Listening to Cage: Nonintentional philosophy and music

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Abstract: Listening to Cage: Nonintentional Philosophy and Music threads together the writings of ordinary language philosophy and the music of John Cage, responding specifically to requests made by Cage and Stanley Cavell. While many texts downplay or ignore the philosophical demands in Cage’s music and other texts find grandiose spiritual and philosophical material tied to his work, this text rejects both efforts. It challenges the basic directions of the growing secondary source material on Cage, finding it largely contrary to what Cage himself and his music teaches. That secondary material constantly offers an intentional approach to the music which is to make Cage understandable or easier to understand. The present text makes him appropriately difficult and basically unapproachable, asking the reader for serious acknowledgment of what Cage says he does, namely, “I have nothing to say and I am saying it.” While there is little hope of stopping the Cage industry that academia and publishers have grown, this text wishes at least to try to slow it down. The footnotes of this text include direct conversation material with Cage from the 1980s and 1990s regarding many subjects—his own compositions, our life struggles, remarks on Wittgenstein, Thoreau, philosophy, and music—all with a new context for their hearing.

Subjects: Music; Music & Philosophy; Philosophy; Philosophy of Language

Keywords: ordinary language philosophy; music; Wittgenstein; Cage; Cavell; Thoreau; nonintention; Interdisciplinary Humanities

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard Fleming is an ordinary language philosopher and author of books in philosophy and contemporary music, including The State of Philosophy, First Word Philosophy, and Evil and Silence. With the contemporary musician William Duckworth, he edited John Cage at Seventy-Five and Sound and Light: La Monte Young, Marian Zazeela. With the literary critic Michael Payne, he edited The Senses of Stanley Cavell. He regularly teaches philosophy and humanities courses, recently giving various seminars on Wittgenstein and Cavell at Duke University and Cage presentations for the Fusion Art Exchange, Northeastern University. Most recently, he was a contributor to John Cage Was by James Klosty and has completed a lengthy text titled Threads of Philosophy.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

John Cage. Listen then talk. While it might seem obvious that listening to music should come before talking about it, strangely that is often not the case with the music of John Cage. This text bases its discussion of Cage’s music on listening to some of his more prominent pieces, including the famous “silent piece”: 4′33″. The context for the discussion is philosophical reflections on sound and silence, emphasizing that Cage’s music demands a reflection on the conditions that make any piece of music and music itself possible. Listening to Cage’s music awakens our needs and interests in how we talk about music and our lives. This text finds affinities in Cage’s musical efforts in the writings of Thoreau and the philosophical investigations of Wittgenstein. It interweaves the work of these three individuals providing a constant variation in how we might talk about Cage and nonintentional philosophy and music.
Cage creates compositions and occasions of listening where our staying or leaving has already been prepared and given place, constructions that are independent of our expectations and intentions or desirous needs. Works that are thereby unapproachable.

**Foreword**

Herein discussed is “listening to ...”. The ellipsis is filled first with a specific piece of music by John Cage and then by “Cage.” These crossing threads are followed by the question “why listen to this?” (We might ask that question of many kinds and people of music. Some answers are: “It takes one away.” “It is enjoyable.” “It was on the program.” “There is no reason.” “She is important.” “He teaches me things.”) To talk about Cage’s music and to try to answer the “why” questions, I ask two other entwined questions: “what do we hear?” “what do we say about it?” I do not, in any primary way, concentrate on “how or why did Cage write it?”, “what was supposed to happen when?”, or “what did Cage want us to hear or do?” Each of these further purposeful questions is likely rather different from the first set, which alone have been enough to keep me preoccupied, and to which I shall stick. (Although admittedly the latter concerns do arise here-and-there—especially in the second part of the second section—and play a role not to be denied—particularly as the rungs on a ladder, as the dominant metaphor goes, but rungs and ladder that here are finally thrown aside.) I feel ruefully sure, also, that one must be at least one sort of fool to rush in over ground so well trodden by the musicians. At best, I can only hope to make a contribution to one part of the musical interest, where it seems that a little more patient industry still might be of service. Some will only wish it was a more central part. Reservations might also be voiced of the opening and founding expressions of nonintentional philosophy, “how could there even be such a thing?”, “is this all it comes to?”, “why not give such reflective energy to more traditional problems and work?”, but here at least the conditions of ordinary language philosophy, and my earlier efforts in “Threads of Philosophy,” provide direction and rough ground for what I say and do. (This inquiry is rightfully but a Part of the “Threads” text.1)

So I am led to consider in the following short number of pages what is said about what we hear when we listen to Cage’s music. Much depends, obviously, on the specific musical composition about which we ask the intertwined questions and there are many cases and concepts that I shall not cover at all. Those absent instances are left to the reader for continued investigation. I begin and end with Fontana Mix, a piece, upon hearing, which is liable to produce rather readily “why listen to this?” and the sort of composition that, at least sometimes, leaves us without an answer or without knowing how to answer such a sort of question. Fontana Mix may serve, therefore, as a case in point as well as any other. (While 4′33″ might seem the ideal or more obvious piece to do this exemplary work, it has been said to me, convincingly, that “because of its fame we are no longer these days quite so engaged or embattled by its listening.”)

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1. Threads of Philosophy I. Reading the Philosophical Investigations Remark by Remark II. Ordinary Studies: Conceptual Brackets—Textual Moments III. Listening to Cage: Nonintentional Philosophy and Music IV. Stirring The Claim of Reason V. Acknowledgments Indices Postscript (independently circulated text).
Many of the footnotes contain quotations from what was said during visits and talks with Cage (most from the 1980s to 1990s). In general, even while not doing so completely enough, I take myself out of these comments for reasons central to a nonintentional philosophy, and following the sage advise of my friend Bill Duckworth who stressed that it was well never to give the impression of being an authority or in possession of some special insight or circumstance regarding Cage. “There is always someone else who will have heard or experienced more, or something Cage has done you know nothing about” he said. (Along this line, Bill told the story (on himself) of his getting two tickets to one of the games of the 1990 Kasparov/Karpov World Chess Championship at the World Trade Center. He excitedly went to Cage to tell him of this and said he could come with him to watch the game if he wished. Bill said Cage shuffled a bit and said, “I think Kasparov is coming over this afternoon.”) The conversational descriptions and quotations of the footnotes are to serve the present text investigation and are not isolatable particulars; they do not purport to be unique or biographically noteworthy and, in fact, others have, in one way or another, quoted many of the comments before, although the context provided here is often very different. May that context be one of provocation.

So much for the cackle ... on to the dawning work at hand.
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Fontana Mix
Fontana Mix

1. Talk
This is John Cage’s Fontana Mix (1958)—Why would we listen to this? It is a chance-determined piece of 17 minutes of material, to be used in any time length, consisting of a multitude of sounds ordered and coordinated within a variety of time units, all of which are established by a rather strange tool of composition, with the sounds spliced and mixed on magnetic tape. The following illustration (Figure 1) shows one instance of the tool or manual for creation of the work.

These building blocks of paper sheets and transparencies inscribed with points, lines, and grid were used to create, for performance, two stereo or four single-track tapes of mixed sounds. Cage says the piece can be played alone or in conjunction and simultaneous with other pieces like his Aria or Song Books. The elements and material of creation for Fontana Mix can also be used to determine time-brackets for creating works “not limited to tape music.”

1.1. Discord
What are we to make of Fontana Mix? Why listen to it? What do we hear? What are we to say about it? Many of the voices surrounding it are decidedly negative.

junkyard of noises gurgles grunts screeches no musical worth scrap heap of taped sounds common world din tormenting jarring slices mocking cacophony waste of time drably depressing sadly lacking desperate disagreeable clatter truly intolerable

2. Sounds of Fontana Mix—city, country, electronic, instrumental, wind (e.g. singing), and “small” sounds (amplification needed, e.g. crickets chirping).
Having listened to the piece and heard these expressions of negation, what might we say about *Fontana Mix* and about listening to Cage?

The distress heard in talk about *Fontana Mix* is readily found in much of the talk of Cage’s music with many of the specific complaints transferring easily to his music in general.3 We find the broader sensitivities wrapped in or closely woven with the particular instances. Regarding his corpus of work, dissention is regularly voiced with a general dissonance of tone. Some people have been inclined to say (I have heard people say as they leave a performance): “John you are important to me but I cannot listen to the noise you inflict on us.” Or: “I don’t know what this is supposed to be about but I will not listen to any more.” Or “this is the worst kind of squallor of sounds that can be imagined.”4 Certainly, Cage’s work created and creates much controversy and discord. Some have replied or responded to the general or specific critical voices, saying: “Listening is not supposed to be easy … it takes practice. Stretch the ears and be patient.” Others have said: “Try to find value in what may at first seem only to hold confusion and negation.” It is often stressed that: “The failings that you note may be yours and not his.” To the dissonant voices, there is always to be found a counterbalancing voice of retort.5

One of the recurring conflicts in talk about Cage is often presented as that between his music and his ideas (or his philosophy). Although such an enforced dichotomy is almost inevitably used early on in talk and writings about Cage, it can be quite misleading, and it has produced important disagreements in the ways we listen to, talk about, and write about Cage’s work. There tend to be two somewhat extreme sides on this issue: one says, they “can’t stand his music but his ideas are important,” (implying that while his ideas are significant and maybe lasting, his music is not) and the other asserts, “Cage was first and foremost a composer, not a philosopher, and to concentrate on his ideas is to demean and devalue his compositions.” James Pritchett has usefully reanimated this discussion and overlays his wonderful text, *The Music of John Cage*, with the controversy. He insists in his various writings that Cage be treated as a composer and that attempts to make him a philosopher simply undermine understanding him. How much of a philosopher, after all, says Pritchett, are these people who claim Cage is a philosopher? An interesting question to be sure. It is true that we find mention of the pre-Socratics or Existentialism or Phenomenology or Heraclitus or Wittgenstein or Heidegger, etc. in writings about Cage. But this is often philosophical reference at its weakest—take passages out of philosophical texts and allow them to illustrate or serve whatever purpose you presently have in mind in talking about Cage. Looking at the written material, it is hard basically not to sympathize with Pritchett. He is, however, quite uncompromising here and writes, “it has been stated on various occasions by various authorities that Cage was more a philosopher than a composer, that his ideas were more interesting than his music.” However, “Cage-as-philosopher is … an image

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3. It is a distress that followed Cage. Several people visited him in the late 80s and showed him some of what was written (recently?) about *Fontana Mix*. They told him that it had upset many listeners. “And these people were upset with people being upset with it”, laughed Cage. “What was said about it?” he was asked. “It was all very negative,” he said. Have you “ever seen the materials of the piece” and he showed the tools of composition and asked: “now how could this lead to that reaction? Where does the negation and distress come from? It is not the sounds that are at fault but us. We need to change ourselves, let our desperation go.” Can we not say “why we would listen to it?”.

4. There are, of course, many variations on the theme with general denouncements fairly common: “The many chance- created pieces are no longer music.” “I like the early prepared-piano pieces but not much after that.” “His hard work and dedication are not to be denied, but the results of those efforts are very inconsistent.” (cf. the discussions of Cage by Pierre Boulez, John Rockwell, Richard Taruskin.)

5. One is reminded here of a similar criticism often made generally against existentialist philosophy. It is said to be full of negation and obsessed with the darker and unpleasant sides of life. One only needs to list some of the titles of texts associated with existentialism and the point seems readily made. *[The Stranger*, *Being and Nothingness*, *A Happy Death*, *Second Sex*, *Demos*, *The Concept of Dread*, *Notes from Underground*, *The Rebel*, *The Anti-Christ*, *No Exit*, *Fear and Trembling*, *Crime and Punishment*, *The Plague*, *Wretched of the Earth*, *Sickness unto Death*, *Nausea*, and *House of the Dead.*] But the sense of using such negation to awaken us to action and overcome passivity is not to be missed. Death and suffering will not allow our ignoring them and they force an active engagement of the world that we must embrace. Replacing complaints of “obsession with negation” with “cacophony and squallor of sounds” makes the parallel thought with Cage readily apparent and the similar emphasis (criticism and reply) perspicuous.
that will not bear close scrutiny” and so he admonishes us to return to what he says is “the obvious: Cage was a composer” (Pritchett, 1993, pp. 1–3). Not everyone, on the other hand, agrees or holds the position with such rigidity. Richard Kostelanetz, a formidable author whose thinking and writings on Cage are extensive, constantly useful, and always valuable to return to, does not fully join Pritchett here. He most certainly tolerates and does think of Cage and his music as having philosophical importance and while never diminishing the music, he quite often makes references to Cage’s esthetic ideas and social philosophy. He finds the connection of the music and the concepts to be a broad and involved affair, and is hardly willing to reject in total a philosophical attitude in understanding and listening to Cage.6

While the division of music and ideas permeates much of the writing and talk about Cage, it does not settle itself easily. One may need to distinguish Cage as a philosopher from philosophical elements in Cage’s music. However, in a more tautological and grammatical vein, it is difficult not to agree that without a healthy dose of listening to Cage and experiencing numerous of his compositions, one is not in a very good position to talk significantly about his work. It is not hard to accept that one should listen to the music before one tries to talk meaningfully about it (this may seem obvious, but is not so in discussion about Cage). But it may be worth remembering, and this is what unsettles efforts at a simple solution, that talk about the music likely has already placed itself in a context of philosophical moment. Let me expand this thought.

Philosophy’s all but unappeasable reflections on itself are bound to seem comic to those who have not felt such yearning. As though instead of simply going north as we were told to do to achieve our proper ends, we insist on carefully and with full measure going northwest, and then being surprised that nothing has been accomplished and that one is disoriented. (“It is a colossal waste of time living on confusions.”) Philosophy’s extreme tolerance of self-reflection can seem absurdly self-defeating. Nonetheless, taking the condition of oneself, of one’s talk and action, one’s own possibilities as a primary aspiration is a way to survive when nothing else seems to do. To those who have felt philosophical desire, it may seem frightening, and they may well come to hate and fear it and avoid it, for the step after that desire is to yield to the reflections, and then you are endlessly lost. No steps seem of worth and staying in place has a new attraction. For some time now (50, 100, and 200 years), music has made us feel this yearning of self-reflection, and more recently has done so through heightened attention to the use of what variously has been called source texts, preliminary workings, and precompositional assumptions. Music has come rather inevitably to encourage reflection upon itself—as though the condition of philosophy were its natural condition and composers, maybe unwittingly, have assumed the condition of philosophy. The discipline of philosophy could become almost joyful, in this regard, with the noting of such particulars, as it takes in the joke and accepts the facts that sit uneasy on the head of the proud, autonomous, contemporary musician. But the ironic or bemused smile, if there be such, is short lived, for continued reflection makes one aware that both disciplines may now be lost. Within such a state, why would we listen to either?

So, coming to agree in general terms with those who stress a preference for listening over talking and to taking, thereby, a stand against many a picture of Cage as philosopher seems tolerable. But, unfortunately, sensibly stating such a position requires talk and meaning and opening questions

6. For just one instance of the interweaving of music and ideas, see his marvelous text: Conversing With Cage, table of contents, and passim. Other relevant and noteworthy authors are omitted here, three of which (author and a main topic of concern) I will only inadequately mention: Kyle Gann (4′33″, Silence), Rob Haskins (Number Pieces, anarchism), and Laura Kuhn (Europeras 1&2, chance). The Cage secondary source written-material is understandably large and allows a wide range of approaches to his music and to talk about him and the connected ideas. The best of it has produced an excitement that likely would not have arisen without the printed materials and a provocation that allows the reader to finish the described experience and moments of listening in their own way. There seems no reason to think this purposeful way of writing and advancing Cage thought will not continue, although the current text might slow it down.
about words and sounds, standard philosophical material, and hence does not easily allow for an acceptable rejection of all connected philosophical worth or thinking in Cage’s music. That is to say, in a further reflective sense, the position does not finally leave one satisfied, for it simply overstates the point and fails to reflect fully on how making the point can be done meaningfully and how such questions of meaning and talk naturally emerge from listening to Cage. (Standard philosophical reflection on how we do and say what we do undermines this type of overgeneralization.) Additionally, misuse of philosophy does not mean there is no philosophical importance to Cage. There is, after all, a reason why there is such a stress on Cage’s ideas and why people say what they do about him and his music. If one ignores or downplays the philosophy in Cage’s work, then one is apt to miss questions and reflections embodied in the music which are capable of producing valuable thoughts about the nature of sound and provocations about how we live our lives, important parts of Cage’s interest. Cage’s music encourages a reshaping of the questions we ask about music, our world, ourselves, and that is a philosophical enterprise. (It will take us most of this investigation to clarify and make understandable this claim.) Sound and ideas are profusely entwined and their separation is not something we can be fully confident about. The discipline and efforts of philosophy can benefit from listening to Cage just as much as musicians can benefit from awareness and talk about the concepts, limits, and grammar of music.

1.2. Threads
Ordinary language philosophy is a philosophical stance that resists musical efforts, and all comparable efforts, which allow or encourage questions that remove specific content in favor of general concerns such as: Does music have meaning? Is it a universal language? Is it ineffable? Does it reveal understandings nothing else can? ... As if meaning is something outside of the human, to be found and revealed, or as if our language is something conventional and flawed that we can escape or overcome or move beyond with musical efforts. As if music can give understanding that transcends or stands outside our ordinary existence. Such concepts and phrases as: unsayable, otherworldly, beyond rational thought, outside all senses, indefinable, spiritual, heavenly, transcendent, of a higher meaning, an ideal, an oasis, diverting, distracting, a respite ... these expressions are not uncommon in some contexts of talk about music. They are language uses that tempt us to a higher meaning and a universal, spiritual realm, which music taps or opens to us or to which we can escape. For all of their apparent attraction, however, these words and phrases are the kinds of language use that are challenged by ordinary language philosophers, like J.L. Austin. His early, 1940, essay “The Meaning of a Word” begins with the contrast of sense and nonsense—of particularity and generality.

Specimens of Sense
1. 1. What-is-the-meaning-of (the word) “rat”?  
1. 11. What-is-the-meaning-of (the word) “word”?  
1. 21. What is a “rat”?  
1. 211. What is a “word”?  
1. 22. What is the “muzzle” of a rat?  
2. 1. What-is-the-meaning-of (the phrase) “What-is-the-meaning-of”?  
2. 11. What-is-the-meaning-of (the sentence) “What-is-the-meaning-of (the word) ‘x’”?  

Specimens of Nonsense
1. 1. What-is-the-meaning-of a word?  
1. 11. What-is-the-meaning-of any word?  
1. 12. What-is-the-meaning-of a word in general?  
1. 21. What is the-meaning-of-a-word?  
1. 211. What is the-meaning-of (the-word)-“rat”?  
1. 22. What is the “meaning” of a word?  
1. 221. What is the “meaning” of (the word) “rat”?
2. 1. What-is-the-meaning-of (the phrase) “the-meaning-of-a word”?

2. 11. What-is-the-meaning-of (the sentence) “What is the-meaning-of-(the-word)-‘x’?”?

2. 12. What-is-the-meaning-of (the sentence) “What is the ‘meaning’ of ‘the word’ ‘x’?”?

We must be on our guard, says Austin, against asking about “Nothing-in-particular.” For example, take “the case of ‘reality’—we try to pass from such questions as ‘How would you distinguish a real rat from an imaginary rat?’ to ‘What is a real thing?,’ a question which merely gives rise to nonsense.” Similarly, hard and fast logical categories of “either this or that” (p v ~p) are generally empty and misleading in ordinary use. Freedom from such generality “may encourage us to consider again what the facts in their actual complexity really are.” Without a particular, rule-governed context of use there will be no meaning: The “reason why I cannot say ‘The cat is on the mat and I do not believe it’ is not that it offends against syntactics in the sense of being in some way ‘self-contradictory’. What prevents my saying it, is rather some semantic convention (implicit, of course), about the way we use words in situations.”7

It is difficult, therefore, to engage in meaningful talk of the more general kind about music (it is ineffable or transcendent or beyond all words), as this seems to empty the questions of specific content and context. We are not sure in these general cases what would even count as an answer or understanding. (Yes, No, I feel that too?) Such “great” and abstract questions and claims of music are constantly in danger of being senseless, of losing any context of use, and are those forms of expression Austin constantly cautioned us to be alert to and often to avoid.8

In a manner similar to Austin, the contemporary ordinary language philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein stresses that for “a large class of cases” involving the word “meaning,” it “can be explained” by saying “the meaning of a word is its use in the language.”9 Meaning is not something found in some mental operations or tied to our personal intentions or subjective efforts, but is discovered in the actual uses of our words. What is the context of talk of our concern and how do we use the words of interest? It is in answer to these questions that meaning will be determined. This is not to say there are no general concerns interwoven with the particulars of use. In our extended, philosophical efforts, we concentrate not on empirical facts, this particular use, or uncovering new discoveries and truths of language (our considerations are not scientific ones) but on the grammar of use, the possibilities of this one. We examine the broad sea of different uses and “workings of our language.” But we do not try to “advance any kind of theory” about these uses. Explanation “must disappear, and description alone must take its place.”

There will be nothing easy in this descriptive effort, as there is an “urge to misunderstand” and overly generalize the workings of language. The great multiplicity and diversity of uses of language feeds the drive and the desire for finding that which is the hidden, simple, and beyond. But that is

7. (Austin, “The meaning of a word,” 1979, p. 55, 58, 65, 64). Regarding simple logical structures of the world: “Can I think of a case where a man would be neither at home nor not at home? This is inhibiting, because I think of the ordinary case where I ask ‘Is he at home?’ and get the answer ‘No’: when certainly he is not at home. But supposing I happen first to think of the situation when I call on him just after he has died: then I see at once it would be wrong to say either” (p. 68). Austin will marvelously bring the situational differences and uses of such similar concepts as “accident” and “mistake” to our attention: “You have a donkey, so have I, and they graze in the same field. The day comes when I conceive a dislike for mine. I go to shoot it, draw a bead on it, fire: the brute falls in its tracks. I inspect the victim, and find to my horror that it is your donkey. I appear on your doorstep with the remains and say—what? ‘I say, old sport, I’m awfully sorry, &c., I’ve shot your donkey by accident’? Or ‘by mistake’? Then again, I go to shoot my donkey as before, draw a bead on it, fire—but as I do so, the beasts move, and to my horror yours falls. Again the scene on the doorstep—what do I say? ‘By mistake’? Or ‘by accident’?” (Austin, “A plea for excuses,” 1979, p. 185, fn. 1).

8. Why do we so talk? Two possibilities come readily to mind. A grammatical fiction that all words are names (too limited a view of language use) and asking for more when we have done all we can (not accepting finitude) are important reasons for consideration (cf. Austin, 1979, p. 61).

9. Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations (PI), #43.
what ordinary language philosophy resists. “Philosophy is a struggle against the bewitchment of our understanding by the resources of our language.”

Our very talk here, in fact, in stressing a “particular” use can mislead if it is taken already to enjoin or impose talk of universals. (Philosophical teaching often invokes problems about the status of particulars and universals.) For it is not particulars in such a sense of which we speak, but instances and examples of use (workings of language) with which we are concerned.

So, part of the difficulty we face in talking as we have traditionally about music, or as we often find talk about music, is the clash of such talk with the contemporary efforts of ordinary language philosophy and its’ persuasive sense of meaning as use—the need to talk and act within a particular context of concern in order for meaning anything at all to be possible. Our emphasis needs to be on the threaded nature (use) of word and world, not on their separateness and proper recombination or on some hidden real meaning beyond our specific talk that will reveal a special understanding. Language that tries to break out of contexts of use or be outside contexts of specific use and seeks that is hidden and beyond is threatened with or full of emptiness. It is an effort at mystical expression not musical meaning.

To be sure, it is not an effort easy to resist or without depth. Wittgenstein, himself, did so succumb in his early work, the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, and later admitted such and came to reassess it in his Philosophical Investigations. He remarks that it was for mystical effort as much as anything else that he started the Tractatus with the proposition: “1. The world is all that is the case.” A wonderful and glorious first sentence, and an effort at wonder and mysticism about the world that is readily undermined if instead we talk not of “the world” but, as he will stress in the Philosophical Investigations, of “shopping for five red apples,” or “this tree,” or “this chair.” Replacing “the world is all that is the case” and beginning the Tractatus with “1. There is a tree in my backyard” rather readily reduces the feeling of mysticism.

10. Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations (PI), #109.

11. Paraphrasing Wittgenstein in the Philosophical Investigations (#97): we are under the illusion that what is peculiar, profound, and essential to us in our investigation resides in its trying to grasp the incomparable essence of music. That is, we want to find the order or reason existing between concepts like meaning, music, significance, listening, value, nonverbal, and unsayable. This order is treated as a super order between, so to speak, super concepts. But, in fact, if the words “music,” “meaning,” “non-verbal,” “non-rational,” “universal,” and “transcendent” have a use, it must be as humble a one as that of the words “table,” “house,” “day,” “squeak,” and “chair.” (We speak not of “the world” but of “this chair.”—Not of “the meaning and universality of music” but of “Fontana Mix.”) Compare the following two lists regarding the 24 August 2013 live performance at the KKL by Abbado and the Lucerne Festival Orchestra of the Schubert “Unfinished” and Bruckner 9 (the first from the Guardian’s Tom Service and the second my own):

- New levels absolutely everything spiritual experience distilled gossamer communication genuinely spiritual
- Music-making ethereal beauty intense interior journey somewhere beyond disembodied hyperreal other state of being visions of the beyond // stillness wholeness life-affirming lolly-level embracing sound memory evoking breathless tearful welling lasting reserved intensity.

While quite ready to embrace the unfettered emotion of Service’s words, their/his push to “visions of the beyond” leaves me cold. Another mystical presence, by the way, could be added here to Service’s comments by noting that both Bernstein and Abbado, after a decade of reinvestigating Mahler, return in their last efforts of life to Bruckner’s 9th. Just think of the possibilities of talk here: unfinished last ending dying body soul rest silence leaving … The otherworldly push could even and enticingly note that memorial concerts for both began with performances without conductor (Candide Overture for Bernstein and Schubert Unfinished, first movement, for Abbado), with the podium physically empty but imaginatively and spiritually full. The mystical can usually turn the ordinary toward itself.

12. Think of other first sentences and possible companions that may do this: Call me Ishmael (My name is Bob), In the beginning, God created heaven and earth (Tom planted the garden). It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking 13 (Yesterday we fixed our clocks … or so we thought). It was the best of times, it was the worst of times … (This day is confusing).

In collected and rejected notes posthumously published as “Remarks on Frazer’s Golden Bough,” Wittgenstein writes: “For back then, when I began talking about the ‘world’ (and not about this tree or table), what else did I want but to keep something higher spellbound in my words?” (Wittgenstein, 1993, p. 117).
The tug and temptation of a mystical, hidden reality and meaning can be strong, says Wittgenstein, but is best treated as superstition, an undue respect for the extraordinary, and is to be resisted.\textsuperscript{13} Meaning is not something outside humans waiting to be discovered, but is found within the uses of language, threaded in the particular contexts of language use. So, when talking of music and ideas and meaning, and music and existence and world, following Wittgenstein and Austin, it is best to work from the inside out, from the particulars of use, and present not the distance and discord of our lives, but the richly woven harmonious character of language and music by talking of specific experiences and examples of musical composition and particular talk of such works.

It is useful to add one further ordinary language philosophy consideration when thinking about much of our talk of music. Accompanying the possible emptying of the content of speech to a nothingness of generality, it might be said that treating music as the portal to some ineffable, hidden, mystical place, as an oasis of tranquility, as Schopenhauer says, to do this is not just making an effort at capturing a higher meaning beyond our limited, instances of use, but it may also be to reinforce a fear that our common world, the world of: this tree, this sound, this city, is uninhabitable or becoming so. It may be to stress we need an oasis, a diversion, and a distraction away from the world we daily inhabit just to be able to continue to live in it. This is a fear that may be very well founded. At least one that many can accept without much reflection. The ordinary world does not easily allow us to be part of it (given the multitude of pain, suffering, and evil that confronts us). This stress and reminder of the fact of evil might show existentialist influences and leanings in our thinking about our contemporary lives and the music we hear (and that should not be denied), but it also most certainly shows a Stanley Cavell interest and developing discussion. (Cavell being a third defining member of twentieth century ordinary language philosophy—the WAC trio.) The words and sentiment of “the growing uninhabitability of the world” and our “fear” of its reality and of the pollution and evil of the world are Cavell’s.\textsuperscript{14} Do we fear that the common world of our everyday lives is uninhabitable, that our ordinary lives are in need of a higher, other-worldly meaning, and that in order even to exist day by day, we need to find reprieve and sanctuaries and oases in places and activities like music, and thus find our musical place of refuge often ruined or mocked or threatened by the, nonintentional, sounds of the common world?\textsuperscript{15}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{13} Just as Wittgenstein finds he goes too far toward the mesmerizing with “The world is all that is the case,” so Cage will also acknowledge that he “went too far” when recting the claim, on several occasions, that “music quiets and sober[s] the mind making it susceptible to divine influences.” The first half of the sentence seems tolerable while the second pushes too far and into emptiness.
  \item \textsuperscript{14} Cavell, “The fact of television,” 1988, p. 267. Cage remarked that he had heard Cavell speak and liked him very much. “He is a poet?” When told that Cavell was a “philosopher,” Cage said “No, he is a poet.” Again told he was a “philosopher at Harvard”, Cage said “He struck me as a poet. He is a poet.” When informed of this conversation, Cavell smiled puzzlingly and said he “was happy to accept the marker from Cage.”
  \item \textsuperscript{15} Mahler’s Ninth (A story): The first night of three concerts (November 2007), with Simon Rattle and the Berlin Philharmonic at Carnegie Hall. This initial night included the Mahler Ninth symphony. Expectations were high, with a sold-out house on an unseasonably warm night. Extraordinarily, at the end of the first movement, Rattle waits a bit longer than normal and then interrupts the performance, steps off the podium, and turns to the audience and says: Please help us with the “magic of silence” that is this music. “These help,” he says, and he shows his own handkerchief that he has pulled from inside his coat. “Please use yours and muffle your coughs.” And there was, to be sure, a fair amount of coughing and noise during the first (30 min) movement. His appeal here was, of course, to preserve, in particular, the silences of the last movement that lay (an hour) ahead. And this is where the true “magic” occurred. Something no one expected or rehearsed happened. When Rattle reaches the last page of the last movement, the audience is almost completely silent. They have indeed done their job. And he slowly counts away the strings and fibers of sound and the silences of the end. But from afar—outside of Carnegie—comes the wailing of sirens (ambulances or police cars or fire engines racing up 7th Avenue), which increases in sound and fills the hall. Rattle remains in place on the podium and the orchestra players do not move. The sirens noise gets louder and then slowly recedes. At least 12 seconds of sound before it ends, and Rattle continues to count, keeping the orchestra and audience in place, until nothing inside or outside is easily heard and then he drops his arms and ends. The applause and frowns follow. “Cage!” I immediately shout. It was an amazing moment of chance and of all the sounds we don’t intend (Cage’s definition of silence realized), with Rattle either knowingly choosing or being forced to conduct the outside world “after” “concurrently with” the Mahler Ninth. Many in the audience felt the piece was “ruined.” One reviewer (James Oestreich—NYT) wrote that the outside sounds “mocked” Rattle’s speech and efforts at silence and general performance. It, of course, could have been heard that way, as something that mocked or ruined. But it also was an experience that was absolutely uncanny yet bound. The ebbing silence, the death-filled resignation, of Mahler’s 9th, was turned (around) by the Cagean silence of “all we do not intend.” Being threatened or broken by (losing) the world (Mahler’s Ninth) was turned into being filled with all the sounds of the world (Cagean silence).

When these events were described to Cavell the next day, he said: “to write like Mahler you have to be open to the depth of chance in all events, at any moment.” He encouraged a discussion of “ruined.” “Can’t that be done?”.
\end{itemize}
1.3. Description
Efforts at general pronouncements about music or anything else must be mindful of being founded and grounded within the human condition of the finitude, limits, and diversity of language uses. Music can be uncanny, but to be meaningful it must be bound. The extraordinary is grounded in the ordinary. There is no extraordinary without the ordinary. How does one then do one’s reflective work when trying to achieve something general and broadly meaningful? We can either be silent, letting the content of concern stand and speak for or show itself (a much better solution than we might wish to accept—but it is rather hard for academics and kin, false and true experts, especially philosophers, to leave no traces, to do so little) or we can provide examples (examples of use), describe, and speak of the plain facts of language use, speak of the possibilities and contexts of use, and allow our general concerns to find their place connected to or within such talk.16—in ethics, for instance, this might be to follow Thoreau (attending to our neighborhoods, to small pockets of value and responsibility); in social matters, it may well mean struggling with Fanon or Camus (attending to the rebellious individual, I rebel therefore we exist); in concerns with drama and theater, it probably would demand reading O’Neill (asking whether we mean what we say, finding boundaries and illusions); and in music, this could require taking note of Cage (attending to nonintentional sounds and listening to silence). Granted, this redirection of interest and struggle with instances of use and the ordinary conditions of our talk and action might take some new schooling, new training, and learning. But as Cavell stresses: in the light and context of ordinary language and its importance, “philosophy becomes the education of grownups.” (Cavell, 1979, p. 125). In a less rigorous but possibly more familiar occasion, consider and contrast an effort at or understanding of a textual reading that proceeds, for instance, step by step, word by word, with that standing outside or beyond the text. By teaching with textual examples, instance by instance, we then allow another to see what is to be learned by their own efforts. We do not force them to learn by means of definitions, or tyranny of personality, or laws of being.17 A good teacher must know when to stop and be willing to stop and stand away and let the student go on on their own.18

16. “Within” is a word open to confusion in this context, as though hidden within could be meant, whereas “connected to” or maybe “functions of one another” or “threaded with” “overlapping with” are probably less open to misunderstanding. “Within” would seem to need to be followed by “threaded with”, or a similar phrase, in order to avoid confusion, e.g. a sense of working within, threaded with, language use. “Synthesis” might be tempting here but would be mistaken since it supposes a separation that is overcome or recombined rather than a threaded harmony that serves as a granted condition of possibility for what we say and do.

17. Wittgenstein’s remarks on James Jeans’ book, The Mysterious Universe resonate here. “These books which attempt to popularize science are an abomination. They pander to people’s curiosity to be titillated by the wonders of science without having to do any of the really hard work involved in understanding what science is about. Now a good book is one like Faraday’s The Chemical History of a Candle. Faraday takes a simple phenomenon like a burning candle, and shows how complicated a process it really is. All the time, he demonstrates what he is saying with detailed experiments ….” (Jeans, 1930, p. 132 Drury conversations in Recollections, ed. Rhees) A similar attitude can be voiced regarding listening to Cage. Replacing science with music in the quotation almost finishes the point. Efforts at making listening to Cage easy or approachable (easy to talk about) are generally abominable or at least demonstrate “artistic differences.” Just think of the implications of the following voice of comfort given to concert goers considering listening to Cage. Music for Four:

18. cf. Threads of Philosophy I, Appendix VI.
It is often useful to simplify and clarify our threads of use by concentrating on a single or restricted or more primitive use. By, as it were, untying the complex fibers and isolating a particular thread. Such efforts do not provide hidden insights into our materials of concern, but rather provide objects of comparison through similarities and dissimilarities with other lines of note. They are not to remain or stand-alone but to throw light on features of our language or objects of investigation. Efforts at simplicity and simpler understanding may help us in many ways, but it is an endeavor that loses meaning, some of the uses, of what is of original interest. Our susceptibility, under the pressures of thought, to forget such loss and to misunderstand is fought by description of what is rather than explanation or theory or pursuit of simpler, hidden realities. A linguistic phenomenology produces a landscape and background of data that can assist in the asking of questions and reminders of the contextual limits of meaningful work.

We must not in our talk of music, whatever we do, be misled into concluding that music is some indefinable experience, but instead concentrate on what we say about our experiences and making clear how we compare and identify musical experiences. We must describe and collect the data of

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19. These are etudes VI and VII from a set of twenty-one. The complete set is found in Threads of Philosophy II.

20. cf. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, #130 “Our clear and simple language-games are not preliminary studies for a future regimentation of language ... Rather the language-games stand there as objects of comparison which, through similarities and dissimilarities, are meant to throw light on features of our language.” And #5 “It disperses the fog if we study the phenomena of language in primitive kinds of use in which one can clearly survey the purpose and functioning of the words.”

21. Elaboration on the methods of ordinary language philosophy can be found in First Word Philosophy, pp. 95–101 and passim. Descriptive particulars for the Ordinary Language Philosophy source materials of this investigation can be found in Appendix II.
interest and use, not trying to explain or give a theory but asking what conditions, what allowances for the workings of language, make possible what we say and do. The sounds we hear, however they came to be, by whatever effort or biographical force, stand as they are and have a worth in listening to them in and of themselves. Listening to the sounds of musical work allows for meaningful talk we would otherwise likely not have (it provides a place for subjects to be or for contexts of use and meaning). This is, to be sure, a tautological point without reflective challenge or thereby great interest, but then nothing said here is forcing an involvement with disagreement.

So, to talk of Cage’s music: listen to the sounds and thereby make it possible to compare experiences by talking with others of what you hear, of that to which you have listened. Listen then talk. Talk not of what you know or think of Cage but provide the linguistic data of what you then can or will say about a particular piece of music. Don’t say “this is my theory,” but rather ask “how do our experiences compare?” Pay attention to the linguistic phenomenology: collect the data and describe what is said. Listen and then ask or listen to what is said. What words are now said about what we hear and what words are brought to mind? The linguistic phenomenology here is not just what we say we physically hear—boom bang clarinets c-major—but what we then (are brought to) say (by the context of listening)—fast pleasant recognition soaring. Don’t get lost in general abstractions: Is there a contrast between actual sounds heard with what we say we hear? Do we hear more exactly when young than old, in the morning than at night? Don’t worry about mistakes. If there is some question about a word or phrase include it in the data for discussion, for it can later be removed. Listen and then collect the data of talk.

What do we hear and what do we say?

2. Listen–Talk

2.1 Credo in US

- tin cans
- piano
- tom-tom
- phonograph records
- radio
- other composer’s music
- Shostakovich
- gongs
- percussion
- hammering rhythmic energy
- interruptions
- stoppings
- overlapping
crisscrossing sounds
- electric buzzer
- scratches

2.2 Sonatas and Interludes

- altered piano
- pleasingly unusual intimacy
- tranquility
- quiet
- unfamiliar
- familiar
- multiple parts
- settled
- unsettled sounds
- relaxed instrument
- striking intense
- muted beauty
- ongoing in place

2.3 Suite for Toy Piano

- accepting limited tones
- beam delight
- breaking assumptions
- virtuoso expression
- white keys simplicity
- clarity
- vitality of rhythms
- joyous
- affirming reverberations
- surprising effects
- impressions

- 4’33”

- piano
- silence
- sounds unattended
- world self
- disaffirming
- affirming
- threads
- inner outer
- expectation
- three movements
- confusion
- active involvement
- questioning
- acceptance
- open
- encompassing
- embracing

2.4 Music of Changes

- short piano episodes
- variable note disconnections
- unexpected loud soft
- confusions
- strenuous demands
- jarring
- strings plucked
- lid slams
- impatient compliance
- tolerance
- wonder
- patience
- release

2.5 Speech

- newsreader
- five radios
- seated stationary
- reading
- radios
- movement carried
- walking
- timed tuning
- volume on-off
- varied
- changed
- sounds
- far near
- broadcast stations
- voices
- music
- static
- indeterminate
- changing moments
Fontana Mix
mixed diverse confusing sounds tape electronic various guttural grunts growls amplification voices human nonhuman increasing identifications abrupt broken noises discontinuity thumps pleasant free-for-all

Atlas Eclipticalis
points of sound discrete notes eerie dissonances unpredictable timings large orchestra amplified moments unknown sound forest playful open field joyful outbursts soft loud long short sidelong snaps rumbles squeaks aroused curiosity

Song Books
voices amplification electronic variations theatre not singing singing doing performance abundant diverse materials humor Satie confusions simultaneous mixed happenings rules form absent Thoreau no government at all

Roaratorio, an Irish Circus on Finnegans Wake
sound collections thick deep mishmash reading taped voices nature animals children crowded places happenings Irish folk music performers instruments joyous festival abundant scratches cuts scrapes forms of life

Europeras 1&2
swirling operatic bits pieces other’s operas new contexts time place singers instrumentalists recordings arrays layers on layers dense multiplicity classic fragments rubble phrase slivers recognized pleasing moments

I–VI
readings out loud multiple quotations voices source texts split spliced unheard concepts complex challenges simplicity cravings sense other’s words smiles pockets of ideas repetitions unclear limited increasing recognitions identifications

103
single tones orchestral mixing integration anticipation string tension little release discrete winds brass subtle free expression interwoven lines lengthy exhausting unrelenting accepting

Seventy-Four
sustained sounds instrumental high low single notes overlapping coinciding small differences pitch rhythm orchestral journeys tranquil spatial intensity independent absorbing moments unbounded bounded

2.1. PercussionQuietingIndeterminacyAbundanceDensityTimeBrackets
Wanting to say more than broken phrases and appended descriptions of what we hear is most probably asking for a way to approach listening to Cage. To feel disappointment and insufficiency in such nonexplanatory talk (voices, unpredictable, edgy repetition, two pianos, and no conductor) is to ask for a methodological advance of inquiry. Accordingly, I will say that there is no approach to it, anyway I have none. Approach suggests moving nearer, getting closer; hence suggests we know some orderly direction to it not already taken within it; that we sense some distance between us and it, which useful criticism and reasonable, repeated method could close. Such attempts at so talking of “listening to Cage,” while quite standard, place us on the brink of misunderstanding and losing the

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22. Descriptive details for the Cage source materials of this investigation can be found in Appendix I.
words and works at hand (this has yet to be made fully clear). Leaving myself, then, without an approach, I find only a scratch or thump (maybe the sounds of the music of other’s) from which to start. I know, of course, that others under the demands of thought want and ask for more.

Historical ordering and rational organization of Cage's compositions, of what we hear, is not an unexpected or unhelpful endeavor. It is a common and repeated effort found in most discussions that aim to clarify and make amenable Cage's music. We are often encouraged and taught to understand an individual and ourselves by such chronological organization. That teaching and resultant longing might be partially satisfied here, in Cage’s case, with the imposition of an outside structure like the following.

| Year    | Title                          |
|---------|--------------------------------|
| 1939    | Imaginary Landscape No. 1      |
| 1942    | Credo in Us                    |
| 1946–48 | Sonatas and Interludes         |
| 1948    | Suite for Toy Piano            |
| 1948–52 | 4′33″                          |
| 1951    | Music of Changes               |
| 1952–53 | Williams Mix                   |
| 1955    | Speech                         |
| 1958    | Fontana Mix                    |
| 1962    | 0′00″                          |
| 1961–62 | Atlas Eclipticalis              |
| 1967–69 | HPSCHD                         |
| 1970    | Song Books                     |
| 1974–75 | Etudes Australes               |
| 1979    | Roaratorio                     |
| 1985–87 | Europeras 1&2                  |
| 1988–89 | 1–VI                           |
| 1977–80/89–90 | Freeman Etudes |
| 1991    | 103                            |
| 1992    | Seventy-Four                   |

How long such a commanding framework remains useful may depend on how long one continues or needs to continue talk about Cage. The longer one works at such talk, the less useful such impositions tend to become and the more lacking in sense and worth the external reductions and simplifications become. (How quiet are the various Sonatas and Interludes? How different is the indeterminacy of Speech and Atlas Eclipticalis? What are the actual dates and origins of 4′33″ or of the Freeman Etudes?) But of course, in lieu of silence, one has to start talking somewhere and place one’s footing on some kind of (however unsteady and provisional) spoken ground.

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23. Shortly after Cage’s death, while sitting with Bill Duckworth and a New York City journalist, in a restaurant in Hell’s Kitchen, the topic of “understanding all that Cage meant” arose. The journalist, quite seriously, remarked that “it will take months before we can say we understand what he was about.” This brought an exchange of eyes, and a small mention of different conceptions of time. How long does one need to continue the talk?
2.2. Experimentation

Four concepts that are useful in listening to Cage are: experimentation, silence, chance, and anarchism. They can be seen as moments or stages of his musical development. The early experimentation with percussion and brash, cacophonous, crisscrossing sounds (sonic landscapes) does give way to a decided quieting and a move to or emphasis on silence. The loss of composer intentions, commands, and control emerging from the experimentation and silence interests do lead to indeterminate and chance procedures, opening a prominence and concern given to multiplicity, density, freedom, and discipline to anarchism and working within bracketed limits.

Such a straight-line presentation has shown itself to be pedagogically useful and will help order our talk here, but finally it will be released since it produces rather rigid steps that push us in a single and narrow direction away from what we are “listening to ...” These concepts (experimentation, chance, silence, and anarchism) and their various kin (percussion, quieting, indeterminacy, abundance, density, and time-brackets) wind and twist through Cage’s work. They are not linearly developed but are found overlapping and coinciding with a constant presence and intersection throughout the various works, with a density and wholeness best left intact. Experimentation never leaves, but is there from earliest to final days, while anarchism maintains similarly a great importance from first efforts to last. Silence and chance importantly interconnect and nourish each other throughout the 200+ compositions. Rather than use these concepts to segment Cage's life, it is better to see them as differently present and interspersed in his work, with sometimes an emphasis on one and then another. They can be untied and separated for the purpose of a clearer understanding, as will be partially done in the coming discussion, but to achieve such simplicity of thought, one likely loses actual and original meaning and use. One can lose the very thing one is trying to understand with efforts at simpler forms of understanding. This loss and threat is reduced through giving up efforts at knowing and understanding, seeking instead the personally sensed or the mystically hidden (something many artists seem inclined to think they prefer) or by remembering the conditions of possibility (the complex multiplicities) that make such simpler talk possible and restrict the kinds and breadth of claims that can sensibly be made, calling to mind what is in plain view (something harder to do, maybe surprisingly, than giving up knowing and understanding). These two choices confront us when listening and talking about Cage: (1) give up pursuit of knowing and understanding, and thereby solve and eliminate problems of listening and talking—concentrate on how we feel or think without regard for other’s words. Make one’s self the authority. (2) investigate the conditions that make knowing and understanding possible and in so doing dissolve general problems that obscure particular instances of listening and talk—concentrate on what is said by us and others when we listen. It is the second path (a path of ordinary language philosophy) that will be followed here.

2.2.1. Experimentation

Cage’s interests in and use of experimentation have many roots. Three or four are worth a first mention. Certainly, the emphasis on the inventing and treading of different paths that he found in his father was important to him and it has been recounted quite often. “My father was an inventor ...” He “invented a submarine just before the First World War which had the world’s record for staying underwater ... Because his engine ran on gasoline it left bubbles on the surface of the water. So his sub wasn’t used in the war, and Dad went bankrupt.” Cage remarked that his father would say to him, “If somebody says can’t, that shows you what remains for you to do.” Regarding musical experimentation, many influences of different kinds have been stressed (“I was always devoted to Erik Satie’s music”). Cage’s sense of the importance of noise and of experimentally mixing the

24. When word and world are ordinarily intertwined (what is the meaning of rat = what is a rat), then nonsense and superstition are possibly reduced or avoided. An undue respect for the extraordinary (what is the real meaning of any word? what we remember or say happened is not what truly happened? does the accurate nature of the world constantly escape us?—real, truly, accurate) must be avoided. Simpler language games can provide perspicuity—although we best not forget from where the simples came.
familiar and different found grounding in Henry Cowell and Charles Ives. Cowell’s *New Musical Resources* “was very important to me.” Through Cowell, sound “became important to me—and noise is so rich in terms of sound.” Ives added another element. “What distinguishes Ives’s music for me is that it has both inherent in it this social aspect of music ... familiar tunes, and then it has something mysterious in it that we don’t know ... but in order to come out of the listening experience with any shape of your own, you have to finish the experience in your own way.”

Finally, the literary writer and philosopher Henry David Thoreau gave Cage an experimental center for much of his work and Cage would often mention *Walden* and the extensive, multi-volume *Journal of Thoreau* and talk of his important experiment in living. “How could youths better learn to live than by at once trying the experiment of living?” (Thoreau, 1991, p. 43)

*Credo In Us* provides an early instance of Cage’s experimental temperament. It is one of the earliest uses of experimentation with phonograph sound and using pre-recorded music (records) of other people’s music, set alongside and crisscrossing with composed live music for such instruments as gongs, piano, buzzers, and tin cans. It is a joyful experimentation with nontraditional elements of musical composition.

Cage’s basic musical limitations and his confrontations with this factual necessity produced some, if not much, of his interest in experimentation. The story of Cage’s studies with Schoenberg and his being put on notice for his harmony limitations are constantly repeated. While Schoenberg referred to Cage as an “inventor of genius,” he straightforwardly told him that he had little harmonic sense and that that meant he would ultimately run into a compositional wall because of it. Cage’s reply was to say that he would then spend his life “banging his head against that wall.” Important, Cage cultivated rather than fought his acknowledged incapacity for harmony and did indeed emphasize rhythm rather than harmonic structure in his early compositions. *Credo In Us* being such an instance.

Cage’s physical limits regarding harmony meant he was led to investigate sound and sustained duration of sound in ways others had largely not. He was to give less importance to standard relationships and traditional harmony between sounds and give more time to exploration of different structures and temporal dimensions of music. Additionally, Cage found experimentation essential, given basic physical limitations of place and time. A story often recounted in this respect involved the Bonnie Bird dance company at the Cornish School in Seattle and the Syvilla Fort dance composition *Bacchanale* for which Cage was asked to provide the music. Fort “asked me to make the music” for her composition. “The space was small, and there was no room for percussion, only room enough for a grand piano. So I had to do something suitable for her on that piano.” Such physical restrictions as the smallness of a stage led to experimentation with the sounds he could produce from a reduced-sized grand piano. He wanted percussion sounds that the piano, by itself, could not make. So he experimented with altering the sound of the piano by inserting objects inside. Hence, was created the prepared piano, resulting in quite marvelous compositions such as *Bacchanale*, *The Perilous Night*, and *Sonatas and Interludes.*

25. Kostelanetz (2003, “father” p. 1, “Cowell” p. 39, “Ives”, p. 40). The father quotation on “can’t” is from an acceptance speech for the Carl Szczuka Prize for Roaratorio.

26. A disproportional emphasis has been given to Cage’s lack of harmonic sense. While he himself did not temper the stories about the limits he had, it cannot go without serious saying that much of this is just a good story, in the sense that he without a doubt had a very good, even, exceptional ear, including an ear for harmony. He would sometimes say that with regard to this story (and others as well) he might have let it “go too far.”

27. Kostelanetz, 2003, p. 58. Again, we have a good story, told repeatedly, taking on a life of its own. Cage said that it was not so much the smallness of the stage that caused all the problems, but the fact that “I could not get all the instrumentalists together to rehearse” that led him to concentrate on the piano alone.
With these pieces, Cage takes the familiar (piano) and it becomes unfamiliar (a percussion instrument, nuts–bolts–rubber–screws–strings), or that in need of being learned anew. Thoreau talks of such an experience in the middle chapter of Walden, called “The Village,” where he writes of how a very familiar path and terrain can become unfamiliar in a snowstorm. (The various splicings and mixing of audiotapes that comprise Fontana Mix produce such sentiment as well.) It also is an experience that echoes Wittgenstein saying that philosophical problems arise when “I don’t know my way about”; and then new questions come to mind. (The reading of lectures I–VI set a similar state of mind.) Certainly, listening to Sonatas and Interludes can provide this sense of the familiar becoming unfamiliar and with a wonder of where we are finding ourselves in this listening. Cage imposed experimental constraints on familiar settings in order to avoid old-fashioned habits and physical restraints and to allow new questions and experiences to present themselves—the prepared piano can be seen as such an effort.

The limits and necessities of our world are best treated as occasions for experimentation and as opportunities to attempt new things that have not been tried before. Obstacles are not reasons for failure, but opportunities that should be utilized, something that gives us a chance to do what we have not or might not be able to do or think of doing. Again, Wittgenstein commenting on the significance of shifting contexts for doing and saying what we do comes to the fore in such thinking. “One predicates of the thing what lies in the mode of representation.” We would not have thought of such a comparison, he will remind us, if we had not first asked about this or that particular instance. “We’d never have hit on the idea that we felt the influence of the letters on us when reading had we not compared the case of letters with that of arbitrary marks.” The specific situation and instances of concern brought our attention to a certain general point. Remembering the conditions that make possible what we do and the comparisons we make in order to understand the interests of attention are standard philosophical concerns, and Cage continually and correspondingly reminds us of these endeavors in his earliest compositions and increasingly throughout his work.

2.2.2. Chance
The variable and new sounds of the prepared piano allowed an awareness for Cage that he likely would not otherwise have had, an awareness about experimentation that made clear that he or any composer might have less control, than they might suspect, over the final sounds of their compositions. Hence, an interest was developed in the variable results from experimentally created sounds and in the elements of indeterminacy in the process of composition. His Music of Changes being one of the first clear efforts in this regard. While a piece written for a traditional piano, it provides clear steps into the sound field of indeterminacy. The more environmentally open Speech, written but a few years after Music of Changes, also invokes questions (specifically with radios) about the controls we have over our inventions. Cage, thereby, created indeterminate results in his compositions by means of a variety of chance operations. In a more general sense, he removed the individual’s self and desires, concentrating on asking questions, rather than seeking specific results or answers.

Cage’s chance operations were not intended to introduce arbitrariness into musical compositions or notations, but were to remove the decisions of the composer from the last stage of creation. It was not randomness of choice that he developed (which would rely on memory or feelings) but carefully, calculated chance operations, providing an objective procedure for choosing the sounds of a composition. This method required an embracing of the performer and audience in ways not always found before. In a more general sense, as Richard Kostelanetz says: “Chance is really about trust.”

28. Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations #104: Finishing the remark: “We take the possibility of comparison, which impresses us, as the perception of a highly general state of affairs.” We often believe we have found the overall ideal to which everything else must conform, rather than an instance of the ways in which we presently speak and think.

29. Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, #170 Austin’s questions of footnote 7: “neither at home nor not at home?”, “Is he at home?” reverberate here.

30. Next to last page, John Cage’s Greatest Hits, Richard Kostelanetz (This pleasing and quixotically titled text is found principally online.).
To embrace chance, one had to assume that people were generally good and able to think and act on their own with a proper spirit of cooperation and acceptance.

**Exercise 2: Chance Practice**

Choose any page from this book. Flip a coin: heads-front page, tails-back page. Count the number of lines on the page given, divide the number in half. Flip a coin: heads-top half of page, tails-bottom half of page. Repeat the procedure until a single line is found. Count the words and divide in half. Flip a coin: heads-left hand side, tails-right hand side. Repeat until single word or phrase is discovered. Write down the word or phrase. If several people do this together they can then read the words out loud, in an ordered manner or simultaneously. Each word might be read as a presentation of discovery—someone can write down the series of words for posterity.

Cage felt that since everyone else was exploring intentional sounds, someone had to do the same for (at least experiment with) the nonintentional. He wished to pursue whatever others were not. Whenever others started following him and doing what he was doing, he did something else. This was voiced in his saying with emphasis: “I have no students.”

*Atlas Eclipticalis* is one of his large-scale chance determined pieces and one that caused many to criticize him. Pierre Boulez, a friend of some years, felt that this type of writing was no longer music and the two had significant disagreements about it and about Cage’s efforts with indeterminacy. In the end, these *enfants terribles* no longer had the same friendship or relationship as before. The composition also caused great outrage with the various and many members of the New York Philharmonic. Their performance of the piece, under the guidance of their conductor Leonard Bernstein, was a notable disaster, leading Cage to refer to the orchestra members as a bunch of “gangsters.” The scandal has been related in much and various detail with Bernstein and Cage’s efforts being variously applauded and condemned. Most interesting, during preparation for the performance, Cage wrote a letter to Bernstein, a letter that details concerns about misunderstandings surrounding the concept of chance. The letter was prompted by the announcement of the overall program to be performed by the Orchestra. In early 1964, Bernstein presented a five-week series of avant-garde music as part of the Philharmonic’s regular programs. The last set of the series, given February 6, 7, 8, and 9, was under the title of “Music of Chance” and included Cage’s *Atlas Eclipticalis*, Morton Feldman’s *Out of ‘Last Pieces,*’ and Earle Brown’s *Available Forms II*. These pieces were to be presented in the second part of the program, after an intermission, and were to be preceded, prior to the intermission, by “Autumn” from Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons* and Tchaikovsky’s *Symphony No. 6*. They were then, themselves, to be followed at the end of the concert by “Improvisations by the Orchestra.” It was quite a lengthy and diverse program, to be sure. A disagreement developed over the inclusion of the improvisation for orchestra. Cage wanted it dropped. Bernstein saw this request as an overstepping of the composer’s bounds. But he was willing to listen and did reconsider whether the “Improvisations by the Orchestra” was best done at the end of the concert. In the final result, the improvisation was not dropped but was played as part of Bernstein’s introduction to the pieces.

31. Said in reply to a mentioning that we would be glad “to include any of his students in the book.” Quite quickly and emphatically, he said: “I have no students!” It was one of the few times that he seemed to let an emotion of negative passion and a bit of anger show itself; not as fully as in discussion of the New York Philharmonic and *Atlas Eclipticalis*, [see below] but recognizable nonetheless.

32. Cited both positively and negatively, for instance, Bernstein gave an 11½-minute introduction to the “new” pieces (*Atlas* being one) to be performed. In his comments, he talks clearly of aleatory and chance music and of accidental occurrences, improvisation, and of the seriousness of the pieces. (See Bernstein LIVE, New York Philharmonic Special Editions, CD disk 9, 2000.) The audience, in large measure, was unconvinced and retreated in great numbers to the exits, while many who stayed booed strongly after the performance of *Atlas*. A discussion of the different sides of the series of events is found in the first chapter of Piekut (2011).
as though to be a bridge to the more radical hearing coming in a few minutes, and to assist in an introduction, where Bernstein tries intensely to stress the seriousness of the music (something Cage was demanding) and what is involved in listening to it. All efforts, in the end, were mostly to no avail for both performers and audience.

The Cage letter is of note for the emphasis given to the differences of “chance” and “improvisation” and, by this means of distinction, to the influence it did or did not have on Bernstein’s presentations to the orchestra and listeners. Beginning with “Dear Lenny,” Cage thanked Bernstein for his efforts saying: “We all admire your courage in doing this at the present time, for actual hostility toward our work is still felt by many people.” Cage then made his request with reasons:

I ask you to reconsider your plan to conduct the orchestra in an improvisation. Improvisation is not related to what the three of us are doing in our works. It gives free play to the exercise of taste and memory, and it is exactly this that we, in differing ways, are not doing in our music.

Since, as far as I know, you are not dedicated in your own work to improvisation, I can only imagine that your plan is a comment on our work. Our work is still little understood and your audiences, for the most part, will be hearing it for the first time. It would seem best if they could do so without being prejudiced ....

Surely there must be some less provocative way to conclude the program, one which will leave no doubt as to your courage in giving your audiences the music which you have chosen to present.

The letter then concludes: “With best wishes and friendliest greetings, John Cage.”

Bernstein responded with a broad dismissal of the concerns and he presents a different sense of the program and of chance:

Dear John,

Your letter astounds me. What, for example, makes you think that our orchestral improvisation should in any way constitute a “comment” on your work, and that of your colleagues? What, again, gives you the idea that everything in this part of the program must be confined to the realm in which you work? The overall idea is Music of Chance and there are chance elements in your work, as well as those of Brown and Feldman, and as well as in total improvisation. We are trying to have as comprehensive a look at the aleatory world as is possible in half a complete program; and it seems clear to me that improvisation is an essential part of such a look. And, finally, how can you deny that your music enlists “free play of taste and memory” when you write for an orchestra that may or may not play at any given time, and if it does play, render approximations?

If it will make you feel any better, I shall be happy to play the improvisation before your work, thus avoiding the tendentious notion of its being a final comment on the preceding music. I hope that this will alleviate your concern, and prove to you the integrity of my intentions. Most cordially.

33. Letter of 17 October 1963, Library of Congress, Washington, DC, Bernstein Collection, and Cage archives of C.F. Peters. Bernstein’s reply came on 22 October. Both letters are included in The Leonard Bernstein Letters, ed. Nigel Simeone, pp. 452–454, 2013. It is this latter text that is basically used here in reproducing the letters. That text includes the draft reply of Bernstein, written in pencil on the verso of Cage’s letter, hence containing some small differences with other reproductions. It does reproduce in full Cage’s letter with his comments of respect for Copland but derision for Smallens’ presentation of Webern.
The concept of chance that Cage introduced into his music was of great and lasting importance for him. It allows us to ask how we can meaningfully talk about and compare experiences, musical and otherwise, which lack a singular, repeatable identity. It leads us to question our sense of justification, mistake, ruin, and interruption. The Atlas Eclipticalis performance by the New York Philharmonic faces and crashes on these questions. It took courage for Cage to continue to write that way, for it caused the loss of friends, demanded constant and repeated efforts at clarifying misunderstandings, and produced various musical scandals that would forever influence and mark him.34

When we speak of chance when listening to Cage, we are not speaking of random occurrences or accidental happenings or freely chosen, desire-based results. We are rather speaking of nonintentionality, removing the personal self, escape from the choices and desires of the self, divorcing the final product of composition from the conscious desires of the composer, and thus coming to live with all the sounds we don’t intend. The particular sense of chance stressed by Cage was contentious and misunderstood in its beginnings and has not fully been listened to, accepted or absorbed, to this day.35

2.2.3. Silence

All the sounds we don’t intend. That is how Cage came to talk about and understand silence. It is that which opens us fully to the world, breaks any barrier between world and art, so we don’t know their difference, and necessitates an active not passive listener; it is not the opposite of sound but the encompassing of all sound.

Listening to the silence of the world was preferred by Cage over all other music and was that that was with him everyday. 4′33″ most fully of all his compositions gives us a nonintentional philosophy and music, by calling to mind, reminding us of all the sounds we don’t intend. It is a piece written for piano; to be performed in three movements, each having a chance-determined, fixed length. (He would later consent to performances for any duration, any number of movements, or any instrument. It would even be rewritten so its form could accommodate any actions rather than any sounds. This latter reworking was titled 0′00″ (4′33″ No. 2) and included the single sentence instruc-

34. While Cage’s fury at the New York Philharmonic, and theirs at him, is a central element of talk about his use of chance in music, Cage, in his last years, seemed to find the misunderstandings quite sad and said somewhat sorrowfully about Atlas: “Can’t the piece be heard as a walk down an unknown street or through an unfamiliar forest or meadow?” After he had said this, the sense of Bernstein’s efforts to make the piece “work” for players and audience was stressed and reopened to him. He simply, but with a clear touch of anger, replied that the orchestra members were “criminal.” He had not changed or softened on that. It must be noted that we have come some way from this conflict and with the development of our listening palates. Cage’s chance compositions and Atlas Eclipticalis have received many performances over the years, in the more traditional venues, without repetition of the rude disturbances of the 1960s; to cite just two instances, there have been uneventful and quite wonderful performances of Atlas by Petr Kotik and the S.E.M. Orchestra in 1992 and a James Levine-led performance with the full MET orchestra in 1996, both at Carnegie Hall.

35. Such a struggle brings to mind Wittgenstein’s use of “private.” For all of his effort at making clear his use, even directly saying: “But that is not what I mean” (PI #243), misunderstanding seems constant. “Private” is not meant to be something shareable, it is not something secret to be intentionally kept from most others, or that can even be kept from others. “Private” involves an unteachable and unknowable element and when attached to ourselves, it is to indicate that sense of our being that is impenetrable by others and which we cannot convey meaningfully to others. Wittgenstein rejects the joining of private and language since language to be language must be rule based, involve a public use of criteria of correctness, which is to say if there is no mistake or criteria of correctness possible, then the concepts of language and language itself have lost any possible use and meaning. So, the very possibility of language involves others, criteria, rule following, and a grammatical setting and place for proper and improper word use. Wittgenstein’s use of private elicits our extensive anxieties about expressing ourselves to others and about having to live with others within the fragilities and frailties of language use. (Cavell makes much of the latter points in Part Four of his The Claim of Reason.) There is, then, a nonintentional element in our use of language, in our lack and loss of control over what we mean when we say what we do, in coming to recognize that greater than our individual and private selves. So, whether the issue is that of “chance” or “others,” the removal of the intentional or private self, we are struggling to make sense of the nonintentional, of a nonintentional philosophy and music. An exercise of worth here is finding the crossing threads of chance/others.
tion: “In a situation provided with maximum amplification (no feedback), perform a disciplined action.” While details of the origins of 4′33″ in written (“A Composer’s Confessions”) and nonmusical forms (“White Paintings” of Robert Rauschenberg) have been differently presented and stressed, it is generally safe to assert that however it came to be, it is his most famous and notorious piece. With both literalness and irony, people will say “his greatest piece” or “encore.” The realization of 4′33″ is the sounds that naturally happen during the time of the performance—people and noises from the inside and outside environment. Of all his compositions, it reflects most fully the love and respect for the world as it is; for the equality of sound. It allows the various inhabitants of a situation to “exhibit themselves” by natural turns and frees us from questions of standard aims and intentions to be replaced by questions of how we do what we do, why we are where we are. Cage would remark that it was his favorite piece and that it offered his sense of accepting the world, rather than thinking there was a need to change it. In this regard, he would often paraphrase Thoreau (and assumed people knew he was doing this) when asked in various contexts “if he did not want the world to be changed?” He answered with a joyous smile: “No, I like it well enough.”

4′33″ provides a moral of noninterference. We must accept the world as it is and live and create so as not to interfere with all the sounds that are continuously going on around us. To interfere is to make things worse. Might we be allowed to say that this is the moral of his work in general?

4′33″ has both the sense of quieting and indeterminacy (all the sounds we don’t intend) about it. It shares with many of Cage’s chance-dominated works the concepts of wondering and waiting, concepts that are a large part of such pieces as Atlas Eclipticalis and Music of Changes. What we willingly accept without further questions, with a patient acceptance, shows “how [we] think and live.” These various concepts become prominent as well in the “number pieces”, such as Seventy-Four and 103, which dominate Cage’s last forms of composition, and often present a basic dispersion and simplicity of sound. Cage’s Suite for Toy Piano similarly exposes us to such thinking about limits and a vitality of listening. The simplistic reduction of our creative efforts can still hold the means of general appreciation and understanding that might well remain hidden or inaccessible in the complex whole, within which we find ourselves.

With such range of influence and connection across his various musical works, it is not hard to understand why he said that 4′33″ was the piece he listened to most often and liked best. It most fully of all his works, he believed, makes us ask: How quickly will we say Yes to our lives as part of (not apart from) the world? It provides a sense of wholism rather than destructive dualisms. We are to listen but not interfere. The harmony of sound and silence is not better expressed anywhere than in 4′33″.

2.2.4. Anarchism

In order to write music as Cage did, to take the concepts of the experimental, chance, and silence as seriously as he did, you have to trust or treat as given that people are good and able to take care of and think for themselves, without the hierarchical arrangements and interferences of legislative society. That is anarchism and Cage’s work exhibits this anarchistic way of composing and living. He was committed to such a way of thinking, talking and being, and tried to live anarchistically in almost all that he did and to show in his music what such a life involved.

I–VI, the short title of Cage’s Harvard “Norton Lectures”, is an expression of his anarchism. These six, large lectures prepare us to listen affirmatively, anarchistically to the nonintentional, silent world that surrounds us. They are complex, multi-voiced, mesostics texts, chance formed, based on 15 concepts and multiple quotations important to Cage, and are to be read aloud in a disciplined and methodically extensive fashion.

36. In later life, Cage tried very directly to avoid negative actions or attacks directed at a need to change the world, so when asked to sign a petition of protest, he said he “could not. But that he would write a letter of support.”

37. One of Cage’s more enigmatic yet direct comments about his music result from talk about the 40+ number pieces. “I am finally writing music as I always wanted to. And as I have wanted it to be heard.” In the number pieces, the time-brackets set the context for the musical content contained therein.
(Here we have a bit of a reversal of Roaratorio. In Roaratorio, a book, Finnegans Wake, becomes a piece of music and leaves us wondering and questioning our way about. In I–VI, a piece of music—out loud, spoken, disciplined readings of chance-created mesostics—becomes a book, with a main body, counterpoint subtexts, introductions, and indexes, encouraging us to find different ways to put them together.)38 The lectures imitate the world in its specific manner of operation. The world, in its generality, is overwhelming, unclear, and complex; it challenges our cravings for simplicity, understanding, and meaning, as are and do the Norton Lectures. They both leave us with a thirst for sense and a question of how much we ever take away from either one. Do we always have “rules ready for” all the complexity and differences that confront us? Do we know what to say as change and variation, the particularities of our life, overrun us?

It is not just the natural world and its operations to which the Norton Lectures speak. They address attention as well to our (contrived) order of learning and intellectual forms of communication. The lectures consist of speech and word chains sometimes of near gibberish, sometimes of what almost seems sense, and sometimes of a whole fairly standard sentence or phrase. A complete reading of a lecture can insult or outrage an audience member and cause them brazenly to leave early from the presentation. But the lectures can also charm to the point where one might achieve an “overall mood as of hovering in a sort of active peacefulness, freed from the demands either of sense or of silence.” These are, in fact, Cavell’s words about his own listening to the lectures. He continues that apart from “the sensuous pleasure of the event, it was almost mimetic, a simulacrum, of an ordinary lecture, of one of those uncountable hours in which audiences have sat without effective complaint through an hour-long talk, so much of so many of which are recyclings of personal or cultural source texts, parts of which are unintelligible, other parts as if almost intelligible, with here and there perhaps memorable leaps or slips of clarity” (Cavell, 2005).

Most certainly, Cage has brought these types of questions and feelings of I–VI forward before, quite notably in his overwhelming Song Books, with its clear discontinuities and theatrical confusions. Just as was the case there, so in I–VI, it is markedly worthwhile to experience and listen to a performance following the general advice for living in the world given by Thoreau—the main protagonist of the Song Books. Thoreau encourages our concentrating on pockets of ideas, a single leaf or empty space on a hillside or in the woods, listening carefully to a few, particular repetitions of sound, finding the general form in the particular instances, all-the-while never forgetting the limitations of such efforts (of all that we don’t know or experience). In the Norton Lectures and the Song Books, Cage’s music in many an instance are not unhelpfully listened to as rehearsals or exercises for listening to the world (in its human and nonhuman facets), all-the-while additionally providing constant reminders that our hearing has grown rusty and antique in our routine employments and habits.39

38. Cage spends the six-page introduction to the lectures explaining these details, talking of the title (what it is), nonintention, mesostics (what they are), and source and counterpoint texts.

Mesostics are a structured form of presentation that Cage used on numerous occasions. They include a vertical set of spine words and horizontal wing words. Cage would say that mesostics came “from ideas but were not about them.” He said that teaching at its best “could be often so described.” Cavell’s experience with the Norton Lectures (main body paragraphs below) echoes such a sense of ambiguity and provocation.

Certainly, few others refer to I–VI as a musical composition. Nonetheless, Cage said that the publishers of the lectures were perplexed about how to refer to it. “They had several suggestions but finally the only one I found acceptable was ‘poetry’. That seemed okay to me, although it would have been simpler to just call it ‘music’.”

39. A more extensive discussion of I–VI is given in Evil and Silence (#98ff), a section of work which itself is a reworking of an article that was originally to be part of John Cage at Seventy-Five. That article was replaced by a much shorter and direct introduction to the whole book.

When shown an early draft of some of the interlocking sentences that were slowly generating a threaded manuscript, Cage asked to have the “way of working” explained to him. “How did these sentences get created and what source texts were used?” Can you “tell me how you used Wittgenstein?” As talk developed, it centered on Cage’s selections of parts of the Philosophical Investigations. However, we kept getting lost in our thinking and forgot where we started and “where we were before we were where we were.” Cage laughed at all this and said that that “did not matter to him since Wittgenstein first had to be read as something different not something like what we had ever read before.”
The operatic equivalent of I–VI is Europeras 1&2. Both were created at basically the same time. Europeras 1&2 is a broad reconfiguration of all the elements of opera by the means of chance procedures. These elements include everything from the lighting to the costumes to the staging to the music and most other details of importance. Even the program notes for the operas were developed by chance operations. Twelve different synopses of the two parts of the opera were chance created and one set of notes was randomly placed in each program. So people sitting next to each other would almost certainly be reading a different set of synopses. Here, are two of the 12 sets.

1

He is happy with the court life and is in love with her; he ignores her apparent indifference toward him. He meets with the Turks a visiting knight who says to forget his stepmother and enlist his help. Actually, he returns disguised as a monk on Christmas Eve. She soon denounces him to his friend, each time they accept his traveling companion. To circumvent discovery in his dark tomb, she marries him; they are surprised to win.

2

He arouses her (they are about to be married): he threatens to kill his mother. She expresses her delight; now his brother has presumably been thrown into the flames. At her birthday ball, he is very careful. After the bloody deed is done, she, remorseful returns. The two exchange ecstatic pledges. Nevertheless he is dying. He offers his life to the gods.

* * *

1

She is bored with most men; he is in love with her. He accepts a preliminary trial hoping to find a way. She persuades him to give her his life. He dies. Now in his dark tomb he goes to her rescue. She reawakens his love early in the morning.

2

He lusts after her; she has died, his only hope of redemption. In his despondency he maintains his reserve, accepts the bird. He fulfills the second part of the witches’ prophecy: They rescue him quickly. He loses his power. He falls prey to another man’s wife. Once more he invokes Venus (he is first to admit it); in vain: her life is over. He wishes; he refuses. Thoroughly embittered, he rails.

For all of its destructive elements, it is important to note, as Richard Kostelanetz stresses, what is fundamentally missing in the Europeras is narrative, which is to say the ostensible thread connecting one incident (or aria) to another. One critical question implicit then in Europeras 1&2 is whether or how

40. In speaking of his Europeras 1&2, Cage playfully remarked: “I was really happy when that phrase from the Walkure ride emerged. I was hoping it would.” In the same spirit, he recounted: “I was asked to write a Noh-opera. Could I write any other kind?” And similarly, reflecting on the times and things said before the Europeras: “I was often asked if I had any ‘big’ works, like an opera, in my future plans. I always said ‘I hope not.’” “Do you have any major works, symphonies or operas, planned?” “I certainly hope not.” More seriously, but still with a wry smile, he commented on the physical materials and staging of the Europeras: “My big problem recently has been how to keep objects from colliding or occupying the same space.”

41. Excerpt from original program book for the Summerfare festival held in Purchase, New York July 8–31, 1988.

42. Kostelanetz, John Cage’s Greatest Works.
opera can succeed without an identifiable narrative. The more general, and deeply Wittgensteinian, question of: What “is great and important” in what we do and say also breaks open before us.

With his general anarchistic sense of life, Cage stressed: “Opera in this society is an ornament of the lives of the people who have. I don’t feel that so much with my work, but, with more conventional operas, it’s clearly an ornament that has no necessary relation to the 20th century.” We must free ourselves from such conditions, from those things that give rise to the dominance of the decorative, pecuniary, and non-substantial. We must understand what made this possible and reject such conditions in our present lives.43

Cage’s music prepares us to listen affirmatively and with full trust, anarchistically, to the nonintentional, silent world that surrounds us. Cage creates compositions and occasions of listening where our staying or leaving has already been prepared and given place, constructions that are independent of our expectations and intentions or desiring needs. Works that are thereby unapproachable. Acts of leaving, no longer choosing to listen, are as accurate and telling a response to his work as that of staying and each allows and may provoke the asking: Why are you there? Why listen to this? Or as Thoreau would say: Where do you live?

Anarchism, in a context of musical life, is an expression of the equality of sound rather than hierarchical relationships of dominant structures. It asks that we compose, create, and listen without interfering with the music continuously going on around us. It seeks new possibilities, new freedoms, in presenting what has not been done before and in questions not yet asked. Cage’s anarchism: affirmations equality nonhierarchical noninterference new freedoms questions not dogmas others trust no privileged self

2.3. Rethreading

The discussion of experimentation, chance, silence, and anarchism has provided a context for a more encompassing talk about listening to Cage. Even with the readily apparent danger of meaninglessness and abstract emptiness, with unbending historical and personal facts, and with the probable loss of the particular object of first concern, even with all this directly facing us, the efforts at simplification and untangling the multiple threads of our listening have provided a conviction and first reflection toward saying something more general about what we hear. Let us continue that thinking not by trying to take new intentional steps upward or forward but by more modestly twisting and reordering the fibers and strings of our talk, with the only object or sense of purpose being that of staying in place and being reminded of what we already know but have not fully said or articulated. Let us rethread our listening to Cage.

How could youths better learn to live than by at once trying the experiment of living? (H. D. Thoreau, 1991, Walden).

Credo in US

tin cans piano tom-tom phonograph records radio other composer’s music Shostakovich gongs percussion hammering rhythmic energy interruptions stoppings overlapping crisscrossing sounds electric buzzer scratches

43. It is not unhelpful, maybe surprisingly and even if only for the moment, to think of a common bond or two between Wagner and Cage, between Europeras 1&2 and The Ring of the Nibelungen. Both wished to show the emptiness of the ornamental aspects of our lives and plunge us into the questions of the possibilities of our existence and the conditions that make possible who and what we are and might be. In performance, Europa 1 is 90 min and Europa 2 is 45 min, only about the same length as the prelude opera Rheingold; but there is a 30-min intermission, during which is played Frank Scheffer’s Wagner’s Ring in 3 min and 40 s. The Ring stands as the great interconnection of parts, an organic integration of the arts—“Gesamtkunstwerk”. In the Europeras 1&2, the traditional parts are all there, coexistent but independent.

On a European visit of some distinction, Cage was wined and dined fully. He said “they even took me to the opera.” What opera? “They took me to Falstaff. It is a masterpiece. Don’t you think?” Yes, I like it. “It is a masterpiece” he reiterated. Did you stay for it all? “Oh no … I left at intermission.”

44. Certainly Austin’s worry about talking of “nothing-in-particular” echoes here, as does the voice of Wittgenstein: “Here it is difficult to keep our heads above water, as it were, to see that we must stick to matters of everyday thought, and not to get on the wrong track where it seems that we have to describe extreme subtleties, which again we are quite unable to describe with the means at our disposal. We feel as if we had to repair a torn spider’s web with our fingers” (Pf, #106).
Europeras 1&2
swirling operatic bits pieces other's operas new contexts time place singers instrumentalists recordings
arrays layers on layers dense multiplicity classic fragments rubble phrase slivers recognized pleasing moments

Where does this investigation get its importance from, given that it seems only to destroy everything interesting: that is, all that is great and important? (As it were, all the buildings, leaving behind only bits of stone and rubble.) But what we are destroying are only structures of air [houses of cards], and we are clearing up the ground of language on which they stood. (PI, #118)

A philosophical problem has the form: “I don’t know my way about.” (PI, #123)

Sonatas and Interludes
altered piano pleasingly unusual intimacy tranquility quiet unfamiliar familiar multiple parts settled unsettled sounds relaxed instrument striking intense muted beauty ongoing in place

Fontana Mix
mixed diverse confusing sounds tape electronic various guttural grunts growls amplification voices human nonhuman increasing identifications abrupt broken noises discontinuity thumps pleasant free-for-all

Roaratorio, an Irish Circus on Finnegans Wake
sound collections thick deep mishmash reading taped voices nature animals children crowded places happenings Irish folk music performers instruments joyous festival abundant scratches cuts scrapes forms of life

It is surprising and memorable, as well as valuable experience, to be lost in the woods any time. Often in a snow storm, even by day, one will come out upon a well-known road, and yet find it impossible to tell which way leads to the village. Though he knows that he has travelled it a thousand times, he cannot recognize a feature in it, but it is as strange to him as if it were a road in Siberia. By night, of course, the perplexity is infinitely greater. (Thoreau, 1991, p. 139)

Thus it seemed that this one hillside illustrated the principle of all the operations of Nature. The Maker of this earth but patented a leaf. (Thoreau, 1991, p. 248)

Suite for Toy Piano
accepting limited tones beam delight breaking assumptions virtuoso expression white keys simplicity clarity vitality of rhythms joyous affirming reverberations surprising effects impressions

Seventy-Four
sustained sounds instrumental high low single notes overlapping coinciding small differences pitch rhythm orchestral journeys tranquil spatial intensity independent absorbing moments unbounded bounded

If one looks at the example in #1, one can perhaps get an idea of how much the general concept of the meaning of a words surrounds the working of language with a haze which makes clear vision impossible. - It disperses the fog if we study the phenomena of language in primitive
kinds of use in which one can clearly survey the purpose and functioning of the words. \( PI, \#5 \)

You only need sit still long enough in some attractive spot in the woods that all its inhabitants may exhibit themselves to you by turns. (Thoreau, 1991, p. 185)

4′33″

piano  silence  sounds unattended  world self  disaffirming affirming  threads inner outer  expectation three movements  confusion active involvement questioning acceptance open encompassing embracing

\textit{Atlas Eclipticalis}

points of sound  discrete notes  eerie dissonances  unpredictable timings  large orchestra amplified moments  unknown sound forest  playful open field  joyful outbursts  soft loud long short  sidelong snaps rumbles squeaks  aroused curiosity

The question what the expression means is not answered by such a description; and this tempts us to conclude that understanding is a specific, indefinable experience. But one forgets that the question, which should be our concern, is: how do we compare these experiences; what criterion of identity do we stipulate for their occurrence? \( PI, \#322 \)

...—What people accept as a justification shows how they think and live. \( PI, \#325 \)

\textit{Music of Changes}

short piano episodes  variable note disconnections  unexpected loud soft  confusions strenuous demands  jarring  strings plucked  lid slams  impatient compliance  tolerance wonder patience release

103

single tones  orchestral mixing integration  anticipation  string tension little release  discrete winds brass  subtle free expression  interwoven lines  lengthy exhausting unrelenting accepting

I heard that a distinguished wise man and reformer asked him if he did not want the world to be changed; but he answered with a chuckle of surprise in his Canadian accent, not knowing that the question had ever been entertained before, “No, I like it well enough.” (Thoreau, 1991, p. 120)

As with our colleges, so with a hundred “modern improvements,” there is an illusion about them; there is not always a positive advance. The devil goes on exacting compound interest to the last for his early share and numerous succeeding investments in them. Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things. They are but improved means to an unimproved end, an end which it was already too easy to arrive at; … As if the main object were to talk fast and not to talk sensibly (Thoreau, 1991, pp. 43–44).

\textit{Speech}

newsreader  five radios  seated stationary reading  radios movement carried walking  timed tuning volume on-off  varied changed  sounds far near  broadcast stations voices music static  indeterminate changing moments
I say, “There is a chair over there”. What if I go to fetch it, and it suddenly disappears from sight? —— “So it wasn’t a chair, but some kind of illusion.” —— But a few seconds later, we see it again, and are able to touch it, and so on. —— “So the chair was there after all, and its disappearance was some kind of illusion.” —— But suppose that after a time it disappears again — or seems to disappear. What are we to say now? Have you rules ready for such cases — rules saying whether such a thing is still to be called a “chair”? (PI, #80)

Postscript—“if we must”

After several unsuccessful attempts to weld my results together into such a whole, I realized that I should never succeed. The best that I could write would never be more than philosophical remarks; my thoughts soon grew feeble if I tried to force them along a single track against their natural inclination. —— And this was, of course, connected with the very nature of the investigation. (PI, Preface)

To him whose elastic and vigorous thought keeps pace with the sun, the day is a perpetual morning. It matters not what the clocks say or the attitudes and labors of men. Morning is when I am awake and there is a dawn in me. Moral reform is the effort to throw off sleep. Why is it that men give so poor an account of their day if they have not been slumbering? They are not such poor calculators. If they had not been overcome with drowsiness they would have performed something. (Thoreau, 1991, pp. 73–74)
3. Grammar–Listen–Talk

Having listened to Cage and begun our continuing talk about (and rethreading of) some of the music, where do we find ourselves? Why listen to 4’33” or Fontana Mix or Sonatas and Interludes or Europaeras 1&2 or any other Cage composition? Is there something to be understood and learned?—“I now talk and live my life differently”, or are there surprises to be experienced?—“It is like something you have ever heard”, or are there sounds that will entertain us?—“It was hypnotically pleasurable”, or are there no reasons for listening?—“If one wants then one will.” Might it not seem now that silence is the only proper response to these questions of particular listening? After all, what talk could add significantly to the music and to our attentive hearing? The talk we have given can seem quite secondary to the music to which we listened; Cage, furthermore, placed a great importance on silence, so here with such why-questions don’t we do best to follow him? Indeed, acceptance of nonsignification or silence, quietly listening to Cage, to Credo in Us, might indeed be best … best that is, if these concepts and actions in turn were not significant.

How are we to continue? We need once again to remember that there is no object without grammar. There is no king unless there is the game of chess, no such chess piece as “king” unless we play the game of chess. There is no F# without an ordered tonal system. There is no kind of action without talk that can demarcate and distinguish. No running or thinking without a context of meaningful word use. This is what analytic philosophers in the twentieth century called the linguistic turn, what ordinary language philosophers call the ordinary. To put it simply, for our present sense of place and questions, we are reminded here that: the very asking of the questions about listening to Cage and the answer of silence places us precisely where those who championed “non-significant” silence had hoped not to be, mired in meaning and consequence. Silence was invoked to allow us to avoid talk and action of any meaningful kind. However, in the asking of the questions (not to mention the pursuit of the answers), we are not able to do so little as just listen since listening is inseparably thread-ed with words and talk of significance. So, while there might be no qualms with stopping talk at this point and noting how little words add to our listening (the stopping and noting are possible how? Only if there is language.), it does not seem something naturally or easily done, or that to which we can remain wedded without falling into nonsense (forgetting what allows us to do what we are doing) and facing threats of mysticism (taking refuge in some intangible place “beyond” words or “inside” my personal self).

Having listened to Cage, what might we say now about our original concerns regarding distress and disapproval of his music? Or about the patience and practice in listening that is said to be required? Rather than wait for the proper marshaling of paragraphs (which is to come), let me state straight away what I now wish to say.

45. Where do we find ourselves? Emerson answers (Experience): in a series of which we do not know the extremes, and believe that it has none. We wake and find ourselves on a stair; there are stairs below us, which we seem to have ascend-ed; there are stairs above us, many a one, which go upward and out of sight. Think of Plato’s Divided Line (Republic) and the movements from darkness to light, the ascent to what is. Or of the Tractatus and propositional “steps” which lead us “beyond them” and allow us to “throw away” the ladder to “see the world aright.” (6.54) How useful is it to find ourselves in an image of climbing a ladder without sight of the end or constantly needing to turn around to move upward or seeking freedom from such effort to see things aright? Such metaphors house a sense of movement, wanting and needing to move, and moving beyond to some currently unlived, hidden realm. We might better see ourselves living with the threads of language use, the weaving and unweaving of talk and action, learning the possibilities of our everyday language. We untie particular threads to learn, make simpler for us, general possibilities of language use, of talk and action, and accept that we may thereby solve a problem but not the problem. We find threads of understanding but not the single thread that runs throughout our concerns. Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations allows such consideration. As does Plato’s Republic: the divided line has left- and right-hand sides (ways of knowing and being) that are tied (woven) together. The Wittgensteinian shift, however, requires giving up a sense of singular and hierarchical privilege (turning inside or climbing to higher, truer realms) but without release from our ordinary moral and epistemological burdens. Even without directional or privileged movement, difficulties and threats remain: how to live a life tied, inseparably woven with others presses upon us. The possible breaking of our attachments is now more consequential and destructive than solip-sistic flights away from them have allowed, involving what Cavell (The Claim of Reason) will call “fears of being unknown” and the terrors of the “inexpressible ground of exclusion.” This could be where we find ourselves.

46. When opening a new book, Cage said that he would “immediately turn to the last pages because that is where inevit-ably the author would say what she or he thought most important.”
Listening to Cage stirs our sleeping selves, or rather—not ourselves, but the expression of ourselves—our grammar.\(^\text{47}\) It intensifies our sense of the familiar and unfamiliar, of multiplicity and simplicity, of not knowing our way about, and of our craving for meaning. It provokes our asking if or how we are to talk and if or how we compare experiences and identify them again.\(^\text{48}\) It does not push us to another stair or toward a hidden realm, but stirs what surrounds us, is already before us, that in the midst of which we find ourselves. It calls to mind the affirmations and nonintentions, the silences, of our lives, reawakens us to the agreements that bracket what we say and do. \textit{Listening to Cage stirs our grammar.}

Let me now elaborate.

3.1. Structures of air

Taking the ordinary harmonies and stabilities of our lives away or overwhelming us with their details (stirring our grammar), as Cage does, brings us face to face with questions of value. We are encouraged to ask what is of real importance and usefulness in what we do and say?\(^\text{49}\) \textit{I–VI} removes and engages meaning and significance, and thereby reminds us of it, of its closeness. (“I left the lectures craving sense.”) \textit{Sonatas and Interludes} takes away the familiar piano and give us unfamiliar stretched and dampened strings. (“I was not even sure what instrument I was hearing.”) “Tonal beauty clashed with abrasive dissonance.” \textit{Europeras 1&2} engulfs us with the multiplicity of the data of opera, its theatre, and sounds while removing lines of connection. (“Every moment I heard or saw something familiar but lost it in the next moment of the even more familiar.” “There was nothing to hold on to from moment to moment.” “Can opera, or talk and action of any kind, survive such presentation?”) “\textit{4’33’} overwhelms us with the intensity of the moment (“Encore”) and with its emptiness (“Well, even I can write and do that”). \textit{Atlas Eclipticalis}embraces nonlinear points of sound in the midst of which we find ourselves lost. (“I expected something but never got it.”) “Nothing I heard seemed to matter, anything could be done.”) \textit{Fontana Mix} presents noises in such great array that things may end before they begin. (“I am no longer sure what a mistake is or an interruption or a ruining of what is done.”) \textit{Seventy-four} places us within disciplined sounds, not under them, not in desire or desperation to move from them, but accepting them as they are. (“I do not wish to change...

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\(^{47}\) The stirring or nonhierarchical expressing of ourselves might bring to mind a variety of instances. Think of Siegfried (Siegfried, Act II, scene 2) stirring the woods with his dissonant reed and unrelenting horn, and his disconnected, awkward awakening (Siegfried, Act III, scene 2) of Brunhilde; and think also of Macbeth’s witches (Act 4, Scene 1) stirring their cauldron brew with eye of newt, tongue of dog, and toe of frog. Consider Thoreau: Moral reform is the effort to throw off sleep. To be awake is to be alive. We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake ... (Thoreau, 1991, p. 74). Moral stirrings and reform require breaking with standard routines, ingredients, and habits. Remember the \textit{Tractatus Preface:} Thus, the aim of the book is to draw a limit to thought or rather not to thought, but to the expression of thoughts, for in order to be able to draw a limit to thought, we should have to...be able to think what cannot be thought. Mind again \textit{PI} #31: There is no kind of object unless there is possible language use, unless the occasion for it is already prepared. There is no self, our selves, unless there is a grammatical place for it to be expressed, recognized, and altered. Reflect on “music stirs our souls” and Cavell (TCR): The soul is impersonal. 361. If the body individuates flesh and spirit, singles me out, what does the soul do? It binds me to others. 411. Grammar is that I share with and that binds me to others.

\(^{48}\) If the Cage music of our listening is created by nonintentional procedures, then the possibility of sameness and identity naturally arises. “It was great to hear but it is now gone for good ... never to be repeated.” Of course, this is often said as well of intentional music and improvisation: it is “in time not space,” and thereby comes and goes and is lost and does not remain for inspection but is only in the mind’s ear. We have found the need for writing it down and the limits to our rational understanding. When facing these platitudes of musical experience, it is of use to remember \textit{PI} #32: ... this tempts us to conclude that understanding is a specific, indefinable experience. But one forgets that the questions, which should be our concern, are: How do we compare these experiences?. What criterion of identity do we stipulate for their occurrence? Cage: “It is not choices and conclusions we should weigh but questions.”

\(^{49}\) A central Wittgenstein and Cage aim is to agitate our very sense of what is important. \textit{PI} #118: Where does this investigation get its importance from, given that it seems only to destroy everything interesting: that is, all that is great and important? ... But what we are destroying are only structures of air (houses of cards). Cavell reminds us, in his discussions of Thoreau in \textit{The Senses of Walden}, that a book on freedom or confinement is also about its absence.
it, but like it well enough as it is.”) Even the seemingly innocuous Speech allows and encourages us to ask: How do we use radios and what do we do with them and what worth do they have?\(^{50}\) (“Sometimes two or three things were done in a matter of one second, while other things never were done at all.”) Listening to Cage allows recognition of the habits and routines into which we have fallen and which we have been given, the many houses of cards and structures of air that tempt us and are offered to us, and that have controlled and guided us.\(^{51}\)

Listening to Cage evokes questions of importance.

While the interjection of a question of importance (“does the destruction that we witness matter?”) can rapidly lead to wanting to know what that importance is (“what of worth should be preserved here?”), that latter concern is not what Cage’s music first or maybe ever gives—it rather provides a place for the asking of the question of importance and not primarily for the providing of a solution, an effort that might produce nothing but meaninglessness. Answers of “general” importance can quickly become empty, can be lacking in context of use. Instead of that interest in our infinite desires and all-purpose talk and habitual ways of acting, listening to Cage provides a clearing of the ground on which our actions, compositions, and fragilities of talk stand. After listening, we are likely or may very well be awakened from the standard routines of our lives and be in a position to ask meaningful questions about importance or value.

### Exercise 3: Listening to Freeman Etudes

Listen to the Freeman Etudes. Collect the data of words and concepts called to mind … provide a list. After having done this, weigh the list against that given by others (one is found in the following footnote). How do they measure side by side? What sense of agreement and difference of experience can be established? What criteria are used to compare and identify the experience and the talk provided? (e.g. “live” listening/performance, CDs/recorded presentation; different performers; prior reading or none.) Listen again. What does one now say about the Freeman Etudes?\(^{52}\)

### 3.2. Reminders

We seem now with attention to grammar and questions of significance to be making various concepts (sense, multiplicity, familiar, nonlinear, change, possibility, and order) and their investigation important to Cage’s music. And this is true. What we hear is wrapped in a collection of concepts. But we need not feel the need to justify such a reminder with further references to philosophical arguments and investigations (although this will not be far from our efforts). Cage himself regularly provides lists of concepts important for his work. One of the last lists he gives was tied to his Norton Lectures (1988), which has as a full title: I: VMетодStructureIntentionDisciplineNotationIndeterminacyInterpenetrationImitationDevotionCircumstancesVariableStructureNonunderstanding ContingencyInconsistencyPerformance

50. Today, the piece could easily be transformed and performed using iPhones or laptops or whatever audio technology dominates, with the same questions arising. “As with our colleges, so with a hundred ‘modern improvements,’ there is an illusion about them; there is not always a positive advance … Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things. They are but improved means to an unimproved end, an end which it was already but too easy to arrive at … As if the main object were to talk fast and not to talk sensibly.” (Thoreau, 1991, pp. 43–44).

51. It is remarkable how easily and insensibly we fall into a particular route and make a beaten track for ourselves. I had not lived there a week before my feet wore a path from my door to the pond side; and though it is five or six years since I trod it, it is still quite distinct. It is true, I fear that others may have fallen into it, and so helped to keep it open (Thoreau, 1991, p. 259).

52. Freeman Etudes: violin sound clusters strict control pitches rhythms bowings fingerings fast slow concentration challenging extreme density discrete dense scratchings hissing plucking note by note tiring intensity winding static.
This list of concepts adds five new concepts to an earlier list attached to the text: Composition in Retrospect (1981). Concepts and their collection are not foreign to the musical work Cage gives us. However, in so granting importance to concepts, we have not opened any decided distance between the concepts and the listening to the music. Sounds and concepts do not escape each other here. This is to say, we cannot so meaningfully talk of these concepts in Cage’s music without the sounds that bring them to our attention, give a particular use, provide their place. Furthermore, just as importantly, we cannot so meaningfully talk of the sounds unless we can talk, have repeatable concepts for discussion. This is a grammatical reminder. You cannot talk or want to talk if there is no talk possible. You “can only say something if” you have “learned to talk.” So, “in order to want to say something one must also have mastered a language.”

Let us remember and be reminded of Wittgenstein’s reminder: “to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life.” (PI #19) Without the actions that accompany our asking, telling, or reporting, significant linguistic expression could not be. There is an inseparable interrelation of word and action. We can formally or abstractly distinguish talk and action but must remember how we actually do what we do. Talking, whether asking questions, giving directions, or reporting events, is doing something and acting in some particular way. Similarly, acting, whether running, crying, shopping, or wanting, is only possible because there is talk or language in which we can distinguish one action from another. Human action does not identity itself or tell us how it is to be clearly distinguished and recognized. It is by means of talk that actions are identified and distinguished. Running and crying and wanting are different activities because there are uses of language that distinguish them and give them their identity. We get ourselves in intellectual trouble when we ignore these interwoven particulars. We find confusions when we disregard the uses of our sentences and try to classify them in order to understand their ultimate meaning. Placing thought and meaning outside of and prior to language and actions is a basic confusion that must be resisted. If you do not so resist, you will fall into asking questions like: “but does ‘wanting this’ consist in thinking in some form or other a different sentence from the one you utter?—” That is the type of question that begins to lead you in the wrong direction, away from the use. Our investigations are conceptual investigations of the entwined nature of language use and forms of life, of the harmony of word and world. Learning to talk is a requirement or condition, a bracket of possibility, for wanting to say something. “Wanting” is not a primitive, independent act but is embedded and learned in a human setting, it is a threaded, used concept. So, we might be brought then to say here: as silence is not the opposite of sound, but all the sounds we don’t intend, so the nonintentional is not the opposite of intention, desirous wanting, but, as we might say, the ordinary conditions that make intentions possible; that which we have no control over but that given in which we find ourselves.

53. To do that, allow such an opening, we might as well follow the fairly common path of those who have made autobiographical facts and life changes or otherworldly realities [family, travels, diet, people, Buddhism, and meditation] more important than listening to Cage’s music.

54. PI #338 Finishing the remark: and yet it is clear that one can want to speak without speaking. Just as one can want to dance without dancing. And when one thinks about this, the mind reaches for the idea of dancing, speaking, etc. It is the reaching for some abstract, hidden idea, rather than examining the various uses that produces problems.
This clarification of sound and words is to stress that it is not just any and all philosophy that is relevant to listening to Cage (how meaningless is such a “totalizing” claim), but requires a grammatical, nonintentional philosophy. Cage’s music reminds us of the conditions and brackets of possibility of human activities. It does so by taking away or challenging the substances of our lives. It reminds us of what is always there, of what is easily forgotten. It provides an invitation not for dispute or despair, not a voicing or sounding of preference or a taking of sides in a context of separation and detachment, but is a call for an acknowledgment of who and what we are. Cage’s music offers a promise for examining the conditions and possibilities of our lives, of our ways of acting and talking. Listening to Cage calls to mind what is always before us and unapproachable. It reminds us of what we easily forget because it is so close (unapproachable), a reminder of that greater than us and that makes what we do and say possible.

Questions, therefore, that pressure and pursue unrelentingly the old problem of trying to resolve a conflict between words and sound, between philosophy and music have misread and misheard Cage. If Cage is seen as trying to recapture or solve a problem about sounds and words, rather than remind us of and call to mind the agreement and harmony they share, then we have made a mistake. If his music is approached and given as an effort to solve problems of Western dualism or escape to another world or finding peace and transcendent feelings, then a mistake has been made.

This shift from “listening to ...” to what music may point to or reveal to us has regularly occurred in contexts of musical understanding, and does happen in listening to Cage, especially when the complexity baffles and confusions initially abound. Certainly, questions of what the music is about or how it is to be understood and what its ideas are will be found in listening to some of Cage’s music (e.g. Song Books, Roaratorio, and even Credo In Us and Music of Changes) and will be prominent in some talk about it. But this falling toward or into the nonmusical and inexplicable need not come to pass or cause us problems if we remember or acknowledge the threaded nature of word and sound, the complexity rather than simplicity of our talk and actions. If we do not assume, that is, we know

55. Some might want to say a philosophy of Cage’s place and time. That would be ordinary language philosophy and the philosophy of Wittgenstein–Austin–Cavell. Just note, for instance, the clash and collision of intention and nonintention (my/I v. natural inclination), of me and that greater than me, in these opening sentences. “I have written down all these thoughts as remarks, short paragraphs, sometimes in longer chains about the same subject, sometimes jumping, in a sudden change, from one area to another. — Originally it was my intention to bring all this together in a book whose form I thought of differently at different times.” However “my thoughts soon grew feeble if I tried to force them along a single track against their natural inclination.” —— And this was, of course, connected with the very nature of the investigation.” Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, Preface. Also, hear the objectivity of words that escapes subjective intentions, in the following: “First, language is an inheritance. Words are before I am; they are common” (Cavell, “Being odd, getting even,” 1994, p. 113). “Few, I dare say, have it in mind that they might own their very own set of words. But is it tempting to suppose that one may own one’s very own sensations?” (Cavell, 1979, p. 356). Austin echoes these thoughts of nonintention, the objective or common, and its getting lost or forgotten in personal intentional efforts: Our “common stock of words embodies all the distinctions men have found worth drawing, and the connexions they have found worth marking, in the lifetimes of many generations: these surely are likely to be more numerous, more sound, since they have stood up to the long test of the survival of the fittest, and more subtle, at least in all ordinary and reasonably practical matters, than any that you or I are likely to think up in our arm-chairs of an afternoon—the most favoured alternative method” (Austin, “A plea for excuses,” 1979, p. 182). “All this must seem very obvious, but I wish to point out that it is fatally easy to forget it: no doubt I shall do so myself many times in the course of this paper.” (Austin, “The meaning of a word,” 1979, p. 60).

Nonintentional Philosophy:
unapproachable calling to mind nonhierarchical staying-stirring in place harmonies concordances other objectivity sense nonsense importance incite question provoke awaken common ordinary natural.

56. Such an effort is an effort of a nonintentional, grammatical, philosophy. cf. Philosophical Investigations #89 Something that one knows when nobody asks one, but no longer knows when one is asked to explain it, is something that has to be called to mind. (And it is obviously something which, for some reason, is difficult to call to mind.) #129: The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something—because it is always before one’s eyes.) The real foundations of their inquiry do not strike people at all. Unless that fact has at some time struck them.—And this means: we fail to be struck by what, once seen, is most striking and most powerful.
that philosophy and music, ideas and sounds, are distinct, but instead are committed to investigating the great variety of use we find as part of our concepts and in our listening to Cage.

There is no traditional tension between sound and ideas in Cage’s music. It is reasonable to hold that claims of philosophical substance that demean or empty the content of Cage’s music would seem to be of little use in listening to Cage. But if Cage’s music is doing what ordinary language philosophy does—reminding us of that immediately before us and awakening us to such facts—then the philosophy has a place, even if only as another perspective on a similar subject matter. Listening to Cage reminds us of, evokes, stirs, and reawakens our grammar (the nonintentional, the possibilities of use, the multiplicity and variety of talk and action, the workings of language, the limits of talk, objective standards, of words not my own). Listening to Cage awakens and stirs us to resist, accept, embrace, reflect, frown, laugh, question, affirm, challenge, walk away, dance, and talk. It brings to mind the brackets or conditions of possibility, the agreements, which govern what we do. This is nonintentional philosophy and music.

Attempts to dismiss Cage the musician or Cage the philosopher fail in a similar way. The second encourages and tolerates a narrowness about philosophy and Cage that we need not accept, whereas the first assumes and works with a conception of music and ideas that unnecessarily confines us. “Not philosophy” misses the nonintentional and ordinary, it sees philosophy much too narrowly and seems unaware of the work and depth of ordinary language philosophy. The opponents of Cage and philosophy have an “old” and restricted conception of philosophy. “Not music” misses the nonintentional and silence (all the sounds we don’t intend), it sees music much too narrowly and seems unaware of the breath, diversity, and complexity of sound. It holds fast to an “old” and constrained conception of music.

Exercise 4: Nonintentional Reminders

337. But didn’t I already intend the whole construction of the sentence (for example) at its beginning? So surely it already existed in my mind before I uttered it out loud!—If it was in my mind, still it would not normally be there in some different word order. But here again, we are forming a misleading picture of “intending”: that is, of the use of this word. An intention is embedded in a setting, in human customs and institutions. If the technique of the game of chess did not exist, I could not intend to play a game of chess. To the extent that I do intend the construction of an English sentence in advance, that is made possible by the fact that I can speak English.

337. But didn’t I already intend the whole sentence and its structure from the beginning? So it must have been in my mind “before I uttered it out loud!” Here we are creating confusion about “intending.” “An intention is embedded in a setting, in the human customs and institutions.” It is not separate from but a part of human forms of life, part of natural inclinations and nonintention. I can only intend so and so, e.g. to read more carefully, if the materials of language use are already present. Intention is not prior to but part of the language used. If it were, by the way, in my mind before I said it, is it not true that it would be in “some different word order?” I would then have to reorder or translate it correctly. Where did I learn this? “To the extent that I do intend the construction of an English sentence in advance, that is made possible by the fact that I can speak English.”

338. After all, one can only say something if one has learned to talk. Therefore, in order to want to say something, one must also have mastered a language; and yet it is clear that one can want to speak without speaking. Just as one can want to dance without dancing.

And when one thinks about this, the mind reaches for the idea of dancing, speaking, etc.

338. You can only say something if you have learned to talk. This is an example of a philosophical thesis? (128) Something no one would dispute. So “in order to want to say something one must also have mastered a language.” Learning to talk is a condition, an ordinary, nonintentional condition of
3.3. Saying Yes
Our restrictions and limits may seem only a negative fact about us. But acknowledgment and recognition of restrictions can certainly produce a different sense of ourselves. (We might remember the existentialist emphasis on negation and its point of use or the stress on obstacles being seen as opportunities.) Think of the image of walking through unknown woods, heavily timbered on all sides. We fretfully, hence rather quickly, lose our bearings and don’t know our way about. How do we then move? We may be overwhelmed by a general problem of density, with no differentiation and all things looking the same. With some patience and attention to detail, we can, however, come to notice a particular place here-and-there less uniform and dense and formidable; and we might then with effort reach an opening and find new promise and occasions for thinking and doing. We may no longer think of ourselves as lost.

It is such a walk and work within limits and possibilities that infuse ordinary language philosophy and Cage’s music. We move within the necessities and restrictions of what we say and do, of what makes our saying and doing possible, yet affirming and openly facing the prospect of going on on our own without a clear sense of what is to be found or result. Just as the ordinary language philosophers ask us to learn and acknowledge the possibilities of everyday language (rules, criteria, and mistakes), so does Cage repeatedly ask, to different extremes, what are the possibilities of the piano—Sonatas and Interludes and Suite for Toy Piano, of audio material—Speech, Williams and Fontana Mix, of opera—Europeras 1&2, of the orchestra—Atlas Eclipticalis, 103, of the violin—Freeman Etudes? He asked this question, in fact, of more or less anything he came across, almost endlessly and constantly attentive to all he lived with and found around him—plants, shadows, cameras, words, rocks, paper, human bodies, and kitchen utensils.57 How readily do we remember or acknowledge what makes us, our talk and action, possible, accept our restrictions and live within them, rather than pursue a special self and destructive dualisms, and lament about who and what we are.

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57. A work whose possibilities he did not live to realize was that involving electric motors. “I am thinking of writing something for electrical motors—they are around us everywhere, refrigerators, furnaces and we don’t hear them.” The Freeman Etudes were almost not finished because of its extreme (even for Cage) investigation of possibilities. Compositional work was stopped at approximately mid-stage with almost half of the etudes left incomplete because the material as it developed, Cage was forcefully told, was “no longer possible to play,” e.g. too many notes in too short a time. Etude XVIII, in particular, brought things to a halt. But after about 10 years, Cage was brought back to the piece and finished the Freeman Etudes, with the “invaluable” help of James Pritchett and the virtuosity of Irvine Arditti. During his work on completing these Etudes, several people with genuine puzzlement asked: “Why is he going back to work on that?” As though he had bigger and better things to pursue. He had after-all just recently finished the overwhelming Norton Lectures, I–VI, and the Europeras 1&2. But in the context of understanding Cage as giving conditions of possibility their place, no such question need be asked.
and the difficulties we day by day confront? We might choose instead to create with and for others, at least not critique, separate, and judge others, rather than bemoan the extreme, general problems that surround us and the hopelessness that can overwhelm, we might celebrate the “practicality of the impossible” and the wonder of the possibilities and hard work offered us. This is the specific language, the talk and action, Cage used and proffered when talking about his Freeman Etudes (he talked in similar ways about his earlier compositions when he talked of limits and constraints and of his father’s bold efforts and counsel); and these last 32 etudes do represent one model, in his musical work, of our social needs, viz., despite their extreme difficulty of composition and formidableness of performance and of listening, they are to be seen as expressions of optimism, joy, and of success where none seems possible. Listening to Cage affirms the harmonies of our lives. We are brought to ask: How quickly will we say Yes to our existence? How quickly will we say Yes to our lives as part of (not apart from) others and the world?

Cage’s music embodies an anarchistic way of life, combining (intertwining) experimentation, chance, and silence. It conveys the natural goodness and livability of our ordinary, communal lives, and suggests that the struggles and difficulties of life be faced by listening carefully to the nonintentional world. It provokes and encourages us to learn to live deliberately (reflectively grammatically rule governed, within discipline) rather than desperately. It offers a means of learning to live without paralyzing despair or reckless anxieties and passions (unhurriedly, thoughtfully, attending to the workings of language and sound)—of meaningfully and peacefully saying, “I like it well enough ... as it is.”

58. Asking questions about the agreements and harmony of ourselves and others, of word and world, answers and dissolves the questions, reminds us of what makes possible the use of language. Does the world exist independently or is it just a product of my mind? What of others? Without the essential agreement of ourselves and others, ourselves and the world, these questions cannot sensibly be asked. The meaningful asking of questions or use of meaningful language in any form requires the basic following of rules, which is a public, objective, and criteria-based action. You cannot talk sensibly without others; there is no private, individually grounded language. So, to question in some general or skeptical sense the worth or existence of others or the world meaningfully dissolves in the reflection on the conditions that make that question possible. Under the pressures of our daily routines, we may need reminded of the concordances that make possible what we say and do in the very asking of the questions, in showing that the questions themselves can make no sense, given what is required to ask them. A whole cloud of philosophy, Wittgenstein will say, condenses into a drop of grammar.

59. Anarchism and grammar have a similar context of learning and understanding. They both involve an acknowledgment of the basic agreements, trusts, and limits that make what we say and do possible. Anarchism quickly gets distorted with divisions of power (personal and social) and thereby relegated to a narrow, political sense of use, while grammar gets lost in the intentional efforts at pursuing the private and hidden and the special self. We are told repeatedly that various dualisms and class distinctions and personal ownership (of property, people, and words) are a natural condition or (as used to be said) god-given (rather than derivative, contrived, and changeable). Because the people who talk and write about power and personal selves are so convinced of the urgency of what they are saying, because politics and narcissism bring an insistence of effort (enforced divisions and self-interest), they are expressed constantly in passionate, subjective terms, and thereby bluntly ignore the objective facts that make possible such passionate expression. Grammar and anarchism are interwoven concepts—learning about one is to learn about the other.
Fontana Mix

mixed diverse confusing sounds tape electronic various guttural grunts growls amplification voices human nonhuman increasing identifications abrupt broken noises discontinuity thumps pleasant free-for-all

Having provided a grammatical place for our talk and listening, we end this brief excursion in nonintentional philosophy and music by answering more directly our original question about Fontana Mix: Why would we listen to this? It is not hard, now, to suggest that listening to Fontana Mix awakens us from the tired standards and routines in which we find ourselves. It agitates and reorients our sense of importance. It tests our sense of mistake, interruption, ruin, and justification. It clears the ground for questioning our concepts anew.

Listening to Fontana Mix helps fight our fears of the uninhabitability of the world (it allows us to face and accept better what nonintentionally comes our way) and helps us resist emptiness of meaning when talking of music or anything at all (it promotes a concentration on the immediate particularity and instances of substance we hear). Listening to Fontana Mix as a means and rehearsal for listening to the world (to the workings of word and world) ... learning to listen to it without desperation or despair ... hearing its dense and diverse materials without immediate dispute or a fleeing to hidden realities ... all this may now be measured with a firmer sense of meaning threaded with a more general understanding of how to listen to Cage.

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While often a solitary task, the work on this material has involved a fair number of others. Some of this material was given a place for talk by the composer Tony Di Ritis and many of his Northeastern University music colleagues and students, especially when we gathered together on several occasions in New York City for the Fusion Art Exchange sessions. I am exceedingly grateful for the opportunities to think aloud for many-a-summer with those individuals and with my friend Tony. Kyle Gann, a friend for several decades, was also part of those summer events and his enormous energy and musical talents helped me think about Cage in broader ways. Just as important, was his willingness to laugh about himself and about the discipline of music, a true Cagean quality, and he has, thereby, always made me feel positive about my thinking and work. He is an accomplished composer and wide-ranging author and noted journalist, but is always willing to speak frankly about the discipline of music and the strange occupation of an academic professor—something that is refreshing and unfortunately quite often missing in academia and its furrowed-browed sense of itself.

Of almost untraceable importance are the occasions provided by Duke University, and especially by PAL (Duke’s philosophy and literature institute). They have allowed me to return regularly to their presence to discuss ordinary language philosophy and recently also to talk of Cage. Toril Moi and Sarah Beckwith, now long-standing friends of mine, are the force behind the amazing work that Duke and PAL have been giving for close to a decade. It is at their website that several lectures and notes of mine can be found, including relatively recent ones titled: Cage, Wittgenstein, and the Sirens of 7th avenue and Grammatical Stirrings: I. Listening to Cage (Experimentation Chance Silence Anarchism) II. Reading Cavell’s The Claim of Reason—Threads of the Inner and Outer. Sarah’s work on Shakespeare and her recent brilliant book Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness have provided me with numerous moments of provocation in my thinking and have produced conversations that have been of wonder in their depth of thought. How lucky I am to be a friend of such a person as Sarah. Toril remains a confidant and person of great importance to me. She is, of course, an exceptional thinker and friend and I learn much from her each time we communicate. Most recently, her writing on Ibsen’s late plays has taken me places I would never have gone in reading and thinking. After a recent Cage presentation and discussion, Toril talked with me and looked me directly in the eyes and said, ”You must write something sustained on Cage. It is important material and not well known or considered. I have listened to some of the music before but only now do I hear it with significance. You MUST begin writing on it, now!” I have taken internally those words.

I must also thank Jacqueline Waeber of Duke’s music department who has been instrumental in my presentations on Cage in 2013 and 2014 at Duke, and specifically with the Audiovisualities group that is reshaping much of the University’s and our understanding of sound and sight. I am indebted to her for her kindness.
Kelly Knox has sat with me on repeated occasions (more now than I can remember) discussing Cage, Cunningham, and various texts as well as dance and ordinary language philosophy. In our conversations, I was continually reminded, just by her presence, that the ability to live and act in the world without a need to talk at length about it was to be prized and probably pursued, yet she also reminded me that if one could clearly talk about how one has and does live, then something additionally of some importance has been recognized and offered for use. Talk and action can be a conundrum, unless one does not forget their threaded and inseparable character. Kelly, being who she is, powerfully reminded me of this each time we talked. Like Toril, she excitedly said that this Cage material was quite rewarding and should be made available for others. Unlike Toril, she did not look me in the eye when she said this, but stood up and moved between my chair and office door saying as she rushed and jumped up and down: “You MUST write this Cage material down. You MUST do so for people like me that need to read and hear such words.” Her modest and remarkably sincere efforts to understand have forced me to find one way and then another to talk about most all of what is in this text. How could I possibly thank her for this …?

Many others in many ways have helped the text come to be. Certainly, Stanley Cavell always casts a long shadow over all my work and that includes most certainly the work here. Peter Fosl continues to keep me questioning the place of ordinary language philosophy with respect to the tradition, and especially regarding Hume. If it were not for Peter’s great efforts this text would not appear as it does now. Two individuals I can hardly thank at all since anything said falls short are Leonore Fleming, who regularly presses my clarity of thinking and forces me to try to match the clarity of her questions, and my mother, my love, Ona, who is present with me everyday and keeps a stability to my life that no one else can give.

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Appendix I

Cage Source Material

Credo in US
1942 Bennington, VT.

Percussion quartet, including piano and radio or phonograph

60. She worked with me, for instance, through much of 2015 reading and discussing Carolyn Brown’s marvelous Chance and Circumstance. This is the resulting linguistic phenomenology from that work.
Scored for tin cans, gongs, electric buzzer, tom-toms, piano, and phonograph or radio; using music by Dvorak, Beethoven, Sibelius, or Shostakovich (records)

Originally for dancers

12 min

**Sonatas and Interludes**

1946–1948 Black Mountain, NC ‘48

Solo prepared piano

20 pieces, 16 sonatas, and 4 interludes; Sonatas I–IV; First Interlude and Sonatas V–VIII; Second Interlude; Third Interlude; Sonatas IX–XII; Fourth Interlude; Sonatas XIII–XVI

45 notes are prepared, mainly with screws and bolts, but also 15 pieces of rubber, 4 pieces of plastic, 6 nuts, and one eraser

70 min

**Suite for Toy Piano**

1948 Black Mountain, NC

Toy Piano, nine white keys from E below middle C to the F above

5 movements, I and V limited to five tones: G to D, III and IV use all nine tones

Originally music for the dance: “A Diversion”

8 min

**Music of Changes**

1951 New York, 1952

Solo piano, 4 volumes

Chance composition, involving extensive use of the *I Ching*—chance-derived operations determining tempi, dynamics, durations, sounds, and silences

Piano keys and pedals used, strings inside are plucked with fingernails, lid open and closed (slammed), and cymbal beaters used to beat strings and keyboard lid

43 min

**4′33″**

1952 Woodstock, N.Y.

Piano (or any instrument or combination of instruments), tacet

3 movements lasting 30″, 2′23″, and 1′40″, lengths determined by chance operations

4 min 33 s

**Speech**

1955

Five radios with news reader

Score gives specific time indications and suggestions for playing of the radios, the tuning, volume, on/off while walking, carrying radio, reading and articles of newspaper determined by performer

42 min
Fontana Mix

1958 Rome ‘59
4 single-track or 2 double-track tapes
Collected, mixed, spliced sounds, determined by a musical tool of 10 paper sheets and 12 transparencies involving points, curved lines, 1 straight line, and 1 grid
Six classes of sounds: city sounds, country sounds, electronic sounds, manually produced sounds (including music, instrumental), wind-produced sounds (including songs, singing), and “small” sounds requiring amplification (e.g. crickets’ chirping)
17 min

Atlas Eclipticalis

1961–62 Montreal ‘61
Orchestra
Variable length score played in whole or in part by any number of players, up to the full 86 specified; performers and instruments can be amplified with contact microphones
Chance determined notes, may be performed simultaneously with Winter Music or Song Books
14–48 min

Song Books

1970 Paris
Solo voice, two volumes 56 songs volume one, 34 songs volume two
Solos may be sung with or without any other indeterminate music, e.g. Concert for Piano and Orchestra, Rozart Mix
Any number of solos may be performed in any order and any superimpositions may be effected; each solo belongs to one of the following categories: (1) song, (2) song using electronics, (3) theatre, (4) theatre using electronics; each solo is relevant or irrelevant to the subject: “We connect Satie with Thoreau”; texts are by Henry David Thoreau, Erik Satie, James Joyce, and others
Few minutes to more than an hour

Roaratorio, an Irish Circus on Finnegans Wake

1979 Donaueschingen, Germany
Generic title: ____, ____ ____ circus on ____.
For voice, tape, and any number of musicians, optionally on tape
Sounds of a text, Finnegans Wake, collected, mixed, and transferred to tape
60’00’

Europeras 1&2

1985–87 Frankfort am Main ‘87
1: 90 min, 2: 45 min, intermission film
19 singers, 12 dancer/athletes, 24-piece chamber orchestra, tape, Truckera (101 layered, mixed, operatic fragments)
Chance determined score, lighting cues, costumes, props, stage actions, dance, and stage decor
135 min
Appendix II

Ordinary Language Philosophy Source Material

Walden

1854

Full title: Walden or, Life in the Woods

Epigraph: I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up.
Appenix III

Unapproachable Material

For a good number of years, I have felt a need to write something like what is said in this tangled manuscript on listening to Cage, but I could never bring myself properly to doing so. It was only because of relatively recent and direct instigation provided by Toril Moi and Kelly Knox (more on them in the general acknowledgments) that I did finally pursue the actual writing. Why I have been so slow in this (and other related) writing might now be said with more understanding, as the reason, I now recognize, “was, of course, connected with the very nature of the investigation.” This is to say that I have found Cage, I suppose more than any other composer of the last 100 years, to be paradigmatic of music for me, to be a dominating present of the history of music for me. This has meant, as these things will, living with the sounds of the music, subjected to the sound. This was a boon but also a burden as it often meant, or seemed to mean, that in order to think and write with some communal clarity and general impartiality about listening to Cage, I required finding a certain freedom from that sound, not always hearing Cage in all that I heard (how objective could one be in such a situation?). This demand, however, continually escaped me and led to the constant stopping of such work, even given the compelling need to satisfy the daunting tasks set for me that are mentioned at the end of footnotes 3 and 15, for it seemed to required that I step outside the controlling sound to a place of nonCagean or unbound silence. But there was no way, for me, so justifiably to move (philosophically or musically) and I could only continue to work on “listening to …” from the inside out with no approach from outside rightly possible. And that is finally the nonprivate or moral fiber and restrictions that imbue this text, namely finding the method and paths of thought within the works of concern. (Why does it seem not just an error of effortlessness but an affront to our esthetic and moral sense to separate, reprint, and then discuss by itself, say, the chapter “The Grand Inquisitor?” What is unprincipled and unappealing about discussing “the private language argument” by itself?

Philosophical Investigations

1953 posthumous
English editions 1–4
Epigraph: The trouble about progress it that it always looks much greater than it really is. (Nestroy)

Philosophical Papers

1961
Editions 1–3
~12 Essays including The Meaning of a Word ‘40 Other Minds ‘46 A Plea for Excuses ‘56 Performative Utterances ‘56
Opening paragraph “A Plea for Excuses”: Much, of course, of the amusement, and of the instruction, comes in drawing the coverts of the microglot, in hounding down the minutiae, and to this I can do no more here than incite you.

The Claim of Reason

1979
Full title: The Claim of Reason Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy
Four Parts
Epigraph: Truly speaking, it is not instruction, but provocation, that I can receive from another soul. (Emerson)
Or “naming” and “family resemblance” by themselves?) When Cage, for instance, says (playfully or not) “Everything we do is music, and everyplace is the best seat” I hear not, as do many, a figurative and empty overgeneralization said primarily for effect or a Zen koan-like expression intending perplexity. I hear not, that is, something one can or needs to move away from, but rather I hear an announcement or calling to mind of something quite literal, namely, the “unapproachable.” There is no reason or place to move in listening to Cage’s music. One can at best work and listen from the inside out. We are already as close as we can be. Even when I felt a clear resistance to what was heard or what was said about Cage and his music, I was unable to free myself by an outside move. (To note but an instance or two of this way of working, the often-time acceptance or embrace of irrationality in Cage’s work could drive one quickly to avoidance and to leaving the bothersome talk and action behind (even to screaming into the night). But when Cage was asked about this very fact, he talked of Mao and society and the good and bad to be found in his efforts, with the conversation ending on the assertion “We don’t have to follow him there.” Dispute, he said, “is not the point.” Both Cage and Cavell have said similarly that general and personal criticisms of Thoreau, of which there are many, are largely misplaced. “Why would we not instead thank him for such a life and feel grateful for what he offered us?” Where is the use “In the criticism?” Wittgenstein talks this way as well, reminding us that it is the conditions that make dispute possible that are of interest. If one wishes to dispute what he says, then he will drop the point and move elsewhere (cf. Appendix VI, Threads I, “Contesting Wittgenstein.”).) So, clarifying efforts and writing about “listening to …” seem to face a constant difficulty of having nothing to say and saying it. This is a challenge of nonintentional philosophy and music (masterly called to mind by Wittgenstein and Cage) and has been one I have tried to meet for what has now stretched to a good number of lonely/unapproachable years.