

# Cage and Joyce

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**Abstract:** *James Joyce's work was very important to the development of John Cage's music and poetry. We can see it when we listen to his compositions or read his poems. Cage admired Joyce's last novel, Finnegans Wake, praising mainly its language and circular structure. Cage decided to rewrite this novel, using a very personal method, that he called "chance operations". Why did Cage decide to do it? I do not intend to explain his innermost motivations, but it is obvious that Cage created a very interesting poem, "Writing through Finnegans Wake", that could be considered a very condensed version of Joyce's masterpiece. After finishing his poem, Cage decided to transform it into a musical piece. He collected a great variety of sounds, using Joyce's novel as a guide. So all the sounds that Cage collected are mentioned in Finnegans Wake – noises, voices, traditional songs, etc. All these sounds were played together, creating a sonorous chaos that suggests a dream, the dream of all mankind. Its title is taken from Finnegans Wake: "Roaratorio". This musical composition is in its own right a masterpiece. Cage's voice, reading his own poem, was added to this musical chaos. This composition was recorded and today is available on CD. I would like to play a small fragment of it. But before doing so, I would like to call attention to Cage's poem, because it reveals Cage's poetics very well. Cage loved Joyce's words, but criticized his syntax, because it looked like the normal syntax of the English language. For this reason Cage decided to use words without normal syntax, creating a new kind of poetic language not found in Joyce's novel.*

In the introduction to "In the Wake of the Wake", a book which records the impact that James Joyce's novel had on other artists, editor David Hayman comments:

"Few writers in either nation read "Finnegans Wake". In America, we are just now getting beyond "Ulysses", but at least we have been there. Only a chosen few – [...] – are branching out from the "Wake". [...] "Finnegans Wake" is not yet the model and integrated source it could and may become."

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In the same text Hayman cites Californian musician and poet John Cage as one of the few artists who was really affected or influenced by his reading of “Finnegans Wake,” even before it was published as a book.

John Cage was born in Los Angeles in 1912 and died in New York in 1992. An experimental composer, he became known for his piece “4’33,” “where the composition is based on the sounds a silent audience is likely to be able to hear during that specified period of silence,” according to Otto Karolyi. Cage also “developed the prepared piano, for which he became one of the most inventive writers.” “[...] As the piano is prepared, the various timbres give an illusion of a percussive ensemble, though there is only one player.” In the opinion of 20<sup>th</sup>-century critics, Cage “is one of the great experimentalists of our century.”

In addition to being a composer, Cage was also a poet, and published several books. He was an avid reader and admired modern literature. In the 1970s he admitted that “[...] when I was young, the writers who were of interest to all of us were Pound and Stein and Eliot and Cummings and Joyce, and I am still devoted to Pound and Stein and Joyce. And of those three, I’m at present interested in Joyce.”

In fact, along with composer Erik Satie and painter and sculptor Marcel Duchamp, the author of “Finnegans Wake” was probably the artist who most marked Cage’s artistic path, influencing both his poetry and music. Cage recognized this at the end of his life:

“And I think that the artists of the twentieth century who resist our understanding are the ones to whom we will continue to be grateful. Besides Joyce there is Duchamp. And Satie whose work, though seemingly simple, is no less difficult to understand than that of Webern.”

Cage discovered Joyce’s work when he was still very young, as we already know. In 1939 he acquired a copy of the first edition of “Finnegans Wake,” but at that time he was already familiar with several fragments of the book, which had been published in magazines during previous years: “[...] I had read parts of it in “transiton” (sic) before that. [...] I was always fascinated with the language and I think of it as the most important book of the century.”

Even though Cage considered the novel to be a masterpiece, he never read it from beginning to end. He admired some passages, which he stumbled on by chance. Cage admitted: “But like so many other people I never read it.” Yet Cage used the book as a source of inspiration, for he “was always fascinated with the language:” “Very early in the forties I wrote a song called “The Wonderful Widow of Eighteen Springs.” I found the text for that – I’ve forgotten the page, something like 556 – I simply looked for a lyrical passage.”

Cage composed this song in 1942. At the time, he also enjoyed reading some fragments of the book to friends. The book was always close at hand, on his table or on his bookshelf, but was only occasionally opened by Cage.

This situation continued during many years. In the 1970s Cage finally opened the book to read it from the first to last pages, as he had never attempted before. He did not, however, read it as a typical reader, but as a poet seeking inspiration in the novel for his own poems, or better yet, for some “mesostics” on the name of the Irish writer.

“A mesostic is like an acrostic,” a poem written in verse that highlights, through the succession of certain letters placed in the middle of sentences, the name of some person or thing to whom or which one wishes to pay homage. In other words, “the principle of a mesostic is simple: a name, word, or phrase serves as a “key” for the text to be written.”

According to James Pritchett, Cage “began using mesostics as a way of rearranging an existing text [...]. The first such use was in his “Writing Through ‘Finnegans Wake’ (1977).”

That is, for John Cage a mesostic was a type of poetic composition that took as a reference another literary piece or pre-existing text: the poet randomly selected words and sentences from this source, and then rearranged them in a new and briefer order. By adopting this method, Cage was able to write in verses a fairly reduced version of “Finnegans Wake” (“it is 626 pages long”), in which Joyce’s name is cited in the middle of the sentences.

However, Cage’s editor considered this summarized version of the novel too long. For this reason, Cage soon thereafter decided to write “Writing for the Second Time Through ‘Finnegans Wake’,” as he explained:

“The text itself was written because J. R. de la Torre Bueno, my editor at Wesleyan University Press, found my first “Writing Through ‘Finnegans Wake’” unreadable. He said it was too long and boring. It has around 120 pages and is a series of 862 mesostics on the name of James Joyce starting at the beginning of “Finnegans Wake” and going to the end. [...] Instead of 120, “Writing for the Second Time Through ‘Finnegans Wake’” has only 41 pages.”

We could conclude from what was stated above that when Cage read “Finnegans Wake,” he was “bringing it to life in another form.” That is, instead of trying to discover the meaning of the book, Cage was more interested in manipulating and reinventing it. He thus declared: “So that rather than trying to find out what the book’s about, this opens up the possibility of doing many things with the book.”

Cage stated that he had “a non-scholarly and naive attitude toward the book” and that for him, “each instant in ‘Finnegans Wake’ is more interesting than trying to find out what the whole book is about.” He concluded, “everything about it is endless and attractive.”

Joyce’s novel, however, was not the only literary work that Cage rewrote or recomposed using mesostics. As Pritchett stated:

“After the first “Writing Through ‘Finnegans Wake’,” Cage wrote three more, using slightly different rules of finding mesostics. Later, Cage applied the same procedure to the “Cantos” of Ezra Pound (1982), Kafka’s “Die Verwandlung” (1983), and Thoreau’s “On the Duty of Civil Disobedience” (1985).

In 1978, a German radio station (West German radio, Westdeutscher Rundfunk) invited Cage to read his “Writings Through ‘Finnegans Wake’.” Cage accepted the invitation and decided to read only “Writing for the Second Time Through ‘Finnegans Wake’.”

According to Kostelanetz:

“Asked to add “musical background” to this declamation, Cage decided to gather sounds recorded in every geographic place mentioned in Joyce’s text [...] but since most of Joyce’s places were in Ireland, he decided to spend a whole month there himself [...], recording not only place but native music.”

In addition, the German radio station “agreed to arrange for letters to be sent to radio stations around the world to ask for sounds from the places mentioned in the ‘Wake’.”

During his one-month voyage through Ireland, Cage recounts that he talked to laymen about Joyce’s novel, and they told him “[...] that they didn’t understand it. And then I asked them if they understand theirs dreams and they confessed that they didn’t. And if you can’t understand your dreams, it’s perfectly reasonable not to be able to understand “Finnegans Wake,” which is also a dream.”

Cage preserved this dream – and on occasion nightmare – atmosphere that is intrinsic to Joyce’s book, in the noise-riddled music composed for “Writing for the Second Time Through ‘Finnegans Wake’.” As a composer, Cage followed an aesthetic principle: he always tried, as he admitted several times, “to find a way of writing music that freed the sounds from my likes and dislikes and from my memory and from my taste.” For this reason Cage began working with what he termed “chance operations,” which involve impersonal and abstract decisions or choices. Cage did not wish to express his own feelings, but to do art to change himself. One could say that Joyce also shared this aesthetic conviction, to a certain extent. As Cage himself stated: “I forget where it was that I read that Joyce preferred comedy to tragedy, because in comedy – as he put it, I believe – there is greater freedom from likes and dislikes.”

In sum, the “musical background” that Cage composed for “Finnegans Wake” is an experimental composition, “free of melody and free of harmony and free of counterpoint.” The audio material originates from two basic sources:

- “a tape collage, based on sounds and noises mentioned by Joyce in his book (such as bells, dogs barking, water running etc.)”
- “a circus of Irish folk music.”

The two “tapes were then assembled and mixed.” The noise-riddled music that emerged from this was then “superimposed upon the reading of Cage’s text.”

In the opinion of James Pritchett: “The effect of this is a thick, joyous collage of sounds, music, and reading.” This performance, “which is both literary and musical,” was termed “Roaratorio,” a word composed of another two: “roar plus oratorio,” which Cage took from “Finnegans Wake.”

When evaluating his own work, Cage stated: “I don’t think it’s as complex as “Finnegans Wake” itself.” His intention was perhaps to suggest the work’s complexity, without reproducing it.

Cage explained the following about the term “oratorio:”

“An oratorio is like a church-opera, in which the people don’t act, they simply stand there and sing. And so a “Roaratorio” is – well, you don’t roar in a church but you roar in life, or roars take place in life and among animals and nature and that’s what this is. It’s out in the world. It’s not in the church.

Or you can say the world has become a church – in which you don’t sing, you roar.”

And now I would like to present a fragment of this John Cage performance, which was recorded on CD. In fact, it is an excellent recording that preserves the qualities of Cage’s music and Joyce’s novel: chaotic, oneiric, nocturnal, non-melodic and non-harmonic art.

## **Works Cited**

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