Hearing and Seeing (Beyond) *Finnegans Wake*: *Roaratorio* and the Revitalization of Cage's and Cunningham's Experiential Aesthetic

Rena Roussin

ABSTRACT

A diversity of meaning that includes the option that there be no meaning at all, an ongoing invitation to the audience to participate in the creation of art by choosing where to focus their attention, and the experience of multiple ways of experiencing are all aspects that have come to define the Merce Cunningham Dance Company's aesthetic inspiration and vision. Yet in Cunningham's 1983 choreography *Roaratorio*, performed alongside John Cage's 1979 musical composition *Roaratorio: An Irish Circus on Finnegans Wake*, several other aspects and influences become apparent, namely: James Joyce, his 1939 novel *Finnegans Wake*, connection to a central (if multivalent) textual narrative, and a loose sense of place joined to placelessness. These narrative and thematic elements make *Roaratorio* an anomaly within the Company's output. Yet *Roaratorio*'s differences and incorporation of Joycean elements expand and revitalize, rather than depart from, Cage's and Cunningham's experiential aesthetic. By outlining the features of *Finnegans Wake* and tracing its fingerprints across Cage's writings on it, *Irish Circus*'s sound world, and *Roaratorio*'s choreography, this paper demonstrates how Cage and Cunningham allowed their audience to see and hear *Finnegans Wake* through the artistic languages of multivalent music and movement. Yet by interpreting the many meanings and possibilities of the novel through multiple artistic genres, Cage and Cunningham also hear and see beyond it—and widen their own experiential aesthetic in the process.

> "The word in English for 'laughing' is 'laughter.' And by putting an *a*, it becomes 'laughtear' in Joyce. So that the opposites which we try to keep apart in our lives—because we prefer to laugh rather than to cry—he brings them back together where they belong. And that's why this book [*Finnegans Wake*] seems to me like a whole world, rather than part of a world, it [is] this *bringing together of the opposites*."
>
> "…if you open *Finnegans Wake*, which is I think without doubt the most important book of the twentieth century, you will see that it is just nonsense. Why is it nonsense? So that it can make a multiplicity of sense, and you can choose your path, rather than being forced down Joyce's."
>
> – John Cage[1]

The Merce Cunningham Dance Company, a modern dance troupe based in New York City and active from 1953 to 2010, is widely associated with a distinct aesthetic. Rather than joining dance to a narrative story, the Company focused on movement for movement's sake, and, in an era when music often added to or interpreted choreography, the company's chief composer, John Cage, composed music independent from the movement, creating sound for sound's sake. The Company's performances consequently contained independent layers of music and

---

I would like to express my indebtedness to the findings Marjorie Perloff presents in "Music for Words Perhaps: Reading/Hearing/Seeing John Cage's *Roaratorio*," *Genre* 20, no. 3-4 (1987): 427-462, which has greatly influenced my own thinking. Perloff's "Difference and Discipline: The Cage/Cunningham Aesthetic Revisited," *Contemporary Music Review* 31, no. 1 (2012): 19-35, though a lesser influence on this paper, first led me to consider the Cage/ Cunningham aesthetic, and its various influences and impacts. For their generous feedback, I am grateful to Dr. Michelle Fillion, Dr. Jeffrey Hennessy, Rebekah Hutten, Michelle MacQueen, Shelby Marshall, and the members of the *Musicological Explorations* Editorial Board. Gordon Mumma's early encouragement of this essay brought it to fruition; I am grateful for his enthusiasm, time, and insight.

[1] John Cage and Klaus Schöning, "Laughtears: Conversation on *Roaratorio*," in *Roaratorio: Ein irischer Circus über Finnegans Wake/An Irish Circus on Finnegans Wake*, ed. and trans. Klaus Schöning (Köningsten: Athenäum, 1985), 77; Richard Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1988), 147.

movement, free of narrative or a centralized sense of meaning. Consequently, audience members were free to determine their own meaning and to experience the performance in any number of ways depending on where their attention was focused in each moment.[2] This aesthetic in which the art forms are independent of each other and lack a central narrative, and which I refer to in this paper as 'experiential,' is among the defining aspects of the Company. Therefore, Merce Cunningham's 1983 choreography *Roaratorio*, performed in conjunction with John Cage's 1979 musical composition *Roaratorio: An Irish Circus on Finnegans Wake*, is something of an anomaly in the Company's output, as the music and movement both draw inspiration from a central literary source: Irish writer James Joyce's 1939 novel *Finnegans Wake*.[3] I intend to argue that *Roaratorio*, because of its differences from the Company's standard practices, and in its incorporation of Joycean elements, expanded and revitalized Cage's and Cunningham's experiential aesthetic. Irish writer James Joyce (1882-1941) was a direct inspiration on Cage's poetic writings and musical compositions, while *Finnegans Wake* nourished Cunningham's choreographic vision and creative concepts in the 1983 choreography. Furthermore, Joyce's oeuvre—and its embrace of multivalent narrative and untraditional language and structure— directly correlates to many of Cage's and Cunningham's

---

[2] These practices of the Company are widely known, and are inherent to their artistic output. For some select explanation, however, see Merce Cunningham, *The Dancer and the Dance: Conversations with Jacqueline Lesschaeve* (New York and London: Marion Boyars, 1985), 137, as well as Cunningham's "Space, Time and Dance" (1952) and "Four Events That Have Led to Large Discoveries" (1994) as published in *Art Performs Life: Merce Cunningham/Meredith Monk/Bill T. Jones,* curated by Phillpe Vergne, Siri Engberg, and Kellie Jones (Minneapolis: Walker Art Centre, 1998), 18-21. The Cunningham Company's principal dancer, Carolyn Brown, gives in-depth discussion of life and aesthetics within the Company in her *Chance and Circumstance: Twenty Years with Cage and Cunningham* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2009).

[3] In order to provide clarity of meaning I refer to Cage's 1979 composition as *Irish Circus*, an abbreviation of its full title, throughout this paper, and reserve the name *Roaratorio* for discussion of the music joined to movement and décor in 1983.

career-long goals of breaking traditional syntax and structure in their respective fields of music and movement. By outlining the features of *Finnegans Wake* and tracing its fingerprints across Cage's writings on it, *Irish Circus* as music and sound, and *Roaratorio* as a multifaceted work of art, I hope to demonstrate how Cage and Cunningham allowed their audience to see and hear *Finnegans Wake* by expressing it through the artistic languages of multivalent music and movement. Yet by interpreting the many meanings of the novel through their own artistic fields, Cage and Cunningham also heard and saw *beyond* it—and widened the Cunningham Company's experiential aesthetic in the process.

Though the main focus of this essay is *Roaratorio*'s simultaneous expansion and revitalization of the Company's typical aesthetic, it is also necessary to demonstrate the aesthetic with which *Roaratorio* breaks—and why, of necessity, I have dubbed that aesthetic 'experiential.' The central aesthetic of the Company is rooted in independence: music and movement do not interpret one another, and indeed, need not interpret anything at all. In the words of Gordon Mumma, "Cunningham's choreography exists for its own reasons—for the theatre of human movement…and does not have to be driven by anything outside it."[4] While narrative is not expressly forbidden, it is not a driving force of movement or music. Cunningham believed that "the dance is an art in space and time" and that "dancing is a spiritual exercise in physical form and…what is seen, is what it is."[5] He further stressed that

> I do not believe it is possible to be 'too simple.' What the dancer does is the most realistic of all possible things, and to pretend that a man standing on a hill could

---

[4] Gordon Mumma, "From Where the Circus Went," in *Cybersonic Arts: Adventures in American New Music*, ed. with commentary by Michelle Fillion (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2015), e-book location 2062.

[5] Merce Cunningham, "Space, Time and Dance," in *Art Performs Life*, 18.

> be doing everything except just standing is simple divorce—divorce from life, from the sun coming up and going down, from clouds in front of the sun… from each thing that succeeds each thing. Dancing is a visible action of life.[6]

The Cunningham Company's output, then, is mostly about movement and sound in and of themselves rather than being about story-telling or meaning-making. The aesthetic is grounded in a reflection of everyday life in its duality of simplicity and complexity. The choreography, as is the case in ordinary, non-choreographed human movement (i.e., walking down a city street), need not be complex or revolve around one centre, and rarely occurs in linear fashion, with one thing happening at a time. The audience must choose where to focus its attention in any given moment, just as one does in daily tasks.[7] As I shall presently demonstrate, *Roaratorio* breaks with many of these concepts through narrative components and connections between music and movement, but at the same time, renews the very aesthetic from which it departs.

I refer to the principles of the Cunningham Company's aesthetic as 'experiential' foremost to highlight that the strongest evidence of Cage's and Cunningham's aesthetic is to be found in direct, experiential contact with it. Though critical writing and scholarship may explain processes or facilitate insights, no commentary can substitute for directly experiencing the Company's visual, musical, and choreographic output.[8] Yet at the same time, their aesthetic is also experiential

---

6 Ibid., 20.

7 This is clear through viewing video footage of the Company's dances, though it was highlighted to me through personal communications with Gordon Mumma throughout February 2015.

8 Further proof of experiential import can be found in Cunningham's *Changes: Notes on Choreography* (New York: Something Else Press, 1968), the choreographer's only book on his Company's work, which features minimal traditional text, instead giving attention to photos, choreography charts, lighting plans, notation and instructions for musical performance, and similar primary documents. It is significant that Cunningham shows rather than explains the Company's history, projects, and goals.

in that it created new artistic experiences for audiences and inspired innovative collaborations among the Company's artists. Furthermore, because of the Cunningham Company's goal of using art to reflect life rather than to give an interpretation of life or communicate one particular story, their output could arguably lead the audience towards reflection on the experience of daily life. Their aesthetic, then, is doubly experiential: it must be experienced to be fully understood, and, when experienced, may lead to new reflections on art and life.

FINNEGANS WAKE: JOYCEAN BEGINNINGS FOR CAGE'S AND CUNNINGHAM'S ENDS

Within the context of my argument, the inspiration and beginnings of *Irish Circus* and *Roaratorio* are not to be found in 1979 or 1983, but rather in 1939, the year *Finnegans Wake* was published. British author Peter Dickinson has argued that Joyce's final literary opus is "still perhaps more discussed than widely read."[9] Dickinson's observation is a fair one: *Finnegans Wake*'s narrator communicates the story from a state of unconscious sleep, which enables the text—the narrator's dream—to demonstrate a breakdown of traditional narration and language use. Indeed, a breaking down of syntax and language is arguably the book's main goal. Puns, allusions, and both foreign and idiosyncratic language abound in the novel, making it a challenging read that is impossible to approach traditionally. *Finnegans Wake* is, however, situated in the same place as the rest of Joyce's oeuvre: in Dublin.[10] Furthermore, the novel

---

[9] Peter Dickinson, "Introducing *Roaratorio, Cage*, Cunningham, and Peadar Mercier with Peter Dickinson," (interview from July 19, 1987) in *CageTalk: Dialogues with and about John Cage*, ed. Peter Dickinson (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2006), 218.

[10] In Harry Blamires's *Studying James Joyce* (Harlow, Essex: Longman and York Press, 1987), 17, he stresses that Joyce believed that Dublin could be "Everyman's city." Consequently, Dublin exists in a dual state of being a distinct place, while also serving Joyce's purpose of exploring deeper, universal truths applicable to humanity rather than exclusively to Dubliners.

tells, if unconventionally and loosely, a story of an Irish family struggling to deal with rumours that their patriarch, Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker (HCE), has committed sexual transgressions. In spite of the novel's Irish characters and locations, however, both its narrative and narration, as well as its significant use of experimental language, are not distinctive to any one place or time. Colin MacCabe's summary of the goals, structure, and interpretive challenges of the *Wake* provides a comprehensive introduction to Joyce's incomprehensible text and its multivalent significance:

> In *Finnegans Wake* Joyce attempted to write a book which would take all history and knowledge for its subject matter and the workings of the dreaming mind for its form. If one takes a page at random from *Finnegans Wake*, one may find reference to subjects as disparate as chemistry, Irish mythology, philosophy, American history, details from Joyce's life, all woven together in a language that constantly creates new words….The result of this deformation of language is that every word carries more than one meaning and each sentence opens out into an infinity of interpretations.[11]

Joyce, then, penned a work that, although situated in Ireland, is truly about the whole world and everyone and everything in it. Patrick O'Neill has taken MaCabe's observations further still, noting that "*Finnegans Wake* is a literary machine designed to generate as many meanings as possible for as many readers as possible."[12]

There is, as such, no one right way to read the *Wake*. Indeed, one may ask whether it is a book that is to be read, or one that is to be experienced and lived. The latter seems to have been its impact on John Cage, who in addition to citing it as the most important

---

[11] Colin MacCabe, "An Introduction to *Finnegans Wake*," in *James Joyce's Finnegans Wake: A Casebook*, ed. John Harty III (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1991), 23.

[12] Patrick O'Neill, *Impossible Joyce: Finnegans Wakes* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 3.

book of the twentieth century, potently observed that "the story of it is exactly what it isn't."[13] Cage was intimately familiar with Joyce's work, and was fascinated by its breakdown of syntax and structures. Although Cage read parts of the serialized *Finnegans Wake* throughout the 1920s, and bought a copy of the completed novel in 1939, he did not read it fully until 1977 upon being asked to write a text that was inspired by the novel.[14] Several pieces of scholarship suggest that Cage never actually read the book—a definite falsehood. If Cage's own repeated iteration that he read the *Wake* multiple times is not enough evidence that it is so, surely, as Marjorie Perloff points out, the nuance and insight with which Cage discusses and writes of Joyce's magnum opus will prove his profound knowledge of it.[15] For Joyce inspired not only Cage's compositions but also his poetry.

In his roles as writer and composer, Cage shared Joyce's fascination with sound and word. As is the case with *Finnegans Wake*, Cage's poetic writings are meant to be "asyntactical."[16] There is thus a shared spirit in Joyce's and Cage's writing of celebrating the very existence of words and language, of appreciating their sounded reality

---

13 Cage and Schöning, "Laughtears," 75.

14 Ibid., 73.

15 Perloff herself points to Jill Johnston's "Jigs, Japes, and Joyce," in *Art in America* 75 (1987): 102-105 as one review which suggests Cage had not read the book. Similar cursory treatment can be found in Scott W. Klein, "The Euphonium Cagehaused in Either Notation: John Cage and *Finnegan's Wake*," in *Bronze by Gold: The Music of Joyce*, ed. Sebastian D.G. Knowles (London: Routledge, 1999), 156. Cage clearly stated that he had read the book in his and Richard Kostelanetz's "Talking About Writings through *Finnegans Wake*," in *A John Cage Reader in Celebration of His 70th Birthday*, ed. Peter Gena and Jonathan Brent with supplementary editing by Don Gillespie (New York: C.F. Peters Corporation, 1982), 146. Perloff's layout of the critique and her defense of Cage can be found in "Music for Words," 440-444.

16 Jackson Mac Low, "Cage's Writings up to the Late 1980s," in *Writings Through John Cage's Music, Poetry, and Art*, eds. David W. Bernstein and Christopher Hatch (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2001), 211, where Mac Low also notes that Cage himself preferred the term "nonsyntactical."

and individuality rather than their traditional hierarchies. Cage's poetic writings were meant to evoke a sort of spiritual experience by "allowing the experience of sounds perceived in themselves…rather than as means of communication, expression, or emotional arousal or as subordinate elements in a structure."[17] Reading Joyce's work aloud invokes a similar experience, and, like Cage's writings, creates a place of increased freedom for the reader, who must learn to read and appreciate language in new ways. In that sense, it is worth noting that Joyce's holistic attitude towards literature, words, and the removal of self from artistic creation parallels the artistic goals of Cage and Cunningham. "Unlike most traditional writers," Blades stresses, "[Joyce] does not interfere by telling you how to react to the events and people in his work. Freedom is one of the key features of his work."[18] That freedom of interpretation, which is also scattered across Joyce's syntax, makes him a likely source of inspiration for Cage's compositions and writings, and of the Cunningham Company's artistic mission. Yet through *Roaratorio*, Joyce moves a step beyond an artistic predecessor, instead becoming in a sense one of the Company's many artistic collaborators.

That collaboration indirectly began in 1977-1982, when Cage 'wrote through' *Finnegans Wake* five times using varying poetic and chance devices to reinterpret Joyce's prose. Cage's *Writing for the Second Time through Finnegans Wake* formed the text for *Roaratorio*, and reduced his first *Writing through Finnegans Wake* from 125 pages to 41. In these two *Writing throughs*, Cage selected lines from the text of *Finnegans Wake* and wrote mesostics on JAMES JOYCE until he reached the end of the novel; in the second writing through, all

---

[17] Ibid., 211.

[18] John Blades, *How to Study James Joyce* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: MacMillan Press, 1996), 2.

words with repeated syllables were omitted to reduce the text length. Cage removed punctuation from Joyce's sentences, then re-inserted it through chance operations, so that it would further obscure syntactical structure.[19] In this sense, by breaking sentences into fragments and removing Joyce's still-traditional grammar and punctuation, Cage's writings "break down the last remaining hierarchy that he saw functioning in Joyce's language."[20]

Cage's mesostics enable an even greater breakdown of syntax than *Finnegans Wake*, and allow readers to 'read through' and experience the *Wake* in a realistic reading time. But at the same time, Cage's re-writing of Joyce in and of itself creates more multiplicity of meaning. Perloff notes that "to cite someone else's words…thus cutting them free and grafting them elsewhere is to create what Cage himself would call a 'both / and' situation, the cited passage retaining its original meanings even as its new context generates others."[21] Cage's narrative is inextricably linked to Joyce's own, but by virtue of looser syntax and removed words, it becomes a new entity, a narrative of wider contexts, and one of more experiential and experimental structure (see Figure 1 for a comparison of syntactical and narrative structures).[22]

---

[19] Readers interested in a further discussion of Cage's *Finnegans Wake* writing-throughs as literature and sound (including the composition of *Roaratorio*) are directed to Thomas Köhler, *James Joyce und John Cage: Welt, Klang, Text* (doctoral dissertation, University of Hannover, 1998), particularly 267-294, as well as Cage and Kostelanetz, "Talking About," 142-150. An example of a mesostic is also provided in Figure 1.

[20] Klein, "The Euphonium Cagehaused," 159.

[21] Perloff, "Music for Words," 449.

[22] Sources used in Figure 1 include James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (New York: The Viking Press, 1939), 1, and Cage's first two mesostics from *Writing for the Second Time through Finnegans Wake* in *Empty Words: Writings* '73-'78 (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1979), 133.

riverrun, past Eve and Adam's, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodious vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle & Environs.

Sir Tristram, violer d'amores, fr'over the short sea, had passencore rearrived from North Armorica on this side the scraggy isthmus of Europe Minor to wielderfight his penisolate war: nor had topsawyer's rocks by the stream Oconee exaggerated themselse to Laurens County's gorgios while they went doublin their mumper all the time: nor avoice from afire bellowsed mishe mishe to tauftauf thuartpeatrick: not yet, though venisoon after, had a kidscad buttended a bland old isaac: not yet, though all's fair in vanessy, were sosie sesthers wroth with twone nathandjoe. Rot a peck of pa's malt had Jhem or Shen brewed by arclight and rory end to the reggin-brow was to be seen ringsome on the aquaface.

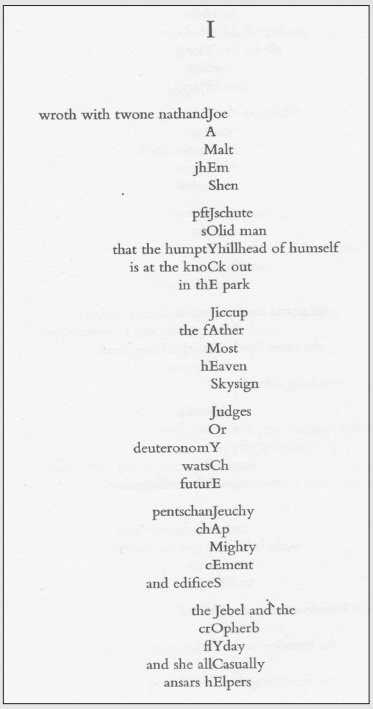

Figure 1: A comparison of the opening two paragraphs of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* and the first two mesostics for Cage's Irish Circus demonstrate both narrative and syntactical differences. "Writing for the Second Time through Finnegans Wake" from *Empty Words: Writings* '73-'78 © 1979 by John Cage. Published by Wesleyan University Press. Used by permission.

HEARING *FINNEGANS WAKE*: CREATING THE *IRISH CIRCUS*

Cage's most multivalent of texts was then joined to multivalent music in the form of *Roaratorio: An Irish Circus on Finnegans Wake*, a *Hörspiel* (radio play) commissioned by Klaus Schöning.[23] Central to the sixty-minute composition is Cage's recitation of his *Writing for the Second Time through Finnegans Wake*, which allows the listener to 'hear' the *Wake* through the sound of its syntax and language brought to life. Joined to Cage's reading, constantly interacting with and playing over it are various recorded sounds, including, for a brief sampling, dogs barking, water running, Irish jigs and reels, Irish songs, and laughter (see Figure 2 for a detailed chart). These seemingly disparate sounds were, however, linked to a goal: an incorporation of all the sounds that Joyce specifically mentions in the novel, along with soundscapes associated with places that are mentioned (the 3000 places Joyce mentions in the novel were narrowed to 626, the number of pages in the book, through consultation with the *I Ching*). The sounds, furthermore, were spaced throughout the composition so that they would occur in a scaled-down proximity to where they occurred in the *Wake*.

Some of these sounds were specific to Ireland, and included excerpts and samples of traditional Irish music. Cage spent a month in Ireland in the summer of 1979, collecting these sounds and soundscapes with the assistance of engineer designer John Fullemann. However, other sounds were neither linked to Ireland nor attached to any one place or time (laughter and farting, for two examples). Cage's method of gathering the sounds was to ask radio stations, universities, and personal

[23] For discussion of the *Irish Circus*' impact on radio art and tape composition, and detailed explanation of the Hörspiel as distinct from North American radio culture, see Richad Kostelanetz, "John Cage as *Hörspielmacher*," in *Writings about John Cage*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz, 213-221 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996).

friends from all over the world to send him tape recordings of the listed sounds, which were then joined to the sounds recorded in Ireland and to Cage's recitations in the final radio play. This was all accomplished through an extensive process of tape recording at IRCAM, forming a collage of musical, spoken, and ambient sound.[24] In this sense, the music of *Irish Circus* is at once placed and placeless: it is about Ireland and the Irish people, but also, to borrow Cage's words on the story of the *Wake* and re-apply them to his music, "a family which is all of humanity. And…all of nature."[25]

CATEGORIES AND NUMBER OF ALL SOUNDS USED IN *ROARATORIO*
(Hand-written facsimile: Poster (9))

A. Listing through Finnegans Wake:	Part I	Part II
Thunderclaps	6	4
Thunder rumbles and earthquake sounds	29	27
Laughing and Crying (Laughtears)	64	100
Loud voice sounds (shouts, etc.)	31	22
Farts	5	5
Musical instruments (short)	66	96
Bells, clocks, chimes	28	42
Guns, explosions	32	36
Wails	7	11
Animals and particular birds	56	113
Music (instrumental and singing)	57	145
Water	34	24
Birds (in general)	16	18
Singing	64	72
	495	715
		495
B. Places		1210
		1083
	Grand Total	2293

Figure 2: John Cage's index of categories and numbers of the sounds which appear in *Finnegans Wake*. Appears in *Roaratorio: An Irish Circus on Finnegan's Wake*, p. 147. Copyright © 1979 by Henmar Press, Inc. All Rights Reserved. Used by kind permission.

[24] The logistics of the sound gathering and recording process of the *Irish Circus* is subject to incomplete and at times conflicting summaries in its literature. My summary of the process is drawn from Cage and Schöning, "Laughtears," 89-91, 99-101.

[25] Ibid., 77.

What Cage accomplishes in his joining of natural sound to text is a sort of 'sounding through' *Finnegans Wake*: Cage's listeners are able to directly experience the sounds of the novel, moving them beyond the silence of the written word. Perloff has suggested that it was "the *textuality* of the *Wake* rather than its larger 'plot' or its 'themes' and characters that inspires *Roaratorio* [1979 version]."[26] In spite of Cage's aforementioned comment—that the story is what the book is not—I disagree. It is what textuality *did* to the plot of the *Wake* that we hear in this composition: an enabling of multiplicity, a breakdown of structure and syntax and hierarchies that thus reflect everything and nothing, the sound and story of the whole world.

Cage commented that he did not feel the *Irish Circus* shares the same level of difficulty as the *Wake*, but rather musically alludes to the challenge of Joyce's language and story.[27] Cage did himself a disservice in suggesting this. The *Irish Circus*, to my hearing, is rather a musical or sound-based reinterpretation of its source, the full musical equal of its mother-text. Scott Klein has gone so far as to suggest that the composition is "the most thoroughly Joycean work of music yet written."[28] Klein's assessment is fair: just as Joyce's readers are left wondering how to read the *Wake*, Cage's listeners are left wondering how to listen to the *Irish Circus,* as traditional aspects of and reciprocal relationships between words and sounds collapse. In suggesting this, I am in alignment with the thoughts of Chris Thompson, who notes that Cage's writing-throughs (his mesostics included) "[were] on one level a device for enabling the development of music, and on another a device for undercutting the attachment to syntax which keeps

---

[26] Perloff, "Music for Words Perhaps," 451.

[27] Cage and Schöning, "Laughtears," 75.

[28] Klein, "The Euphonium Cagehaused," 152. Klein's intriguing suggestion that the *Irish Circus* democratizes music in a mirror of Joyce's democratization of language (163) is worthy of further examination than this paper can provide.

us bound to listening to relationships between sounds rather than to sounds themselves."[29] Cage's mesostics are of course only one layer of the composition: the tape-recorded sounds routinely overlap with them, and at times drown them out altogether, creating a new level of complexity in the sounds themselves. Robert Bean has dubbed this phenomenon "polyphonic aurality."[30] I would suggest that "aural multivalency" would be a more appropriate term, since Cage's realization of the text and sounds of Joyce's novel lead the listener to a sound experience that constantly allows multiple options: the listener is forced to decide, in almost each moment, what aspect of the composition to listen to. Bean notes that over the composition's sixty-minute time span, our hearing becomes "provoked long enough to re-experience the act of listening."[31] In this sense, the *Irish Circus* is not entirely different from Cage's typical aesthetic: new and multivalent sound experiences are present all across his sound world, and consequently listening itself becomes an art form. But in linking Joyce's sound world to his own, Cage decidedly adds a new layer to the how and what of the act of listening, therein expanding his experiential aesthetic. Yet at the same time, in sounding-through *Finnegans Wake*'s text and sounds, Cage begins the process of moving beyond Joyce, expanding the author's original creative vision and artistic platform. This process is one that 1983's *Roaratorio* would take still further.[32]

---

[29] Chris Thompson, "Voicing Joyce: Crossmess Parzels from Cage to Beuys," in *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts* 8, no. 1 (2003): 10.

[30] Robert Bean, "Polyphonic Aurality and John Cage," in *Aural Cultures*, ed. Jim Drobnick (Banff: YYZ Books, 2004), 127.

[31] Ibid., 134.

[32] Rather than release a traditional score for his composition, Cage released a score entitled *(title of composition), (article) (adjective) Circus on (Title of Book)*. The score provided an instruction manual for turning any book into a musical score, an action which in and of itself points to the composition's ability to see beyond the *Wake*. German and English copies of the score are reproduced in Cage, *Roaratorio*, 172-175.

SEEING THE HOLY CIRCUS: *ROARATORIO*

Cage's comments on the extended title of his composition hold implications for the 1979 composition and 1983 choreography alike, and lend some insight into one possible interpretation for both works; as such, an examination of the title and its meanings is where my discussion of the *Circus* and the *Roar* finally merge. Cage initially forgot that the word 'roaratorio' appears in Joyce's original text, and had his own unique conception of what the word ought to mean.[33] The word-play on "oratorio" and the sacred connotations that this musical genre holds are very much intentional. Cage noted that "an oratorio is like a church-opera, in which the people don't act, they simply stand there and sing," and that the additional letters reflect the fact that "the world has become a church—in which you don't sing, you roar."[34] In examining these quotations, Perloff has pointed out that the addition of extra letters also refers to an idea "that it is the world outside the church that has become holy."[35] What is most sacred in the world outside of the church, this work seems to suggest, is the 'roar' of human life—and the fact that life itself is a circus in that it has "not one center but…a plurality of centers."[36] In other words, life is a continual whirlwind of multivalent aspects, dialectics, and contradictory perspectives, the whole of which can never be known at once. That very unknowability, however, rests at

---

[33] Cage notes his overlooking and recollection of Joyce's pun in his and Schöning's "Laughtears," 87; Joyce employs the term on p. 41 of *Finnegans Wake*: "the thrummings of a crewth fiddle…caressed the ears of the subject of King Saint Finnerty the Festive…. with their priggish mouths all open for the larger apprasiation of this longawaited Messiagh of roaratorios." This quotation is elucidated in Dickinson, "Introducting *Roaratorio*," 218.

[34] Cage and Schöning, "Laughtears," 89.

[35] Perloff, "Music for Word Perhaps," 451.

[36] Cage and Schöning, "Laughtears," 107.

the core of life's beauty, richness, and holiness. Such a conception, I would suggest, underlies not only the pulse of *Roaratorio*, but the experiential aesthetic itself.

In 1983, the music of *Irish Circus* joined movement and décor to comprise *Roaratorio*— something Cage had hoped to see happen since the genesis of his composition.[37] Merce Cunningham, himself half-Irish, was also inspired both by James Joyce and "the feeling of dance" in *Finnegans Wake*.[38] Like Cage, Cunningham incorporated elements of the *Wake* into his own artistic medium of movement. Cunningham has stressed that he did not want to fully recreate the story or ideas of *Finnegans Wake* in his choreography, but that he did notice an element of the story that seemed to focus on "this enormous human family continuing and moving around in a kind of spiral fashion."[39] This element, he concedes, is present in his conceptualization of the *Roaratorio* choreography, specifically in his utilization of time and space:

> We start by entering one side of whatever area we're going to perform in, gradually it continues, and then we exit. We leave at the other side as though we are going on someplace else to start all over again…or continue in some other way. That's simply a spatial way for me, and it isn't meant as any kind of strict reference at all. It was like a structure I could use to work on the piece.[40]

There is, as such, an element of central narrative in the choreography—a profound anomaly in the context of Cunningham's

---

37 Ibid., 97.

38 David Vaughan, "About Roaratorio," Merce Cunningham Trust Dance Capsules, "Roaratorio," accessed July 3rd, 2016, http://dancecapsules.mercecunningham.org/overview.cfm?capid=46035.

39 Dickinson, "Introducing Roaratorio," 225.

40 Ibid.

normal aesthetic. Cunningham's joining of movement to narrative decidedly breaks with his typical approach to both movement and audience experience. Yet this break and this particular narrative both support and affirm his experiential aesthetic: the dance, ultimately, is about everyone and everything. The anomaly Cunningham allows in embracing Joyce's novel expands the number of possible experiences the audience might have in electing to 'see' the narrative, or not.

Yet the narrative aspect is only one of the two Joycean anomalies that fill *Roaratorio*'s movement. Irish-flavoured dance is ubiquitous in the choreography, but it is joined to Cunningham's typical range of modern dance movement, linking his sense of dance to Joyce's heritage and stories. However, Cunningham notes that the Irish dance vocabulary he employed in *Roaratorio* was not deliberate in

> any strictly material sense…the dance contains a number of reels and jigs, all made up. I simply took the sense of the rhythm and made them up—they're certainly not authentic. I wouldn't pretend to do that. The *Wake* is so full of references to dancing that I thought it could have that kind of thing.[41]

In this semi-Irish movement, then, there is a sense of Ireland—but that sense is scattered and not entirely authentic: the movement, like the music, is with and without place. This, too, is an aesthetic anomaly: the music and movement share a central link. Cunningham has stressed that the two creative processes did still occur independently, but that a shared concept of place led to a certain amount of coincidence. In relating his movement to Cage's composition, Cunningham has stated that he "thought of the dancing as another layer, not supported by other layers or referring to them—just to add more complexity."[42] Cun-

[41] Ibid.

[42] Ibid.

ningham's own creative efforts, then, do not directly mimic the place and placelessness of the *Irish Circus*, but instead reflect the choreographer's unique vision, which happens to reflect something of the same as what is heard in Cage's composition: Joyce's Ireland, and the whole of humanity. The two multivalent layers come together to create an impossible complexity and number of experiences.

Yet another layer is added through *Roaratorio*'s décor, costuming, and lighting, all contributed by Mark Lancaster (Christine Shallenberg assisted Lancaster with lighting design). The dancers, dressed from a pile of vibrantly coloured clothing, alternate solos and group movement. When they are not dancing, they rest on bar stools to the side of the stage.[43] The combination of vibrant colour in clothing and lighting, and the multiple activities of moving, resting, and watching lend themselves to many interpretations. If one is tempted to create one central meaning or place, an Irish pub in homage to Joyce is quick to come to mind. However, dancer Neil Greenberg has commented on his sense of profound human and social interaction in Cunningham's choreography, distinct from any one sense of time or place.[44] The result, I would suggest, is a transcendence of place in what listeners both hear and see: Joyce's Ireland is hinted at in the music, and, to a lesser extent, in the movement. But when they are all brought together, joined to Lancaster's conceptions and stage design, Joyce's Ireland is only one part of a story that is ultimately placeless and timeless, a spiral of human

---

[43] Permission to reproduce images of *Roaratorio* in this article could not be obtained; excerpts of the dance can be viewed online through the Merce Cunningham Trust Dance Capsules, "Roaratorio," accessed July 3rd, 2016, http://dancecapsules.mercecunningham.org/overview.cfm?capid=46035.

[44] For Greenberg's comment, and video footage from the 2010 revival, see Merce Cunningham Trust, "*Mondays with Merce*, Episode 13: Roaratorio," accessed July 3rd, 2016, http://dancecapsules.mercecunningham.org/player.cfm?capid=46035&assetid=3947&storeitemid=5498&assetnamenoop=Mondays+With+Merce+Episode+013+.

interaction that seeks to speak to all of humanity. What the audience sees and hears is *Finnegans Wake*—but in joining the text, its places, and its ideas to sound and movement and décor, the audience also sees and hears far beyond the limits of the *Wake*'s words.

Cunningham succinctly outlined the Company's defining aesthetic mode and artistic feature in 1985, saying that "the three arts don't come from a single idea which the dance demonstrates, the music supports and the décor illustrates, but rather they are three separate elements each central to itself."[45] This guiding principle lies in exact contradiction of what occurs in *Roaratorio*—yet the Company's audience and enthusiasts, steeped in the concept of independence rather than interdependence of each art form, had come to expect their separation. *Roaratorio*'s breaking of that expectation is exactly what enables a revitalized, expanded experiential aesthetic. The audience may *choose* to see the elements of interconnectedness, or not. The independence of each artistic element is still present, and the dazzling array of layers and options that vie for one's attention ensure that seeing the greater whole in each moment will not be possible. *Roaratorio*'s structure reflects the holiness of Cage's world outside the church: it holds a plurality of centers.

In 1979, the year he composed the *Irish Circus*, Cage wrote that

> Many composers no longer make musical structures. Instead they set processes going. A structure is like a piece of furniture, whereas a process is like the weather. In the case of a table, the beginning and end of the whole and each of its parts are known. In the case of the weather, though we notice changes in it, we have no clear knowledge of its beginning or ending. At a given moment, we are where we are. The nowmoment.[46]

---

45 Cunningham, *The Dancer and the Dance*, 137.

46 John Cage, "The Future of Music," in *Empty Words: Writings '73-'78* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1979), 178.

In each moment of Cage's and Cunningham's artistic output, we are where we are in the nowmoment, which can alter and shift as our attention and experience does. When one examines their entire artistic output, one can well argue that Cage and Cunningham, in their multiplicity of experiential options and their breakdown of traditional syntax of sound and movement, have ultimately beaten James Joyce at his own game. Indeed, the very two works that started out as a "sacrilegious homage" to Joyce end up, I would suggest, out-Joycing Joyce.[47] Yet if Cage and Cunningham move beyond Joycean multivalency and experiential aesthetic in their own creative fields, Joyce's own texts and ideas in the literary field are central to this accomplishment: they provided both Cage and Cunningham with a place of profound artistic nourishment. For in spite of its departures from aesthetic norms, *Roaratorio* stands as one of the best exemplars of the Cage/Cunningham experiential aesthetic in its sheer variety of options presented to the audience's attention. If I might revise an earlier sentence, we are where we are in the now *moments* as word and sound and movement come in and out of human perception. At the heart of the experiential aesthetic in *Roaratorio* is the sacred element of the unknowable. It is a work full of overlapping layers we cannot fully decipher, rich in opposites and dialectics that cannot be understood at once as text, sound, music, movement, and décor all come together to portray the unfathomable circus that is human life.

[47] Cage and Schöning, "Laughtears," 83.

Bibliography

Bean, Robert. "Polyphonic Aurality and John Cage." In *Aural Cultures*, edited by Jim Drobnick, 127-135. Banff: YYZ Books, 2004.

Blades, John. *How to Study James Joyce*. Basingstoke, Hampshire: MacMillan Press, 1996.

Blamires, Harry. *Studying James Joyce*. Harlow, Essex: Longman and York Press, 1987.

Brown, Carolyn. *Chance and Circumstance: Twenty Years with Cage and Cunningham*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2007.

Cage, John. *Roaratorio: An Irish Circus on Finnegans Wake*. Accessed July 3, 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bdHe4c10smY.

———. *Empty Words: Writings '73-'78*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1979.

———. *Roaratorio: Ein irischer Circus über Finnegans Wake/An Irish Circus on Finnegans Wake*. Edited and translated by Klaus Schöning. Köningsten: Athenäum, 1985.

——— and Richard Kostelanetz. "Talking About *Writings through Finnegans Wake*." In *A John Cage Reader in Celebration of His 70th Birthday*, compiled and edited by Peter Gena and Jonathan Brent with supplementary ediitng by Don Gillespie, 142-150. New York: C.F. Peters Corporation, 1982.

——— and Klaus Schöning. "Laughtears: Conversation on *Roaratorio*." In *Roaratorio: Ein irischer Circus über Finnegans Wake/An Irish Circus on Finnegans Wake*. By John Cage, edited and translated by Klaus Schöning, 72-113. Köningsten: Athenäum, 1985.

Cunningham, Merce. *Changes: Notes on Choreography*. New York: Something Else Press, 1968.

———. *The Dancer and the Dance: Conversations with Jacqueline Lesschaeve.* New York and London: Marion Boyars, 1985.

———. "Space, Time and Dance" (1952) and "Four Events That Have Led to Large Discoveries" (1994). In *Art Performs Life: Merce Cunningham/ Meredith Monk/Bill T. Jones*, curated by Phillipe Vergne, Siri Engberg, and Kellie Jones, 18-21. Minneapolis: Walker Art Centre, 1998.

Dickinson, Peter. "Introducing *Roaratorio*, Cage, Cunningham, and Peadar Mercier with Peter Dickinson." Interview from July 19, 1987. In *CageTalk: Dialogues with and about John Cage*, edited by Peter Dickinson, 217-226. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2006.

Johnston, Jill. "Jigs, Japes, and Joyce." *Art in America* 75 (1987): 102-105.

Joyce, James. *Finnegans Wake*. New York: The Viking Press, 1939.

Klein, Scott W. "The Euphonium Cagehaused in Either Notation: John Cage and *Finnegan's Wake*." In *Bronze by Gold: The Music of Joyce*, edited by Sebastian D.G. Knowles, 151-170. London: Routledge, 1999.

Köhler, Thomas. *James Joyce und John Cage: Welt, Klang, Text*. PhD diss., University of Hannover, 1998.

Kostelanetz, Richard. *Conversing with Cage*. New York: Limelight Editions, 1988.

———. "John Cage as *Hörspielmacher*." In *Writings about John Cage*, edited by Richard Kostelanetz, 213-221. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996.

Mac Low, Jackson. "Cage's Writings up to the Late 1980s." In *Writings Through John Cage's Music, Poetry, and Art*, edited by David W. Bernstein and Christopher Hatch, 210-233. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.

MacCabe, Colin. "An Introduction to *Finnegans Wake*." In *James Joyce's* Finnegans Wake*: A Casebook*, edited by John Harty III, 23-32. New York: Garland Publishing, 1991.

Merce Cunningham Trust. "*Mondays with Merce*, Episode 13: Roaratorio." Accessed July 3, 2016. http://dancecapsules.mercecunningham.org/player.cfm?capid=46035&assetid=3947&storeitemid=5498&assetnamenoop=Mondays+With+Merce+Episode+013+.

Merce Cunningham Trust Dance Capsules. "*Roaratorio*." Accessed July 3, 2016. http://dancecapsules.mercecunningham.org/overview.cfm?capid=46035.

Mumma, Gordon. "From Where the Circus Went." In *Cybersonic Arts: Adventures in American New Music,* edited with commentary by Michelle Fillion, ebook locations 2045-2570. Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2015.

O'Neill, Patrick. *Impossible Joyce: Finnegans Wakes*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013.

Perloff, Marjorie. "Music for Words Perhaps: Reading/Hearing/Seeing John Cage's *Roaratorio*." *Genre* 20, no. 3-4 (1987): 427-462.

———. "Difference and Discipline: The Cage/Cunningham Aesthetic Revisited." *Contemporary Music Review* 31, no. 1 (2012): 19-35.

Thompson, Chris. "Voicing Joyce: Crossmess Parzels from Cage to Beuys." *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts* 8, no. 1 (2003): 5-22. Accessed July 3, 2016. doi: 10.1080/13528165.2003.10871906.

Vaughan, David. "About Roaratorio." Merce Cunningham Trust Dance Capsules, "Roaratorio." Accessed July 3, 2016. http://dancecapsules.mercecunningham.org/overview.cfm?capid=46035.