GADJI BERI BIMBA

The Problem of Abstraction in Poetry

Stephen Scobie

I dreamed I saw Hugo Ball
the night was cold I couldn't even call
his name though I tried
so I hung my head and cried

I dreamed I saw Hugo Ball
and he looked fine he stood tall
but he lived in a world of pain
I never saw Hugo again

bp Nichol

ZURICH, 1916: a city at peace in a world at war; a city of exiles, of refugees, of revolutionaries both artistic and political.[1] On the Spiegelgasse, Alley of Mirrors, a narrow street climbing up from the banks of the river Limmat, Lenin sits waiting for his closed train, for his moment in history. And just down the street, obliquely across the Alley of Mirrors, in an emblematic juxtaposition which has delighted writers and historians,[2] is a cafe in which Lenin occasionally eats, and which also houses the Cabaret Voltaire, the birthplace of Dada. In Switzerland, the linguistic crossroads of central Europe, there came together Jean or Hans Arp, sculptor and poet, from Strasbourg; Tristan Tzara, writer, from Bucharest; and Hugo Ball, dramaturge and religious visionary, from the Rhineland Palatinate of Germany. At a time when the nationalist ideals of European high culture had produced the institutionalized insanity of trench warfare, Dada proclaimed the end of that high culture. It promoted the cult of the irrational, the chance, the spontaneous: in the various possible (and later fiercely debated) origins of its name, "Dada" was a child's rocking-horse, the affirmation of the Russian "yes," the tail of a sacred cow, a repetition of the initials of Dionysius the Areopagite, or merely nonsense syllables. In place of art, Dada promised anti-art, and in doing so fell into the inevitable paradox of producing art again, such as the lovely, chance-generated drawings of Arp, or the oddly haunting and compelling poems of Hugo Ball.

On June 23, 1916, Ball wrote in his diary, "I have invented a new genre of poems, 'Verse ohne Worte' [poems without words] or 'Lautgedichte' [sound

poems]."[3] Ball's claim to have "invented" this form of experimentation may well be challenged, and the date is also in dispute, but the name he used for it — sound poetry — has (despite certain theoretical inadequacies) persisted to this day. On that evening, the diary continues,

> I gave a reading of the first one of these poems. . . . I had made myself a special costume for it. My legs were in a cylinder of shiny blue cardboard, which came up to my hips so that I looked like an obelisk. Over it I wore a huge coat collar cut out of cardboard, scarlet inside and gold outside. It was fastened at the neck in such a way that I could give the impression of winglike movement by raising and lowering my elbows. I also wore a high, blue-and-white-striped witch doctor's hat.
>
> On all three sides of the stage I had set up music stands facing the audience, and I put my red-pencilled manuscript on them; I officiated at one stand or the other. . . . I could not walk inside the cylinder so I was carried onto the stage in the dark and began slowly and solemnly:
>
> gadji beri bimba
> glandridi lauli lonni cadori
> gadjama bim beri glassala
> glandridi glassala tuffm i zimbrabim
> blassa galassasa tuffm i zimbrabim. . . .[4]

Ball, who was later to retreat from this kind of experimentation into a both literally and metaphorically Byzantine mysticism, never developed a fully articulated theory for sound poetry.[5] His remarks are scattered through his diary, *Flight Out Of Time*, whose entries he often reworked and revised before publication. On the day after his performance at the Cabaret Voltaire, he wrote, "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."[6] And the following year, on March 5, 1917, he concluded, "The next step is for poetry to discard language as painting has discarded the object, and for similar reasons."[7]

Sixty years later, in 1978, the Dutch sound poet Greta Monach repeated the same simple faith:

> Familiarity with music from an early age led me to think in terms of abstract art.
>
> Given the fact that, after music, the visual arts also emancipated from the figurative into the abstract, it seems a matter of course to me to follow this example in poetry.[8]

It is not, however, "a matter of course." I would call these two statements — so strikingly similar, despite the sixty years of experience and experimentation between them — simplistic, even naive, precisely because they propose, as easy and obvious assumptions, that there is a direct parallel between the history of painting and the possible history of literature, and that abstract poetry is both possible and desirable. Not that these propositions are necessarily invalid: but

they cannot be made as assumptions, they have to be argued. It is my purpose in this essay to suggest some lines which that argument might follow.

It should be clear that, by "abstract poetry," I do not mean simply poetry which is *about* abstract ideas, or which uses abstract vocabulary, like, for example, Eliot's "Burnt Norton": "Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future," etc. Rather, I mean abstraction at the deeper levels of poetic structure, syntax, and semantics. But it will be useful, before going any further, to clarify the various senses in which the word "abstract" is used, and in doing so I am greatly indebted to a book by Harold Osborne entitled *Abstraction and Artifice in Twentieth-Century Art*. Osborne speaks of the "Constant misunderstandings and confusion [which] occur, even among artists themselves, owing to failure to grasp the difference between . . . two uses of 'abstract.' "[9] The first use, which Osborne classifies as "Semantic Abstraction," derives from the fact that "Both in philosophical and in everyday language 'to abstract' means to withdraw or separate, particularly to withdraw attention from something or from some aspect of a thing." Thus,

> a work of figurative or representational art, i.e. one which . . . transmits information about some segment of the visible world outside itself, is said to be more or less abstract according as the information it transmits is less or more complete. In this sense abstraction is equivalent to incomplete specification. . . . Abstraction in this sense is a matter of degree and the term has no relevance or application outside the sphere of representational art. It is a factor of the relation between a work of art and that which the work represents.[10]

Under this heading of Semantic Abstraction, Osborne is able to discuss such diverse schools of painting as German Expressionism, Neo-Impressionism, Cubism, and Futurism.

"But," Osborne continues,

> "abstract" is also commonly employed as a general descriptive term denoting all the many kinds of art production which do not transmit, or purport to transmit, information about anything in the world apart from themselves. Other terms that have been used are: "non-representational," "non-figurative," "non-objective," "non-iconic." "Abstract" is the term which has obtained the widest currency although it is perhaps the least appropriate of all both linguistically and because of its established use in a different sense within the sphere of representational art. There are many types of pictures and sculptures within the wide spectrum of twentieth-century art which are not pictures or sculptures *of* anything at all; they are artefacts made up from non-iconic elements fashioned into non-iconic structures. These works are not more "abstract" or less "abstract." There *is* no relation between the work and something represented because the work represents nothing apart from what it is.[11]

Under this second heading, "Non-Iconic Abstraction," Osborne discusses the work of such painters as Kandinsky, Malevich, and Mondrian, and such general movements as Suprematism, Constructivism, and Abstract Expressionism.

It is obviously in this second, non-iconic sense that Hugo Ball and Greta Monach intend the notion of "abstract poetry," and many of the rhetorical manifestoes of sound poetry have postulated this kind of "abstraction" as an ideal. At the same time, there is a large body of experimental work which fits into the loosely defined area for which the term "sound poetry" is a generally accepted, if not entirely accurate label, but which is not "abstract" at all, in the non-iconic sense. It may, however, be possible to see this writing as "abstract" in Osborne's *first* sense, especially when we consider the potential of that suggestive phrase, "incomplete specification." So another purpose of my essay is to attempt an application of Osborne's terminology to the whole field of sound poetry.

FIRST, HOWEVER, I HAVE TO CONSIDER the parallel to painting suggested by both Ball and Monach. They pointed towards painting because it was the clearest example (or even the *only* example) of an art form which had actually made the transition from a representational to a non-representational discourse. The painters, in turn, had sought their inspiration in music,[12] whose ideal self-reflexive containment had been described, by Schopenhauer and by Walter Pater, as the "condition" towards which all art "aspires." Kandinsky, in *On the Spiritual in Art*, speaks of the "envy" with which artists in other media regard music, "the art which employs its resources, not in order to represent natural appearances, but as a means of expressing the inner life of the artist."[13] Music, of course, had always possessed this characteristic; in the space of approximately sixty years, from 1860 to 1920, painting, through a conscious and heroic struggle, acquired it.

In 1890, the French painter and critic Maurice Denis wrote: "We must remember that a painting, before it is a warhorse or a nude or any kind of anecdote, is a flat surface covered by colours arranged in a certain order."[14] This statement later came to be regarded as one of the first slogans of abstract art, and as a foundation for the dogma of "flatness" which Tom Wolfe burlesqued in *The Painted Word*,[15] but, strictly speaking, it refers not to non-iconic abstraction but to semantic abstraction, or to a balance between representation and self-reflexiveness.[16] The painting is not yet *only* surface and colours: these things may come *before* the nude or the anecdote, but they do not displace them. The Impressionists had "abstracted" light, in Osborne's sense, by withdrawing attention from other aspects of representation. In doing so, they brought the painting forward to that "flat surface" which Denis speaks of, thereby setting up an unresolved tension with the recessional "depth" of the image, which they still organized by traditional perspective. That tension in turn became the focal point for the semantic abstractions of Cézanne and the Cubists, who may push their visual analysis and

synthesis to the very border of the non-iconic, but who never cross it. Indeed, the theory of Cubism, as enunciated in its most dogmatic form by Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, is violently hostile to non-iconic abstraction: "Let us hope," wrote Kahnweiler in his definitive study of Juan Gris, "that all 'abstract painting' — which is neither painting nor abstract — will soon disappear. It has done a great deal of harm, for it has largely prevented Cubism being understood and has turned more than one painter and collector against real painting. It has absolutely nothing to do with real painting."[17] However, despite its own theory, Cubism became — historically — a stepping-stone on the path towards non-iconic abstraction. The great Cubist painters — Braque, Gris, Picasso — never painted any non-representational canvases; but other artists, like Delaunay and Malevich, passed through Cubism to the purified realms of, respectively, colour and form. By 1912 Delaunay was painting the brightly coloured discs of what Apollinaire christened Orphism; other painters, such as Kuka and Kandinsky, had achieved non-iconic abstraction through other, more idealist routes; and in 1914 the Russian Kasimir Malevich arrived in one giant stride at the minimal abstraction of form, painting a black square on a white ground.

It is an understandable error — though I think an error nevertheless — to see the history of modern painting as a steady progression (or, in Monach's word, "emancipation") towards the non-iconic, the minimal, the conceptual, zero. The imagery of the "avant-garde" supports this notion of an advancing line, and allows the dubious terminology of statements that Malevich was "ahead of" Braque, who had "gone farther than" Cézanne. Abstraction is not the sole goal of painting; and if there is a "line of advance," then it has been twisting back on itself ever since that black square. One major problem of contemporary painting is that there is no front line any more for the avant-garde to man. Everything is possible, from minimal conceptualism through to photo-realism, so no one style occupies a privileged position. The contemporary painter must move eclectically through the whole range of possibilities the last century has laid out before him — or else, as a *naif*, bypass them altogether.

Given, then, this exemplary progression, in painting, away from representation towards the many and various forms of abstraction, what possible consequences are there for poetry? There are indeed many significant parallels between literature and the visual arts, but they are parallels of analogy rather than of identity. During the twentieth century, there has been a continuous interchange between poets and painters, and there have been many attempts to translate the effects of one medium into another. Apollinaire, for instance, developed the principles of literary collage, in his poem, "Lundi, Rue Christine," as a direct result of the Cubist collages of Braque and Picasso; his original title for the volume *Calligrammes* was *Moi Aussi, Je Suis Peintre*. But he was not a painter, just as Picasso was not a poet. The process of translation — whether from one language to

another, or from one code to another within the same language, or from one artistic medium to another — always involves change; whenever it clings too closely to the stylistic or structural features of the original, it fails; it succeeds only when it adapts to the conditions of the new medium. What Greta Monach calls the "emancipation from the figurative into the abstract" is a process which must be worked out, not in terms of painting, but in terms of literature: not in terms of shape, line, and colour, but in terms of language.

It is at this point, obviously, that the analogy between painting and literature becomes problematic, and that Hugo Ball's casual assumption that poetry can "discard language" stumbles upon the intractability of the medium. Can language in fact be rendered truly abstract, in either of Osborne's senses? A totally non-iconic art declares its own materials — sound, harmony, and rhythm in music; shape, line, and colour in painting — to be sufficient, without any need to support themselves by external reference, or to justify themselves in terms of their fidelity to some preconceived standard of "the real." Music — excluding for the moment such mixed media as opera and song — may indeed evoke emotions, may "express this emotional substratum which exists, at times, beneath our ideas,"[18] but it does not refer directly to objects, or concepts, or fictional worlds. The note B-flat does not signify anything except itself, and its place in relation to a series of other notes: in this it is quite different from the word "guitar," or from the curved line, however abstracted or formalised, which signifies "guitar" in many Cubist paintings. That line, in turn, is adaptable: while it may be made to signify a guitar, or a mountain, it may also be made to signify nothing but itself, or its place in relation to a composition of other lines. A word, however, is always significant. The word "guitar" must always direct the listener — provided, of course, that the listener speaks English — to the mental image or concept of a wooden stringed instrument; it can never be construed purely as an arbitrary composition of the *g*, *t* and *r* consonant sounds with the vowels *i* and *a*. Language is inherently referential. As a medium, it resists abstraction much more strongly than painting did: the difference is not simply one of degree, but of kind.[19]

IF, THEN, WE ARE TO TALK AT ALL about an "abstract poetry" — a poetry, that is, that abstracts not merely at the level of vocabulary but at the level of structure — we must look at techniques whereby the inherent referentiality of language may be circumvented or subverted. How can this be done? If the word is to be retained as a compositional unit, then it must be placed in a context which will drastically qualify, undercut, or cancel altogether its function as signifier: this will lead the writer towards what Bruce Andrews has called "an experimentation of diminished or obliterated reference,"[20] or, more simply, to Osborne's "incom-

plete specification," semantic abstraction. If the word is *not* retained, the poet moves to non-iconic abstraction, and must work with sub-vocal elements or speech: individual letter-sounds, phonemes, morphemes, or the whole range of pre-verbal vocalization: grunts, groans, yells, whistles, passionate gurgling, heavy breathing.

The kind of context in which word-meaning may be cancelled is simply illustrated by Richard Kostelanetz in terms of a tongue-twister:

> If a Hottentot taught a Hottentot tot to talk 'ere the tot could totter, ought the Hottentot to be taught to say ought or naught or what ought to be taught 'er?

Kostelanetz comments:

> The subject of this ditty is clearly neither Hottentots nor pedagogy but the related sounds of "ot" and "ought," and what holds this series or words together is not the thought or the syntax but those two repeated sounds.[21]

The form cancels the content: the words are dis-contented, reduced to patterns of sound. This principle can be applied in a multitude of ways: through chant, through repetition, through simultaneous performance by several voices impeding the understanding of any single voice, and through all the technical devices of tape manipulation such as multi-tracking and phase distortion. Ernest Robson describes how a writer

> may destroy contextual meaning with such excessive repetition that attention to grammar or meaning is eliminated by exhaustion of all its information. Once this elimination has occurred the residual messages are acoustic patterns of speech. Then by default no other information remains but sounds, sounds, sounds.[22]

The technique of simultaneous readings was certainly used at the Cabaret Voltaire. Nicholas Zurbrugg comments that

> The Dada poets manifest the two main tendencies of all twentieth-century creativity — the impulse towards abstraction and the impulse towards expressive simultaneity. While the impulse towards abstraction reduced language to elementary sounds (just as abstract art reduced the subject-matter of painting to non-figurative, elementary forms), the impulse towards simultaneity attempted to communicate several sonic statements at the same time (just as the collages and montages of the Dada artists condensed several visual statements by juxtaposing and superimposing images in one composite message).[23]

Ball himself may have picked up the notion of this use of repetition from the painter whom he most admired, Wassily Kandinsky. John Elderfield, in his Introduction to the translated edition of Ball's diary, notes that

> In ... *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Kandinsky makes only a brief mention of literature, but it is a very significant one. Just as images are the outward containers of spiritual truths, he writes, so words have two functions: to denote an object or notion, and to reflect an "inner sound" ("*innerer Klang*"). The inner

> sounds of words are dependent upon the words' denotive context — but the poet's task is to manipulate his material so as to efface this outer meaning, or at least to permit other meanings to emerge in "vibrations" that will affect the audience on a spiritual level. Repetition of a word can "bring out unsuspected spiritual properties . . . [and] deprives the word of its external reference. Similarly, the symbolic reference of a designated object tends to be forgotten and only the sound is retained. We hear this pure sound . . . [which] exercises a direct impression on the soul."[24]

The mystical tone here would certainly appeal to Ball. Brian Henderson, in his very detailed and perceptive account, "Radical Poetics," plays particular stress on the idea of sound poetry as an attempt to recover an original Adamic language. "Dada's dismantling of the word," he writes, "was a process that was to release the hidden energies of it. . . . This dismantling of the word for the Word is Hermetic, and would not only be an unmasking, but a revolutionary spiritual act."[25] Theorists of non-iconic abstraction, whether in poetry or in the visual arts, return frequently to such appeals to a mystical ground or justification. Religious chants have long used repetition as a means of occupying and distracting the foreground of consciousness in order to facilitate the unconscious mind's access to a state of meditation. Ball himself noted that, while performing at the Cabaret Voltaire, "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."[26]

There are, obviously, infinite gradations available to the writer/performer/composer, depending on the degree of intelligibility the piece allows, between semantic and non-iconic abstraction. The American musician Steve Reich has created a brilliant piece of what I would call sound poetry (though he presumably calls it music), whose sole acoustic material consists of a few words on tape. Reich describes the process of composition:

> The voice is that of Daniel Hamm, then nineteen, describing a beating he took in the Harlem 28th precinct. The police were about to take the boys out to be "cleaned up" and were only taking those that were visibly bleeding. Since Hamm had no actual open bleeding, he proceeded to squeeze open a bruise on his leg so that he would be taken to the hospital — "I had to, like, open the bruise up and let some of the bruise blood come out to show them."
>
> The phrase "come out to show them" was recorded on both channels, first in unison and then with channel 2 slowly beginning to move ahead. As the phase begins to shift a gradually increasing reverberation is heard which slowly passes into a sort of canon or round. Eventually the two voices divide into four and then into eight.[27]

The piece thus moves from a completely intelligible phrase, isolated from its context — in Osborne's term, given "incomplete specification" — to purely abstract or musical noise, in which no linguistic element can any longer be de-

tected. Apart from its intrinsic fascination as a compelling and hypnotic work, "Come Out" thus illustrates the range and the limits of sound poetry.

Repetition, however, need not always be used as a means of cancelling surface meaning, but rather of insisting on it. bpNichol's "You are city hall my people" uses its emphatic repetitions as a means of enforcing a very direct statement, which is clearly and syntactically *about* civic politics. The work of Gertrude Stein, though it attenuates meaning to a precarious edge by its insistent and convoluted repetitions, never cancels it entirely. I would prefer to argue that Stein's work is "Cubist," bearing in mind that Osborne includes Cubism in his category of semantic abstraction. Again the notion of "incomplete specification" would come in very handy, especially in relation to those works of Stein which correspond most closely to the "synthetic" stage of Cubism, namely, her later "Portraits," and the "still lives" of *Tender Buttons*. But that is a whole different paper.

Another technique for undercutting the meanings of words is to arrange them, not in terms of their syntactic or semantic relations, but at random, using chance techniques to generate the text. Tristan Tzara, in 1924, gave his "recipe" for a Dada poem:

> Take a newspaper.
> Take a pair of scissors.
> Choose in the newspaper an article which is the same length as you wish to make your poem.
> Cut out the article.
> Then carefully cut out the words which make up this article, and put them in a bag.
> Shake gently.
> Then take out each scrap of paper, one after the other.
> Copy them out conscientiously in the order in which they came out of the bag.
> The poem will resemble you.[28]

And, indeed, it usually does. One of the theoretical advantages of chance structures is that they are supposed to be impersonal; they free the artist from the compulsions of self-expression, and liberate his imagination to operate in areas he would otherwise never have access to. While this is true to a certain extent, an artist's personal style is too fundamental and pervasive to be entirely denied or disguised, even in chance-generated structures. Arp's drawings, for instance, determined by the positions in which dropped scraps of paper fell to the floor, are absolutely identifiable as Arp's work. The same is true, as Tzara suggests, in poetry.

Brian Henderson argues for a stricter conception of chance as producing "the disappearance of the self" or "a kind of pure detachment of being."[29] In doing so, he aligns himself with Steve McCaffery in the espousal of a Derridean sense of the primacy of *writing*, which questions the metaphysics of presence and the

location of value in the authenticity of an authorial *voice*. The problem is that a great deal of sound poetry depends, absolutely, on the authenticity of voice. While I am intrigued by the Derridean focus on writing, and recognize the kind of autonomy that a text can (or indeed must) take on, I am still reluctant to abandon the notion that the writer, when faced by the infinite range of possibilities which chance-generated structures open up, still has a role to play — a role which depends upon the existential authenticity of the *choices* he makes in such a situation. "The poem will resemble *you*."

More complex chance structures have been worked out by recent writers, most notably by the American musician and composer, John Cage. Refining on Tzara's elementary methods, Cage has created and performed "treated texts" based on Thoreau's *Journals* and on James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. The Thoreau text — *Empty Words* — uses the *I Ching* to determine the chance selection of phrases, words, syllables and individual letters from the original, which are then performed by Cage in counterpoint to periods of silence whose frequency and duration are also chance-determined.[30] The result is minimal and austere, yet also — thanks largely to Cage's compelling performance and presence — totally fascinating.

The treatment of pre-existing texts in this way has sometimes been referred to as "homolinguistic translation," and has been practised in Canada by bpNichol, in *Translating Translating Apollinaire*, by Steve McCaffery, in *Intimate Distortions*, and by Douglas Barbour and myself, in *The Pirates of Pen's Chance*. Take, for instance, the following poem:

the incantatory paintings etc.
proposed it art
challenges Plato

order ordinary imitations
painting for bed

Plato's
Aristotle's

therefore useless
because

counters dangerous in
in advocates decorative
a outside
the upon Greek
through works is which off the form
even discarded reality

the conceive a the
content lucidly content

definition X[31]

This work, I submit, conforms exactly to the notion of "incomplete specification." Its text has been "abstracted from" another text — in this case, the opening page of Susan Sontag's famous essay, "Against Interpretation" — using the technique of reading only the left-hand margin, the first word of each line from a page of prose, where the line divisions have been produced by the accidents of a particular typesetting. The vocabulary is still, identifiably, Sontag's; but the information which would allow the reader to specify the message — i.e., the surrounding words and syntax — is incomplete. The result is a poem which hovers on the edges of meaning, without ever totally abandoning or embracing it.[32]

WE HAVE BEEN DEALING SO FAR with poems which use complete and identifiable words, albeit in contexts which severely limit or obscure their intelligibility; all such works fall, I would argue, into the category of semantic abstraction. Non-iconic abstraction is possible only when the word is abandoned altogether, and the performer moves into the area of non-verbal vocal sound. Here the problem of the inherent referentiality of words is by-passed by resorting to fragments of vocal sound at a pre- or sub-verbal level. Although the elements of language are still present, they have been abstracted from any semantic context, in the same way as non-iconic painting abstracts line, colour and shape from their representative functions. Vocal sound becomes self-sufficient and self-reflexive, as the total material and subject-matter of the composition.

Hugo Ball's attempts in this direction may now appear, in retrospect, quite tentative. Although his poems use invented "words," in no recognizable language, many of these words are in fact quite clearly onomatopoeic, and he gave most of his poem titles — "Clouds," "Elephant Caravan" — whose specifications of a referential subject-matter must inevitably affect and condition the response of the listener.[33]

Ball's fellow Dadaist, Raoul Hausmann, asked the obvious question:

> Why bother with words? . . . It is in this sense that I differ from Ball. His poems created new words . . . mine were based on letters, on something without the slightest possibility of offering meaningful language.[34]

From as early as 1918, Hausmann wrote poems at this level of non-iconic abstraction, which was taken to its highest pitch of sophistication by Kurt Schwitters in his great *Ur-Sonate*, begun in 1923, and the subsequent history of sound poetry affords many further examples. Among recent works, I would cite particularly Tom Johnson's "Secret Songs,"[35] which use rigidly limited series of letter-sounds to produce vocal patterns of astonishing energy and grace.

It is not the purpose of this essay to trace a complete history of sound poetry, or to enter into the many quarrels about who discovered what first, but it is worth

noting that the principles of non-iconic abstraction in poetry had in fact been fully stated and put into practice, at least three years before Hugo Ball's much better-mythologized performance at the Cabaret Voltaire, by the *zaum* poets of Russian Futurism.[36] *Zaum* (two syllables) is a contraction of "zaumnyj jazyk," which may best be translated as "transrational speech" — though later Soviet critics have tended to use it simply to mean nonsensical gibberish. The three leading poets associated with *zaum* are Velimir Khlebnikov, Alexei Kruchenykh, and Ilya Zdanevich, known as Iliazde. The first of these poets to achieve recognition in the West was Iliazde, whose *zaum* play, *Ledentu as a Beacon*, was published in Paris in 1923.

Kruchenykh was the most extreme of the three (so much so that it became far too easy for later critics to dismiss and forget him altogether); he had a genuine dislike for all previous literature, and Pushkin was his favourite target. He once declared that a randomly chosen laundry bill had better sound values than any of Pushkin's poetry; and he also claimed that the following *zaum* poem of his was "more Russian than all of Pushkin's poetry":[37]

dyr bul shchyl
ubeshshchur
skum
vy so bu
r l ez

This poem was first published in January 1913; later that year Kruchenykh published his manifesto *Declaration of the Word as Such*. He declared the bankruptcy of normal language, which keeps the word chained in subordination to its meaning. Vladimir Markov summarizes his argument: "Whereas artists of the past went through the idea to the word, futurists go through the word to direct knowledge.... The word is broader than its meaning (this statement later became Kruchenykh's favourite slogan)."[38]

Velimir Khlebnikov held a more restrained view of *zaum*, believing it could be used to create a "universal language of pure concepts clearly expressed by speech sounds." He developed an esoteric linguistic theory based on the beliefs that "the sound of a word is deeply related to its meaning" and that "the first consonant of a word root expresses a definite idea." For instance, he believed that the letter L expressed the idea of "a vertical movement that finally spreads across a surface."[39] By discovering these original meanings he hoped to create a new, universal, and (in contrast to Kruchenykh) meaningful *zaum*, which he idealistically believed would put an end to all misunderstanding, strife, and war between people.

By 1919, however, Khlebnikov had abandoned his ideas, and wrote that "A work written entirely with the New Word does not affect the consciousness. Ergo, its efforts are in vain."[40] Similarly, Tristan Tzara eventually wrote that sound

poetry "became ineffectual as soon as the poem was reduced to a succession of sounds."[41]

These reservations must, of course, be taken seriously. Just as many respectable critics, such as Kahnweiler (not only conservative cranks), have argued that abstract painting betrays the very function of art, to provide an imaginative representation of material reality, so many listeners to non-iconic abstract poetry have concluded that it betrays the essence of language, and that it performs, less effectively, the functions of music. Response to this argument would have to stress those aspects of sound poetry which, even in its most abstract manifestations, continue to link it to poetry. It is an art which is based on the *voice*: not the singing voice, but the speaking voice, the primary medium in which language exists. It is also an art which, in almost all of its forms, uses, or plays with, the notion of a *text*.

THE MOST SERIOUS ALTERNATIVE to the name "sound poetry" is the description "text-sound," which obviously places a strong emphasis on the presence of a text. That text may be a highly elaborate system of notation, or it may be a few squiggles on a scrap of paper; in the inventive work of the English poet Paula Claire, the notion of "text" has been expanded to allow the poet to "read" anything from the bark of a tree to the wall of a room. Most commonly, the text is simply the basis for improvisation. But the presence of a text, whatever its form, continues to imply a relationship to meaning. Even individual letter sounds — *b*, *k*, *u* — convey, if not meaning, at least an awareness of their potentiality to combine into meaning.

I suspect that it is this potentiality which ultimately distinguishes text-sound from music. Richard Kostelanetz, in what is certainly the most thoughtful attempt so far to define text-sound,[42] attempts to make that distinction by excluding from his definition any works which use specific pitch — but this definition, it seems to me, runs into trouble with various forms of chanting, such as Jerome Rothenberg's "Horse Songs," or the works of Bill Bissett. Text-sound, I would submit, always deals *not* with sound *per se* (music), but with sound *as an aspect of language*: and even when that aspect is isolated (abstracted) from all other aspects, isolated even from meaning, its *ground* is still in language, and its practitioners are called, properly, poets.

Sound poetry is a manifestation of one of the most important general tendencies of twentieth century art and culture: self-reflexiveness, the urge in all the arts to examine their own means of expression, to find their subject-matter in the exploration of their own ontology and structure. The question becomes not so much "what is language about?" as "what *is* language?"[43] Sound poetry is analytical,

and often highly theoretical, in its approach to language: but it combines this intellectualism with a delight in the physicality of language, and the performance pieces which derive from the theory are often very entertaining, at an immediate level, even for audiences who know nothing of the theory.

One major division within sound poetry is between those poets who use a wide array of tape technology — multi-tracking, editing, splicing together sound collages — and those who don't, who rely exclusively on the sounds which can be produced by the unaided human voice. This division shows up clearly in the theoretical justifications which the two groups offer for their work. Tape artists talk of the need to make aesthetic use of the latest developments in technology: not to use what is available, they say, is as stupid as attempting to ignore the typewriter or the printing press. Steve McCaffery summarizes the ideology as

> the transcendence of the limits of the human body. The tape machine, considered as an extension of human vocality allowed the poet to move beyond his own expressivity. The body is no longer the ultimate parameter, and voice becomes a point of departure rather than the point of arrival.[44]

In contrast, the non-technological sound poets tend to justify their work in deliberately primitivistic terms, speaking of it as a *return* to earlier, more basic poetic forms, such as the chant. The Swedish poet Sten Hanson writes:

> The sound poem appears to me as a homecoming for poetry, a return to its source close to the spoken word, the rhythm and atmosphere of language and body, their rites and sorcery, everything that centuries of written verse have replaced with metaphors and advanced constructions.[45]

And Jerome Rothenberg:

> what is involved here is the search for a primal ground: a desire to bypass a civilization that has become problematic & to return, briefly, often by proxy, to the origins of our humanity.[46]

Perhaps the most extravagant of all the manifesto-writers — he has a flair for these things — is Steve McCaffery. His 1970 statement, "For a poetry of blood," describes sound as "the poetry of direct emotional confrontation" and as "the extension of human biology into a context of challenge."[47] He believes that the energy released in sound performance

> marks an important stage in establishing the agencies for a general libidinal derepression. Sound poetry is much more than simply returning language to its own matter; it is an agency for desire production, for releasing energy flow, for securing the passage of libido in a multiplicity of flows out of the Logos.[48]

McCaffery argues against tape technology on the interesting grounds that tape is not performance but writing:

> For if we understand writing as what it is: the inscription of units of meaning within a framed space of retrievability and repeatability, then tape is none other

> than writing. To transcend writing, and the critical vocabulary built up around the logocentricity of writing, and to achieve a totally phonocentric art, must involve a renunciation of these two central canons of the written: repeatability and retrievability, a claiming of the transient, transitional, ephemeral, the intensity of the orgasm, the flow of energy through fissures, escape, the total burn, the finite calorie, loss, displacement, excess: the total range of the nomadic consciousness.[49]

In speaking for myself, both as a critic attempting to define the theory of sound poetry and as a poet attempting to perform it in practice, I would find much to agree with in McCaffery's comments, even if I would hesitate to phrase my ideas in such an ecstatic fashion. It is clear that the *energy* of live performance is a major component of the attraction of sound poetry, both for its performers and for its audience. Further, as McCaffery says, the flow of this energy comes "through fissures": through the tensions between sense and sound, between language as content and language as dis-contented, between semantic and non-iconic abstraction, and through the displacements between the decorum of the printed page and the unpredictability of live performance.

At the same time, I must acknowledge some uneasiness with the romanticism implicit in phrases like Hanson's "rites and sorcery," Rothenberg's "primal ground," and McCaffery's "nomadic consciousness."[50] Sound poetry may indeed reach into this area of our experience, but it is not confined to it: sound poetry may also be used in very controlled, intelligent, witty, classical ways.

To investigate the various forms of abstraction implicit in language may indeed lead one towards a mystical sense of Kandinsky's "inner sound," Ball's "alchemy of the word," or Henderson's "Adamic language"; but it may also induce a sense of the precariousness of language, the sheerly arbitrary nature of those configurations of sound on which the whole of our human intercourse depends. I would like to close this essay by describing an experiment of my own: like so much of the work I have been discussing, it was undertaken in a spirit as much whimsical as serious, and has produced, I think, a result as beautiful as it is arbitrary, as profound as it is meaningless. Prompted by my usual spirit of cheerful iconoclasm, I took one of the greatest speeches in Shakespearean tragedy — Macbeth's response to the news of his wife's death — and subjected it to a simple linguistic shift. I moved every consonant one forward in the alphabet: *c* became *d*, *t* became *v*. Generously, I left the vowels alone. The result is what I suppose Derrida might call a trace, or a deferral, of the Shakespearean original:

> Tje tjoukf jawe fief jeseagves;
> Vjese xoumf jawe ceep a vine gos tudj a xosf.
> Vonossox, apf vonossox, apf vonossox,
> Dseeqt ip vjit qevvy quade gson fay vo fay
> Vo vje matv tymmacme og sedosfef vine,
> Apf amm ous zetvesfayt jawe mihjvef goomt

Vje xay vo futvy feavj. Ouv, ouv, csieg dapfme!
Mige't cuv a xamliph tjafox, a qoos qmayes,
Vjav tvsuvt apf gsevt jit jous uqop vje tvahe,
Apf vjep it jeasf po nose; iv it a vame
Vomf cy ap ifiov, gumm og toupf apf gusy,
Tihpigyiph povjiph.

These final words — "Tihpigyiph povjiph" — do indeed form a sequence of abstract sounds "signifying nothing." Or, do they?

NOTES

[1] This essay is a re-working of "Realism and Its Discontents," a lecture presented to the NeWest Institute's conference on that topic, held in August 1980 at Strawberry Creek, Alberta. A slightly revised version was then published in *Aural Literature Criticism*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Precisely, 1981), pp. 39-48. A more substantially revised version was delivered as an Inaugural Professorial Lecture at the University of Victoria in March 1982.

[2] See George Rickey, *Constructivism: Origins and Evolution* (London: Studio Vista, 1967), p. 42, and also, of course, Tom Stoppard's play, *Travesties*.

[3] Hugo Ball, *Flight Out of Time: A Dada Diary*, ed. John Elderfield (New York: Viking, 1974), p. 70.

[4] *Flight Out of Time*, p. 70. This is the text as given in Ball's diary. The version published in his *Gesammelte Gedichte* (1963) is longer, and has many variants. For a detailed discussion of the poem, see Brian Henderson, "Radical Poetics" (Ph.D. Dissertation, York University, 1982), pp. 125-31.

[5] See Henderson, p. 119: "The recognition of the futility of actually achieving a natural language with a fallen tongue pushed Ball first, in the direction of the sound poem, and then straight on through and out the other side. For the sound poem, though it strove for the divine, was only a striving human image for it, with which the poet became dissatisfied."

[6] *Flight Out of Time*, p. 71.

[7] This quote, which is not included in Elderfield's edition of the diary, is given by Hans Richter, in *Dada: Art and Anti-Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1965), p. 41.

[8] Greta Monach, "Statements: dated the 16th of July 1978," in *Sound Poetry: A Catalogue*, ed. Steve McCaffery and bpNichol (Toronto: Underwhich Editions, 1978), p. 23.

[9] Harold Osborne, *Abstraction and Artifice in Twentieth-Century Art* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), p. 25. My own earlier versions of this essay suffer from such a confusion, and several of their arguments have been recast within the framework of Osborne's terminology.

[10] Osborne, pp. 25-26.

[11] Osborne, p. 26.

[12] See Peter Vergo, "Music and Abstract Painting: Kandinsky, Goethe and Schoenberg," in *Towards a New Art: essays on the background to abstract art 1910-20*, ed. Michael Compton (London: Tate Gallery, 1980), pp. 41-63.

[13] Quoted in Vergo, p. 41.

[14] Maurice Denis, "Définition du Neo-Traditionnisme," first published in *Art et critique*, August 1980; available in Maurice Denis, *Theories* (Paris: Hermann, 1964).

[15] Tom Wolfe, "The Painted Word," *Harper's* (April 1975).

[16] See Joseph Masheck, "The Carpet Paradigm: Critical Prolegomena to a Theory of Flatness," *Arts Magazine*, 51, No. 1 (September 1976), 93: "We should remember that what Denis actually said was that a picture is a plane with colour patches arranged in order *before* it is something else. That is far from saying that it could not also *be* something else; in fact, it implies that the picture *will be* something else."

[17] Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, *Juan Gris: His Life and Work* (New York: Abrams, n.d.), p. 170.

[18] Teodor de Wyzewa (1885), quoted in Vergo, p. 47.

[19] It is of course possible to argue, at a more complex philosophical level, that the referentiality of language is an illusion. Jacques Derrida, for instance, questions the metaphysics of inherent "presence," and sees the linguistic sign as a "trace." Such ideas are explored in Steve McCaffery's "The Death of the Subject," *Open Letter*, Third Series, No. 7 (Summer 1977), 61-67, and in Chapter IV of Brian Henderson's dissertation, "The Horsemen: Adamic Language and the Politics of the Referent." However, even if we grant these arguments on a theoretical level, we still have to deal, on a pragmatic level, with the concept of language as having referential value, and we still have to act *as if* that were not an illusion.

[20] Bruce Andrews, "Writing Social Work & Political Practice," in *Aural Literature Criticism*, p. 92.

[21] Richard Kostelanetz, "Text-Sound Art: a Survey," in *Text-Sound Texts*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: William Morrow, 1980), p. 14.

[22] Ernest Robson, "The Concept of Phonetic Music," in *Aural Literature Criticism*, p. 113.

[23] Nicholas Zurbrugg, "Regarding Recorded Literature," in *Aural Literature Criticism*, pp. 62-63.

[24] *Flight Out of Time*, pp. xxvi-xxvii.

[25] Henderson, p. 103. See also pp. 11-12, and Chapter IV, passim.

[26] *Flight Out of Time*, p. 71.

[27] Steve Reich, liner notes to "Come Out," on *New Sounds in Electronic Music*, Odyssey 32 16 0160.

[28] Tristan Tzara, *Sept Manifestes Dada* (Paris, 1963), p. 64.

[29] Henderson, pp. 79-80.

[30] John Cage, *Empty Words* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1979).

[31] Douglas Barbour and Stephen Scobie, *The Pirates of Pen's Chance* (Toronto: Coach House, 1981), p. 64.

[32] Cf. Steve McCaffery, "The Death of the Subject," pp. 63-64: "Language is material and primary and what's experienced is the tension and relationship of letters and lettristic clusters, simultaneously struggling towards, yet refusing to become, significations."

[33] See also Henderson, p. 127.

[34] Quoted in Zurbrugg, p. 63.

[35] Tom Johnson, "Secret Songs," in *Text-Sound Texts*, pp. 168-71.

[36] The material in the next few paragraphs is recapitulated from my earlier essay, "I Dreamed I Saw Hugo Ball: bpNichol, Dada and Sound Poetry," *Boundary 2*, 3, no. 1 (Fall 1974), 213-26.

[37] Quoted in Vladimir Markov, *Russian Futurism: a History* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1969), pp. 44, 130.

[38] Markov, p. 127.

[39] Markov, pp. 302-03.

[40] Quoted in Markov, p. 374.

[41] Quoted in Robert Motherwell, ed., *The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology* (New York: Wittenborn, 1951), p. 397.

[42] See *Text-Sound Texts*, p. 15: "The first exclusionary distinction then is that words that have intentional pitches, or melodies, are not text-sound art but *song*."

[43] See Henderson, p. 82: "Because of the multivalent manner in which radical poetics perceives the relation of word to world, the writer's function is to maximize the precipices, the bridgeless gorges, and the unfordable rivers, all the mysterious topology of syntax and language the reader must confront."

[44] *Sound Poetry: a Catalogue*, p. 10. In relation to this and the next quotation, I must acknowledge a certain irony in quoting McCaffery, who does not do a great deal of tape work, in support of tape, and Hanson, who is best known for his work in tape, against it.

[45] *Sound Poetry: a Catalogue*, p. 47.

[46] *Sound Poetry: a Catalogue*, p. 53.

[47] Steve McCaffery, "For a poetry of blood," manifesto issued in 1970, distributed by the author.

[48] *Sound Poetry: a Catalogue*, p. 72.

[49] *Sound Poetry: a Catalogue*, pp. 35-36.

[50] Henderson distinguishes between "primitivism" and "the truly primitive," and concludes that "Our attempts at returning to what we consider primitive are doomed to be parodies" (pp. 110-11).