide artificial limbs, wax noses or spectacles that can provide these things is, rather, only sham education. Culture is liberation, the removal of all the weeds, rubble and vermin that want to attack the tender buds of the plant, an outstreaming of light and warmth, the gentle rustling of nocturnal rain, it is imitation and worship of nature where nature is in her motherly and merciful mood, it is the perfecting of nature when it deflects her cruel and merciless assaults and turns them to good, and when it draws a veil over the expressions of nature’s step-motherly mood and her sad lack of understanding.”

[25] See the Preface of the Human, All Too Human, written ten years after the first publication of his work, where Nietzsche recognizes the advent of the “free spirit” as an event to come and as a sign of hope for a future Europe: “Thus when I needed to I once also invented for myself the ‘free spirits’ to whom this melancholy-valiant book with the title Human, All to Human is dedicated: ‘free spirits’ of this kind do not exist, did not exist (...) That free spirits of this kind could one day exist, that our Europe will have such active and audacious fellows among its sons of tomorrow and the next day, physically present and palpable and not, as in my case, merely phantoms and hermit’s phantasmagoria: I should wish to be the last to doubt it.” Friedrich Nietzsche, Human, All Too Human, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1996, 6.
made for the individual urges chaos, dissolution, as well as hope. The individual, as the most significant element of modern times, foregrounds the opportunity for an “atomistic revolution”, for a renewal of the ideal or the “image” of man. Here, the term “revolution” does not, in any way, refer to a political change, but should be interpreted both as destruction of previous decadent ideals of “humanity” and as a renewal, as a rebirth of a more dignified “image of man”:

“We live in the age of atoms, of atomistic chaos. (...) The revolution is absolutely unavoidable, and it will be the atomistic revolution: but what are the smallest indivisible basic constituents of human society? It is incontestable that the spirit of humanity is almost in greater danger during the approach of such eras than it is when they and the chaotic turmoil they bring with them have actually arrived: the anxiety of waiting and the greedy exploitation of every minute brings forth all the cowardice and the self-seeking drives of the soul, while the actual emergency, and especially a great universal emergency, usually improves men and makes them more warm-hearted. Who is there then, amid these dangers of our era, to guard and champion humanity, the inviolable sacred treasure gradually accumulated by the most various races? Who will set up the image of man when all men feel in themselves only the self-seeking worm and currish fear and have thus declined from that image to the level of the animals or even of automata?”

This view about the persistence of a major crisis of modern civilization and about the necessity of a spiritual revolution is thoroughly consistent with Ball’s concerns with the emergence of a cultural renewal. The “liberation” and “education” are current themes in Ball’s writings. As early as 1909, as student in Munich, Ball initiated a thesis on Nietzsche with the title Nietzsche in Basel. Eine Streitschrift, where he saw Nietzsche as a Kulturreformator of Germany. Here he criticized the common views about Nietzsche’s vocational philological career and about his philosophical discipleship of Schopenhauer, stressing more his vocation towards “culture” in general and his lifetime as Kulturdenker: “culture as his mission, his task, his muse and his life goal” (die Kultur als seine Aufgabe, sein Beruf, seine Muse und Lebensbestimmung). In this writing, Ball shows a very intimate knowledge of Nietzsche’s life and works. He was also very aware of Nietzsche’s solution concerning the utopian renewal of a modern, “higher” image of man, through a new kind of art, an art that could be, by Nietzsche’s definition, more “human, all too human”, more concerned with man as such:

“Artists alone hate this sluggish promenading in borrowed fashions and appropriated opinions and they reveal everyone’s secret bad conscience, the law that every man is a unique miracle; they dare to show us man as he is, uniquely himself to every last movement of his

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26 See Friedrich Nietzsche, Untimely Meditations (III.4): “How should a political innovation suffice to turn men once and for all into contented inhabitants of the earth? “ (quoted above).
muscles, more, that in being thus strictly consistent in uniqueness he is beautiful, and worth regarding, and in no way tedious”

It is obvious that this form of cultural anarchism transformed anarchism as a political doctrine into a spiritual (geistig) anarchism. We see this “cultural” anarchism as permeating Ball’s writings after 1917. To the German historian Wolf Lepenies, this remained a special feature of the German notion of “culture,” which has always been very carefully separated from German politics. Lepenies does support the idea that intellectual debate, representing “culture,” should not be cast away from the realm of political deliberation. He contends that from Herder’s notion of “cultural nation” onwards, almost every German intellectual sought to perceive “culture” as a “noble substitute” for “politics.” Moreover, he says, the German intellectuals always exhibited not only a propensity to separate culture from politics but also an indifference to politics, but also an “urge to solve a political problem in the field of culture”. That is why Hugo Ball’s “utopia” is a cultural utopia which constantly exhibits social and political aspirations towards “emancipation,” “liberation,” “education,” etc. but never seeks to relate these goals to particular political actions. This inclination towards separating “culture” from “politics” explains why only the “few”, the “free spirits”, or the ones which express themselves solely as “individuals” are capable of assuming the difficult task of “liberation.”

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29 Friedrich Nietzsche, Untimely Meditations (fragment quoted above). See also a posthumous fragment of Nietzsche from 1883-1888; “Fragm. 18 (1883-1888). The most universal sign of the modern age: man has lost dignity in his own eyes to an incredible extent. For a long time the center and tragic hero of existence in general; then at least intent on proving himself closely related to the decisive and essentially valuable side of existence – like all metaphysicians who wish to cling to the dignity of man, with their faith that moral values are cardinal values. Those who have abandoned God cling much more firmly to the faith in morality” Friedrich Nietzsche, The Will to Power, New York, Vintage Books, 1968, 16.


31 Wolf Lepenies, op.cit., p. 205.
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