JOHN CAGE'S QUEER SILENCE OR HOW TO AVOID MAKING MATTERS WORSE

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"To know of some is good; but for the rest, silence is to be praised; "
Ser Brunetto speaking of his fellow sodomites to Dante in the Inferno 1

John Cage never did quite come out of the closet.2 Nonetheless, nearly everybody in the art world who knew him knew of his lifelong relationship with Merce Cunningham, and some even about the other men in his life. His sexuality was a kind of open secret within the avant-garde, and, as his fame spread, so too did knowledge of his personal life. Still, direct public acknowledgement of Cage's sexuality was, until quite recently, hard to find, consigned to the realm of gossip and understood to be tangential to his historical import and achievements. Cage himself, while never denying his sexuality, preferred instead to duck the question: when asked to characterize his relationship with Merce, he would say, "I cook and Merce does the dishes."3

Gay Life

John Cage first met Merce Cunningham in 1938 at the Cornish School in Seattle, after having taken a job as piano accompanist to the dance classes. In a rare personal revelation, Cage remarked that he and his wife Xenia had an open marriage and that both were attracted to the teenage Cunningham. Following their menage a trois, "Cage stated that he realized he was more attracted to Cunningham than to Xenia."4 The two men moved together to New York, without Xenia, in 1942 and there collaborated on their first joint endeavor, entitled Credo in Us. Its title is an acknowledgement for the first time of the personal and professional partnership that would animate so much of their subsequent work. Though they had already been involved with one another for nearly four years, Credo in Us, a collaboration born of this new independent life together in New York, marks the public emergence of the relationship as muse.

Tellingly, the music Cage composed prior to the period of his acquaintance with Cunningham was given largely straightforwardly descriptive titles [eg., Sonata for Two Voices (1933), Solo for Clarinet (1933), Five Songs for Contralto (1938), Music for Wind Instruments (1938)] . That this first joint project should so unabashedly express their partnership in such romantic terms, seems, in retrospect, remarkable. Yet many of the titles of Cage's compositions written between his first move with Cunningham to New York and his final separation from Xenia (1942-1946) seem to reflect--in a distinctly allegorical, even expressive way--on his involvement with the dancer: Credo in Us (1942); Amores (1943); Tossed as it is Untroubled (1943); Root of an Unfocus (1944); Perilous Night (1944); A Valentine out of Season (1944); Mysterious Adventure (1945). Of the evocatively entitled Amores, Cage admitted that its thematic "concerned the quietness between lovers."5 It was, he wrote," an attempt to express in combination the erotic and the tranquil, two of the permanent emotions of Indian tradition." 6That many of these later "expressively" titled pieces were moreover written to correspond with dances by Merce Cunningham only reinforces the point.

But between the evocative Amores and Perilous Night a year later, there is a change in mood, as if the volubility of the early works produced in association with Cunningham could not be sustained. Cage reported that he was having difficulties communicating his feelings in Perilous Night, and thus coming to question the very possibility of a traditionally expressive music.

I had poured a great deal of emotion into the piece, and obviously I wasn't communicating this at all. Or else, I thought, if I were communicating, then all artists must be speaking a different language, and thus speaking only for themselves. The whole musical situation struck me more and more as a Tower of Babel. 7

And what were those emotions or feelings that Cage was struggling to give form to in Perilous Night? Hinting at their nature, Cage uncharacteristically spoke in the impersonal, "The loneliness and terror that comes to one when love becomes unhappy."8 Derived, as he later explained it, from an Irish folk tale, "The music tells a story of the dangers of the erotic life and describes the misery of 'something that was together that is split apart.'" 9The year after Perilous Night was finished, Cage officially concluded his separation from Xenia. He has characterized that separation as especially painful and bitter, remarking to one interviewer that "earlier he found it difficult to communicate with Xenia and that their later relationship had not been particularly friendly." 10

Cage had had long term homosexual relationships prior to his marriage, including a serious relationship with a man named either Don or Allen Sample, with whom he was involved at the time he met his future wife. Cage and Sample enjoyed relationships with other men as well.11 Cage recalled that "Contact with the rest of [gay] society was through [cruising in] the parks. For me it was Santa Monica along the Palisades."12 No less a figure than Harry Hay, the founding voice of the modern gay/lesbian rights movement, befriended Cage and assisted in the preparations for a course on modern music Cage gave to housewives in the mid-30s.13 Hay even sang several of Cage's compositions publicly, becoming the first stage performer of his music. The year before, 1933-34, Cage lived in New York, and through Virgil Thomson, met and became involved with the architect Phillip Johnson, a relationship that apparently ended in part due to differences in socio-economic standing.14 Johnson recalled," With his talent and good looks, everyone in Virgil's circle was wild about Cage."15

Xenia knew about Cage’s past, and accepted it. Cage remarked, "I didn't conceal anything so that even though the marriage didn't work any better than it did, there wasn't anyone to blame." But the failure of the marriage, blameless though it was, came to have an unexpected corollary effect, troubling his creative life as well. Pointing the way towards a connection between his private life and creative work, Cage has characterized this period as one in which, "I was disturbed both in my private life and in my public life as a composer."16 In Perilous Night, it seems Cage only discovered the impossibility of communication while, paradoxically, working to express some very specific, highly charged emotions, and his subsequent abandonment of an expressive musicality was thus intimately interwoven with the changes in his private life that followed the advent of his

relationship with Cunningham. If Perilous Night maps the culmination of the gradual dissolution of his marriage, then its theme of "unhappy love" is of the heterosexual and marital variety, the result of Cage's return to a fully homosexual existence after his failed attempt at normative heterosexuality.

Cage has repeatedly remarked that he turned first to psychoanalysis and then to Zen following what he termed these "disturbances" in his personal and creative life. Indeed, his first visit to a therapist and his subsequent involvement in Zen came almost immediately after separating from Xenia. As he flippantly put it, "Do you know the story of my relationship to psychoanalysis? It's short. It must have been around 1945. I was disturbed. Some friends advised me to see an analyst. "17 But psychoanalysis did not suit him, and as he put it in an unpublished interview with Paul Cummings, "So through circumstances, I substituted the study of Oriental thought for psychoanalysis."18

Cage clearly relates this new found curiosity about Zen--and his abandonment of psychoanalysis-- to the "personal problems" attendant upon his new life with Merce:

Well, if you had a disturbance both about your work and about your daily life, what are you going to do?... None of the doctors can help you, our society can't help you, and education doesn't help us. It's singularly lacking in any such instruction. Furthermore, our religion doesn't help us...There isn't much help for someone who is in trouble in our society. I had eliminated psychiatry as a possibility. You have Oriental thought, you have mythology.19

After searching for resolution to "disturbances" in his work and his life in the dominant Western authoritative traditions--medicine, education, religion--Cage not surprisingly found nothing of use. Given the centrality of homophobia to each of these traditions at the time (the American Psychological Association would not remove homosexuality from its list of pathologies until 1973), Cage's failure to find support in Western thought was hardly surprising. The initial turn towards the East, then, is in part a response to a very personal need, unmet by the more orthodox traditions of Western culture.

Cage has characterized his state of mind at the time as one of desperation. He was separating from his wife, embracing his relationship with Cunningham and concomitantly, his identity as a socially marginal gay man, and through these experiences, coming to the conclusion that communication in art, the hallmark of an expressive musicality, was not possible. Cage began to attend the now famous lectures on Zen Buddhism offered by Dr. Daisetz T. Suzuki at Columbia University . These lectures seemed salve to both the personal and artistic problems.

"It was after 1945, between 1946 and 1947 I suppose, that I began to become seriously interested in the Orient. After studying Oriental thought as a whole, I took Suzuki's course for three years, up until 1951. 20

In essence, Zen repositioned the closet not as an accomplice to repression nor a source of anxiety but as a partner in healing; it was in not talking about-- and hence reifying--one's

troubles that healing began. Hence, perhaps what made Zen so attractive to Cage was its unhinging of the connection between problems and passions. Zen provided a way to negotiate traumas by acknowledging the pain and then moving beyond or through it. This is not to say that problems are to be ignored nor passions smothered, but rather that they are not to become obsessively rehearsed. In this Eastern tradition, the expression or articulation of trauma, so central to our Western notions of healing from Christian confession to Freudian talking cures was devalued. Many years later, one can hear just this Zen note in Cage's remarks that, "You can feel an emotion; just don't think that its so important...Take it in a way that you can then let it drop! Don't belabor it! ....And if we keep emotions and reinforce them, they can produce a critical situation in the world. Precisely that situation in which all of society is now trapped." 21

Weaving seamlessly from an individual to a communal perspective, Zen Buddhism, as initially garnered from Dr. Suzuki's lectures (Cage makes clear that Suzuki did not "teach" in the Western sense of the term), thus became the means through which Cage came to align the perceived social necessity of the closet with what would become an individual--and ultimately global--liberationist perspective. Paradoxically, at least from a Western perspective, not talking about feelings would eventually yield a society free of the invidious excesses of emotion when enacted on the social plane: hatred and oppression. Through Zen, Cage could thus connect his involuntary and highly individuated experience of the closet with a larger social/ethical politics of monadic non-interference. 22Through such psychic sleight of hand, social necessity was transformed into moral virtue.

Zen thus provided a theoretically attractive and emotionally satisfying resolution to the problematics of communication enforced by the closet. The Zen inspired call to attentiveness to the present, coupled with its transparency to doctrinal or dogmatic claims led Cage out of the swamp of his mounting problems and towards a new relationship with his "disturbances." He called this new attitude "nobility": '" Nobility' is an expression I take from the Buddhist tradition. To be ' noble' is to be detached, at every instant, from the fact of loving or hating. Many Zen stories illustrate that nobility." 23The newly noble Cage had performed a remarkable alchemy: anxiety and pain had metamorphosed into detachment, which was itself both morally superior and actively therapeutic. Through his early Zen involvement, then, Cage first came to theorize a system wherein detachment, paradoxically, yielded engagement-- an engagement stemming not from an ideological preconception or program, however, but simple attentiveness to the world. This detached or "noble" engagement, what Cage would often call simply "listening," served as precursor to his subsequent detachment from political doctrines and engender his explicitly anarchist convictions.

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Clearly, then, Cage became influenced by Zen out of a complex set of needs, some born of his new gay life. Widely taken to be at the core of Cage's aesthetic, this new Zen "nobility" or detachment is now routinely invoked as an originary moment in the development of postmodernism in the arts--an instantiation of a non-expressive authorial

voice, an early indication of the "death of the author." 24To pursue the authorial origins of a postmodernist precept that takes meaning-making from authors and places it squarely in the hands of the audience may seem a paradoxical, even contradictory task. Yet meaning as an historical artifact connected to authors (their lives and contexts), as opposed to author -functions or projections of readerly desire, was nonetheless authorized by John Cage himself--tellingly with regard to another closeted gay composer and critic with whom he was once friendly.25

In response to a request by Virgil Thomson, Cage spent ten years attempting a biography of the other composer and critic acceptable to its subject.26 In the process, Cage found he simply could not analyze the meaning of Thomson's ouevre distinct from the life of its creator. Unfortunately, this proved to be precisely what Thomson wanted him to do and as a result , the biography not only proved to be a source of immense difficulty in Cage's life but also the end of his friendship with the composer. Clearly, despite his own insistent anti-expressionism and authorial silence, Cage did not believe in Thomson's segregation of life and work. As Cage reported:

In the chapter, I began by dealing with both the life and the work of Virgil Thomson. In fact, I figured that there was no way in this case to separate one from the other. That was what had not pleased him...Once I completed my text, the difficulty arose: he had to find a reader to edit my work--to filter out everything that had to do with his life, and only leave in print whatever dealt with the works themselves and their analyses.27

Finding John Cage advocate such a situated, even biographical approach to music criticism is perhaps a surprising, albeit happy, antecedent for my own analysis of the social dynamics of his silences. But it isn't difficult to reconcile Cage's infamous anti-expressionism with his example of a situated, social historical inquiry, for there is a substantial difference between saying that the work is not about the life (anti-expressionism) and saying that the life has nothing to do with the work. There are, after all, modes of revelation of self that have nothing to do with expressionism. And one of the points of silence, Cage was fond of reminding his audiences, was to give life itself a more ample hearing. As Cage once said: "Sometimes we blur the distinction between art and life; sometimes we try to clarify it. We don't stand on one leg. We stand on both."28

Indeed, it is only from such a symmetrical, two legged stance that we can see how the development of Cage's anti-expressive aesthetic correlates with these wholesale changes in his personal life. Repeatedly, Cage's referencing of "disturbances" in his life slips so easily between the spheres of his creative work and his daily existence as to "blur the distinction between art and life." And indeed, as we've seen, personal trauma could prove to be artistically fecund. Cage has remarked:

I saw that all the composers were writing in different ways, that almost no one among them, no one among the listeners could understand what I was doing in the way that I understood it. So that anything like communication was not possible. I determined to find other reasons, and I found those reasons because of my personal problems at the time, which brought about the divorce from Xenia.29

In understanding himself as homosexual, Cage came to accept as corollary a new creed as well: an injunction against self-expression in daily life. Cage's newly embraced gay life-- in the context of Cold War homophobic culture-- made clear in a very personal way that "anything like communication was not possible." This is not to say that the closet alone motivated Cage's deepening involvement with Zen and concomitant turn towards an anti-expressive art, nor is it to confine his powerfully felt theoretical investments to a species of identity politics. Yet it seems clear that through Zen Cage finally found a means to quiet what had once been so disturbing, to transmute trauma into peace. Indeed, in explicitly crediting his embrace of Zen to the "personal problems" that brought about his divorce from Xenia, Cage himself reframed the origins of his Zen sensibility from theoretical to autobiographical grounds.

A developing relationship with Cunningham thus pointed in the direction of a new musical voice not tied to the desire for communication. That voice, he would shortly conclude, was most at home in the definitionally "noble" (which is to say, detached) aleatory mode, which achieved its most crystalline form, for 4 minutes, 33 seconds, in the embrace of silence.

Silent Lives

A new generation of scholars have been trying to break through Cage's silence, ascribing his coy reticence with regard to his sexuality to his membership in the pre-Stonewall, pre-liberationist generation of gay men. As to why a person of Cage's radical, unconventional lifestyle, disdain for public opinion, and anarchistic leanings would nonetheless uphold the highly restrictive social compact of the closet, one long-time acquaintance of Cage's (who wishes to remain anonymous) remarked, "Well, he's a fifties queen, you know. " And surely according to our contemporary modeling of gay and lesbian identity, which holds being out of the closet as perhaps the central measure of freedom and psychic health, John Cage was a fifties queen, his conspicuous silence regarding his sexuality an index of a time thankfully receding into the past.30

That Cage's increasingly unexpressive mein was at least partly strategic is clear from his friend Morton Feldman's account of the culture in which Cage traveled throughout the 1940's , the macho, often homophobic community of Abstract Expressionism.31 Feldman underscored the degree to which Cage's unexpressiveness may have done double duty as shield, answering an interviewer’s question self-consciously, as if fearful of violating a confidence, "I don't want to exaggerate this point, because John was very sensitive to it. I remember there was a little gathering in a Chinese restaurant, and Jackson Pollock was taunting John." 32For his part, Cage has remarked of Pollock, "Well, I more tried to avoid him. I did this because he was generally so drunk, and he was actually an unpleasant person for me to encounter. I remember seeing him on the same side of the street I was, and I would always cross over to the other side." 33

The audience for avant-garde music was notably small, and the Abstract Expressionist painters, as the chief advocates for an experimental and self critical art in the post-war

American context, became Cage's friends and allies.34 But for a closeted gay man, not only was the Abstract Expressionist premium on self-expression anathema, but so too its too-anxious rehearsal of a performative machismo. The Abstract Expressionist agreement with dominant cultural attitudes regarding sexuality and gender--including a general assumption of masculine privilege premised at least in part on the exclusion of women and gay men-- made the painters alliance with Cage somewhat tenuous. Morton Feldman, who was not gay, perceived just such homophobic bias in the Abstract Expressionist painter Robert Motherwell's relationship to Cage, despite the fact that the composer was his former co-editor of Possibilities:

I became quite close to Motherwell. I think that they may have had some kind of intellectual or artistic falling out. John never talked about Motherwell.... Although everybody cared greatly for him (Cage), and they weren't overly critical, I would say there was a homosexual bias...Well, not only against him, but against the younger people who began to associate with him: Rauschenberg, and Jasper, and Cy Twombly. I would say there was a homosexual bias. 35

To be homosexual in a homophobic culture was to forcefully realize that conversation was not always about expression; that it could in fact be about the opposite--dissimulation, camouflage, hiding. But is there another frame through which to assess Cage's conspicuous silence? For if Cage's silence was an attempt to escape notice--as the silence of the closet presumably is--it was a manifest failure. Cage became notable precisely for his silences--clear proof of its unsuitability as a strategy of evasion. Closeted people seek to ape dominant discursive forms, to participate as seamlessly as possible in hegemonic constructions. They do not, in my experience, draw attention to themselves with a performative silence, as John Cage did when he stood before the fervent Abstract Expressionist multitude and blasphemed, "I have nothing to say and I'm saying it. " 36

My point is that if silence was, paradoxically, in part an expression of Cage's identity as a closeted homosexual during the Cold War, it was also much more than that. Silence was not only a symptom of oppression, it was also, I want to argue, a chosen mode of resistance. This silence is not the passive stratagem of a closeted homosexual unwilling and unable to declare his identity within a hostile culture. On the contrary, in contrast to the codes of the closet, if the point of Cage's silence was to escape notice, its effect was surely the opposite.

On Nothing

In his infamous 1949 "Lecture on Nothing" delivered at the Artists' Club, Cage denigrates the authorial "I" in favor of the spectatorial "you, " emblematizing this too-perfect symmetry between his vaunted musical silences and the less noted silences of his closet. Announcing at the very beginning of his lecture, "I am here/ and there is nothing to say/," Cage went on to declare, "Nothing more than/nothing/can be said."37 Comparing his lecture to an empty glass of milk, he asserted, "Or again/it is like an/empty glass/into which/at any moment/anything/may be poured." "Lecture on Nothing" is a veritable essay in detachment. Whereas he had five years earlier "poured a great deal of emotion" into

compositions like Perilous Night, now Cage found a Zen peace in limitation, creating works like empty glasses--explicit inducements to the listener to pour into them anything desired. Similarly, by the late forties, his music was increasingly less an expression of his ideas and/or tastes and more and more a product of aleatory compositional processes in which "meanings," if there were any, were clearly a chance product of the listener's individual cognition. Indeed, his Concerto for Prepared Piano and Chamber Orchestra, begun in 1950 and finished in early 1951 thematized his developing distinction between aleatory and expressive modes. Cage has remarked of this composition;

I made it [the concerto] into a drama between the piano, which remains romantic, expressive and the orchestra, which itself follows the principles of oriental philosophy. And the third movement signifies the coming together of things which were opposed to one another in the first movement.38

The agent of that "coming together of things which were opposed" was silence. As musicologist James Pritchett characterizes it, "What makes the third movement sound so different from the others is Cage's arrival at the single most important discovery of the concerto: the interchangeability of sound and silence.39 " With the recognition that silence is coterminous with sound--in that a silence exists as the ground from which sound springs and to which it ultimately returns--Cage finally developed a compositional strategy that favored coexistence ahead of opposition. Silence preceded and exceeded sound, and as such dissolved the binarism of sound/silence into a form of continuity. Through silence, the domination of one term over another would simply dampen into quiescence.

A point of silence, then, is to dissolve the oppositional by freely allowing other voices to be heard. As early as 1928, while still in high school, Cage won the Southern California Oratorical Contest with a speech called "Other People Think" in which he proposed "silence on the part of the United States, in order that we could hear what other people think, and that they don't think the way we do, particularly about us."40 Many years later, Cage clarified his vision of an ideal society through reference to the notion of conversation:

They [the members of this society] would not communicate, but they would talk, they would carry on dialogues. I much prefer this notion of dialogue, of conversation, to the notion of communication. Communication presupposes that one has something, an object, to be communicated...Communicating is always imposing something: a discourse on objects, a truth, a feeling. While in conversation, nothing imposes itself. 41

For Cage, then, communication, which is a form of expression, burdens the listener. It is an attempt to sway, to "impose" a discourse. In substituting "conversation" for "communication," Cage seeks to replace a desire for mastery or control with the open-ended free play of ideas. Indeed, in his "Lecture on Nothing" he described a radical detachment from ideas. "As we go along/ (who knows)/ an i-dea (sic) may occur in this/ talk. I have no idea/ whether one will/ or not./ If one does/ let it. Re/gard it as something/ seen/ momentarily,/ as/ though/ from a window/ while traveling."42

Cage's elevation of conversation above communication entailed refusing what Gordana P. Crnkovic has termed the vertical or hierarchical organization of discourse in favor of the horizontal. "Cage symbolically aims to halt the march of language, meaning and human control." 43This analysis of communication as riddled by power dynamics is of course the particular insight of the subordinated subject, and as a gay man, Cage was clearly familiar with the often painful impositions of a hostile discourse over his own.44

Meaning in Cage, now replaced by a policy of non-interference, was freed from any dependence on such logos, for it was logos, after all, which had marked him, as a gay man, as disturbed, marginal and unworthy in the first place. Discriminations of meaning or value were, Cage argues here, inherently discriminatory.

I hold a great deal against this system of organization, that is, [the separation of things which should not be separated.] We categorize everyone...What is government? That which maintains these divisions. In other words, our body is divided against itself. Just about everywhere anybody has tried to organize, that is to articulate that body, it doesn't work; we are not dealing with a healthy organism.45

Hence, for Cage, freedom from meaning was also freedom from domination, definition, and control in a very real world sense. After all, to be a subordinated subject is to be defined by power. To articulate the social body, and one's place or investments in it, was thus to divide that body against itself. In silence, there was instead a wholeness, healing: the interplay between life and art worked both ways.

It is just this sense of the seamlessness of personal and creative existence that is underscored in Cage's assertion that, "I think there's a slight difference between Rauschenberg and me...I have the desire to just erase the difference between art and life, whereas Rauschenberg made that famous statement about working in the gap between the two. Which is a little Roman Catholic from my point of view....Well he makes a mystery out of being an artist. "46 For Cage, there is no mystery in being an artist: art cannot be segregated from the rest of existence--a "noble," hence liberatory art and a "noble," hence liberatory life are one.

Cage's Lecture on Nothing thus exemplified his new approach to this problem of communication or expression, especially within the policed Cold War cultural context.47 The lecture was, in Cage's sense of the term, a conversation, not a communication. He proffered an empty glass before the Abstract Expressionists, leaving them to fill it. He neither endorsed an expressionist practice nor conveyed his opposition to one. No, his was instead to be a third route and it lay in the direction of silence.

Silent Music

Interviewer: In your Eastern itinerary, first there was India, then the Far East.

Cage: Yes, you could conclude an evolution of that kind from my works. It sometimes seemed to me that I manage to "say" something in them. When I discovered India, what I was saying started to change. And when I discovered China and Japan, I changed the very fact of saying anything: I said nothing anymore. Silence: since everything already communicates, why wish to communicate? 48

My goal for the remainder of this essay will be to recuperate silence as a means of what I will characterize as a historically specific queer resistance during the Cold War. Silence was much more than conventionally unmusical; it would prove to be a route towards actively challenging the assumptions and prejudices that gave rise to homophobic oppression in the first place.49 For Cage, silence was an ideal form of resistance, one attuned to the requirements of the Cold War consensus-- at least within its originary social historical context. 50There is both surrender and resistance in these silences, not in a relation of either/or but as both /and. And it is within this complicated nexus of what can be viewed as at once compliance and defiance that the undeniable consistency and congruence to Cage's silence about his sexuality and all those other manifestations of artistic or creative silence--such as 4'33"--needs to be understood. That Cage's self-silencing was very much in keeping with the requirements of the infamously homophobic McCarthy era, should not obscure the fact that it was also internally and ideologically consistent with Cage's larger aesthetic politics.

The task at hand, then,is to restore the weight and force of the Cold War social context on John Cage while also granting that his ideological convictions were not simply or purely a product of his oppression as a gay man. After all, many similarly oppressed queer artists did not then go on to make silence the touchstone of their aesthetic.51Against a web of connections, both personal and political, Cage's many types of silence can be seen as reflecting his queerness--not least through their common repression of expressivity and identity--while no less fully articulating his deeply held aesthetic and political convictions.

Reframing Cage's consistent self-silencing as something other than a timorous refusal to come out of the closet (perhaps even recovering it as a species of politics, however strange, if not self-defeating, it might appear from our contemporary vantage point) may help explain why Cage was so persistently closeted well after the point that life in the closet held any instrumental benefits. When scholars and activists were rooting for John Cage to come out, were we thus asking him to turn his back on his own ideological convictions regarding silence and the work it could do, thereby ignoring the distinction between our political claims on him and his own lifelong principles?52 Yet it's equally true that Cage was hardly silent about many other aspects of his personal life, detailing his love of mushrooms, various anecdotes about his friendships, even intimate particulars of his daily routine. Why then this silence about his sexuality?

I certainly believe that the easy answer--that Cage's closeted gay identity compelled his infamous anti-expressionism and self-silencing-- is at least partially true. Indeed, in correlating his embrace of Zen to his personal "disturbances," he says as much himself. And there is, after all, a lovely economy to the notion that a closeted gay man made anti-

expressionism the hallmark of his carrier, culminating in a work of absolute authorial silence. But this notion may also be putting the cart before the horse.

Could it also be the case that Cage's anti-expressionist convictions compelled his closetedness, that his belief in the utility of silence caused him to stifle or at least mute the public acknowledgement of his sexuality? Perhaps, a mix of both factors, his fear of exposure and his belief in the efficacy of silence coexisted without a relation of priority, such that his closetedness and his anti-expressive ideology reinforced one another. I think we can best make sense of Cage's closetedness by analyzing it as both an individual tendency and an ideological conviction, as a social historical phenomenon common among gay men in this era and as a coherent political philosophy. It is precisely this double layered interpretative frame that I next want to explore.

Silent Politics

In what way can silence be understood politically, as a remedy for oppression? I propose that the particular utility of silence as a means of resistance for Cage and his circle was its evasion of a politics of opposition. Not only could closeted homosexuals ill afford to call attention to themselves with an articulated and entrenched oppositional stance, but, according to Cage, actively opposing power would only "Make Matters Worse"--as he claimed in the eponymous series of diary entries from which I've borrowed for the title of this article.53 Indeed, Cage argues in these entries that any attempt to improve the world will actually only result in worsening the situation you sought to better. But Cage was hardly one to believe that that the world was just fine as it was. His objection wasn't so much with the desire to improve the world (a desire I dare say that animated much of his prodigious output in so many media), as to the best strategies to select in order to bring this desired improvement into practice.

Repeatedly, Cage most powerfully objects to modes of redress which make active opposition to entrenched authority their hallmark. What silence offered was the prospect of resisting the status quo without opposing it. Cage's divorce and subsequent involvement with Cunningham coincided with a very dangerous time for queers in America, a time of long prison sentences, McCarthyite witchunts and Cold War hate mongering.54 Cage knew these dangers well: long before this dangerous time his friend and teacher Henry Cowell had been imprisoned at San Quentin on a trumped up "morals" charge.55 The fact that silence-as-resistance allowed its author to escape both complicity in dominant culture and detection as a homosexual during this dangerous period was not the least of its charms.

Cage comes closest to describing his particular politics of silence in a 1962 article about his friend, the painter Robert Rauschenberg, whose White Paintings Cage himself publicly acknowledged as precedent for his own silent 4'33". Cage wrote, "He is like that butcher whose knife never becomes dull simply because he cut with it in such a way that it never encountered an obstacle."56 While Cage's explicit subject is Rauschenberg's White Paintings, he could just as easily have been-- and I speculate was-- referring to himself. To cut and not encounter an obstacle is of course paradoxical, for cutting implies

the existence of that which is cut into. But there is a mode of cutting that avoids such direct incision: the ironic.

It has been too little noted how profoundly ironic it is for a composer to make silence the hallmark of his work.57 The fact that Cage's initial encounter with Zen may have been motivated in part by a highly emotional search for resolution to his post-marital "disturbances," should not obviate the fact that he continued to explore its ramifications in all facets of his work throughout his entire life. Irony's distinction between what is said and what is meant opened up a space of otherness that was not understood as specifically oppositional. As a "readerly' relation, irony is recognized, not written, understood not declared. And irony would prove to be a means through which resistance could figure in a culture of coercion.

What makes Cage's silence ironic is its status as the absolute negation of the dominant discursive norm--whether in music, lectures or both. By ironizing expression in any of its forms, Cage succeeded in creating room to maneuver against modernist hierarchies--hence his canonization as postmodern today. But the attempt was not originally oppositional so much as it was "other," a seduction away from dominant expressive discourse towards other meanings for other purposes.58

So what were these other purposes? Silent music inaugurated a process of reading that at least potentially moved the listener from an unselfconscious complicity with dominant forms of expression (forms wherein the expressive is passively registered as inherent in the music) towards a degree of self-consciousness about one's role as a listener or maker of meaning. In so doing, silence, paradoxically, contributed to the destructuring of music's discursive norms. Negating heretofore "naturally" expressive musical forms through silence, Cage denaturalized them, fostering an awareness that music is the result of a reading, of an exegetical process which has been naturalized. (In this context, silence is a negation because an audience has gathered to hear something; of course in other contexts that would not necessarily be the case.) Music's seemingly automatic or transparent claim to "meaning" is thus replaced by an awareness of the conditions in which or through which that particular subset of sound known as "music" comes into being.
Importantly, this embrace of silence cannot be conceived of as itself a politics, position or statement; rather it exists in perpetual alterity, always appended to its host-- music--in a parasitic relationship. And, like any parasite, it will eventually weaken its host. But also like a parasite, it works invisibly, never declaring its aims, its purpose or project. Having inaugurated a problematizing of dominant expressive forms, it acts like shock wave, destabilizing the foundations of what was once understood, much more simply and solidly, as "music." Since such silence constituted an oppositional mode that refused articulated oppositionality, it offered precisely the kind of cover required to seed destabilization in the policed consensus of the fifties, especially for closeted homosexuals.

Note that silence achieved these destructuring effects without uttering a sound. Cage's many silences did succeed as a form of resistance. The fact that his work was not

discussed at the time as specifically oppositional is in this sense evidence of its discursive success in the consensus-based culture of the fifties. Silence made a statement through the absence of statement. It constituted an appeal to the listener for a new relationship to authority and authoritative forms in music and--this is very much the point--surely in other arenas, too.

Silence, in short, is not another kind of music, but a challenge to the construction of music itself. Neither musical nor unmusical, Cage's silence was quite precisely "other," escaping the binaries that circumscribed the status quo as the sole arena for contestation. As result, it managed to be an anti-authoritative mode that was nonetheless not oppositional. And as an anti-authoritative mode, it revealed the power of the individual to construct meanings unauthorized by dominant culture--and all the while under its very nose. Silence was, in short, seditious.59

Cage's silences can thus inaugurate potent "misreadings," seductions towards such profoundly unauthorized interpretations that, for example, a silence can be read instead as a silencing. However, since dominant interests lie above all with preserving authoritative discursive control (as a means of social control), such silences are permitted to flourish precisely because they are not presented as a direct challenge or opposition to authority. Whatever "misreadings" are produced remain the responsibility of the listener, while Cage, ever the Cold War warrior, remains under cover.60

The important point here is that Cage's silence can thus recast audience from passive to active, from consumer to producer, and from coopted to resistant. Authority shifts from outside the individual to inside, and potentially, this new relationship to authority within the concert hall begins to suggest new ways of being outside of it as well. Queer culture has long recognized that not only does this silence--as --resistance make it possible to escape proscription (since the discursive norm is upheld), moreover it paradoxically may assist, and even nurture the establishment of oppositionality, providing precisely the cover that allows it to flourish. In the long history of queer culture, the closet emblematized just such a potential. As the requisite produced effect of domination, the silence of the closet thus opens a space for oppositional existence.

No wonder McCarthyism understood every homosexual as a potential communist, the figure of seditious resistance.61 The most dangerous enemy is the one you can't see, the most dangerous threat the one that is invisible. And silence--many different kinds of silence--was what enabled these dangers to flourish. Thus the powerful cultural anxiety over the "invisibility" of homosexuals and communists in Cold War culture, testimony to the oppositional potential of silence--real or imagined--within authoritative discourse.

Yet, there is also second, related political effect of silence: it also avoids the recolonizing force of the oppositional-- that which permits dominant culture to solidify and suture its authority through reference to the excluded other. Some recent poststructuralist analysis of both textual and cultural oppositionality has stressed the utility of opposition as a means of control.62 In these accounts, opposition may simply reproduce the binary logic through which domination writes itself, and the oppositional thus becomes the "outside"

that allows the "inside" to cohere in a series of exclusions. Given its instrumentality to oppression, then, opposition continually risks being coopted as but a tool of hegemony--and indeed, as we've seen, the outsider (such as the communist or for that matter the homosexual) has long served to support, if not actually author(ize) the production of the power which controls her/him. Once marked as oppositional, any disturbance can then be incorporated into a discourse of oppositionality which only serves to catalyze oppressive constructions, the way homosexuality has supported and stabilized heterosexuality, and communism the Cold War consensus.

John Cage had a very clear picture of how to avoid this recolonizing force of the oppositional, and that was, again, through recourse to silence. He indirectly credited his studies in Zen with this insight, "Daisetz Suzuki often pointed out that Zen's nondualism arose in China as a result of problems encountered in translating India's Buddhist texts...Indian words for concepts in opposition to one another did not exist in Chinese."63 And since, as Cage once wrote, "Classification...ceases when it is no longer possible to establish oppositions." he thus concluded, "Protest actions fan the flames of a dying fire. Protest helps to keep the government going." 64 Cage never protested in the usual sense, yet through a performative silence that refused any direct opposition to dominant culture, his work nonetheless constituted a seduction away from authority.

Of course, there is a powerful alternative tradition to this Cageian paean to silence-as-resistance, perhaps best represented by Foucault and his careful analysis of relations of power. And surely, the weight of contemporary resistant practice, my own included, falls heavily in line with this Foucauldian tradition. But, as they say, times have changed. Silence-as-resistance was keyed to a context of constraint I have thankfully never experienced. And even Foucault wrote in an oft-quoted passage:

Silence itself--the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers--is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies. There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying things, how those who can and those who cannot speak of them are distributed, which type of discourse is authorized, or which form of discretion is required in either case. There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses."66

Cage would certainly have agreed in principle, and his breakthrough recognition of the coexistence of sound and silence in his Concerto for Prepared Piano makes much the same point. But Cage would also surely have differed over Foucault’s insistence on determining the import and meanings of that which was left unsaid. For Cage, the unsaid could never have a meaning; it would differ for every (non)speaker.

In fact, Cage was quite specific that simple opposition to dominant culture would never produce any real social change. As he said in an interview:

It is unimaginable that one particular attitude alone would be able to unleash what you envision under the name revolution. I believe instead that the revolution is in the process of unrolling right before our eyes on all levels--and that we aren't aware of it...Protest movements could quite easily , and despite themselves, lead in the opposite direction, to a reinforcement of law and order. There is in acceptance and non-violence an underestimated revolutionary force. But instead, protest is all too often absorbed into the flow of power, because it limits itself to reaching for the same old mechanisms of power, which is the worst way to challenge authority! We'll never get away from it that way!67

In short, there is an "underestimated revolutionary force" in modes of resistance that are not oppositional, and equally, the prospect of being coopted (" absorbed into the flow of power") through an opposition that is " itself to reaching for the same old mechanisms of power."

That Cage understood his particular form of acceptance--silence--as an expressly political force is evident in the connections he draws between his composing and the larger social situation at the time in this 1976 book.

When I really began making music, I mean composing" seriously", it was to involve myself in noise, because noises escape power, that is, the laws of counterpoint and harmony. When I spoke about Schaeffer, I said that noises had not been liberated but had been reintegrated into a new kind of harmony and counterpoint. If that were the case, that would mean that we had only changed prisons! My idea is that there should be no more prisons! Take another example: Black Power. If blacks free themselves from the laws whites invented to protect themselves from the blacks, that's well and good. But if they in turn want to invent laws, that is, to wield power in exactly the same way as whites, what will the difference be? There are only a few blacks who understand that with the laws that will protect them from the whites, they will just be new whites. They will have come to power over the whites, but nothing will change...Today, we must identify ourselves with noises instead, and not seek laws for the noises, as if we were blacks seeking power! Music demonstrates what an ecologically balanced situation could be--one in which whites would not have more power than blacks, and blacks no more than whites. A situation in which each thing and each sound is in its place, because each one is what it is. Moreover, I 'm not the one whose inventing that situation. Music was already carrying it within itself despite everything people forced it to endure.68

The goal is thus not to challenge power, but to escape it. Active opposition would mean that we would only "change prisons." Through identifying "ourselves with noises instead" --which are themselves, of course, only audible when the music quiets down--we will free ourselves from our prisons. And what makes a noise a noise is precisely its freedom from any preordained conceptual or ideological system. Thus music permeates culture, and our culture permeates music; change one and you change the other.

As Cage demonstrates time and again, there is life (even his life) and there is music (even his music) and it is all the same thing.

1Dante Alighieri, trans. Allen Mandelbaum. The Divine Comedy, Inferno, (Berkeley: University of California Press,1987), Canto XV: 137. Interestingly, when Cage's friend Robert Rauschenberg illustrated this passage in his Dante Drawings he uncharacteristically opted out of the prescribed silence-- identifying himself as among the sodomites sentenced to wander over burning sands by outlining his own foot in red at the top of the page.

2 I would like to thank Moira Roth, without whom this essay could not have been written and Kevin Schaub for his love and patience while it was being finished.

3Interview with Remy Charlip. 4/24/96. The most significant historical account of Cage's gay life, based on two remarkably candid interviews with Cage, is to be found in Thomas Hines, "'Then Not Yet "Cage"': The Los Angeles Years, 1912-1938" in John Cage: Composed in America, ed. Marjorie Perloff and Charles Junkerman (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 65-99.. In contrast, as late as1988, an Architectural Digest spread on Cage and Cunningham photographed them together in the apartment they shared, but referred to them only as "lifelong friends." Caroline Jones does a remarkable analysis of Cage's silence as a means of opposition to the Abstract Expressionist ego in Caroline A. Jones, "Finishing School: John Cage and the Abstract Expressionist Ego," Critical Inquiry (Summer 1993), 643-647.

4 Hines"'Then Not Yet "Cage"', 99. Professor Hines was kind enough to let me hear parts of the actual tape recording of the interview, as well as give me the entire unpublished transcript. Despite Richard Kostelanetz's rather scurrilous charges as to its genuineness, I can testify to the authenticity of the tape and transcription.

5John Cage, "A Composer's Confessions" in John Cage: Writer. ed, Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Limelight Editions, 1993), 40.

6 Ibid.,9.

7John Cage and Daniel Charles. For The Birds (Boston: Marion Boyars,1981),148.

8Cage. "A Composer's Confessions" 40.

9Richard Francis. introduction, Dancers on a Plane: Cage, Cunningham, Johns (Exh. Cat., Anthony d'Offay Gallery: London, 31 Oct-2 Dec. 1989) ,26.

10Hines, "'Then Not Yet Cage'":99.

11In an interview with Joan Retallack in October 1991, Cage refers to the man as "Allen Sample" but Hines,interviewing Cage in May 1992, calls him Don Sample. see Joan Retallack, Musicage. (Hannover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 86 and Hines: "'Then Not Yet Cage'":84-85.

12Hines, "'Then Not Yet Cage'": 84.

13see Stuart Timmons, The Trouble with Harry Hay: Founder of the Modern Gay Movement, (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1990) ,40, 56-59,72,75,85.

14Indeed, on a long car trip across America, Johnson repeatedly called Cage in an effort to keep the relationship alive. see Franz Schulze, Philip Johnson: Life and Work, (New York: Knopf, 1994), 97, 112.

15interview with Philip Johnson, Hines, 92.

16John Cage,John Cage: Writer, ed. Richard Kostelanetz, (New York: Limelight, 1993), 239.

17John Cage. For The Birds, 116.

18John Cage interviewed by Paul Cummings (May 2, 1974, unpublished interview in the Archives of American Art), 36.

19Ibid., 37.

20Cage, For The Birds, 94.

21Ibid.,56.

22There remains much work to be done on the relationship between homosexuality and a Westerner's embrace of Zen. A great many influential queer artist from Lou Harrison to Allen Ginsburg drew from Zen throughout this pre-Stonewall era..

23Ibid., 201.

24See Amelia Jones' excellent book Post Modernism and the En-gendering of Duchamp (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

25Ibid., 12-14.

26Thomson even tried Cage out as a music reviewer for the Tribune, but found Cage both too idiosyncratic a writer and unable to meet deadlines. See Anthony Tomassini, Virgil Thomson: Composer on the Aisle (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), 368.

27Cage, For The Birds: 85-86.

28John Cage, M: Writings '67-72, (Middletown, CT.: Wesleyan University Press,1973), 106.

29John Cage interviewed by Paul Cummings, 36.

30Philip Brett has argued that music itself constitutes a kind of closet, wherein musicians are free to engage in the most public displays of emotion in exchange for not articulating those emotions verbally. See Philip Brett, "Musicality, Essentialism and the Closet," in Queering the Pitch (New York: Routledge, 1994),9-26.

31Caroline Jones explicitly correlates Cage's silence to a refusal of the rapacious Abstract Expressionist ego. see Caroline A. Jones, "Finishing School: John Cage and the Abstract Expressionist Ego", 643-647.

32R. Wood Massi, "Morton Feldman, John Cage and Who". unpublished interview with Morton Feldman (March 3, 1987) 9.

33Cage in Richard Kostelanetz. Conversing with Cage. (New York: Limelight Editions. 1988), 177.

34Cage's friend the composer Morton Feldman recalled in an interview, "Cunningham and Cage did not associate with homosexuals. They associated with homosexuals like Obey, landed-gentry types. John Ashbery, the young poets, Frank (O'Hara), they cruised around. If I went to a party at Frank's, I could have straight friends, or tough Jewish intellectuals like me, Norman Bluhm, Michael Goldberg. He would have all these... And then the party will be, for example, Genet.. Atmosphere." R. Wood Massi, "Morton Feldman, John Cage and Who." 9.

35Massi, 4.

36John Cage, Silence: Lectures and Writings by John Cage (Middletown, CT.: Wesleyan University Press,1973), 109.

37John Cage, "Lecture on Nothing," in Silence, 109,111.

38Cage For the Birds, 41. For an excellent disscusion of the Concerto for Prepared Piano and Orchestra see James Pritchett, The Music of John Cage. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p.62-66.

39James Pritchett, The Music of John Cage. p. 71.

40Hines, "'Then Not Yet Cage'":77-78.

41Cage, For the Birds,148.

42Cage, "Lecture on Nothing" in Silence,110.

43Gordana P. Crnkovic. "Utopian America and the Language of Silence" in John Cage: Composed in America,190.

44As a gay white man, Cage experienced himself as subordinated under one set of discourses (heterosexist) but equally could generally elect to be interpellated under another as equal or even dominant (white male artist/intellectual)--so long as he remained in the closet. This situation is what Chantal Mouffe has termed in another context "contradictory interpellation" by which she simply means experiencing the self in a contradictory manner, as both inside and outside dominant culture. To be both at once inside and outside the structures of domination is a rare and highly revealing subject position, for oppression is most comprehensively understood from the position, or pose, of the dominant. Mouffe argues that this contradictory self-understanding sows the seeds for the deconstruction and challenge of domination for it reveals precisely those strategies necessary to the maintenance of the power of the dominant.

Since the fact of subordination itself need not necessarily produce a challenge or for that matter even an antagonism, Mouffe argues that it is specifically what she identifies as this contradictory self-understanding that provides the tools, and motive, for a destructuring critique. The margins can generate very precise anatomies of domination when allowed an insider's point of view. See Chantal Mouffe, trans. Stanley Gray, "Hegemony and New Political Subjects: Towards a New Concept of Democracy," in Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, ed. Lawrence Grossberg and Cary Nelson (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 89-104. See also Earl Jackson’s systematic development of the implications of this idea in his Strategies of Deviance, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 17-52.

45Cage, For the Birds,111.

46Martin Duberman, Black Mountain College: An Exploration in Community (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1972), 229.

47As Thomas Hines makes clear, Cage's interest in the politics of silence can, however, be traced much further back. "'Then Not Yet Cage'":77-78. Compare this with his 1949 "Lecture on Nothing" in Silence, 109.

48Cage, For the Birds ,103.

49For a related account of resistance among visual artists of the Cage circle, see my "Passive Resistance: On the Critical and Commercial Success of Queer Artists in Cold War American Art" L'image #3, Paris(December 1996): 19-142.

50Cage’s oft-stated defense of what had once been "noise" as simply another (unaccustomed and disempowered) form of music met with much more sympathy than did his defense of silence. The elevation of "noise" only seeks to expand the category of music; the elevation of silence on the other hand could be thought of—and apparently was—as the negation of it. When 4" 33" was first performed, Cage informs us a near riot erupted, a much more forceful protest than met any of his other compositions up until that time. Nonetheless, silence was simply the other face of noise, as noise was the other face of music: and Cage set out quite deliberately to deconstruct these false polarities. His

4'33" of course sprang from this intuition, and the incidental noises produced by the audience during its performance only served to drive home the point . In his 1949 "Lecture on Nothing," Cage said (his unpredictable silences and idiosyncratic punctuation underscoring his theme), "Noises, too/ , / had been discriminated against/ ; / and being American,... I fought / for noises." See Cage, "Lecture on Nothing" in Silence: Lectures and Writings by John Cage, p.117.

51Importantly, the circle around Cage, however, did---most notably in the work of Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns and Cy Twombly.

52A number of scholars asked Cage directly if he was gay. R. Wood Massi, who conducted a number of interviews towards the completion of a doctoral dissertation in musicology at the University of California, San Diego, relates that he asked Cage informally in 1985 at Crown Point Press whether he was gay. Massi reports Cage said, "Yes, but I don't like to be political about it." (interview with R. Wood Massi October 25, 1998) Massi then interviewed Cage formally at a Cage conference on February 26th, 1988,and Cage, who was then accompanied by friends, proved evasive. Thomas Hines, in a remarkable five hour interview over two days in May, 1992, was able to record Cage talking explicitly about his gay life.

53The full title of the multi-part Cage article is "John Cage Diary: How to Improve the World (You Will Only Make Matters Worse)." The first three parts are published in his A Year from Monday. Wesleyan University Press: Middletown, Ct. 1967; the next two in his M. Wesleyan University Press: Middletown, Ct. 1973.

54see John D'Emilio, "The Homosexual Menace: The Politics of Sexuality in Cold War America," in Passion and Power: Sexuality in History, 226-240.

55see Michael Hicks, "The Imprisonment of Henry Cowell" Journal of American Musicological Society 44(1991): 92-119.

56John Cage, "On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and his Work," Metro (May 1961) reprinted in Silence: Lectures and Writings by John Cage: 101.

57Cage has remarked that his 4'33" was his most important work.

58For a groundbreaking analysis of modes of opposition, to which this entire section is indebted, see, Ross Chambers. Room For Maneuver: Reading Oppositional Narrative. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.

59It is beyond the scope of this essay to follow up on the suggestion that it was left to a man himself marked as unnatural or "other" within the binary authoritative discourse of heterosexuality to develop the potential for resistance inherent in a non-binary third term like silence. This notion comes in for fuller treatment in my forthcoming book, Opposition, Inc.

60I take up the question of the peculiar fit between these "closeted" modes of queer resistance and the Cold War cultural climate in my "Passive Resistance: On the Critical and Commercial Success of Queer Artists in Cold War American Art" L'image #3.

61See, for example, Dr. Arthur Guy Mathews, "Homosexuals are Stalin's Atom Bomb Against America, "Bernarr Macfadden's Vitalized Physical Culture (May 1953).

62See , for example, Ross Chambers. Room For Maneuver: Reading Oppositional Narrative and Hugh Silverman, "Writing (on Deconstruction) at the Edge of Metaphysics," Research in Phenomenology, vol XIII, 1984: 97-111, esp. 107-109.

63Cage, M,:xiii

64Ibid: 10 and 12.

65See David Halperin. Saint=Foucault. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p.15-37.

66Michel Foucault. The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978), p. 27.

67Cage, For the Birds: 236.

68Cage, For the Birds: 230-31.