
John Cage's Writings

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Most of John Cage's prose is cast in the form of lecture, diary and criticism, three genres particularly favored in American literature. Cage began an uninterrupted and successful lecturing career in 1927 with the earliest of his substantial pieces of writing, "Other People Think," an address imbued with Pan-American ideals which the fifteen-year-old Cage, representing Los Angeles High School, delivered at the Hollywood Bowl to win the Southern Oratorical Contest. The following year he graduated class valedictorian. In 1931, after his first trip to Europe, he returned to California and for a while supported himself by lecturing on modern painting and music to local housewives. In doing so, he was practicing a typically American genre, dating from the "Declaration of Independence," in which Thomas Jefferson expressed the belief that all men are endowed with the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Lecturing was given literary authority by Daniel Webster and Ralph Waldo Emerson; such eminent statesmen as Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Delano Roosevelt were masters of the art. American culture never suffered as did European culture from Jacob Burckhardt's indictment of rhetoric as a "monstrous aberration." This view remained current in Europe until the 1930s, when two factors effected a change: (1) logical positivism, which drew attention to the importance of studying how language is used, and (2) I.A. Richards's *Philosophy of Rhetoric*, which emphasized the need for a new art of discourse. Since then, considerable efforts were made in the United States towards teaching the art of lecturing in schools and universities.

In 1949, John Cage received an award of one thousand dollars from the National Academy of Arts and Letters, and wrote his "Lecture on Nothing" and "Lecture on Something," both reprinted in *Silence* (1961). In the foreword to this book John Cage explains how in writing those two fundamental lectures he made use of methods similar to those he used as a composer. "Lecture on Nothing," written in 1950 and published in *Incontri Musicali* only in August 1959, was actually an application of the musical techniques of the time to lecture writing. Its content was musical as much as philosophical, and expressed the idea that "a discussion is nothing more than entertainment." With this in mind, Cage prepared six answers for the question-answer period to follow the lecture regardless of the questions

that might be asked. In the afternote to the lecture he mentioned that the first time the lecture was given "there *were* six questions," but he tells us that in 1960, "when the speech was delivered for the second time, the audience got the point after two questions and, not wishing to be entertained, refrained from asking anything more" (1961:126). "Lecture on Something," which discusses Morton Feldman's music, was written in the same year, and also remained unpublished until 1959, when it appeared in *It Is*, edited by Philip Pavia. In its introductory note John Cage stated that "the very practice of music [. . .] is a celebration that we own nothing" (1961:128). Both lectures were written in the form of four columns to be read from left to right with blanks representing silences. Charles Olson, whose poetry influenced Cage to a great extent, observed that

it is an advantage of the typewriter that, due to its rigidity and its space precisions, it can, for a poet, indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspensions even of syllables, the juxtapositions even of parts of phrases, which he intends. For the first time the poet has the stave and bar a musician has had. For the first time he can, without the convention of rhyme and meter, record the listening he has done to his own speech and by that one act indicate how he would want any reader, silently or otherwise, to voice his work. It is time we picked the fruits of the experiments of cummings, Pound, Williams, each of whom has, after his way, already used the machine as a scoring to his composing, as a script to its vocalizations (quoted in Rosenthal 1967:146).

The Black Mountain school of poetry was the only movement that took seriously "the revolutionary formal theory advanced by Pound and contemporaries early in the century" and tried to "adapt it in the light of Williams's concern for the idiosyncratically American" (Rosenthal 1967: 191-192). But whether it is actually "the first time the poet has the stave and bar a musician has had" is a debatable question. In the best of his prose works *The Science of English Verse* (1880) Sidney Lanier had already treated the relationship of poetry to music, explaining a system of superimposed rhythms in verse. Although there is no evidence of John Cage showing an interest in Lanier's experiments, we know that he had "responded" (Kostelanetz 1978:138) early to the poetry of T.S. Eliot, who, ever since his four "Preludes," had shown a preoccupation with musical form which was to stay with him until he wrote the *Four Quartets* (1943), a work which some regard as his finest achievement. Although each of the four poems can stand on its own, together they seem to make up a single work, in which themes and images are developed in a musical manner and brought to a final resolution.

Another important influence on Cage's prose was the typographical nonconformity and experimentalism of Ezra Pound and e.e. cummings, evidenced in Cage's varied line lengths, split lines, extensive quotations, leaps from one subject matter to another, and extreme freedom of syntax and punctuation.

Cage's most significant direct contact with current poetry was probably through Charles Olson, who sees "art as process" (Olson 1966:46, 24), and whose aesthetics are naturalistic not in the sense of imitating nature, but in wanting art to be nature: "art does not seek to describe but to enact" (Olson

1958:97). Olson was educated at Wesleyan University, Yale and Harvard, where he taught from 1936 to 1939. From 1951 to 1956 he held the post of instructor and rector at Black Mountain College, North Carolina. Those were formative years for John Cage, who, on Black Mountain campus, conceived, directed and staged, along with a team of other artists, the first happening in the history of American theater. Charles Olson took part in the experiment, and his poems, together with those of the potter Mary Caroline Richards, were recited from the tops of ladders.

There is no indication that the collaboration between Charles Olson and John Cage started before that event at Black Mountain in 1952, but it is important to note that much of John Cage's writing during the fifties (not only "Lecture on Nothing" and "Lecture on Something," but also the "Juilliard Lecture" [1952] and, subsequently, "Where are We Going? and What Are We doing?" [1961]) is an application in prose writing of Charles Olson's observation on "the advantage of the typewriter." Furthermore, we find in John Cage's writing a personal note, characteristic of Charles Olson's poetry. Olson's disregard for incidental imperfections corresponds to Cage's tendency towards a sometimes unbearable slovenliness, marked by weak grammar in the manner of certain Americanisms, but functionally indefensible, as in so much writing of the Beat generation, from Jack Kerouac to William Burroughs.

Another possible "projectivist" influence on John Cage's attitude toward prose writing may have been Robert Creeley's statement that "form is never more than an extension of content," that "no one any longer denies the organic inseparability of form and content" and very few still conceive "any significant opposition between them" (quoted in Rosenthal 1967:140). As Rosenthal put it, the "projectivist movement has by its nature encouraged [...] new expressions of nonconforming thought and of observed psychological realities" (p. 192), and the most varied personalities and interests have come together under its influence.

These observations enable us to relate Cage's unusual prose to the experimental efforts of the Black Mountain school of poetry, in particular of its mentor, Charles Olson, and those writers who prepared the ground for the crop, sowing it with the seeds of their own experiments. Using typographic devices, John Cage aimed at allowing the public to *experience* what he had to say, rather than just *hear* it. Having been continually involved in a variety of activities, he tried to introduce the conventional methods of one activity, namely music, into one or more of the others, in this case writing. If the connection between music and poetry has always been obvious, that between music and prose is much less so. By making extensive use of typographic devices, blanks and other graphic signs, as in the second of his "Two Statements on Ives," John Cage linked his spontaneous phrases in sequences which are not the result of casualism, but of causality, having been obtained through elaborate and mechanical processes. John Cage's application of such processes to lecture writing is evident in his "Juilliard Lecture," which is divided into four parts, in which he applied processes of collage and fragmentation to texts written earlier on art and to some additional material. As in "Lecture on Nothing" and "Lecture on Something," the text is written in four columns, "to facilitate a

rhythmic reading and to measure the silences." But since the lecture must be read using the "rhythmic freedoms one uses in everyday speech" in order to avoid the artificial manner which might result from being "too strictly faithful to the position of the words on the page" (Cage 1967:95), another kind of artificiality is thus achieved.

In "Talk I" John Cage's lines are no longer printed in columns or rows, but "scattered" (Cage 1967:141) throughout the pages. The talk, "improvised" in September 1965, is one of the rare instances in which John Cage used collage techniques in a way slightly reminiscent of William Burroughs's experiments with the novel form; of the cubist collages, whose important offshoot was the fantastic object; and of the Dadaist assemblage, which opposed rationality and exalted the accidental, the spontaneous and the impulsive, giving free play to associations. Burroughs had learned from a fellow expatriate, Brion Gysin, to use a technique which led to what they termed "cut up," an art which demands a minimum of creative or critical endeavor. The writer simply takes a page with words on it, cuts or tears it up, and puts it together again, preferably with bits from other pages that might be expected to produce baffling or amusing semantic juxtapositions. Gysin himself had jumbled up choice extracts from works by Shakespeare, Eliot, Huxley and others on a tape recorder and published the results as a poem, called the *Song of Songs*. Burroughs favored the most popular parts of James Joyce (the end of *The Dead*, for instance), such Shakespearean passages as one might find in any anthology, a little Kafka, and a good many excerpts from other more or less literary writers. Aiming at originality, Burroughs also developed a novel-making process of his own, which he named "fold-in," involving cross-column reading and random word play. Cut-ups were already known in 1881 to the mathematician and logician, C.L. Dodgson (Lewis Carroll), who used his specialized knowledge to carry the art of nonsense to a peak:

For first you write a sentence,
And then you chop it small;
Then mix the bits, and sort them out
Just as they chance to fall:
The order of the phrases makes
No difference at all. [Carroll 1931:790]

The Dadaist Marcel Duchamp,¹ a close friend of Cage, took Lewis Carroll's suggestion, and using musical intervals instead of words wrote *Musical Erratum* (1913). Cut-ups even have a precedent in the work of a

1. Marcel Duchamp was a chess expert and taught John Cage the game. Regarding chance combinations in music, the American composer Henry Dixon Cowell, one of Cage's teachers with whom he has remained very close, wrote:

Various combinations of chance and choice, pre-established or improvised, are not without respectable musical precedent, in the tala and raga systems in India, and possibly, on a less serious plane, in the music of Mozart. Mozart is said to have composed a set of country dances in which dice are to be thrown to determine the order in which the measures are to appear (Cowell 1952, quoted in Kostelanetz 1978:99-100).

sixth-century grammarian, Vergilius Maro, who wrote a series of fifteen epitomae on the more unusual literary experiments. Number 13 is devoted to the "ars scissendi," the art of cutting up, and is in all important respects a fair description of what Burroughs does today. According to Maro, the ultimate here was achieved by one Gallungus, who chopped up a sentence until it began: "PPPP.PPP.RRR.RRR.LM.SSS." Burroughs's *Nova Express* is not quite as impenetrable as this, but as a folded-in composite of many writers living and dead, it remains Burroughs's most opaque and difficult text—a series of syntactic manipulations more than anything else.

By contrast, when John Cage uses anything in the way of a periodical or a newspaper he does so not in William Burroughs's sense, but in the sense of its content and its relevance to positive action. We find that the influence of the periodical or newspaper form is present more in the way Cage constructs his books than in the actual quotation. Their items, although chronologically arranged, may be read in any sequence, thus suggesting the idea of a magazine rather than a book. Marshall McLuhan laid out his *Mechanical Bride* (1951) in a similar way, perhaps having Joyce's experiment with a circular book in mind.

Cage's "Indeterminacy," a lecture written in late September, 1958 in Stockholm for delivery a week later at the Brussels Fair, was inspired by David Tudor's suggestion that he deliver a lecture composed of nothing but stories. Cage explained that the stories scattered throughout *Silence* play "the function that odd bits of information play at the ends of columns in a small-town newspaper." At the end of his introductory note to "Indeterminacy" Cage suggests that his stories "be read in the manner and in the situations that one reads newspapers—even the metropolitan ones—when he does so purposelessly: that is, jumping here and there and responding at the same time to environmental events and sounds" (p. 261). Since then John Cage has continued to write down stories, some concerning experiences, others recollected from reading in, for instance, Sri Ramakrishna or Zen literature. The ninety stories composing "Indeterminacy" were recorded on Folkways and are reprinted in *Silence*. In his oral delivery of this lecture John Cage tells one story a minute, regardless of its length, and explains in the introductory note:

The continuity of the stories as recorded was not planned. I simply made a list of all the stories I could think of and checked them off as I wrote them. Some that I remembered I was not able to write to my satisfaction, and so they were not used. My intention in putting the stories together in an unplanned way was to suggest that all things—stories, incidental sounds from the environment, and, by extension, beings—are related, and that this complexity is more evident when it is not oversimplified by an idea of relationship in one person's mind (p. 261).

Behind some of John Cage's writing lies a programmatic refusal of any theory of association of ideas such as "the sagacious Locke," so greatly admired by Laurence Sterne, proposed. In 1969 Cage told Richard Kostelanetz: "I [. . .] write these diaries as quickly as I can, and I notice it takes me a year to finish each one. I try to keep only those things that are of general use" (quoted in Kostelanetz 1978:168). When "Indeterminacy" was delivered in Brussels it consisted of only thirty stories, without

musical accompaniment, and mainly reflected Cage's involvement in Zen philosophy. As a matter of fact, all the lectures examined so far demonstrated Cage's interest in philosophy as applied to art.

A further striking example of the application of musical methods to writing is represented by "Where Are We Going? and What Are We Doing?" in which Cage made use of his *Cartridge Music* in order to compose the text. In his introductory note to this lecture John Cage explains that

The texts were written to be heard as four simultaneous lectures. But to print four lines of type simultaneously—that is, superimposed on one another—was a project unattractive in the present instance. The presentation here used has the effect of making the words legible—a dubious advantage [since] our experiences, gotten as they are all at once, pass beyond our understanding (1961:194-195).

The lecture was printed in a different typographical arrangement in *Ring des Arts*, Paris, in the summer of 1961, and recorded by C.F. Peters, New York, in the form of four single-track tapes. According to John Cage's instructions, the four lectures may be used independently,

in whole or in part—horizontally or vertically. The typed relation is not necessarily that of performance. Twenty-five lines may be read in 1 minute, 1¼ minutes, 1½ minutes, giving lectures roughly 37, 47, 57 minutes long respectively. Any other speech speed may be used (p. 194).

The conductor and composer overshadows the lecturer and prose writer: "a performance must be given by a single lecturer," who "may read live" any one of the lectures. The "live" reading may be superimposed on the recorded readings. Or the whole may be recorded and delivered mechanically. "Variations in amplitude may be made." Notwithstanding the overload of directions, the lecture is less concerned with music than with John Cage's own philosophy of art and is written in accordance with his understanding of the operations of nature. Its ultimate philosophical significance may be summed up as Cage's saying "yes to our presence together in Chaos." Although the meaning of the lecture is not easily understood, it is based on Cage's belief that

not all of our past, but the parts of it we are taught, lead us to believe that we are in the driver's seat. With respect to nature. And that if we are not, life is meaningless. Well, the grand thing about the human mind is that it can turn its own tables and see meaninglessness as ultimate meaning (p. 195).

It was natural that the habit of performing in front of audiences should lead John Cage to use the lecture as a means of expression. Along with lecturing, American literary figures have traditionally kept journals, and written for magazines and newspapers. Significantly enough, John Cage's own "Diary" was given several times as a lecture, first at Beloit College in Wisconsin, then, in June 1966, at the International Design Conference in Aspen, Colorado, before being reprinted in the 1967 spring issue of *Aspen Magazine*. At that particular stage of his work Cage seemed to be making a transition from lecture to diary as a more effective means of conveying his thoughts. Four more installments of the "Diary" appeared in *M* (1973)

which, like his other works, contains primarily prose. Here the lecture form has been abandoned in favor of a Cagean type of journal. Cage's "Diary" slights chronology, and is very loosely structured; it has no daily entries, but merely a sequence of numbered, brief, often truncated anecdotes and quotations, many on the subject of futurology and drawn mainly from Fuller's and Thoreau's works. These are interspersed with notes on John Cage's favorite hobbies: picking mushrooms and playing chess, the former being the only really individual activity of the sort generally found in conventional diaries. Cage's "Diary" actually contains more ideas than accounts of individual experiences, more book titles and quotations than people, more economics than emotion, all of which calls into question its classification as a diary at all. One runs into the same sort of difficulty when one attempts to classify, for instance, a work such as *Walden*. As John Cage himself put it, "Classification [. . .] ceases when it's no longer possible to establish oppositions" (1973:10), although a few pages later he admits that "we do what we do by means of contradiction" (p. 16). At its best, John Cage's "Diary" affords one enlightenment of the kind described in the Zen Buddhist proverb: "All things are one when you understand Zen and separate when you do not. All things are one when you misunderstand Zen and separate when you do." Whether John Cage's curious pictures and conundrums are solved or merely accepted, his ambiguities can be superseded and a synthesis made. It may well be that he was thinking of a new world of mass-media men, in which private experience – the main substance of every diary before his – is replaced by information drawn by mass media. Thus, by writing a "Diary" which anybody might have written and in which the ideas of others are presented as a large part of daily personal experience, John Cage turns himself into a representative mass-media man. About a century ago Walt Whitman had attempted to do the same thing with his long lists of objects and situations, somehow fulfilling the "Napoleonic" role which Emerson, speaking of *Representative Men* and recommending the study of nature in order to know oneself, had expected from his "brave Thoreau."

Much of John Cage's work is critical in content, or, at least critical in its intentions. In choosing this form Cage was again following an American trend. The poet Randall Jarrell once described the postwar era in American literature as the age of criticism. Indeed, many of the problems and issues which arose in postwar America seemed to some artists, intellectuals and literary men to be so urgent that they often stepped out of their conventional roles and dealt with them directly through social criticism. Paul Goodman, originally a novelist and a poet, became best known for his study of the young in America, *Growing Up Absurd*, and his other polemical and utopian writings. Marshall McLuhan and Norman O. Brown took the same direction and were among those writers who greatly influenced Cage. Another influence on Cage's utopian interests may be traced in the pessimistic vision of the future reflected in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, a consequence of Huxley's deep distrust of current trends in politics and applied science. Huxley's last major work, however, the utopian novel *Island* (1962), an antithesis of *Brave New World* and a summation of Huxley's thought, corresponds even better to the Cagean

mood. Like Cage, Huxley was drawn to Hindu philosophy and mysticism, and a number of works reflect his later interest in these fields, notably *The Perennial Philosophy* as well as his foreword to *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, one of John Cage's favorite books.

John Cage is one among many who turned away from an exclusive interest in art and literature towards social criticism, and one of the very few to do so in the field of music. His criticism is seldom in the form of essays; it is scattered through his lectures and writings. The reason for this, as hinted above, is that to John Cage the best criticism is no criticism, but doing one's work, for to him "Criticism's not the time to think," whereas we should "Think ahead of time" (1973:20). According to Cage, instead of spending time denouncing what someone else has done, critics should reply with works of their own, and he puts this belief into practice. Such an attitude towards criticism, however healthy in many respects, may well turn out to be devastating, resulting in a forward flight. As a matter of fact, while he increasingly questioned the professional function of the critic, he came to accept Marshall McLuhan's, Buckminster Fuller's and Norman O. Brown's "criticism" insofar as they gave him a "notion of what a critic really should be." Without dealing with overly restricted areas, their "criticism" showed connections where "we haven't dreamed there were any connections." They did so by creating works of their own, and therefore performed a new function whereby criticism turns into creation in the frame of a "new morality" (quoted in Kostelanetz 1978:30-31), where critics would have the task of putting together the chaotic separateness typical of the insight and work of the artist, who should never fool himself by making "connections" where there had never been "separateness" (Cage 1961:215).

John Cage's mechanical techniques bring about a swarm of intrusions which, although artistically relevant, are barriers to any reader. This is true particularly in his later prose, although there, Zen philosophy has been more or less forgotten in favor of active moral engagement. The spell is broken over and over again, as it were. Unwilling as he is to subordinate the freedom of his prose to any sort of formal expectation, the art of collage has suggested to him aesthetics of mixed modes by which he is on occasion guided. Another sort of intrusion are the allusions he makes to his family and friendships, as well as the autobiographical details concerning his private attitudes, all of which may be unknown to the reader. Like Ginsberg and other Beat writers, he brings in the names of his coterie and introduces data on different topics as though these names and data were items within a relevant context. Although his assumptions and understatements are at times far too facile, reading John Cage's writings may be very enjoyable, even when his prose becomes merely a running stream, thinking aloud as it runs, for it does so with a sort of charming broken rhythm where many interesting, although seldom developed, ideas find a place. At its best his prose is marked by the mere proximity of altogether different or even contrasting subject matters. It is then that John Cage's natural gift for quick and knowledgeable quotation, and for vivid and improvised imagery, as well as his spontaneous humor, are no longer constrained by the deliberate use of casual devices. But when his work

goes too far in this direction, it threatens to dwindle into a sort of heightened speech, and on the whole the result is likely to be far from the intentions. At its worst, his American colloquial simplicities, lulling one with their irregular beat, involve a slightly painful process aiming at the dissolution of the complexity of reality; his obtrusive tendency to call attention to the fact that he is writing becomes tedious. Many of these observations might well apply to much contemporary American literature, and in this respect, John Cage connects himself to the literary experimentation of Gertrude Stein, to the formal revolution of Ezra Pound, as well as to certain aspects of Ernest Hemingway's gear of colloquialisms and understatements, with its more or less conscious gusto for the idiosyncratically American.

II

John Cage started writing poetry and composing music in the early thirties, during his wanderings in Europe. At that time he showed a particular interest in Gerard Manley Hopkins's poems. In *Grace and Clarity* (1944) Cage wrote that "with all their departure from tradition, they enable the reader to breathe with them" (1961:91). Dealing with dance in the same article, he quoted Hopkins's friend Coventry Patmore, whose seminal study of *English Metrical Law* (1857/1879) was admired by Hopkins himself:

In the first specimens of versification, there seems to be a perpetual conflict between the law of the verse and the freedom of the language, and each is incessantly, though insignificantly, violated for the purpose of giving effect to the other. The best poet is not he whose verses are most easily scanned, and whose phraseology is the commonest in its materials, and the most direct in its arrangement; but rather he whose language combines the greatest imaginative accuracy with the most elaborate and sensible metrical organization, and who, in his verse, preserves everywhere the living sense of the metre, not so much by unvarying obedience to, as by innumerable small departures from its *modulus*. (quoted from Coventry Patmore, *Prefatory Study in English Metrical Law*, 1879, pp. 12-13) (1961:92).

It would be hard to say to what extent John Cage benefited from Patmore's remarks while writing his own poetry. As a matter of fact there seems to be some confusion about the Cagean border-line between prose and poetry, although it would seem that to Cage the difference between prose and poetry is a matter of form rather than of content. "Lecture on Nothing" is in John Cage's words a piece of poetry as well as a philosophical lecture: "I have nothing to say and I am saying it [. . .] And that is poetry." (1961:109) A similar attitude is to be found in Edwin Morgan's poem "Opening the Cage: 14 Variations on 14 Words," a joke of concrete poetry written in 1965: "I have to say poetry and is that nothing and I am saying it [. . .] And that nothing is poetry I am saying and I have to say it [. . .] (Morgan 1968). John Cage's lectures are not delivered in order to amaze people, but rather, as he explains it, "out of a need for poetry."

[. . .] poetry is not prose simply because poetry is in one way or another formalized. It is not poetry by reason of its content or ambiguity but by reason of its allowing musical elements (time, sound) to be introduced into the world of

words. Thus, traditionally, information no matter how stuffy (e.g., the sutras and shastras of India) was transmitted in poetry. It was easier to grasp that way. Karl Shapiro may have been thinking along these lines when he wrote his *Essay on Rime in poetry* (1961:x)

If John Cage's poetry has to be traced to any source, we must return again to Ezra Pound's and e.e. cummings's typographic experimentation. Portions of Cage's "Diary," "Mureau" and the "Mushroom Book" contain poetry, as does *M*: "36 Mesostics Re and Not Re Marcel Duchamp," "Song," "Six Mesostics," "25 Mesostics Re and Not Re Mark Tobey," along with "62 Mesostics re Merce Cunningham" are scattered like pictures throughout the book. Normally acrostics are poems or compositions in which the initial (*single acrostic*), the initial and final (*double acrostic*), or the initial, middle, and final (*triple acrostic*) letters of the lines make words. John Cage's acrostics line up not down the edge but down the middle—hence "mesostics," Norman O. Brown's coinage. Cage's first mesostic, "Present," written to celebrate the birthday of the poet and dance critic Edwin Denby in 1963, he classified as prose. But those following, "each letter of the name being on its own line, were written as poetry. *A given letter capitalized does not occur between it and the preceding capitalized letter*" (1973: foreword). It is hard to say how much of this technique fulfills John Cage's statements on poetry in his foreword to *Silence*, quoted above. The issue of John Cage's poetry is complicated by the views that he holds on poetry and by the fact that poetry often stimulates him to act in fields other than writing. In his "Juilliard Lecture" he stated rather hermetically: "What I am calling poetry is often called content. I myself have called it form. It is the continuity of a piece of music" (1967:106).

If he applied the methods of music to writing, he also applied those of writing to music. In 1954, while in Europe, John Cage met the Japanese musicologist Hidekazu Yoshida, who introduced to him the notion of the three lines of "haiku" poetry, the first one referring to "nirvana," the second to "samsara," the third one to a specific happening. The influence of Matsuo Basho's "haiku"² may have affected Cage's philosophical attitude towards art in general and music in particular, rather than his verse. His need for an art celebrating life and the now-moment found a precedent in Basho's poetry:

2. In fifteenth-century Japanese poetry, linked verse ("renga") became the preferred medium of the leading poets. Generally three or more poets took part in composing a linked-verse sequence, supplying alternate verses, one in three lines of 5, 7 and 5 syllables, the next in two lines of 7 and 7 syllables. As in most other works of Japanese literature, much more attention was given to the relations of the successive elements than to the overall structure, in opposition to the technique of building up effects over paragraphs rather than within single lines. The first three lines of a linked-verse sequence were to become an independent poem under the name of "hokku" or "haiku." The greatest of the Japanese "haiku" poets was Matsuo Basho [pseudonym of Matsuo Munefusa] (1644-1694), who attracted wide attention with the verse:

On a withered branch
A crow has alighted:
Nightfall in autumn.

The old pond
A frog jumps in,
Plop!

However unrewarding John Cage's poetry may be for the critic, the influence of the methods of the Black Mountain school of poetry on his writing ought not to be underrated. In the introduction to his selection of recent American verse, *Possibilities of Poetry* (1970), Richard Kostelanetz pointed out that

In fact, some of the most adventurous extensions of Olson's method have come from writers outside his immediate camp. The composer John Cage, a sometime colleague at Black Mountain, has developed in several word-pieces entitled "Diary" a stylistically inventive shorthand for miscellaneous remarks. [. . .] Only within the past few years has Cage been publicly accepted as a poet, although his witty and distinctive writing has long earned the admiration of literate people. [. . .] The first three Diaries have been reprinted in *A Year from Monday* (1967), as well as translated into other languages and included in anthologies (Kostelanetz 1978:167-168).

In the same essay Kostelanetz scrutinizes Cage's draft of the "Diary": "The roman numerals identify the stanzas, the arabic numbers the amount of words permitted to each typeface, the symbols refer to results derived from chance operations, as translated into terms suitable for consulting the *I Ching*" (p. 168). Whether John Cage's diaries ought to be considered prose pieces or cantos of a didactic poem is a highly debatable question indeed, one of those issues whose answer is likely to lie somewhere in the *Book of Changes*, if anywhere. If we accepted them as prose we might perhaps find a literary precedent for their quality of heterogeneous descriptions jotted and stitched together in Whitman's *Specimen Days*. The embarrassment John Cage's "poetry" writing gives to many literary people is evident from this frequently told anecdote of his: "London publisher sent blank ('fill out') so I'd be included in survey of contemporary poets of English language. Threw it out. Week later urgent request plus duplicate blank arrived. 'Please return with a glossy photo.' Complied. July, August, September. Publisher then sent letter saying it'd been decided I'm not significant poet after all: If I were, everyone else is too" (quoted in Kostelanetz 1978:167).

Although we may agree with the London publisher's advice, we must admit that John Cage's mainly prosaic language has influenced not only Jackson MacLow's or Edwin Morgan's poetry but also such younger American poets as Ted Berrigan in his "Really the Key" (see Berrigan 1967).

A different matter entirely is Cage's "62 Mesostics re Merce

His accounts of his travels are prized for the "haiku" verses that record various sights along the way. The "haiku" verse previous to Basho's emergence as a master had been subject to a certain staleness, resulting from the imposition of strangulating codes of rules intended to make this popular form of verse "respectable," as well as to ephemerality, as a result of the frequent allusions to current gossip, supposedly so as to keep it lively and up-to-date. Basho, deploring both, insisted that the "haiku" must be at once unbound and eternal; he advised his pupils: "Do not seek to follow in the footsteps of the man of old; seek what they sought." His life of austerity in sharp contrast with the general flamboyance of his time accounts for his title of "saint of the haiku."

Cunningham." These picture texts have an urgency somehow evocative of the incarnated word ("logos") and in some way might be connected with ritual and magic uses of the word. Their forms are reminiscent of Buddhist and Hindu mantras, where, however, chance does not exist, since these spring from a belief in the order and uniformity of nature. The fact that their shapes have been suggested to John Cage by dance postures and stances accounts for their apparent typographic oddity. In this respect they belong to a tradition at least as old as the Greek technopaegnia, as exemplified by the "Pipe" and other calligraphic works by the Alexandrians. Instances of this technique are to be found in English poetry as well, for instance in Francis Quarles's *Emblems and Hieroglyphikes*, a very popular book of verse in the seventeenth century and the most remarkable emblem book in English; or in Dylan Thomas's poetry, as in "Axe Shape," from *Vision and Prayer* (1946). The need for poetry to be more than a poem had been shared by such metaphysical poets as Robert Herrick and George Herbert as well as by the father of the international concrete poetry movement, Stéphane Mallarmé, who was virtually obsessed by nonverbal communication.

In these compositions we find something more than the achievement of graphic effects or the mere imitation of the shape which is the object of their interest. In the twenties the painter Hans Arp had pointed out that modern art operates not so much through the discovery of perfect forms as through submission to the law of chance which "embraces all other laws and is unfathomable to us as the depths from which life arises. It can be comprehended by complete surrender to the unconscious" (Bowler 1970:12-13). This idea, which accounts for John Cage's interest in such different fields as Eckhardt's mysticism and Marcel Duchamp's work, Zen philosophy and Dadaism, was shared to some extent by the literary Futurist movement as well. The Futurists, led by Filippo Marinetti, were also committed to the destruction of syntax, to the liberation of the word and to the utter freedom of imagination. Although John Cage would not go so far as to share their beliefs in poetry as a violent onslaught or in the masterpiece as aggression, his acrostics resemble very closely the kind of poetry to be found in *Les Mots en Liberté Futuristes*. However he may criticize "concrete and sound poets" for having "substituted graphic or musical structures for syntactical ones," thus aiming again at pinning life down, certainly he shares with the international concrete poetry movement at least a need for the rehabilitation not only of the word, but also of the private individual.

On the other hand, Cage's Dadaist attitudes, dating back to his friendship with Duchamp, allow us to link his literary and theatrical experiences and experiments to the activities of the Cabaret Voltaire, which involved simultaneous poems, silent plays and fractured syntax, in the attempt to baffle the audience's expectations and preconceptions and wake it up to a fresh vision of life and an acceptance of diversity, as well as to Antonin Artaud's theories on "events" and "happenings."

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