

## JOHN CAGE CONCEPTUALIST POET

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--We are as free as birds. Only the birds aren't free. We are as committed as birds and identically.

--John Cage<sup>i</sup>

In 1987 John Cage published a mesostic poem called "They Come,"<sup>ii</sup> made by writing through the following five-line poem by Samuel Beckett:

they come  
different and the same  
with each it is different and the same  
with each the absence of love is different  
with each the absence of love is the same

According to the remarkably informative note in the newly published *Collected Poems of Samuel Beckett*, "they come" was written on 25 January 1938, shortly after Beckett was discharged from the Hôpital Broussais, where he was recovering from the almost fatal stab wound he had received a few weeks earlier--a fortuitous attack by a stranger from which he was saved by his soon-to-be companion Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil.

The poem has an interesting publishing history: "I sent," Beckett tells his friend Tom McGreevy, "'they come' (translated by [Alfred] Péron as 'ils viennent' !!) to *Ireland To-day*, where the great purity of mind & charity of thought will no doubt see orgasms where nothing so innocent or easy is intended, and reject the poem in consequence." Rejected it promptly was, but it later appeared in English in Peggy Guggenheim's memoir *Out of This*

*Century* (1946) and then in French—translated by the poet this time--in Jean-Paul Sartre's journal *Les Temps modernes* (November 1946):

elles viennent  
autres et pareilles  
avec chacune c'est autre et c'est pareil  
avec chacune l'absence d'amour est autre  
avec chacune l'absence d'amour est pareille

The "elles," according to the editors' note, referred to the three women-- Suzanne, Peggy, and Adrienne Bethell—with whom Beckett was entangled at the time of writing; the poet himself describes this and other new poems as "French anacreontics," poems in the manner of Anacreon, in praise of love or wine.<sup>iii</sup>

Cage's name is rarely linked to Beckett's, and yet their personal circles often overlapped. Guggenheim, who was to become an early Cage benefactress, provides one link.<sup>iv</sup> His closest artist friend Jasper Johns, who produced the beautiful illustrated edition of Beckett's *Fizzles*, provides another,<sup>v</sup> and Marcel Duchamp, Cage's idol, a third. When in October 1938 Beckett talks of trying to publish his French poems including "They come," he writes George Reavey, "I have 10 Poems in French also, mostly short. When I have a few more I shall send them to Eluard. Or get Duchamp to do so."<sup>vi</sup>

Cage's poem, in any case, is subtitled "A Fifty Percent Mesostic." A *mesostic*, let's recall, is defined by Cage as an acrostic whose operative word or letter string runs, not down the left edge but the center of the text. "This vertical rule, says Cage, "is lettristic and in my practice the letters are capitalized. Between two capitals in a perfect or 100% mesostic neither letter may appear in lower case. In an imperfect of 50% mesostic the first letter may appear in lower case. In an imperfect of 50% mesostic the first letter may reappear but the second one is not permitted until its appearance on the second line as a capital in the string."<sup>vii</sup> If, in other words, the

mesostic string is J-A-M-E-S-J-O-Y-C-E, the 50% rule permits a “j” to be introduced between the capitalized j in the first line and A in the second, but there may not be an “a” between them.

If this rule sounds mechanical—and Cage also regularly claimed that he derived his mesostic procedures from chance operations, usually the *I Ching* and its later computer version Mesolist devised by Andrew Culver--, we should note that the artist’s particular signature always finds its way into the “wing words” – the words surrounding the chosen letter that, as Cage has made clear in various places, he selects “according to taste.” “The situation is not linear,” Cage remarks, “It is though I am in a forest hunting for ideas” (I-VI, 2). In the case of “They Come,” Cage limited himself to the 31 words of the poem, beginning with the “t” of “They.” Because Beckett’s vocabulary here is so restricted, Cage explains, several letters yield no words: “the Y of they; the M of come; the R of different; the D of and; the M of same; the W and T of with; the B of absence; the L and V of love; the F of of. Spaces between lines take the place of the missing letters. These are doubled in two instances” (RCF 85).

Here is the opening:

i**T** is  
each**H** it is  
sam**E**  
is different with ea**Ch** the  
l**O**ve is

Cage’s version is by no means merely arbitrary: at once homage and critique, it acts as a kind of *détournement*, shifting from Beckett’s simple repetitive sentences to an emphasis on fragmentation, incompleteness, and the isolation of function words like “it,” “is,” “the,” and “of,” together with the

qualifiers “each,” “same,” and “different.” “Love,” repeated twelve times, is never specified. As the writing-through progresses, the silences (blank spaces) increase. The poem concludes

different**T**

each**H**

come**E**

love i**S** different

with e**A**ch

is th**E**

“Different each come”: Cage slyly restores the implications of the mistaken “Ils viennent” that Beckett mocked in his letter and foregrounds the function words—“empty words” as Cage called them<sup>viii</sup>-- now unanchored and divorced from the sentences which hold them firmly in place. The final line “is th**E**” ironically anticipates the silence and broken phrasing of Beckett’s late years—a phrasing not yet in evidence in the pre-World War II writing. It is as if the Beckett of “what is the word” (“folly--/ folly for to--/ for to—”), Beckett’s last poem, written in October 1988, were recasting his sardonic love poem written half a century earlier.<sup>ix</sup>

Cage’s mesostic texts have frequently been dismissed, especially by the poetry community, as mere game playing. When the Library of America published *American Poetry: The Twentieth Century*, a two-volume 2000+ page anthology, which takes the reader from Henry Adams (b 1838) to May Swenson (born 1913), Helen Vendler questioned the inclusion of Cage (he was allotted all of five pages as compared, say, to Yvor Winters’s fifteen),

since he is so obviously *not* a poet.<sup>x</sup> Cage himself was accustomed to this charge: in his earlier days, he good-humoredly told the following story:

London publisher sent blank ("Fill out") so I'd be included in survey of contemporary poets of the 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.<sup>xi</sup>

The irony here is that the "everyone else" wouldn't have bothered Cage at all, his emphasis so consistently being on what he called "a circus situation"—a "plurality of centers" that entails "interpenetration and non-obstruction," a situation where "Here Comes Everybody."<sup>xii</sup>

Interpenetration, in the case of the mesostics, should be understood as a form of parody, one poem generating another in what Cage took to be a valuable dialogue. Here, for example, is a passage from "Writing for the first time through *Howl*," produced by "writing-through" Allen Ginsberg's famous poem on the occasion of the poet's sixtieth birthday (1986):

Blind  
in th**E** mind  
towa**R**d  
illuminati**G**  
d**A**wns  
b**L**inking  
Light  
  
th**E**  
wi**N**ter  
li**G**ht

endless r**I**de

bro**N**x

wheel**S**

**B**rought

th**E**m

w**R**acked

li**G**ht of zoo<sup>xiii</sup>

The source of these minimalist stanzas is the following set of strophes, whose erasure, based on the 50% mesostic rule, uncovers the thirteen letters **ALLENGINSBERG** required for the vertical mesostic string. I have highlighted Cage's chosen words, here beginning with the "B" for "-BERG."

incomparable **blind** streets of shuddering cloud and lightning **in the mind** leaping **toward** poles of Canada & Paterson, **illuminating** all the motionless world of Time between,

Peyote solidities of halls, backyard green tree cemetery **dawns**, wine drunkenness over the rooftops, storefront boroughs of teahead joyride neon **blinking** traffic **light**, sun and moon and tree vibrations in **the** roaring **winter** dusks of Brooklyn, ashcan rantings and kind king **light** of mind,

who chained themselves to subways for the **endless ride** from Battery to holy **Bronx** on benzedrine until the noise of **wheels** and children **brought them** down shuddering mouth-**wracked** and

battered bleak of brain all drained of brilliance in the drear **light  
of Zoo** ... <sup>xiv</sup>

Cage's elliptical lyric functions as both homage and critique, subtly interjecting his own values into the exuberant, hyperbolic Beat poem which is *Howl*. As hushed and muted as Ginsberg's baroque "ashcan rantings" are wild and expansive, Cage's is a rhyming night-song, whose referents are elusive, with only the movement toward the "broNcx" transforming the "linking" of the "blinking / light" to one that is "wRacked" with "light of Zoo." Without deploying a single word *of his own*, Cage subtly turns the language of *Howl* against itself so as to make a plea for restraint and quietude as alternatives to the violence and indignation at the heart of Ginsberg's poem.

There is further dialogue between the two poems. For Ginsberg, sound and visual configuration act to support the poet's exclamatory particulars, the urgent things he wishes to say: his primary device is repetition, especially anaphora, used to create a chant-like rhythm. For Cage, on the other hand, the discipline of mesostic condensation produces a visual and sound structure whose import is less obviously communicative. Poetry is not poetry, as he put it, "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." <sup>xv</sup> In "Writing through *Howl*," the formatting itself-- "Blind /in thE mind" or "BroNcx / wheels"-- produces the poem's sense of Buddhist abnegation so distinct from Ginsberg's own ready-to-burst, action-filled anaphoric strophes. And further: the mesostic technique allows for allusion: "dawns / bLinking / Light," for example, slyly points to "dawn's early light" in the *Star Spangled Banner*--a reference not present in Ginsberg's *Howl* at all.

The mesostic text became, in Cage's later career, his preferred form of poetry; such works as *Mureau*, the *Roaratorio*, and the Charles Eliot Norton

lectures at Harvard became his way of holding conversations with the writers and artists who had influenced him—conversations that took intertextuality, allusion, and found text to a new level. But before he wrote mesostics, Cage produces a series of verbal texts that are, to my mind, among his most inventive works—namely, the early ekphrastic and meditative pieces, written in what looks like prose but a prose formalized by various typographic devices, that present a critical-biographical profile of a particular artist—largely in that artist’s own words. Most of these citational poems are occasional pieces, presented with deceptive modesty as book reviews or catalogue essays, part narrative, part descriptive, anecdotal and citational. They include the following:

1. “Erik Satie,” written for the 1958 Arts News Annual and reprinted in *Silence* 76-85. Cage describes it as “an imaginary conversation between Satie and myself. Because he died over thirty years before, neither of us hears what the other says. His remarks are ones he is reported to have made and excerpts from his writings.”
2. “On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist and his Work,” for *Metro* magazine in Milan (1961), reprinted in *Silence*, 98-108. “It may be read in whole or in part; any sections of it may be skipped, what remains may be read in any order. This style of printing here employed is not essential. Any of the sections may be printed directly over any of the others, and the spaces between paragraphs may be varied in any manner. The words in italics are either quotations from Rauschenberg or titles of his works.”
3. “Mosaic,” a “review” of Arnold Schoenberg’s *Letters*, edited by Erwin Stein (translated from the German by Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser, published by St. Martin’s Press, New York in 1964). The review, commissioned by the *Kenyon Review*, where it was published in the Summer 1965 issue, “but with certain modifications which brought the

review 'more nearly into typographic conformity with the others,' was reprinted in *A Year from Monday* (43-49): Schoenberg's words, Cage tells us, are italicized, whereas remarks that Cage recalls Schoenberg making when he was studying with him, are put in quotation marks. The selection of texts to cite or discuss was ostensibly based on I Ching chance operations—I say ostensibly because there is no way to verify that this was really the case: indeed, most of Cage's citations come from the later Schoenberg letters written in Los Angeles at the time that Cage knew him.

4. "26 Statements Re Duchamp," written for the Japanese monthly review of fine arts, *Mizue* (September 1963). Reprinted in *A Year from Monday*, 70-73.
5. "Jasper Johns: Stories and Ideas," written for the Jewish Museum catalog of the work of Jasper Johns in 1964 and reprinted in *A Year from Monday* (73-84). As Cage explains his strategy, "After giving up plans for a text which involved elaborate use of chance operations with respect to type faces, size of type, superimpositions of type, collage of texts previously written about Johns by other critics, I settled on the plan of making use . . . of my *Cartridge Music* [Cage's piece, with David Tudor, for amplified "small sounds," 1960]. However, I took the empty spaces which developed from that way of writing as spaces to be filled in with further writing. The paragraphs and paragraph signs resulted from chance operations." Here again, "Passages in italics are quotations from Jasper Johns found in his notebooks and published statements."

6. "Miró in the Third Person: 8 Statements," written for Miró catalogue of published by the Fondation Maeght in Paris (1966) and reprinted in *A Year from Monday*, 85-88. Eight statements; words in italics are from Miro's writings; quotations are remarks he made in conversation."
7. "Nam June Paik: A Diary," written for Bonino Gallery exhibition catalogue (New York (1965). Reprinted in *A Year from Monday*, 89-91. "Passages in italics are quotations from Nam June Paik in his letters and printed statements.

To compose a critical portrait of an artist by reframing that artist's own words, whether written or spoken: Cage's technique looks ahead to the appropriative texts of our own moment, ranging from Charles Bernstein's opera libretto *Shadowtime*, which characterizes Walter Benjamin by juxtaposing and reframing extracts from his own writing or Srikanth Reddy's *Voyager* (2011), a tripartite writing through the memoir of the SS Officer turned UN Secretary-General and President of the Austrian Republic, Kurt Waldheim. Such conceptual writing, as it is now called, is appropriate for the information age when we are increasingly skeptical about the possibilities of *mimetic* representation of particular individuals; to "invent" a Kurt Waldheim would not be nearly as effective as to let his own sentences and phrases, fragmented, recycled, and collaged, speak for themselves. At the same time, the cited passages can be juxtaposed and spliced so as to produce the precise effects the critic /biographer is looking for without ever commenting in his or her own person. The result is a poetry that neatly avoids what Charles Olson called "the lyrical interference of the ego" even as it makes it possible for the poet to present a highly individual view of the subject in question. In the citational texts, Cage's model may well have been the anonymous editorialist in *The Blind Man* (really Marcel Duchamp

himself), who defended the art status of “R. Mutt’s” urinal called *Fountain*, by insisting that “Whether Mr. Mutt [Duchamp’s alter ego] with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view—created a new thought for that object.”<sup>xvi</sup>

He CHOSE it. Consider the catalogue “essay” on Nam June Paik (#7 above). In real life, Cage had serious reservations about the Korean composer-artist. “His work is fascinating, and rather often frightening,” he was to tell Daniel Charles in the late sixties, “he generates a real sense of danger, and sometimes goes further than what we are ready to accept” (Charles 167). And he recalls the evening in Cologne in 1960 when Paik, performing a piece called *Étude for Pianoforte* in Mary Baumeister’s studio, suddenly stopped playing, came up to Cage who was sitting in the front row, and cut off his tie, and started cutting up Cage’s clothes:

Just behind him, there was an open window with a drop of perhaps six floors to the street and everyone suddenly had the impression that he was going to throw himself out of the window. Fortunately, he was content with leaving the room, but we remained dazed, immobile, and terrified for some time. Finally the telephone rang—it was Paik calling to say that the performance was over! (*Year from Monday* 167-68).

Paik’s assault remained for Cage a “grim memory,” but in “Nam June Paik: A Diary,” he presents the incident comically—“A year or so later he left the room”—and art works like the notorious Fluxus piece *Danger Music No. 1 for Dick Higgins* are neutralized by embedding the title “*Creep into the VAGINA of a living WHALE!*” into an irrelevant context. In other words, as [Dick] Higgins has remarked . . . there is no danger” (*Year* 90). And Cage concludes the *Diary* by quoting a letter from the not yet flamboyant, the serious and idealistic young artist he first met in Japan circa 1959-60:

*My new composition is now 1 minutes. (For Prof. Fortner). The Title will be either "Rondo Allegro," or "Allegro Moderato," or only "Allegretto." Which is more beautiful? I use here: Colour Projector. Film 2-3 screens. Strip tease, boxer, hen (alive). 6 years girl. Light-piano. Motorcycle and of course sounds. One TV . // "whole art" in the meaning of Mr. R. Wagner. (Year 90).*

Here the mistakes of idiom and grammar ("1 minutes," "6 years girl") and the desire to emulate Wagner in making a *Gesamtkunstwerk* put Paik in a very different light. His later "preoccupation with sex, violence, humor, criticism" gives way to a portrait of the artist as a uniquely inventive young artist. And so Cage wants to present him in the catalogue.

A more intricate example of Cage's citational practice is found in "Jasper Johns: Stories and Ideas." Consider the following passage:

Does he live in the same terror and confusion that we do? *The air must move in as well as out—no sadness, just disaster.* I remember the deadline they had: to put up a display, not in windows on a street but upstairs in a building for a company that was involved in sales and promotion. Needing some printing done they gave me the job to do it. Struggling with pens and India ink, arriving at nothing but failure, I gradually became hysterical. Johns rose to the occasion. Though he already had too much to do, he went to a store, found some mechanical device for facilitating lettering, used it successfully, did all the other necessary things connected with the work and in addition returned to me my personal dignity. Where had I put it? Where did he find it? That his work is beautiful is only one of its aspects. It is, as it were, not interior to it that it is seductive. We catch ourselves looking in another direction for fear of becoming jealous, closing our eyes for fear our walls will seem to be empty. Skulduggery. (Year 80).<sup>xvii</sup>

Here the seemingly seamless text is a carefully constructed collage made of different voices. The first sentence is Cage's own question. The "answer" comes indirectly in John's own notebook remark (1960) referring to *In Memory of my Feelings* (his Frank O'Hara elegy): "The air must move in as well as out—no sadness, just disaster."<sup>xviii</sup> Cage evidently liked the Buddhist resignation of this aphorism: one accepts the "disaster" of one's situation without sentimentalizing it ("no sadness"). But the next sentence, which begins with the narrator's third-person account, "I remember the deadline they had," imperceptibly shifts to Johns's own account about an unpleasant work assignment: "Needing some printing done they gave me the job to do it. Struggling with pens and India ink, arriving at nothing but failure, I gradually became hysterical" (*Year 80*).

In the context of Cage's calm narrative, these quoted words are disorienting. The narrative continues with Cage's own matter-of-fact statement, "Johns rose to the occasion," and then shifts to *oratio obliqua*—the representation of another's words in the third person—in the sentence, "Though he already had too much to do, he went to a store, found some mechanical device for facilitating lettering. . . ." But by the end of the sentence, the shift is back to the first person: "and in addition returned to me my personal dignity." The repeated pronominal shifts create a curiously intense drama: the questions, "Where had I put it? Where did he find it?" can hardly be understood as having the noun "dignity" as the antecedent of "it," and so the narrative shifts again, tracking Johns's activity as he looks for some needed object. And there now follows the remarkable conclusion in which Cage concludes beauty is only one of the aspects of Johns's painting: it is so powerful that it also incites jealousy in the viewer—jealousy on the one hand because the narrator takes Johns to be the greater artist, and on the other, because the painting in question (*In Memory of my Feelings*) is dedicated to someone else, leaving "our walls . . . empty." And then comes

the final anachronistic word for trickery, *Skulduggery*, with its aura of Victorian detective stories. Cage evidently chose this noun because it contains the word *skull*, thus setting up a connection to the last words of Cage's text: "A Dead Man. Take a skull. Cover it with paint. Rub it against canvas. Skull against canvas (Year 84). These words come from Johns's sketch for *In Memory of my Feelings: Frank O'Hara* (1968) and appear a number of times in the Notebooks.<sup>xix</sup> *Skull against canvas*: the acceptance of death, Johns implies in an imperative taken up by Cage, makes the everyday life described in "Jasper Johns: Stories and Ideas" precious and meaningful. Indeed, as the poem-essay concludes, the aesthetic of the two artists has wholly merged: their thoughts are no longer separable. For both, "rubbing a skull against canvas" is the key to art. As Cage has put it earlier: "The situation must be Yes-and-No not either-or. *Avoid a polar situation*" (79). Here the first sentence is Cage's own; the second that of Johns,<sup>xx</sup> but their conjunction seems nothing if not natural. In the words of Beckett's *Unnamable*, "What matter who's speaking"?

Poetry as *choice, appropriation, reconfiguration*. The masterpiece in this vein is, to my mind, the Schoenberg "essay" called "Mosaic." If the Johns piece presents a union of narrator and subject, the Schoenberg "review" is more equivocal: it dramatizes the sharp split between the American Cage and his Viennese mentor—a split not apparent in the many Schoenberg reminiscences found in Cage's interviews and sketches. Here, for example, is Cage in conversation with Calvin Tomkins (1965):

Schoenberg was a magnificent teacher, who always gave the impression that he was putting us in touch with musical principles. I studied counterpart at his home and attended all his classes at USC and later at UCLA when he moved there. I also took his course in harmony, for which I had no gift. Several times I tried to explain to Schoenberg that I had no feeling for harmony. He told me that

without a feeling for harmony I would always encounter an obstacle, a wall through which I wouldn't be able to pass. My reply was that in that case I would devote to beating my head against that wall—and maybe that is what I have been doing ever since. In all the time I studied with Schoenberg he never once led me to believe that my work was distinguished in any way. He never praised my compositions, and when I commented on other students' work in class he held my comments up to ridicule. And yet I worshipped him like a god. (*Conversing with Cage* 5)

And in a similar vein, in an interview with Jeff Goldberg (1976):

Schoenberg was approaching sixty when I became one of his students in 1933. At the time what one did was to choose between Stravinsky and Schoenberg. So, after studying for two years with his first American student, Adolph Weiss, I went to see him in Los Angeles. He said, "You probably can't afford my price," and I said, "You don't need to mention it because I don't have any money." So he said, "Will you devote your life to music?" and I said I would. And though people might feel, because I know my work is controversial, that I have not devoted myself to music utterly . . . I still think that I have remained faithful. (*Conversing* 4-5).

And Cage proudly recalls—although the story may be apocryphal<sup>xxi</sup>—that when "Someone asked Schoenberg about his American pupils, whether he'd had any that were interesting . . . Schoenberg's first reply was to say there were no interesting pupils, but then he smiled and said, "There was one," and he named me. Then he said, "Of course he's not a composer, but he's an inventor—of genius."

Schoenberg's severity, his rigidity, his bluntness, his excessive demands on his students, sometimes reducing them to tears--these are recalled fondly in the interviews, Cage repeatedly emphasizing his

admiration for Schoenberg's brilliance as a composer and dedication to teaching. But in the more fictional world of "Mosaic," the emphasis is rather different.<sup>xxii</sup> The Schoenberg who emerges from Cage's assemblage—extracts from undated and unattributed letters, cut up, spliced, realigned and embedded in spoken comments the narrator claims to recall as well as in his own asides—is a complex tragicomic figure—an overbearing, irascible genius, pompous, preachy, and self-important, who is nevertheless admirable in his dogged perseverance and commitment to his art, and sympathetic as a victim of anti-Semitism and the Nazi take-over that forced him into exile in California. As filtered through his letters and presented here, Schoenberg is *sui generis*. Here is a sample passage near the beginning of "Mosaic":

*I disagree with almost everything. Books he remembered were written by opponents. Musical conventions, complexity, yes—but let no objects and settings for operas puzzle his audiences. . . . it is much more interesting to have one's portrait done by or to own a painting by a musician of my reputation than to be painted by some mere practitioner of painting, whose name will be forgotten in 20 years, whereas even now (he was thirty-five) my name belongs to history. Our values. Composition using twelve tones was in the Viennese air. Hauer and Schoenberg both picked it up. But differently. Simultaneously? I empower you to publish this letter . . . ; but if . . . so, . . . in its entirety; not excerpted.* What with his wretched financial situation, asthma, anti-Semitic attacks from political quarters, lack of public recognition, etc., one led (if not to agree) to listen when he says: *The earth is a vale of tears and not a place of entertainment.* Experiencing music not composers' names: at the Private Concerts Schoenberg organized, members listened, not told what they were hearing or who'd composed it. . . . Analyzing a single measure of

Beethoven, Schoenberg became a magician (not rabbits out of a hat, but one musical idea after another: revelation). *Arnold Schoenberg*. (Year 44, ellipses are Cage's)

In composing this subtle portrait, Cage spatializes the events of Schoenberg's life, fusing extracts from early and late letters so as to obscure the timeline and create complex configurations. *I disagree with almost everything* is a leitmotif running through the collection of letters: Schoenberg is always embattled: books, for example, are invariably written by *opponents*. But it is the italicized statement about a potential exhibition of his painting that is most curious. Cage is citing from a letter of March 1910 to Emil Hertzka, Schoenberg's music publisher, in which the composer, then as most of his life short of funds, tries to drum up support for his secondary vocation—his painting.<sup>xxiii</sup> Schoenberg's cited letter radiates a supreme self-confidence that is alternately impressive and irritating: the man who declares "*even now . . . my name belongs to history* is, as Cage's parenthetical note tells us, thirty-five years old. Given to the black-and-white values not uncommon in the Vienna of his day—one finds similar sentiments, for example, expressed by the young Wittgenstein, who readily dismissed composers he didn't like for producing *Hundedreck* (dog shit)—Schoenberg is shown as having nothing but contempt for the "mere practitioner[s] of painting" he regards as his enemies.

Compromise is quite alien to this artist's nature: asked by a minor official to write something for Richard Strauss's fiftieth birthday (22 April 1914), Schoenberg declares:

I cannot refrain . . . from mentioning that . . . I have inwardly rejected Strauss. That I, as one whose conduct will never be guided by envy of 'competitors,' have no cause to take a public stand against Strauss, you will understand. That I am not afraid of doing so, you will necessarily believe since for this purpose I empower you to publish

this letter at any time you may think fit and at your discretion; but if you do so, then in its entirety; not excerpted. (*Letters* 51).

In "Mosaic," Cage erases part of this last sentence and removes its context; as it stands, it looks like a general warning on Schoenberg's part not to tamper with his words in any way, the irony being that this is precisely what Cage himself is doing in his own version of the passage! The sentence that follows the warning about potential erasure-- "What with his wretched financial situation, asthma, anti-Semitic attacks from political quarters. . ." --is *oratio obliqua*, Cage mimicking Schoenberg's way of speaking; in the context of "Mosaic" the reader is likely to take it as a reference to the period of emigration after Hitler took power in 1933. But the cited cliché—*This earth is a vale of tears and not a place of entertainment*—was written much earlier: it is found in a long, painful, and embarrassing letter to Stravinsky, written in 1923 in response to the latter's invitation to join him on the faculty of the newly formed Bauhaus in Weimar. The two composers had been good friends, but at the time of writing, Schoenberg had evidently learned that Stravinsky was making anti-Semitic remarks, linking Jews to Communism. In his hyperbolic response (refusing the invitation!) Schoenberg vociferously rejects this link. He himself, he declares, is *not* a Communist because he knows there aren't enough material goods to go around and that in any case "happiness doesn't depend on possessions." Indeed, he tells Stravinsky somewhat absurdly, one can't be a Communist because "this earth is a vale of tears and not a place of entertainment" (*Letters* 91-92).

In its original context, Schoenberg's long rant is more paranoid than persuasive, especially since we don't have Stravinsky's own words to provide a setting for what is hardly a rational argument. Out of context, in "Mosaic," it becomes at once disturbing—anti-Semitism was very much on the rise—and comically maudlin—a a sententious exercise in self-pity that stands in

stark contrast to the remarkable teaching technique described in the passage that follows the reference to the *vale of tears*—this time, Cage’s own description of a Schoenberg lecture in Los Angeles, in which the composer evidently analyzed a single measure of Beethoven. The parenthesis, (“not rabbits out of a hat, but one musical idea after another: revelation”) represents the larger response to Schoenberg’s “magic,” as well as Cage’s own. And finally, Cage includes the two words *Arnold Schoenberg*: the portraitist concludes this thread by invoking his master’s signature, as it regularly appears in letter after formal letter.

Throughout “Mosaic,” Cage splices citations from the letters so as to create irony and sometimes high comedy. For example: “One’s intentions make life nearly unendurable. *A glass of brandy and . . . enjoyed it*” (Year 44). In the first sentence, Cage speaks for Schoenberg, who was given to such lamentations. In the second, he cited a letter of 1946, the then 71-year old and ailing Schoenberg wrote to his former physician in Vienna, complaining about the vagueness of medical terminology (*Letters* 239). Alluding, at the end of the letter to the doctor’s advice, Schoenberg writes, “Today I acted on your suggestion about having a glass of brandy and so far I have—at any rate—enjoyed it.” But the short version of this sentence, following the complaint about the unendurable, sounds merely silly: why, after all mention such trivia? Or again, consider the following:

He was a self-made aristocrat. *I wonder what you’d say to the world in which I nearly die of disgust.* Becoming an American citizen didn’t remove his *distaste for democracy and that sort of thing.* (45)

Here the “distaste for democracy” is taken from a 1945 letter to William S. Schlamm, an editor who had invited Schoenberg to become a charter contributor to the newly launched *Time* magazine. “I believe in the right of the smallest minority,” Schoenberg writes Schlamm, dismissing democracy as “something like a ‘dictatorship of the . . . majority” (*Letters*, 234). “*That*

*sort of thing,*” on the other hand, is taken from a quarrelsome 1912 letter to Ferruccio Busoni, in which Schoenberg accuses the Italian composer of feigning politeness only as a kind of “wrapping paper” to hide the very real “incivility” of his behavior. “With your permission,” Schoenberg writes Busoni, “I shall store the packing-material of obligingness, in which you wrapped your incivility, in the place where I . . . generally store packing-material, and the real content, the enclosed incivility, in the place where I keep a record of that sort of thing” (Letters 34-35).

By joining “*that sort of thing*” to the “*distaste for democracy,*” Cage points up Schoenberg’s own political naiveté: what “sort of thing,” after all, equivalent to “democracy”? Or consider the conclusion of “Mosaic”:

Though his experience was space-time, his idea of unity was two-dimensional: vertical and horizontal. On paper. The twelve-note system, the U.C.L.A. Retirement System are different. How? The Schoenbergs (wife, three children) received \$29.60 monthly. An afternoon series of Beethoven-Schoenberg string quartet recitals was arranged at U.C.L.A. Schoenberg: Music should be played at night, not in the afternoon.” Studying English, late in life, Schoenberg made a few mistakes, later becoming fluent. We’d all written fugues. He said he was pleased with what we’d done. We couldn’t believe our ears, divided up his pleasure between us. First afraid (*each new person might be a Nazi*), later delighted and grateful: someone was interested in his art. (Year 49).

The “two-dimensionality” of Schoenberg’s “twelve-note system” was one that Cage could not, finally adopt. Yet he sympathizes with the failure of that other system, “The U.C.L.A. Retirement System,” not to take better care of the Schoenbergs, who received only \$29.60 monthly by way of retirement. Always suspicious of the new—Schoenberg insisted that “Music

should be played at night, not in the afternoon"-- the composer nevertheless earns Cage's undying admiration. Even his paranoia was, after all, not wholly unjustified, given his treatment at the hands of the Nazis, first in Vienna and then in Hitler's Berlin. The source of the parenthetical *each new person might be a Nazi* is a 1948 letter to his old pupil Winfried Zillig, who had become the conductor of the Hessischer Rundfunk in Frankfurt. "You also remind me," Schoenberg writes Zillig, "of how we first got to know each other, when you came to me as a pupil. It was very odd at first. For in those days one couldn't help being afraid that each new person might be a Nazi, and that was why I was a bit reserved the first time; but then I very rapidly became fond of you" (*Letters* 259).

This is Schoenberg at his most genial and Cage picks up on that note in his conclusion. When the teacher praises the fugues Cage and his fellow students have written, "We couldn't believe our ears, divided up his pleasure between us." Note that it is *his* pleasure, not theirs. In the end, Cage's narrator enters Schoenberg's consciousness: "First afraid (*each new person might be a Nazi*), later delighted and grateful: someone was interested in his art." "Mosaic" ends on a heightened, lyrical note, its rhythm suggesting the lineation of a poem:

Fírst | afráid  
    (*éach nów pérsón míght be a Názi*)  
láter | delíghted and gráteful  
sómeone was ínterested in his árt

And that "someone" has, so to speak, written on his behalf.

At the same time, the Schoenberg portrait functions as an ironic manifesto of Cage's own aesthetic—an aesthetic curiously opposed to Schoenberg's own. For "Mosaic" presents Schoenberg as the Old World (especially Germanic) Modernist genius par excellence—the uncompromising artist who lives for his art, separating that art as much as possible from daily

life. The “real” world is shown to be full of daily headaches—making enough money, getting one’s pension, affording the right kind of house, finding a tennis teacher for one’s children—but the *real* substance of life is one’s work, which exists in separate and rarified realm. Schoenberg’s arrogance, conceit, repeatedly expressed sense of superiority: these come through “Mosaic” as, by implication, classic European Modernist traits.

By contrast, the prose poem/critique which is “Mosaic” (a diminutive version, perhaps of Schoenberg’s opera *Moses and Aaron*) equalizes art and life in a seamless—and what Cage thought of as a quintessentially American—composition. A cornerstone of Cage’s aesthetic credo was that the sharp divide between “art” and “life” must be bridged—that, on the contrary, the art-life continuum is characterized by “interpenetration and nonobstruction,” by the “plurality of centers” and a democratic “circus situation.” “Mosaic” enacts that complexity by placing past and present, momentous event and casual anecdote, on the same plane and refusing to distinguish between the Schoenberg letter, the Schoenberg off-the-cuff remark, and the narrator’s external view of the composer’s activities and the events in his life. Then, too, by effacing himself as fully as possible in the written text, Cage calls into question the boastfulness, arrogance, and sheerchutzpah that characterize the Schoenberg seen in the letters.

Was Cage less ambitious than his teacher? Probably not: we know that he took advantage of every opportunity proffered to get ahead. Was he any more willing than Schoenberg to compromise? Of course not: indeed, to study Cage’s work is to recognize that he was, in his own way, very much an aesthete. But overt boasting like Schoenberg’s was and is considered curiously “undemocratic” and un-American; we let others say how great we are, smiling modestly as they praise us. The distinction is generational as well as cultural—a distinction of style and manner rather than matter-- but it is a crucial one.

"Mosaic" and the other citational poem-essays of the 1960s look ahead to the conceptual poetry of our own moment, the appropriative writing that is now so prominent—and also so vulnerable to attack as "mere" copying, mere recycling if not outright plagiarism. Current exemplars of conceptualism, dependent as they are on digital reproduction even as Cage himself relied on magnetic tape and early computer programs, often seem to be entirely "uncreative," to use Kenneth Goldsmith's fighting words; such texts, it is often said, seem to contain no sign of the imaginative transformation we expect of poetry. I say *seems* because, as I have argued in *Unoriginal Genius* and elsewhere, texts like Goldsmith's own *Traffic* or are actually carefully composed and assembled; they are no more merely recyclings than Cage's citational texts are based, as he is wont to claim, on chance operations. No *I Ching* operation, I would argue, could generate such telling choices as the reference in "Mosaic" to "A glass of brandy and . . . enjoyed it."

Here an anecdote may be apposite. In 2009, the poet Kent Johnson reproduced an exact facsimile of Goldsmith's *Day* (2003), published the copy with the BlazeVox press, and claimed that his book had the same status as Goldsmith's. The "original" *Day*, after all, was no more, so Goldsmith himself insisted, than the transcription of a single day's *New York Times*, copied exactly from the first word on the first page to the last on the final page. But whereas Goldsmith had visually rearranged and realigned his newspaper items so as to foreground particular features, erase others, and make subtle statements about what we read and the way we read it, Johnson merely reprinted the published *Day* and claimed authorship, so as to demonstrate that *anyone* could make a copy of a given document and call it his own. What this action entirely ignored is the initiating conceptual act

that gave birth to *Day*: what Duchamp referred to when he said “He CHOSE it.”

Cage, in any case, would have understood this controversy only too well: he was regularly accused of plagiarism, unoriginality, laziness, and lack of technique. Reviewing *Silence* in 1963, the respected poet-critic John Hollander protested that “what Mr. Cage’s career as a composer lacks is a certain kind of hard work . . . the peculiar labor of art itself, the incredible agony of the real artist in his struggles with lethargy and with misplaced zeal.”<sup>xxiv</sup> The agony of the real artist: it is a phrase we may easily associate, say, with Schoenberg. But Cage understood that it was not the only path of art, that indeed his compositions might put the oeuvre of Modernism in a new perspective, ironizing its grandiose claims even as he admired its great strength and beauty.

As for the charge that his own music was not the fruit of sufficient passion or hard work, Cage regularly responded with his usual good humor. As he put it in *Silence*, “There are people who say, “If music’s that easy to write, I could do it. Of course they could, but they don’t” (*Silence* 72). And there’s the rub that, a hundred years after his birth, we are just beginning to understand.

## Footnotes

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<sup>i</sup> John Cage, "Lecture on Commitment" (1961), in *A Year from Monday* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1967), 119.

<sup>ii</sup> *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 7, no. 2 (Summer 1987), 85-91. Subsequently cited in the text as RCF.

<sup>iii</sup> *The Collected Poems of Samuel Beckett, A critical edition*, ed. Seán Lawlor and John Pilling (London: Faber & Faber, 2012), in the section *Poèmes 37-39*, p. 91. The notes are found on pp. 372-76. For the letter of 27/1/38 and appended notes, see *The Letters of Samuel Beckett 1929-1940*, Volume 2, ed. Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 594-97.

<sup>iv</sup> Cage has frequently told the following story: "I'd come from Chicago and was staying in the apartment of Peggy Guggenheim and Max Ernst. Peggy had agreed to pay for the transport of my percussion instruments from Chicago to New York, and I was to give a concert to open her gallery, "The Art of this Century." Meanwhile, being young and ambitious, I had also arranged to give a concert at the Museum of Modern Art. When Peggy discovered that, she cancelled not only the concert but also her willingness to pay for the transport of the instruments. When she gave me this information, I burst into tears. In the room next to mine at the back of the house Marcel Duchamp was sitting in a rocking chair smoking a cigar. He asked why I was crying and I told him. He said virtually nothing but his presence was such that I felt calmer." Interview with Jeff Goldberg (1976), in Richard Kostelanetz (ed.), *Conversing with Cage* (New York: Limelight, 1988), 11.

<sup>v</sup> On the Beckett-Johns *Fizzles*, see my *The Poetics of Inderminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 201-13.

<sup>vi</sup> See Notes, Beckett CP, 374; Letters, *Vol. 2*, 645.

<sup>vii</sup> John Cage, *I-VI* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 1-2.

<sup>viii</sup> See Richard Kostelanetz (1979), in *Conversing with Cage*, 141-47.

<sup>ix</sup> For details about the French-English "Comment dire / what is the word," see the Notes to Beckett CP, 474.

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<sup>x</sup> Helen Vendler, "The Back Stacks" (review of *American Poetry: The Twentieth Century*, Vols. 1 and 2 [Library of America, 2001], *New Republic*, 222, no. 25 (19 June 2001), 41-45. In all fairness to Vendler and Cage's other detractors, the selection in the Library of America volume, primarily from *Composition in Retrospect*, written shortly before Cage's death in 1992, does not represent the poet at his best. I say this regretfully as one of the members of the LOA editorial board.

<sup>xi</sup> See Richard Kostelanetz, "Cagean Poetry," in *John Cage: An Anthology*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: De Capo, 1991), 168.

<sup>xii</sup> See, for example, John Cage, *For the Birds: John Cage in Conversation with Daniel Charles* (Boston: Marion Boyers, 1981), 91, 148.

<sup>xiii</sup> John Cage, "Writing through *Howl*" (1986), in Richard Kostelanetz (ed.), *John Cage Writer: Previously Uncollected Pieces* (New York: Limelight, 1993), 165-76, see p. 166. For an earlier discussion of this extract from "Writing through *Howl*," see my "Poetry on the Brink," *Boston Review*, 37, no. 3 (May-June 2012), 64-65.

<sup>xiv</sup> Allen Ginsberg, "Howl," *Collected Poems 1947-80* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 126.

<sup>xv</sup> John Cage, Foreword, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (1961; Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 30.

<sup>xvi</sup> Marcel Duchamp, unsigned editorial: The Richard Mutt Case, *The Blind Man*, 2 (May 1917), 4-5. The text is reproduced in Calvin Tomkins, 185.

<sup>xvii</sup> For a discussion of the Jasper Johns piece, from a somewhat different perspective, see my "John Cage's Living Theatre," in *Against Theatre: Creative Destructions on the Modernist Stage*, ed. Alan Ackerman & Martin Puchner (New York: Palgrave 2006), 133-48.

<sup>xviii</sup> Cage, *Monday 79*; Jasper Johns, "Book A 1960," *Writings, Sketchbook notes, Interviews*, ed. Kirk Varnedoe (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1996), Plate 1 (p. 27), p. 49.

<sup>xix</sup> See Johns *Writings*, Plate 3 on p. 29, p. 50.

<sup>xx</sup> For Johns's "Avoid a polar situation," see Notebook 1964: "Beware of the body / & the mind. / Avoid a polar / situation. / think of the edge of the city

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& the traffic there" (*Writings* 56). Cf. Perloff, "The Music of Verbal Space: John Cage's "What You Say . . . ," in *Sound States: Innovative Poetics and Acoustical Technologies*, ed. Adalaide Morris (Chapel Hill: University Of North Carolina Press, 1997), 129-48.

<sup>xxi</sup> See David Revill, *The Roaring Silence, John Cage : A Life* (New York: Arcade, 1992), 49. Schoenberg's remark was, according to Cage, relayed to him by Peter Yates, so it is partially hearsay.

<sup>xxii</sup> For an earlier version of this discussion of "Mosaic," see *The Dance of the Intellect* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 63-69, where I relate Schoenberg's piece to Ezra Pound's memoir *Gaudier-Brzeska.s*

<sup>xxiii</sup> Arnold Schoenberg, *Letters*, ed. Erwin Stein, trans. Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser (1964; London: Faber and Faber, 1974), 25-26. In the Translator's Preface, Wilkins and Kaiser remind the reader that "German epistolary style is still and complicated by comparison with English, and has man formulae for which there is no English equivalent" (15). Accordingly, the letters, whether translated or, as happens in the late years, written in a stilted English, inevitably sound pretentious and bombastic to Anglo-American ears. The translators also note that "even now, long after the disappearance of the Hapsburg empire, Austrian society has remained very conscious of social hierarchy" (15).

<sup>xxiv</sup> John Hollander "Silence," *Perspectives of new Music*, 1, no. 2 (Spring 1963); rpt. in Richard Kostelanetz (ed.), *Writings about Cage* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 264-69; see p. 269.