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“a limit of the world”: Violence and Silence in Cage and Wittgenstein ¹

Dr. Oliver Perrott-Webb

“I dedicate this work to the U.S.A. that it may become
just another part of the world, no more, no less.”²
—John Cage, Preface to “Lecture on the Weather”

Along with Black Mountain College contemporaries such as Robert Rauschenberg, Charles Olson, and Denise Levertov, John Cage’s work in the postwar moment is one which identifies a moment of profound change. This moment, at the very least, tests the scope of the fractures discussed in Modernist practice. The Modernist “fracture”—whilst of course varying across different nations, cultures, and movements, and thus impossible to nail down to a singular definition—represented a break in aesthetic practice and conventional expectations which reflected the questioning inspired by the revelations of Nietzsche, Freud, Darwin, and the violence of the First World War among others. One such example of this questioning came from the Dadaists whose prioritizing of “nonsense” reflected their perception of flaws of the “rationality” of post-Enlightenment thinking. For the Dadaists, the question became “why should we celebrate rationality when the violence of the First World War is the result of the supposed rationality of man?”

That Cage was so influenced by the man that gave Dadaism its name—Marcel Duchamp—speaks volumes to the importance of these early aesthetic enquiries into violence and fracture in the wake of the two World Wars. Yet the postwar moment—which this essay notes as beginning after the dropping of the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima in 1945—offers an entirely new perspective. Where Modernist practices of

various stripes sought to produce “art of fracture” which sought alternative routes to understanding through aesthetic practice, John Cage, along with many others at Black Mountain College, found that even this premise—that there was an ontological floor on which one could stand—was questionable.

Yet Cage’s project even differs from his Black Mountain contemporaries in this regard. As Juha Virtanen notes in “NO ONE REMAINS, NOR IS, ONE” for this very journal, the poem of Charles Olson—who was similarly concerned with how we come to understand the world around us in the postwar moment—titled “A Toss, for John Cage” “dismisses the composer’s work as self-taught tricks that lack an appropriate degree of gravitas.”³ Whilst this criticism from Olson is not tied to a specific moment within the poem, its criticism is, I feel, lacking. Cage’s work at its best, whilst regularly playful, does possess sufficient force to provide alternative purchase on contemporary issues. That potential comes in the form of a tendency for Cage’s most lasting works—such as *4’33”*—to provide a quite different and radical type of break from language, that which can be used to justify and codify violence. Indeed, as I hope to demonstrate, Cage’s silent work has the potential to move us from the possibility of a codified “truth” towards the unspeakable “no-truth” gestured towards in Zen kōan.

This concern with violence, and the need to consider violence outside of existing structures of thought, is influenced in no small part in an American context by the dropping of the two atom bombs on Japan in August 1945. German-born American political theorist and philosopher Hannah Arendt, for instance, identifies this moment in “Introduction *into* Politics” from *The Promise of Politics* as being explicitly related to the atom bomb. Arendt notes that the atom bomb forces us to split from the notion that, in

violence, “the ability to destroy and the ability to produce stand in balance.” This has extreme consequences for politics; if in the atom bomb we are faced with a weapon which does not balance destruction and production, a weapon which makes the status of continued human life on Earth debatable, we are, for Arendt, left asking not “[w]hat is the meaning of politics?” but rather “[d]oes politics still have any meaning at all?”⁴ Politics can no longer be thought of as a question of “how to balance destruction and production in violence” because that balance, that dualism, has been shown to be fundamentally untenable in the wake of the bomb.

Accordingly, the bomb acts as both physically *and* ontologically destructive; the bomb destroys the idea of considering violence “in balance,” justified for some as a part of “production,” “generation” or “progress”—as “ambiguous” as the “value of this sort of progress” may be, in Arendt’s words.⁵ Instead, writers must contend with a violence of apocalypse, an end which defies the very conversation upon which “justification” or “progress” are based. Indeed, how can one consider the apocalypse in words? What is required is a fundamentally new way of considering politics, art, and violence in a world where such categorizations have been thrown into very serious, if not untenable, doubt.

This paper proposes that John Cage’s concern with silence is born under the shadow of the atom bomb and speaks to his concern with violence in the postwar moment. Whilst Cage’s engagement with Henry David Thoreau and his study of Zen Buddhism with Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki indicates an engagement with non-violence, Cage nonetheless understands that work which aspires to, or advocates for, non-violence upholds an artificial dualism between violence and non-violence, silence and non-silence, America and “non-America.” As noted above, in this moment of the atom

bomb where the “balance” between potential “destruction” and “creation” in violence has been shown to be untenable, the dualisms noted here are shown to be similarly untenable. Just as one *could* consider “silence” in opposition to “noise” or “cacophony” for instance, Cage’s project attempts to dismantle this presumed duality.

This questioning of silence is similarly vital to the project of the Austrian-British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. Arguably Wittgenstein’s most famous aphorism, that which closes his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, is itself a call to silence: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.”⁶ Whilst there is no certainty that Cage read Wittgenstein prior to the premiere of *4’33”* in 1952, there is no doubt that Cage’s later reading of Wittgenstein, especially considering the historical context in which the *Tractatus* was written, adds further richness to his discussions of silence and violence in the postwar moment. Silence in both writers will be presented not as the “antidote” to, nor in opposition to, the noise of war, but rather in deep communion with it. It is a reading of silence which enters the cracks within the supposedly justified violence of war and breaks it open, undermining its internal logic.

Deafening Silence

Before we can begin to further elaborate on Cage’s own process and response to the postwar moment, we must momentarily observe the bomb’s horizon and its force in the American consciousness. By observing the *ontological* destruction that the atom bomb causes as well as its material destruction, we can begin to see how this event connects silence and violence.

As novelist and journalist John Hersey noted in 1946, “[a]lmost no one in Hiroshima recalls hearing any noise of the bomb” which fell on 6th August 1945.⁷ This

at-first curious line from Hersey—explained by the bomb’s deafening volume and rapid evisceration of life in its radius—brings to mind the sonic qualities of a potentially oncoming apocalypse. For many, this impending end of days dawned with no marked sonic impact. Long before the first bomb fell, Cage had already begun to think of silence as intimately connected with violence, as not only an aesthetic gesture but as a geopolitical one. Written in his adolescence, Cage’s earliest surviving written piece, *Other People Think*, notes that:

One of the greatest blessings that the United States could receive in the near future would be to have her industries halted, her businesses discontinued, her people speechless, a great pause in her world of affairs created, and finally to have everything stopped that runs, until everyone should hear the last wheel go around and the last echo fade away...then, in that moment of complete intermission, of undisturbed calm, would be the hour most conducive to the birth of a Pan-American Conscience. Then we should be capable of answering the question, “What ought we to do?” For we should be hushed and silent, and we should have the opportunity to learn that other people think.⁸

This appreciation of silence as a pedagogical tool—one which inspires revelation rather than teaches by rote—retains its own “undisturbed calm” in Cage’s thought from this point onwards. Cage does not take for granted that we can “learn that other people think” without the seemingly counterintuitive application of silence, the absence of the Word, of categorization through language. Crucially, the essay, written in response to the United States’ involvement in Panama’s rent riots in 1925, places silence in intimate connection with imperial violence. Cage’s desire for silence here should not, however,

be mistaken for non-intervention. Cage's silence in *Other People Think* is an interventionist violence of its own, an arresting of "industries" and "businesses," one which cuts across the logic of the violence of the United States in this postwar moment. What makes this violence "American violence" is built upon what Donald Pease termed the United States government's postwar "belief that America was the fulfilment of the world's aspiration for the 'Nation of Nations,'" a belief which was propagated by "constructing the threat to the attainment of the ideal in the image of the Soviet Empire."⁹ Any practice which disrupts these violent categorizations (such as US/Soviet, good/evil, etc.) necessarily unpicks the idea of a "Nation of Nations," an idea which, whether through fantasy or actualization, is irrevocably tied to the United States through extant ideas such as manifest destiny. Cage himself identifies this in the close to his Preface to "Lecture on the Weather" (1975) as published in *Empty Words*:

I have given this work the proportions of my "silent piece" which I wrote in 1952 though I was already thinking of it earlier. When I was twelve I wrote a speech called *Other People Think* which proposed silence on the part of the U.S.A. as a preliminary to the solution of its Latin American problems. Even then our industrialists thought of themselves as the owners of the world, all of it, not just the part between Mexico and Canada. Now our government thinks of us also as the policemen of the world, no longer rich policemen, just poor ones, but nonetheless on the side of the Good and acting as though possessed of the Power.¹⁰

The "Power" here is, in part, in the aforementioned "Word," the symbolic apparatus by which the United States defined itself as "the side of Good." Cage continues, arguing

that “we need communion with everyone” and that, referencing Henry David Thoreau, “[t]he best communion men have is in silence.” In turn, silence—or more precisely communion through silence—allows Cage to reflect that “[o]ur political structures no longer fit the circumstances of our lives...I dedicate this work to the U.S.A. that it may become just another part of the world, no more, no less.”¹¹ In short, communion through silence for Cage undermines the idea of the “Nation of Nations,” of a United States which justifies violence on the grounds of being “the side of Good.” As I will aim to demonstrate later, *4’33”* is thus similarly a halting of the Word, the Power, and the Good of the “concert hall.”¹² In turn, this “halting” of the concert hall can also halt our sense of self, or our attitudes towards the violence of the period. This is not a halting in order to invoke their opposites, but rather to extinguish the illusory logic upon which such categorizations can be based.

Cage’s studies with Suzuki

Whilst Cage may have gestured towards the potential of silence to undermine violence as early as the 1920s, it was not until the late 1940s and early 1950s that Cage’s study of Zen Buddhism would bring him towards a practice which could shape this ideal, one which would eventually find form in *4’33”* in 1952. Part of Cage’s focus became making *himself* “speechless.” His work with *kōan*, arrived at through his study with D.T. Suzuki at Columbia University, showed him that cessation—whether at the scale of his own mind, the minds of others, or the industry of an entire nation—cannot be written down in words.

The *kōan*, as found in Rinzai Zen practice, is often thought of as a “riddle” or “puzzle.” This description is lacking. Where a riddle or puzzle may seek to test the

lateral, logical, or creative thinking of the student, kōan practice is not an exercise in completion. Where the riddle relies on the notion of a thinking self to deduce it, the kōan inspires an understanding of the śūnyatā (emptiness, nothingness)¹³ of all phenomenon including the self. These statements may instead inspire satori (an intuitive apprehension of the nature of reality).¹⁴ There are thus no rewards for simply reciting the “correct answer” of the frequently bewildering gestures offered. The hope of one’s practice is the revelation of “the Great Doubt,” a state in which our conceptual understanding of the world—one which can often be described in language—is brought to a point of crisis. As Victor Hori describes:

When the Great Doubt has totally taken over the self, there is no more distinction between self and other, subject and object. There is no more differentiation, no more attachment... This self returns and again sees the things of the world as objects, but now as empty objects; it again thinks in differentiated categories and feels attachment, but now with insight into their emptiness.¹⁵

Kōan practice thus has the potential to break down the conceptual categories which might also make imperial violence possible, reliant as such violence is on an enemy in supposed opposition to oneself to conquer. Similarly to the kōan, Cage sees his music as containing a “didactic element,” one which changes the mind of the composer and listener “not just in the presence of music, but in other situations too.”¹⁶

What I am proposing then is that *4’33”* is Cage’s kōan, a piece which cuts across the logic of the concert hall, instead offering the audience an interpretation that, in Cage’s words, the “sounds of their environment constitute a music which is more interesting.”¹⁷ This is a revelation to be carried outside of the performance space and

into our understanding of not just art, but of ourselves, and even of violence. Cage's piece is the branch in the spokes of the bike wheel: "If the wheel is to be brought to a stop, the activity must stop."¹⁸ This is a curious pedagogy where we learn not by the lesson itself, but rather by tripping over it as we fail to absorb its unspeakable truth.

Cage's reading of Wittgenstein

Having laid out these initial co-ordinates—silence, violence, and the kōan—I will turn to Wittgenstein before pulling these threads together. Whilst the exact moment of Cage's "alighting upon" Wittgenstein appears unclear, it is in a letter of March 21st 1960 to Peter Yates that Cage writes that there is "[a]nother thing I am grateful to you for: having led me to Wittgenstein."¹⁹ With the presumption here being that, as Martin Iddon notes, Cage "was previously unacquainted" with Wittgenstein until this intervention, *4'33"* could not therefore be said to have been directly influenced by Wittgenstein's thought.²⁰

Nevertheless, Cage acknowledges the link between himself and Wittgenstein from 1960 onwards, even directly referencing him in later works. It is one of Cage's collaborative works, *Theatre Piece* (1960), where Wittgenstein proves most directly influential. In the same letter thanking Yates for his revealing of Wittgenstein, Cage notes that "[m]any actual 'useful means' in my new Theatre Piece are actually mentioned in Wittgenstein, e.g. the non-rigid rulers."²¹ These "non-rigid rulers" which Cage references are identified by Martin Iddon as referring to the ruler of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* which, in Wittgenstein's own words:

...does not say that the body is of such-and-such a length... It is as if we had imagined that the essential thing about a living man was the outward form. Then we make a lump of wood in that form, and were abashed to see the stupid lock, which hadn't even any similarity to a human being.²²

As with kōan, the ruler in Wittgenstein's example here is treated more like a riddle, an individuation with an answer. Wittgenstein notes, of course, that this misses the point. The ruler which we use to measure a given object tells us less about that object and *more about the relationship between the ruler and our desire to measure that object*. This is also the case with kōan: if we attempt to simply solve kōan as we would a puzzle, it tells us less about the fundamental emptiness of things than it does about our relationship with our self and our attachment to solving puzzles.

Indeed, Iddon continues that to focus on measurement in a work such as *Theatre Piece* is to miss the point and return us to a "rigid ruler":

Cage's *Theatre Piece* (1960) incorporates the use of rulers of equal length, but which denote different passages of time: 50, 60, 100, 120, and 180 seconds... Certainly, in *Theatre Piece* the important thing is not that the rulers measure when things might occur... The implication is surely that the sorts of events that are being measured exist in a sort of reciprocal relationship with the measurements, with the site of responsibility the very much living performer who mediates between them.²³

The ontological status of this "very much living performer" which Iddon notes is also up for debate in both Cage and Wittgenstein. Kay Larson notes the following passage from

the Huang Po Doctrine, which Cage notes on numerous occasions as key to his revelations:

This pure mind, the source of everything, shines on all with the brilliance of its own perfection, but the people of the world do not awake to it, regarding only that which sees, hears, feels and knows as mind. Because their understanding is veiled by their own sight, hearing, feeling and knowledge, they do not perceive the spiritual brilliance of the original substance. If they could only eliminate all mentation [conceptual thinking] in a flash, that original substance would manifest itself like the sun ascending through the void and illuminating the whole universe without hindrance or bounds.²⁴

Here, the illusory self which 'sees, hears, feels and knows' stands in the way of 'pure mind'. To create "a global village," Cage notes, "[w]e are going to have to get over the need for likes and dislikes."²⁵

And in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein notes, in 5.631, that "[t]he thinking, presenting subject; there is no such thing." The subject is, for Wittgenstein, "a limit of the world."²⁶ As noted by Saul A. Kripke in *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, "[w]e are aware of no such entity that 'has' the tickle, 'has' the headache, the visual perception, and the rest; we are aware only of the tickle, the headache, the visual perception, itself."²⁷ As Kripke continues, for Wittgenstein the subject may only exist "as a mysterious 'limit' of the world, though not as an entity in it."²⁸ We can speak of the subject in language (in terms of descriptors such as good/evil, happy/sad, etc.) whilst failing to ever actually describe that which experiences "the visual perception, itself." The self, in language at least, remains untenable for Wittgenstein because it

describes—or measures like the rigid ruler—little more than the categorizations that Cage also notes above.

Accordingly, as with both the ruler and the self in Cage and in Wittgenstein, the turn to silence remains compelling. This must, however, be a silence which is not determined, foreshadowed, or limited by that Word—for example, silence as in opposition to noise. To be surprised into experiencing silence outside of the confines of language is to thereby experience it outside of “the Good” and “the Power” which categorized the United States in opposition to the Soviet Union, outside of the logic which generated America’s violent interventions and culminated in the atom bomb.

* * * * *

We can close by turning to Wittgenstein’s final proposition from the *Tractatus*: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.” This proposition, in the spirit of Cage and the “non-rigid ruler,” can be read as a gesture rather than as dogmatic imperative. Much like kōan, we can see Wittgenstein’s proposition 7 as, in some sense, aphoristic. In the sea of the propositions, supplementary propositions and logical elaborations which mark Wittgenstein’s rigor in the *Tractatus*, this final offering sits slightly adrift as the only proposition without further elaboration. On the one hand, it has, as per Maurice Blanchot’s definition of the aphorism, “a form that takes the form of a horizon: its own,”²⁹ a sense of independence. Simply, Wittgenstein’s phrase can be used, and can have possible meanings, without needing to be couched in the wider context of the *Tractatus*. On the other hand, it does not function as a radical singularity—as one completely outside the logic of the other propositions in the same text—nor is it unrelatable to further discourses either within or without that same text. Being neither indissolvable (a

radical singularity) nor leading us *directly* to another proposition, we are left studying the mystery, the gesture, of its horizon and the uncountable number of directions it can take us in. It is this moment which can break us away from silence as in opposition to noise. This can in turn provide a “moment of satori,” revealing the innate interconnectivity of—rather than opposition of—silence/noise, good/bad, shattering our categorical conventions inside and outside of the concert hall.

4’33” then is an escape from the Word of the “concert hall,” the revelation of silence as, not an antidote to noise, but as an experience of noise:

They missed the point. There’s no such thing as silence. What they thought was silence [in 4’33”], because they didn’t know how to listen, was full of accidental sounds.³⁰

So, although 4’33” and “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent” are in some sense singular—because neither require specific contexts to provide possible meaning—they *can* lead us somewhere. By *not* clarifying the silence, Cage and Wittgenstein ask us to consider what “being silent” might mean or when that silence may end or begin.

Silence, in the *Tractatus* and in 4’33”, is not thus the “fatal absence” of words because, for Cage at least, there is no such thing as silence. Furthermore, when the silence of 4’33” has the opportunity to catch the audience by surprise, as it did in its premiere in 1952, it reveals itself to be Cage’s kōan. 4’33” has the potential to offer us a silence that we are unprepared for. Those sat in the hall for the premiere may have expected to find a sense of security in what is “the familiar” of the concert hall (i.e. music, social propriety, etc.). The denial of this security when we are least expecting it

pulls the rug from underneath our feet, denying the Word of the concert hall and the categorizations which we presumed were integral to its function.

Having referred earlier to *4'33"* as potentially "interventionist" in its violence—one which arrests and halts as was proposed in *Other People Think*—Cage chooses to bring Wittgenstein into these conversations, relating his own reading of the *Tractatus* to the writing of the work which took place "in the trenches in Italy."³¹ We can perhaps read this isolated-yet-interconnected closing aphorism of Wittgenstein's as a logical manifestation of the horrors of war through violence and silence. Rather than an imperative to be silent, we could perhaps creatively translate "Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muß man schweigen"³² as "What do you say in the face of all this?" Again, we find silence and the noise of war in communion rather than in opposition.

With this reflection, *4'33"* and the *Tractatus'* closing proposition can ask us whether we ever can speak in a way which does not uphold "the Good" and "the Power." It appears that *4'33"* certainly has this potential to surprise and shake foundational understandings. If we can take Cage and Wittgenstein's approach to silence—as revealing the innate emptiness of the Word through surprising interjection which we sometimes believe to reflect our world with accuracy—we can reflect on this new postwar violence. With this approach, Cage hopes to make the United States "just another part of the world, no more, no less."

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- ¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. by Charles Kay Ogden (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1922), p. 74.
- ² John Cage, *Empty Words: Writings '73-'83 by John Cage* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1981), p. 5
- ³ Juha Virtanen, 'NO ONE REMAINS, NOR IS, ONE: Olson, Black Mountain and Theater Piece #1', *Black Mountain Studies Journal* <<http://www.blackmountainstudiesjournal.org/volume3/3-4-juha-virtanen/>> [accessed November 20, 2021]
- ⁴ Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics* (Schocken Books, New York, 2007), p. 151
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 155.
- ⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. by Charles Kay Ogden (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1922), p. 189.
- ⁷ John Hersey, "Hiroshima." *The New Yorker* <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1946/08/31/hiroshima>> [accessed November 15, 2020]
- ⁸ Kyle Gann, *No Such Thing as Silence: John Cage's 4'33"* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), pp. 39-40.
- ⁹ Donald E. Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), p. 20.
- ¹⁰ Cage, *Empty Words: Writings '73-'83 by John Cage*, p. 5.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² *Conversing with Cage*, p. 70.
- ¹³ Damien Keown, "śūnyatā," in *A Dictionary of Buddhism* (Oxford University Press, 2004). <<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198605607.001.0001/acref-9780198605607-e-1758>> [accessed November 15, 2020]
- ¹⁴ Damien Keown, "kōan," in *A Dictionary of Buddhism* (Oxford University Press, 2004). <<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198605607.001.0001/acref-9780198605607-e-949>> [accessed November 15, 2020]
- ¹⁵ Victor Sōgen Hori, *Zen Sand: The Book of Capping Phrases for Kōan Practice* (United States of America: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003), p. 7.
- ¹⁶ *Conversing with Cage*, p. 104.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 70.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹ Martin Iddon, *John Cage and Peter Yates: Correspondence on Music Criticism and Aesthetics* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2019), p. 106.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 107.
- ²² *Ibid.*
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 108.
- ²⁴ Kay Larson, *Where the Heart Beats: John Cage, Zen Buddhism, and the Inner Life of Artists* (New York: Penguin Books, 2013), p. 199.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 198.
- ²⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, p. 74.
- ²⁷ Saul A. Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 122.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 123.
- ²⁹ Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. by Susan Hanson (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 152.
- ³⁰ *Conversing with Cage*, p. 70.
- ³¹ *Conversing with Cage*, p. 11.
- ³² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Logisch-philosophische Abhandlung* (Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1969), p. 115.