As I Exemplify:

An Examination of the Musical-Literary Relationship

in the Work of John Cage

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the ways in which John Cage negotiates the space between musical and literary compositions. It identifies and analyses the various tensions that a transposition between music and text engenders in Cage’s work, from his turn to language in the verbal score for 4’33” (1952/1961), his use of performed and performative language in the literary text “Lecture on Nothing” (1949/1959), and his attempt to “musicate” language in the later text “Empty Words” (1974–75). The thesis demonstrates the importance of the tensions that occur between music and literature in Cage’s paradoxical attempts to make works of “silence,” “nothing,” and “empty words,” and through an examination of these tensions, I argue that our experience of Cage’s work is varied and manifold. Through close attention to several performances of Cage’s work—by both himself and others—I elucidate how he mines language for its sonic possibilities, pushing it to the edge of semantic meaning, and how he turns from systems of representation in language to systems of exemplification. By attending to the structures of expectation generated by both music and literature, and how these inform our interpretation of Cage’s work, I argue for a new approach to Cage’s work that draws on contemporary affect theory. Attending to the affective dynamics and affective engagements generated by Cage’s work allows for an examination of the importance of pre-semiotic, pre-structural responses to his work and his performances. At the same time, this thesis demonstrates the importance of music and literature as frameworks for interpretation even and especially where Cage attempts to undermine these frameworks. The thesis, then, identifies the tension between pre-interpretative affective response and preconceived frameworks for understanding as part of a dynamic that drives the interplay between music and literature in Cage’s work.
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INTRODUCTION

On August 29, 1952, John Cage and David Tudor gave a benefit concert for the Artists’ Welfare Fund at the Maverick Hall in Woodstock, New York. Cage and Tudor shared the bill with several others, each of notable repute at the time: Pierre Boulez, Earle Brown, Henry Cowell, Morton Feldman and Christian Wolff. Two of Cage’s pieces were scheduled in the program: the first, a theatrical piece that takes its title from the date of the performance, later referred to as Water Music; the second, a composition entitled Four Pieces (Revill 1992, 11). This second, misleadingly titled piece, would become what is now commonly referred to as 4’33”; the infamous, divisive and history-changing composition that placed Cage at the forefront of avant-garde musical practice for decades to come.

While 1952 was a definitive year for Cage in his move towards silence, it is the years that immediately followed that call for further inquiry. In the years following the initial performance of 4’33”, Cage produced several different scores before settling on his final composition for silence, “Tacet,” in 1961. In an often-quoted anecdote, Cage recalls going into an anechoic chamber in the early 1950s in order to experience pure silence. Realizing its impossibility—in the chamber he could hear two sounds, which he was later told were his heart beating and his blood flowing—Cage then began working towards silence as a “thought experiment” (Dworkin 2013, 134). Rather than try to attain the unattainable, rather than aiming to produce a “nonphenomenon” (Kahn 1997), he would then attempt to construct a framework for listening, whereby the act of listening would alert his listeners to the sounds of their environment.

This transition from silence to listening marks a substantial shift for Cage and can be viewed in parallel with his turn to language. Not only had he acknowledged the impossibility of pure silence, he had then similarly come to recognize the inability of musical notation to do the work he now wanted it to do: to provide a framework for listening. His final score for the silent
composition, “Tacet,” is a verbal score: a work made up predominantly of language, providing instructions for performance, notes towards an occasion on which the piece was once performed, along with notes towards the possibilities for the piece being instantiated in future performances.

While many scholars and musicians refer to Cage primarily as a composer, we cannot ignore the extent of his written work. His earliest book, *Silence*, was first published in 1961 and has been through a number of reprints (the most recent of which was published in 2012, to mark the centenary of his Cage’s birth), and he continued to produce written works until his death in 1992. My point of entry into an analysis of Cage’s work is the point of silence, which is also the point where language becomes important to Cage. In his notations for 4’ 33”, of which there are several, we can observe the occasion where Cage turns to language. The relationship between music and language as it develops in Cage’s work from this time onwards parallels the relationship between performative language—in which the work happens in the language—and the text as a set of instructions for producing a separate, performed event. It is at the intersections between performance and description, doing and saying—between the work as an instantiated event that happens in its writing or performance and the work as an *a priori* concept or score that is merely exemplified in each performance—that the divisions between musical composition and the literary text in Cage’s work become blurred. The purpose of my thesis is to address Cage’s navigation between musical and literary compositions and to attend to the various tensions that this interplay between music and text engenders.

Through identifying and addressing Cage’s use of systems of exemplification in both musical and literary compositions, I also address the paradox through which Cage’s work functions, and through which his work is often interpreted. Cage sought to dissolve or invert the institutional frameworks that had previously confined and separated musical composition and the literary text. Yet our interpretation of his work remains within these frameworks, thus restoring the very boundaries against which he was reacting. By attending to the frameworks that Cage was reacting against, I will also explore how Cage attempted to return to music, or “musicate”
language (Perloff 1997, 136). By examining Cage’s attempt to dissolve these boundaries, I will question whether this musicated language can ever escape the capacity of meaning, and if it does, whether that is not language, but simply music. In this regard, I will be looking at the affective dynamic of the work in performance, questioning whether we can come to experience Cage’s work outside of these regular frameworks for interpretation.

Much has been written about Cage as a composer (Pritchett 1993; Shultis 1995; Kahn 1997; Patterson 2002; Nicholls 2002; Gann 2010), as a writer (Perloff 1981, 1997; Bue 1982; Kutnik 1990, 1992), as a major player of American avant-garde practices (Tompkins 1965; Antin 1974; Miller 1999; Johnson 2002; Reck 2004), or simply as an iconoclastic, influential figure of the twentieth century (Griffiths 1981; Revill 1992; Bock 2008; Haskins 2012). It is widely recognized by scholars of Cage’s work that, in his progression from musical composition to writing, he brought to his writing many of the characteristics that had defined his musical practice. Critics like Erberto Bue (1982) and Christopher Shultis (1995) have conscientiously discussed the place of Cage’s compositional practice in his writings. Cage himself had much to say about the process of taking compositional techniques to his writing. In conversation with Richard Kostelanetz, Cage says: “It has been my habit for some years to write texts in a way analogous to the way I write music” (Kostelanetz 2003, 139). Similarly, in conversation with Daniel Charles, Cage says: “in writing my ‘literary’ texts, I essentially make use of the same composing means as in my music” (Cage and Charles 2009, 55).

The topic that scholars and critics have largely shied away from, however, is the space that lies between the two art forms—music and literature—in Cage’s work. To navigate the space

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1 The term might have originally come from Daniel Charles. In conversation, Charles told Cage: “you propose to musicate language; you want language to be heard as music” (Cage and Charles 2009, 151).
between the art forms suggests pushing the limits and boundaries of each art form. Towards this end, the discussion around Cage's deconstruction of frameworks has been valuable and effective. Cage consciously positioned himself outside of the institution, and critics like Jerzy Kutnik (1990, 1992) and Marjorie Perloff (1981, 1992, 1997) have written informatively about the problem of approaching Cage’s work from either a place of music or literature. Kutnik proposes a marriage of the two art forms, as the title to his 1992 article suggests, “John Cage: Literature as (Is) Music.” Similarly, Perloff suggests that Cage’s “Empty Words” is not a work that combines the “verbal and the visual or the verbal and the musical,” but that it is all of these things at once: visual and verbal and musical (1981, 338). These ideas leave us in a quandary: what does it mean for a work to be all of these things at once? What are the qualities of music and literature that can be merged or combined, and what are the qualities that cannot? Where Kutnik and Perloff have argued for a conflation of the two art forms, my attention to the interaction between the two art forms focuses on how Cage exploits the differences between music and literature, and it is this focus on the relationship and distinction between the two art forms that distinguishes my study from some previous scholarship.

The main differential that surfaces when we consider these two art forms is meaning. For a fluent reader of musical scores, a notation has the capacity to represent something other than itself: it provides meaning in terms of the rhythm, duration, and notes expressed in a system of representation or signification. The sounds of that music, however, do not represent in the same way as language. By being located outside linguistic meaning, music in fact comes to mean many things; it is open to interpretation. In comparison, language, by being made up of a fixed signifier and signified, a la Saussure, has the capacity for a more defined meaning or meanings. Although a word might contain multiple meanings (the word “glass” can mean something to drink out of, a pair of spectacles to aid eye-sight, or the material inserted into a frame to constitute a window), these meanings are relatively fixed and determinate. The conventional meaning of musical features such as timbre, tempo, and key are much more loosely defined than
linguistic meanings and hence music tends to have a greater degree of interpretation-dependent polysemy. This is precisely the point where Cage enters the debate, and why his work in the space between music and language is so fertile. Cage depends on this difference between music and language, even as he comes, to some extent, to undermine it.

For Cage, meaning was something he could use to his advantage and something he would seek to dismiss. He recognized that meaning was a component of language, yet at a certain point attempted to create language without meaning. His work on decomposing and deconstructing the possibility of meaning is apparent in his 1974–75 work “Empty Words.” In his own iconoclastic way, Cage upholds the opinion that syntax is a tool for control, used by governing forces such as the patriarchy or the institution. He suggests that language should be “demilitarized”: “Syntax [...] is the arrangement of the army. As we move away from it, we demilitarize language” (Cage 1998, ii). He expresses it similarly elsewhere: “so that language can be enjoyed without being understood” (Cage 1998, 215).

A large part of Cage’s practice stemmed from the desire to exist outside preconceived frameworks, to open up the boundaries of compositions and texts in a way that would allow for everyday life to become integrated, to allow for indeterminacy (Perloff 1981; Pritchett 1993), and non-intentionality or chance (Shultis 1995; Fetterman 1996; Kostelanetz 2003). Yet, to suppose, as Cage suggests, that language can be “enjoyed” without being “understood” poses some larger linguistic considerations. Can language, given that it is made up of linguistic codes, be used to do something that sits outside of “understanding”? If it does, is it still language, or is it something else? Or as Christopher Shultis frames it: “If [language] can’t communicate, what can it do?” (1995, 341). What happens at this deconstruction of language and linguistic codes, is that we see Cage move towards language that has no intentional meaning. In his discussion of “Mureau” (1970) and “Empty Words,” Shultis argues that even “removing all syllables and letters,” as Cage attempts to do, does not mean he can evade the possibility of semantic code: “[‘Empty Words’] still linguistically ‘means’” (342). Cage evades semantics, Shultis suggests, by saying his work is
“empty of intention” (Kostelanetz 2003, 148). I do not argue against Shultis in this regard, but take up his scholarship to address further this idea of meaning and intentionality. Given that Cage was attempting for this later work to exist outside “intention,” I ask how Cage can maintain that subsequent interpretations of his work also exists outside intention. How does Cage frame his work in relation to music and literature, and how does this framing contribute to the way we read it? What expectations of the two different art forms do we apply to his work, and how do these expectations affect our subsequent interpretations?

In attempting to analyse some of the frameworks that dictate our interpretation of Cage’s work we must consider what formal qualities we take to our interpretation. In the preface to *Silence*, Cage states that “poetry is not prose simply because poetry is in one way or another formalized,” and that “information, no matter how stuffy [is] transmitted in poetry” (1961, x). Perloff has argued that it is easy to misconstrue such Cagean statements, suggesting that he does not mean to “repudiate conceptual thought,” but to criticize the “traditional way of conveying meaning in poetry” (1981, 316n34). Where Perloff transcends the more orthodox Cagean scholarship is in her recognition that we cannot take to his work the regulated understandings that we normally take to poetry, those of “indirection, figuration, semantic complexity” (316n34). Instead, she implies that Cagean poetry exists in a realm outside of our regular formalized ideas of the form, and that Cage is a poet “for whom *dianoia* supercedes *ethos*” (316; emphasis in original). By interpreting his work instead through the capacities of chance operations and indeterminacy, Perloff reflects Cage’s own tenet of “purposeless play” (316). Cage’s motivation for engaging in the practice of chance operations and indeterminacy is more concerned with the process than the outcome. How then, we might ask, did Cage illustrate this “purposelessness” in his work? How can he convey an emphasis on process, rather than outcome, on “dianoia” rather than “ethos”? How can a composition turn its focus from “what the piece means, to *how* the piece means” (Agawu 1991, 5; emphasis in original)? David Antin attempts to answer this question in his 1974 essay “Some Questions About Modernism,” where he succinctly suggests
that to do so, Cage turned from a “system of representation” to a “system of exemplification” (31). In other words, Cage’s instructions for an indeterminate or chance procedure could no longer rely on the representational capacities of language, but instead turned to its ability to exemplify. By exemplifying, rather than simply representing, Cage could then open his work up to what Liz Kotz has called a “proposal for action” (2007, 17), in which the word no longer occupies a static place on the page. The score or text has a diachronic existence through its capacity to invite the reader or listener to instantiate the piece, rather than just interact with it as a static object.

The use of the word exemplification is instrumental, and further stresses Cage’s turn towards language, as outlined above. Recognizing the capacity of language to do or perform rather than simply represent provides a way to read Cage’s work in both art forms: music and the literary text. The point where he turned to language in his use of the verbal score for 4’33” is where we can start to look at these instantiative capacities of language: Cage needed his verbal score to both do and say, to provide a set of instructions, while also maintaining the capacity for performance and the ability to be activated (Kotz 2007). Attending to language and its manifold qualities enables us to look at the reasons Cage turned to language to begin with. An investigation of his use of language and his attempt to navigate the space between music and the literary text offers new perspectives on the fundamentals of these two art forms, particularly the way that language enables Cage to both do and say, in ways that Cagean scholarship has yet to explore.

In both Cage’s musical and literary compositions, exemplification occurs on multiple levels. For the purposes of my thesis, I break this down into two approaches: performance and textual exemplification. These two approaches to exemplification relate to each other in Cage’s work, and demand not only an investigation into the performance aspect of his musical notation, but also a semiotic interpretation of his literary texts.
By performance exemplification I mean Cage’s attempt to shift from a representation of a piece to a description of what is to be done. In his movement towards a framework for listening, the actual notation ceases to be a system of representation and becomes, what Kotz calls, something that “no longer describes what we hear but what we do” (2007, 17). This is evident in Cage’s various notations for 4’33”, as Cage requires participation by the viewer/listener/reader in order for the score or text to be activated.

On the other hand, there are the semiotic devices of the text, whereby Cage attempts to make the literary text demonstrate, to do as much as it says, or, in Cage’s words, to “permit the listener to experience what I had to say, rather than just hear about it” (Cage 1961, ix). In this regard, I adopt a term from philosopher and logician J. L. Austin: the “performative utterance.” For Austin, this kind of utterance means making language embody what it is saying, where the act of speaking the words then creates the reality to which they are referring (Austin 1962). Similarly, Kotz also states that “by prying open the regulatory relation between sign and realization, Cagean indeterminacy repositioned writing as a kind of productive mechanism, thereby giving notation a functional and aesthetic autonomy—[…] snippets of language to themselves be the work,” and suggests that the score is the machine through which the text “becomes activated” (2007, 48; emphasis in original). This notion of something happening in the text is what I refer to as textual exemplification throughout the thesis, and it is the idea that the words refer not only to themselves and to their meaning, but actually provoke movement and duration through their very existence on the page.

The pieces I discuss in this thesis examine a specific period of Cage’s trajectory. Chapter 1 begins with Cage’s first prescription or “score” for 4’33” (1952). It looks at the subsequent scores for the piece, written throughout the 1950s, until Cage’s final score for the composition, “Tacet” (1961). This involves an in-depth analysis of Cage’s conception of this “silence,” the different ways he achieves it, the techniques of exemplification that Cage uses and how he applies them to the score, and the various manifestations that silence takes on during this period in his
oeuvre. Such analysis places Cage’s “silence” in both cultural and historical contexts, before I observe how Cage came to realize the inherent impossibility of the phenomenon at large. We then witness Cage’s move from what he had otherwise known as musical composition to the more enabling capacities of the verbal score and the literary text. In examining Cage’s 4’ 33” and its various scores, I show how Cage turned to language in order to generate a structure for silence built on the tension between sound and word, music and literature, and between the concept to be exemplified and the concept/score/words as an event in itself.

Following on from this analysis, the second chapter looks at Cage’s early work in the field of text. After qualifying what the literary text is constructed of for Cage, the chapter then takes a close look at one particular text: “Lecture on Nothing.” First performed in 1949 but not published until 1959 (Perloff 1981, 305), this piece can be viewed, alongside Cage’s silent compositions, as part of his turn to language. I look closely at “Lecture on Nothing” in order to consider the possibilities of performance, the way we come to experience Cage’s text, and the differences and similarities between the written and the spoken word. To do this I build on some of the philosophical ideas introduced in the first chapter: performative language and the text as a score for performance, and the way Cage deals with the tension between the two in this particular text. Parallel to this lies the consideration of the Cagean paradox that crops up at various points throughout the thesis: the idea of a “lecture on nothing,” or Cage’s often quoted maxim “I have nothing to say and I am saying it” (Cage 1961, 109). The paradox Cage presents in this phrase illustrates his reliance on the performative role of language: “I am saying it” makes this reality of him saying it come into being, but at the same time contradicts the claim to be saying nothing. This is but one of the paradoxes built on performative language that will be investigated throughout the thesis.

Chapter 3 then focuses primarily on one work: Cage’s “Empty Words” (1974–75). In this work, having achieved exemplification in the literary text, Cage attempts to strip language back, or to musicate it, to the point where the division between text and music is blurred. Through an
analysis of the score for “Empty Words” and a recording of its performance, I investigate the importance of the interplay between language and music, meaning and meaninglessness, and the dynamic between the audience’s affective and interpretative responses to Cage’s work and performances, as a way of understanding the intricacies of the relationship between music and literature in Cage’s work.
CHAPTER 1: *Cage’s 4’ 33” and the Turn to Language*

The sound experience that I prefer to all others is the experience of silence.

—John Cage, “John Cage about Silence”

Through music, through the fact that not everyone understood my music, it became necessary for me to write.

—John Cage, “Cage with Michael Oliver”

In this chapter I look at the ways in which—and the reasons why—Cage turned to language to write the final score for *4’ 33”*. I show how the process that took Cage from silence to the literary text was part of a larger developing relationship between musical composition and literature in his work. Specifically, I analyse the interplay between Cage’s use of performative speech and the text as a score for performance in the final version for *4’ 33”* (1961) and in several subsequent performances of the piece. I look firstly at Cage’s arrival at the verbal score for *4’ 33”*, and how his use of language for this score enables him to create a less bounded structure for silence than even his more open musical scores. I then attend to the capacities of language that enable Cage to create a score that functions on a number of different levels: in one sense, the textual score is a prescription for action that encourages us to view each performance as a thing in itself; in another sense, Cage’s use of text presents each performance of the score as only ever an example of the original idea. Straddling these contradictory positions, Cage’s presentation of an exemplary performance in his verbal score addresses and unsettles the ontological questions that surround the concepts of exemplar and essence.
Section 1: The Verbal Score

To understand Cage’s arrival at the verbal score we first need to grasp the evolution of his conception of silence. Cage first turned to silence as an antidote for the commercialization of music, as in that produced by the Muzak Company. In “A Composer’s Confessions,” a lecture delivered in 1948 at the National Inter-Collegiate Arts Conference in New York, Cage says:

I have, for instance, several new desires: first, to compose a piece of uninterrupted silence and sell it to the Muzak Co. It will be 4½ minutes long—these being the standard lengths of ‘canned’ music, and its title will be “Silent Prayer.” It will open with a single idea which I will attempt to make as seductive as the color and shape or fragrance of a flower. The ending will approach imperceptibility. (Cage 1992, 15)

“Silent Prayer” was never actually realized (James Pritchett, personal correspondence). However, this quotation demonstrates that the concept is a precursor to Cage’s developments towards 4’ 33”. The main distinction between these two works is the change in Cage’s own idea of silence. “Silent Prayer” was a kind of “silencing” (Kahn 1997), and the genesis of this silencing lay in the attempt to achieve pure silence, a phenomenon that Cage came to realize was impossible to achieve. Following his visit to an anechoic chamber at Harvard University, Cage acknowledged the implicit impossibility of the phenomenon, at which point silence becomes impossible for Cage, a “nonphenomenon” (Kahn 1997). This marks a shift in terms of his ideas of silence and inevitably how a musical composition that focuses on this absence of music could be framed. At this point 4’ 33” becomes more of a framework for listening.
Others practitioners had explored the idea of absence in the visual arts in the years following World War II, and in composing 4′ 33″, Cage was heavily influenced by Robert Rauschenberg’s white paintings. Out of these “airports for the lights, shadows and particles” (Cage 1961, 102) the idea of silent composition emerged for Cage:

Actually what pushed me into it was not guts but the example of Rauschenberg. His white paintings… When I saw those, I said ‘Oh yes, I must; otherwise I’m lagging, otherwise music is lagging.’ (Cage, Shattuck and Gillmor 1982, 22)

As Cage saw it musical composition had a lot of catching up to do. Upon witnessing Rauschenberg’s blank canvases, Cage began to consider the idea of frameworks: organized structures through which to view or hear environmental sounds. No longer was he interested in working towards the “silencing” (Kahn 1997) that he sought in “Silent Prayer,” but he had come to regard environments themselves as the makers of music: the generator of sounds.

For Cage, silence then becomes a kind of paradox. In his attempt to create silence, Cage encourages his listener or performer to hear the non-silence—the music—of their surroundings. By arriving at listening from a search for imperceptibility, Cage was alerted to the sound of the imperceptible, the sound of silence. In his attempt to listen to this silence, Cage created a framework within which these sounds could be heard (as opposed to silencing the sounds themselves, as was his desire with “Silent Prayer”). His initial drive to silence sound led him instead to look for ways to make a score operate as a framework for the sounds that one may otherwise not hear, and it is this potential framework that eventually led him to language.

The score for Cage’s 4′ 33″ has several different versions. These occur at various points in Cage’s early career and an examination of these sheds light on the multiple forms
that silence took for him. Figure 1.1 shows the first page of a 1989 reconstruction by pianist David Tudor of the score used in the first performance of the piece in 1952 (the original score was lost). It is a traditional manifestation of a musical notation; it has a regular brace and staffs, eight bars, a time signature and appears to be written for piano and one other (unnamed) instrument (hence the untitled staffs that occur underneath each complete line, which also lack a treble or bass clef). Yet, in the absolute absence of any musical notes, it is simply an organization for the absence of music.

Cage produced the second notation (fig. 1.2) in 1953, but it was not published until 1967, in Source Magazine (a short-running magazine of avant-garde music from the University of California). This, in contrast to the previous score, consists of a proportional, space-time notation (the lengths of the lines correspond to the time allotted for their performance). The movements of the piece are rendered as space between long vertical lines; a tempo indication is provided at the top of the first line (60); and at the end of each movement the time is indicated in minutes and seconds. There are three pages to this notation, each representing a different movement of the piece. This, the first, is 30 seconds long (as indicated at the base of the second line); the second is 2’ 33”; the last 1’ 40”. It is completely void of any traditional musical notation.

The third score (fig. 1.3) was published in 1961, and includes a description of David Tudor’s original performance of the piece at Woodstock in 1952. Cagean scholars often refer to this version simply as “Tacet.” I discuss “Tacet” in more depth at a later stage of this chapter, but for now I would like to focus on a performance of the original score with these three different notations in mind.
Figure 1.1: David Tudor's 1989 reconstruction of the original 1952 score for 4' 33", in 4/4 time (page 1)
Figure 1.2: Cage’s 1953 proportional-notation score of 4’ 33” (page 1)
Figure 1.3: Score for 4' 33" as published by C. F. Peters in 1961

NOTE: The title of this work is the total length in minutes and seconds of its performance. At Woodstock, N.Y., August 29, 1952, the title was 4' 33" and the three parts were 33", 2' 40", and 1' 20". It was performed by David Tudor, pianist, who indicated the beginnings of parts by closing, the endings by opening, the keyboard lid. However, the work may be performed by an instrumentalist or combination of instrumentalists and last any length of time.

FOR IRWIN KREtEN

JOHN CAGE

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There are a number of visual recordings of Cage’s 4’ 33” and looking at particular performances illustrates the way Cage attempts to construct a framework for listening. It also alerts us to the possibility of reenactment, and the relationship each performance has to the first. One specific recording made in the early 1990s (between the deaths of Cage and Tudor) sees Tudor performing 4’ 33” just as he had in 1952 (Cage 2006), using his 1989 reconstruction of the score (fig. 1.1). Tudor’s performance demonstrates his awareness of the diachronic relationship: he is reading the score in tandem with his observation of a stopwatch. This particular score, with its regular notational devices, allows Tudor to observe time as he counts his way through the bars, without playing anything. In a conventional musical performance a musician would keep a beat through his or her own playing in time with the conductor or a metronome. In the absence of this factor Tudor reads both the score and the stopwatch. He uses the stopwatch to mark his movement through time; in other words, he plays the stopwatch. Additionally, in this recording the stopwatch is audible, and becomes in effect like an instrument in the concert. By playing the stopwatch, Tudor illustrates and enhances the framework of silence, or the absence of music. Furthermore, Tudor once commented in an interview with William Fetterman in 1989: “It’s important that you read the score as you’re performing it, so there are these pages you use. So you wait, and then turn the page. I know it sounds very straight, but in the end it makes a difference” (Fetterman 1996, 75).

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2 There is a large array of performances and interpretations of Cage’s 4’ 33”, many of which are accessible online. They range in output from the traditional concert setting, to graphic applications of the work. See Gann 2010, 215–17, for a concise discography of various recordings of 4’ 33”. See also “Further Listening,” Dworkin 2013, 141–73, for a secondary list of silent recordings and other permutations, and which cites Cage’s 4’ 33” as “the classic.” Alternatively, the hits from a basic YouTube search for “Cage Silence” are voluminous.
There is also the question of reenactment here. By reenacting his 1952 performance, Tudor promotes the possibility of an original or essential performance, and encourages us to think about the relationship that this later performance has with the first. The later score, “Tacet” (fig. 1.3), highlights this relationship by citing the 1952 performance as part of its own set of instructions. Yet, as if to further strengthen this idea of a reproduction, Tudor uses the same score he had used in 1952 (fig. 1.1), not the verbal score that Cage had later written, which cites Tudor’s earlier performance. This could be read as an affront towards Cage’s verbal score “Tacet”: Tudor dismisses the idea of a verbal score being able to take the place of the more conventional score, or even to uphold the capabilities of being activated like a musical score. Yet, this act could illustrate the fact that, upon using the more musical score, Tudor comes closer to reproducing the original performance. Upon reflection, we know that the circumstances would have been quite different: the possible environmental sounds that are apparent in the later version—such as those made by cameras and mobile phones—would not have been there in the 1952 performance. By following the musical notation for the score however (fig. 1.1), rather than making the performance “last any length of time,” Tudor presents the musical score as closed and fixed. Had he followed “Tacet” instead, this particular performance of the score might have taken on a different form.

Beyond the performance of the piece, it is now necessary to turn towards the act of listening in order to examine Cage’s construction of this framework for listening. Having acknowledged that the quest for pure silence was impossible, Cage subsequently inverts his ideas towards silence. Kahn notes that it was amplification and the development of electronic technologies that enabled Cage to think about the possibility that there was music in everything (1997). Cage proposes that, given we exist within a diachronic relationship, the right technology might enable us begin listening to things that were previously or otherwise imperceptible. Cage suggests that even the most seemingly inert objects actually contain music: the vibration of their atomic parts (quoted in Kostelanetz 2003, 106). They are no
longer simply objects, but objects-in-motion. By being able to use amplification modes to enhance the sounds of objects, Cage makes audible the sounds that are not otherwise perceptible to the human ear. Kahn argues that amplitude was a natural progression from Cage’s exercises in percussion, enabled mainly by the development in recording technology and radio equipment during the early 1950s (1997). With the technology at his disposal to be able to bring sounds into an audible sphere, Cage then inverts his own understanding of silence, a progression that mirrors the transition from “silencing” sound to creating a framework for listening. This is evident in Tudor’s performance (Cage 2006) where the pick-up on the stopwatch is loud enough to be audible and therefore recordable. The prospect of amplification also reiterates the suggestion of Tudor playing the stopwatch, the idea that mechanized time provides a structure for listening, and that silence is simply a framework for paying attention to environmental and vibratory sounds of objects-in-motion.

Cage’s use of language further enhanced his attention to this idea of vibratory sounds. In discussion with French philosopher Daniel Charles, Cage once commented that an ashtray is “in a state of vibration…But we can’t hear those vibrations” (Cage and Charles 2009, 220). In paying attention to their vibration Cage attempts to listen to the inherent music of objects. This concept insinuates that a vibration occurs at any time, rather than lying dormant, as an object seemingly does. Kahn observes: “With his commitment to the impossibility of silence the world was suddenly overrun with small sounds,” and that “amplification was still called on to perform rhetorically, far beyond its actual technical capabilities, to increase the number of audible sounds and to deny imperceptibility” (1997, 583). Amplification, in both its pragmatic and rhetorical states, allows Cage to develop listening further, and enables listening beyond the frameworks through which we regularly interpret sound or musical composition. Cage uses language to stretch these boundaries for listening, as it provides a less bounded structure for listening than the musical score does. In making the parameters in his verbal score unlimited—“the work may be performed by an instrumentalist or combination of
instrumentalists and last any length of time” (fig. 1.3)—Cage incites much more than just the musical sounds regularly signified within the musical score. His use of language allows him to broaden the framework in previously unprecedented ways.

If we adhere to Cage’s idea that vibrations occur within the object at any given point in time, we can draw a correlation between Cage’s silence and Umberto Eco’s “works in motion,” or opere in movimento, as explored in his 1962 book The Open Work (translated into English in 1989). To say that the ashtray is making sound or, in a state of process, is to allow us as listeners the opportunity to determine whether we will listen or not. In other words, music and sound becomes less about the act of composition, and more to do with the act of listening. Cage’s works are partly unfixed because there are always sounds and vibrations occurring at any given point in time. Eco’s suggestion with his “works in motion” is that some elements in an artwork are left to chance, to the discretion of the performer or listener: the work is always in motion in the sense that it is never fixed. In his introduction to the 1989 English translation of Eco’s book, David Robey observes that what all works in motion “have in common is the artist’s decision to leave the arrangement of some of their constituents either to the public or to chance, thus giving them not a single definitive order but a multiplicity of possible orders” (Eco 1989, ix–x). If we look to “Tacet” with Eco in mind, we can attend to the idea that the composer is relinquishing control and that the sounds that occur during a conceived framework are beyond the arrangement and control of the composer or performer. Furthermore, in “Tacet,” Cage states “the title of this work is the total length in minutes and seconds of its performance” (fig. 1.3). This opening-up of the composition to the public (or performer), and to chance, becomes an explicit act of openness. The work is open to our deciding when it begins and ends, and therefore remains an opere in movimento. Again, in the same way that Cage attends to a multitude of sounds through the unlimited boundaries of his verbal score, the use of language enables him to pay
attention to the unfixed nature of the work. With language he can signify the unlimited structure in a way that he cannot with orthodox musical composition.

**Section 2: Exemplification**

“Tacet” marks a shift from silence to the literary text while it also illustrates the capabilities of language to both do and say, in ways that Cage could not get musical composition to perform. Language, in being able to hold both textual and performance exemplification in its sway—simultaneously—enables Cage to both do and say. Through examining “Tacet” in detail, we can trace Cage’s turn towards the exemplifying powers of language and away from silence, or towards systems of exemplification and away from the singular system of representation (Antin 1974, 31). Where the musical score for Cage’s silence (fig. 1.1) illustrates an act of composition, Cage turns to language for its ability to work beyond the possibility of an essential score. In other words, he turns to language for its capacity to create a less rigid, less bounded structure for a potential framework for listening, to work beyond the basic functionality of representation and signification.

Figure 1.3, “Tacet,” shows the third—and arguably final—score for 4’33”.

“Tacet” comes in the form of a typewritten text-based set of instructions and was published in 1961. In order for Cage to frame silence or direct our attention to otherwise un-musical sounds, Cage uses language and the verbal score. Furthermore, the text used in “Tacet” performs a paradoxical gesture, much like Cage’s own words “I have nothing to say, and I am saying it” (Cage 1961, 109); if it is to be enacted, it is never actually silence. Having acknowledged the impossibility of silence he attempts to use text to exemplify that pure silence was exactly that, impossible.

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3 The first score (fig 1.1) was rewritten and there are rumours of a rewrite for the second (fig 1.2); there is also a later, related scored piece 0’00” or 4’33” No. 2, 1962.
The question then arises as to what kind of language Cage uses to produce this framework for listening. There are a number of dimensions to Cage’s use of text in “Tacet,” and a number of different techniques being used. Firstly, Cage’s use of the word *tacet* infers a kind of appropriation. From the Latin for “it is silent,” *tacet* is a musical term that Cage takes as a signifier for an instrument’s silence and expands to encompass the entire score. To read the word *tacet* as if it were a musical score promotes a sense of it being read as it would be played, within a certain duration or diachronic continuum, and thus the act of reading the score becomes an act of performance. When we read the word *tacet* in silence, or in performing silence, we make “it is silent” the case, by reading it *in* silence. If we are to follow its literal meaning and read it in silence to ourselves, the text invites the reader to perform the piece. Furthermore, if we arrange a formal reading of the piece and read this word *tacet* in silence in front of an audience, in the diachronic notation that the verbal score requests us to do, we are performing an act of silence. The word itself is capable of two simultaneous functions: *doing* and *saying*, or as Kotz calls it: “snippets of language to themselves be the work” (2007, 48; emphasis in original). It *does* through instruction and it *says* through its performativity.

This aspect of performativity affords a connection with J. L. Austin’s idea of the performative utterance. Austin claims that by uttering a set of words, the words actually allow that certain reality (to which they are referring) to take place: “the name is derived, of course, from ‘perform,’ the usual verb with the noun ‘action’: it indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of the action—it is not normally thought of as just saying something” (1962, 6–7). He gives the example of a marriage, where, upon the celebrant saying the words “I now pronounce you husband and wife,” the relationship of the two people to whom the statement applies actually changes; they become husband and wife through the act of the performative utterance. In other words, by saying the word *tacet* brings the reality of it into being: it refers not only to the phenomenon of silence, but by being said,
it actually refers to the reality that it produces, albeit the opposite of silence (a paradox we will soon come to).

Moreover, if we look at the text as a basic score or a set of instructions, we can see Cage’s attempt to describe not just what we hear, but what we do when we use the word *tacet* repeatedly. If we read this word aloud, as we might a poem in performance, we evoke the very fact that it is a word. It is a piece of speech that has meaning, and is made up of two separate phonemes. When these two phonemes are pronounced together—*tab-cet*—they generate meaning for the listener and speaker. Yet the meaning pertains to the very opposite of our saying it aloud—“it is silent.” By saying the word *tacet*, the situation becomes the opposite of that: non-silent. Cage makes words and sounds by demanding that there be no words and no sounds, and thereby evincing a paradox. We can liken this the aforementioned statement “I have nothing to say and I am saying it” (Cage 1961, 109), where in saying that he has nothing to say, Cage is of course saying something. The word *tacet* embodies the very paradox that speaking it invokes: it never actually is what it means, and thus we again return to the impossibility of silence.

The second part of “Tacet,” the “note,” illustrates a number of different techniques beyond those discussed above, and a closer examination shows further reasons for Cage’s turn to language. On a surface level it shows that Cage has some fun with meaning: the word “note” could refer to a musical note. Beyond that, it provides a description or an explanation of what is to be done with the piece when reading the work as a score, while it also supplies an example of a previous performance. It presents the work as something that exists beyond the text/score, as something in performance, which illustrates the ability of a text to call for an unlimited number of exemplifications, while it also states that “the work may be performed by an instrumentalist or combination of instrumentalists and last any length of time” (fig. 1.3). Furthermore, by allowing for indeterminacy in his work, Cage also brings the piece closer to what Umberto Eco calls “the open work” (Eco 1989). The open work is
dependent on the reader or, in this case, the performer, to realize or activate the text. By the late 1950s and early 1960s—as we have seen in the succession of versions for 4’33”—Cage has departed from some of the conventions of a traditional musical score, such as a time signature. More explicitly, he states that the piece can be performed for any “length of time” (while the piece defiantly remains in three distinct parts). The duration is indeterminate, and therefore goes beyond the traditional frameworks of musical notation, and demands instruction through other means, specifically through language. From the performer’s point of view, he or she is less of a spokesperson for the piece (as in conventional notation), and instead is the very creator of the piece. Equally, it could instead extend Cage’s assertion as the creator, as he could claim to have created all silent works of any length. Cage paradoxically provokes the performer to become the creator, inciting that the performer determines the length and nature of the piece, while at the same time insisting that his own work is the original, of which all other performances are simply reenactments.

Additionally, Cage’s use of language in the place of musical notation opens the piece up to being read by any English speaker, not just a musician. He encourages a prescription for action outside of the musical framework, for “any instrumentalist.” If we consider that for Cage “music is the organization of sound,” (1961, 3) and “everything we do is music” (quoted in Kostalenetz 2003, 70), then an instrumentalist could be anyone or anything making sound; an instrument could be somebody’s nose as he or she breathes, for example. Once the score is made open, as Cage attempts to do by providing the “note,” we can begin to listen to whatever indeterminate sounds occur within the framework (generated either by

4 In 2002, John Cage’s estate sued composer Mike Batt for his track titled “A Minute’s Silence,” for the simple fact that Batt listed the composer as “Batt/Cage.” Had he only listed Cage, he might have avoided liability, like Frank Zappa’s A Chance Operation—The John Cage Tribute (1993) whose recording of 4’33” is credited to Cage (Gann 2010, 188–213).
the listener or the performer). Again, the focus is on the listening, rather than the music-making; the act of listening becomes, in itself, the act of performance. This act is enabled by the instructions in the verbal score, and therefore the language that provides those instructions. The music to be performed is not described, as in a conventional musical score. Rather, we are given instructions in order to produce a performance. The score waits for performance in order to become activated, describing what the performer is to do, not what he or she hears. And yet, the score also maintains that it is the work, the performance: that its existence on the page is a thing in and of itself.

The explicitly open and indeterminate gesture in “Tacet” makes the performer—as opposed to the composer—the primary determinant of the composition and thereby suggests a subversion of control. The score comes to life only when performers take on the role of composer themselves, thereby enhancing the possibilities of performance exemplification where the score describes what we do, not what we hear. While the performer works within some parameters, these parameters are so loose and open that the control is placed with the performer themselves. Consider the words at the beginning of the note: “The title of this work is the total length in minutes and seconds of its performance.” The parameters for the composition are thereby exemplified through the very performance of the score. Cage gives us one particular interpretation or example of how the score can be performed—Tudor’s 1952 performance—and thus, Tudor’s performance is only one interpretation or example. The score in its entirety can only ever be instantiated on the page through these verbal instructions, making it impossible to perform every permutation of the score in one specific interpretation. This further enhances the importance of language, and Cage’s turn towards the verbal score: a musical composition, such as Tudor’s reconstruction of the original score (fig. 1.1), cannot contain all possible interpretations. Even in its open form (without any specific notation) the musical score cannot intimate the multiplicity of other manifestations that language enables Cage to signify with the verbal score.
While the verbal score for 4’ 33” remains a set of instructions like a musical score—something to be realized or activated—the point I want to highlight is the fact that Cage went to language to make the score work on a number of levels, simultaneously. Cage, having attempted to create a framework for silence in his musical scores and subsequently acknowledging the need to explain his own work, he departed from the musical score in favour of text, the verbal score. This is not to say that he ceased to work with music as a medium; a quick glance at a list of his completed works will tell you otherwise. Instead, I suggest that, in trying to constitute a framework for silence (or listening), Cage gravitated towards language in order to explain and exemplify what he was doing, and to open the score up to unlimited exemplifications and permutations. With its capacity to be a both a system of representation and exemplification (Antin 1974, 31), language becomes the medium that enables Cage to make a framework for listening. With language, Cage can do what he otherwise could not have done within the conventions of traditional musical notation: provide instructions for a piece, where “the title of the piece is the total length in minutes and seconds of its performance” (fig. 1.3). As Lely and Sanders have noted, the verbal score can allude to a multiplicity of relationships between “the author and the reader” and “express ideas and concepts as well as [provide] prescriptions for action” (2012, xix).

Additionally, to maintain that the score could be instantiated in an unlimited number of ways means that Cage also makes a comment on the act of composition and the law of instructions. When we take into account the two distinct parts of “Tacet”—the first being the actual score, the second the note or instructions—we can observe an interrogation of the piece itself. By providing a minimal score surrounded by blank space and devoid of conventional musical notation, Cage subverts the power of the orthodox score. In following the score with a set of instructions as to how the piece might (or might not) be played, he undermines the possibility of it working as a score, diminishing the capacity of musical notation and pointing to its singular functionality. Consider, for example, the set of
instructions: while these provide a way into the performance or reading of the piece, they also undermine the idea that there are set laws or rules that must be abided by for the performance, as would normally be the case with conventional notation. Cage states that the piece could be “performed by any instrument for any length of time,” but then goes on to give an example of how it was done at Woodstock in 1952. On the one hand, Cage’s example suggests that there is one particular performance that contains the essence or origin of the piece. On the other hand, he mocks the idea that there could be one essential way to do this as most traditional musical notation does by proposing an ideal performance situation.

This focus on process is key to Cage’s “Tacet” score—there is an endless procession of works produced by its process-oriented instructions—and is a way to connect Cage’s work to abstract expressionism. In his introduction to The New York Schools of Music and the Visual Arts (2002), Steven Johnson places Cage within the context of the New York School, alongside artists working in various media, such as Morton Feldman, Edgard Varèse, Willem de Kooning, Jasper Johns, and the aforementioned Robert Rauschenberg. These artists’ focus on process extends into a literary context in the work of New York School poets such as James Schuyler, Frank O’Hara, and John Ashbery (Ward 1993). Additionally, Charles Olson and other poets associated with Black Mountain College—which Cage was involved for some years—also took some of the philosophies of abstract expressionism to their writing (Belgrad 1998). For many of the artists and writers of this American mid-twentieth century avant-garde practice, the focus of the work is on the process that lies behind the making of the work. An example of this is Olson’s manifesto “Projective Verse,” which puts “into itself certain laws and possibilities of the breath, of the breathing of the man who writes as well as of his listenings” (Olson 1997, 239). In “Projective Verse,” Olson argues “form is never more than an extension of content” (1997, 240), which further suggests a stronger emphasis on the mechanics and making of the piece, rather than the fixed aesthetics of the finished product.
We can liken this focus on process with Cage’s “Tacet” in that while the score provides a set of instructions for performance, it also draws attention to a previous interpretation. To provide an instance of this previous rendition Cage suggests that anything that follows after this performance is only ever an instance of something that has come before, and thereby he comments on the originality of the performance that is about to take place. Cage undermines the originality of future interpretations by providing an example; at the same time he insists that each enactment be a departure from this original performance. Just like some of the work of the abstract expressionists and American avant-garde artists of the mid-twentieth century, Cage draws attention to the process behind the production of the piece.

This emphasis on process also opens up a discussion around the idea of the original and the essence, and encourages an inquiry into the philosophical possibilities of meaning and language. It provokes the question: if a work is a process, how can it have an essence? Does the focus on process undermine the idea of the work’s essence, or an original work? Furthermore, does “Tacet” imply that the cited example of Tudor’s earlier performance was the original, to which every subsequent performance is a referent? By using language, can Cage attend to this essence by enabling each performance to recreate itself anew?

Section 3: Exemplarity & Essence

Exemplarity suggests that there is an essence that lies behind what is being exemplified, and therefore that each act is an exemplification of something that has come before it. Cage’s verbal score presents both generalized instructions and a specific example. In so doing it plays with the relationship between essence and example. In some respects, we can observe that the actual score of “Tacet” is the essence or law that lies behind the performance; it is an essential score from which every subsequent performance is an instantiation of the original. Conversely, we might discern that every performance of the score upholds the qualities of an
original, the score giving birth to itself through every reenactment. These two possibilities for interpretation illustrate how language has the capacity to be both an essential score for subsequent performances and an instance of a previous situation. Cage’s verbal score inhabits the tension that exists between these two capacities. That is, rather than be one or the other—an essence or an instance—through language “Tacet” does the work of both.

Derrida argues that for something to be made an example, it must contain both a signifier and a signified. The only case where this does not occur, he claims, is with God: “God merges with pure essence, pure essence is also without example” (Derrida 1986a, 238). Everything else, Derrida posits—beyond the Hegelian realms of God and this “pure essence”—has both a meaning and a law. This exception is problematic because the subject of God is the pure essence of the signifier, and therefore cannot be exemplified or instantiated through anything else. Irene Harvey argues that for Derrida examples “do nothing more than exhibit other laws” (1992, 205). Undoubtedly, Cage too is aware of the fiction of pure essence: by referring to a previous performance, “Tacet” provides an example of how the piece once was, and therefore could be, performed. And it is this example that has indeed come to be treated as the essential canonized version of the work, “the classic” silent work (Dworkin 2013, 145). Cage, however, both seems to offer us this essential example and to undermine it, by rejecting the idea of any definitive parameters within which the work could or should be performed. Let us consider again the “note” in the second part of the third score for 4’ 33”:

At Woodstock, N.Y., August 29, 1952, the title was 4’ 33” and the three parts were 33”, 2’ 40”, and 1’ 20”. It was performed by David Tudor, pianist, who indicated the beginnings of parts by closing, the endings by opening, the keyboard lid. (Fig. 1.3)
“Tacet” eschews some of the laws of conventional musical notation by suggesting that there is no essential way to perform the piece. Again, Cage’s ability to do this remains tied up in the use of language, and its capacities to be able to refer to itself and something else at the same time. His saying “At Woodstock, N.Y., August 29, 1952, the title was 4’ 33’” gives a reference point of one particular occurrence, yet his instructions also provide for other, quite different performances to occur as his further instruction infers: “However, the work may be performed by an instrumentalist or a combination of instrumentalists and last any length of time.”

If in metaphysical exemplarity is the idea that “examples are examples insofar and only insofar as they are examples of a law” (Harvey 1992, 204; emphasis added), Cage’s playful approach to establishing and undermining examples and essences points also to his playful moving in and out of the laws of musical composition. Working within some musical parameters in “Tacet”—there are three movements and some musical terminology—Cage suggests that he follows the laws of musical convention and notation to some degree. However, in his dismissal of a regular musical framework of staffs, keys, instruments and time signatures, and by opening the piece up to indeterminacy, he also eschews laws of musical convention and notation and so the notion of his piece as an example of music.

Through his playful undermining of the example/law relation in “Tacet,” Cage approaches language in a similar way to Derrida, who repeatedly insists that the problem with thinking we can actually talk about essences in language, be they Platonic or otherwise, is that there are only ever instances. The example, Derrida says, “can be an example if the example is the exemplary ideal, the absolute sense of which the finite examples are precisely only approximating samples” (1986a, 29). There is no pure essence lying behind them, and therefore no examples or exemplifications: only practices or doings, only process. By opening the score up through indeterminacy, Cage suggests that every performance of the piece should be something in and of itself; that each performance gives birth to itself as a new and
original piece. Cage thus attempts to go beyond the fiction of a pure essence and a pure silence. Yet, while “Tacet” is a score that seems to insist that there are no examples, only instantiations, the score takes on the role of master and law in relation to those instantiations, and so returns them to the subordinate position of examples. On the one hand, “Tacet” insists that it is the essential version of which performances are only examples. On the other hand, it rejects the idea of an essence, maintaining that there are only ever instantiations of a concept without an essence.

The main difference between Derrida’s exemplar and Cage’s use of exemplification is that with Cage we are talking about forms that have the capability and characteristics of exemplarity; neither music nor text is on par with the non-exemplarity of God. While language, both spoken and written, can readily be broken down into the signifier and the signified, music—as a played phenomenon—has slightly more resistance to this deconstruction. However, music does consist of a signifier and a signified. As Theodor Adorno argues, when we listen we bring to that listening a whole set of cultural value judgments (2006), and that music can never be pure signifier. Whether intended by the musician/performer/composer or not, sound brings the possibility of interpretation, and therefore, meaning. As Eco’s “open work” demonstrates, the less specific or fixed the score, the more possibilities there are of multiple meanings or interpretations being generated. The mark for a sound in music can never be divorced from what it means in the same way that it is impossible for language to mean nothing. It remains an iteration of something that has come before.

In making his verbal score perform in this manifold way, Cage comments on the very paradox of trying to perform silence. Opening his work up, or providing a “work in motion,” means Cage criticizes the commercial notions of commodity and consumable object and how the conventional frameworks of Western music support these ideas. The composition 4’ 33” was not written to be commodified by being recorded and replayed, and resists
commodification through its indeterminacy. As we have seen, the idea behind the piece was for it to provide a framework through which to listen to the sounds that occur indeterminately within that framework, rather than a highly constructed piece that could be recorded and replayed at the listener’s will.

Returning to the exposition above, where I referred to one particular performance of 4’ 33” by David Tudor in the early 1990s (Cage 2006) there is a comical element to this process: the idea that one might be able to capture the essence of this performance by photographing the performer. The rendition is, by its very nature, a parody of the notion of performance. The piano has been silenced, illustrated through the closing of the piano lid and the reading of the stopwatch. There is effectively nothing to see or capture. In fact, as we have observed, in his attempt to exemplify silence, Cage brings about a kind of critique of the fictional nature of this very thing, silence.

The paradox, as we can see in various performances of the piece, is that performers and their audiences have subsequently attempted to commodify the composition of 4’ 33”, and in doing so, attempt to make reference to some essence of the performance or score. In Tudor’s later performance we can hear the sound of a camera (or cameras) firing in the background amongst other environmental sounds. This is peculiar to this particular performance, as the sounds and their amplitude are heightened enough to be audible in the recorded version. As Susan Sontag says, “…the most grandiose result of the photographic enterprise is to give us the sense that we can hold the whole world in our heads—as an anthology of images” (1979, 3). There is a desire to capture the moment based on the perverse idea that time, with its motion and continuity, can be captured in its essence. In this performance of 4’ 33” the photographer attempts to commodify the occasion, regardless of the fact that by making something static, the image has essentially lost its essence, that of duration and therefore sound. This attempt to capture something also runs counter to some of Cage’s own desires to build a framework around time. An image taken in this setting is of the performer making silence, or more realistically,
making accidental sound: the majority of images are shot in the moments when Tudor actually did something, like reach up to turn the page or open the piano, for example. The doing or making of something in that environment, or within that framework, is not the aspect at which our attention is being directed. The image becomes about the performance rather than the act of listening.

If we consider Cage’s idea that “music is the organization of sound” (1961, 3), then the whole performance aspect of this particular performance becomes rather perverse. These audience members, specifically those taking photographs, are not listening to the sounds that Cage tries to frame. Rather they watch someone else partake in an act of silence or not-music. Given that pure silence and essence is unattainable, and our attention is directed towards listening to the sound of silence, the attempt to capture that act runs contrary to the nature of the idea. A photograph makes an image static, while Cage directs our attention towards our very un-static existence in time and space.

Tudor’s performance adheres to the idea of reenactment, thereby reinstating the concept of an original or essential performance. By using a reconstruction of his original score (fig. 1.1), Tudor tries to replicate his original performance. His audience appears to be aware of this too: it has been billed as 4’33”, as opposed to “Tacet,” making them alert to the preconceived nature of the piece. I suggest that in Tudor’s use of the original (musical) score, he reiterates the possibility of there being an essence behind the score, and therefore the notion that the musical score could not serve Cage in his desire to frame silence. Had Tudor used “Tacet,” and the performance become indeterminate, the outcome would have been an instantiation of the original, while also constituting one example of outcomes in the unlimited number of exemplifications suggested by “Tacet”—an example in motion rather than an example reliant on and pointing back to an imagined essence. By exploiting the non-essential, iterative nature of language, Cage’s verbal score produces the paradox of making silence. He provides a framework for listening, outside of the premeditated, preconceived demonstration of a musical notation, law, or essence, and by
attending to an affective state which happens before we can apply our frameworks for interpretation.
CHAPTER 2: The Literary Text

My intention has been, often, to say what I had to say in a way that would exemplify it; that would, conceivably, permit the listener to experience what I had to say rather than just hear about it.

—John Cage, Silence

Like “Tacet,” Cage’s “Lecture on Nothing” is both a set of instructions to be activated and a text in and of itself. Similarly, “Lecture on Nothing” also developed as a performed work and a text over the course of the 1950s. It was first performed at the Arts Club in New York in 1949, while the written version was first published in 1959 (Perloff 1981, 305), and appeared in Cage’s first book of collected lectures and writings, Silence (1961). In examining “Lecture on Nothing” here, I first locate the text within Cage’s evolving conception of the literary text over this period. I then show how “Lecture on Nothing” exploits techniques of exemplification, in both its written and spoken forms. By addressing the different media/contexts through which we experience the work, I demonstrate that “Lecture on Nothing” is built on a series of intertwined tensions between music and literature, experience and interpretation, score and performance; tensions that are in turn inflected by the expectations that we bring to the work.

In the following examination, when I cite directly from Cage’s “Lecture on Nothing,” I am referring to the printed version that appears in his 1961 book, Silence. Due to spatial restrictions, the font in these excerpts appears smaller than the original. In the interests of remaining true to the original typographical arrangement, the line spacing is also altered accordingly.
Section 1: The Literary Text

By introducing text to his score for 4’33”, Cage became aware of the ability of language to perform multiple functions: to be able to do and say as a text, while also uphold qualities of the instructive aspects of musical notation. In his “Lecture on Nothing,” Cage says, “this is a composed talk, for I am making it just as I make a piece of music” (1961, 110). This excerpt forms part of what I call a literary text—or “lecture-poetry,” as Marjorie Perloff has termed it (1981, 289)—and does, in true Cagean fashion, inform the reading of the text itself. Asked why he did not give “conventional informative lectures,” Cage replies that he “[didn’t] give these lectures to surprise people, but out of a need for poetry” (1961, x). He goes on:

As I see it, poetry is not prose simply because poetry is in one way or another formalized. It is not poetry by reason of its content or ambiguity but by reason of its allowing musical elements (time, sound) to be introduced to the world of words.

(1961, x)

Statements such as this, combined with notes to many of the pieces in his books—which instruct the reader how the piece should be read, or how it is to be, or once was, performed—give us a context through which to read Cage’s work, while also providing a way into the process that lies behind them. These statements and notes serve dual purposes: they function both as part of the literary text while they also inform the reader that the piece should be read as a particular kind of poetic text: one that is composed and that functions as a commentary on its own composition.

In this regard, Cage is amongst a larger group of avant-garde practitioners, among whom it is not rare for the artist to provide a note to a piece, be it a painting, a performance, or a happening. The written component sometimes provides instructions, outlining the setting in which the piece should or could be constructed or performed, or describes the
process which led the artist to this particular composition. They function similarly to a catalogue at an exhibition or performance notes at a concert.

In the case of avant-garde works, the relationship between the artwork and the theory behind the artwork is complicated. With the development of conceptual art—for which Marcel Duchamp is a leading figure—the artwork and the theory become intertwined. As such, the accompanying text sometimes becomes the work itself, replacing the object entirely. At other times, it acts as a manifesto of sorts: a statement of purpose that contextualizes the piece more fully for its observers by bringing some of the theory that lies behind the practice to light. Furthermore, the accompanying text often, as we have seen in the case of “Tacet,” provides a set of instructions, whereupon the enactment of the instructions actually forms the substance of the piece itself.

In his essay “Avant-Garde and Theory: A Misunderstood Relation,” Tyrus Miller calls for a renewed examination of the relationship between avant-garde artworks and the theories that lie behind them (1999). While he accepts that there are distinctions to be made between the different discourses (the art work and the theory), he suggests that there are, however, “major functional relations between avant-garde artworks and theories” (1999, 549). He develops what he calls a “sixfold taxonomy” of the ways in which artworks refer to theories: “iconographic correspondence, use of theories as thematic material, exemplification, direct allusion, formal allusion, and expressive use of theoretical diction” (549; emphasis added). By categorizing these avant-garde strategies, Miller says that exemplification is one technique that the avant-garde artist—Cage included—uses to interrogate the boundaries that traditionally sit between the artwork and the philosophy behind it. We can liken this to David Antin’s argument that Cage’s literary texts took him from the use of basic systems of representation to systems of exemplification (1974, 31), in that it provides a method of reading Cage’s “Lecture on Nothing” both historically and aesthetically. No longer was Cage content with the basic dimension of the artwork. Instead, he wanted to be able to do, say,
and comment all at once; to provide a performance, a piece of work that could be activated beyond the initial performance (and often in unlimited capacities), and a commentary or an explanation of how to read/understand the performance. Cage’s turn to language enables him to fully utilize this technique of exemplification, as a way of interlacing both the practice and the theory behind the practice. This goes beyond what Cage was doing with “Tacet,” which gives a score and instructions for generating performances, but does not discuss what it is trying to do in the same way that “Lecture on Nothing” does. Cage uses techniques of exemplification in “Lecture on Nothing” in order to make the piece act as a score for performance, while it also exists as a text in and of itself, and as a commentary of itself in performance. Moreover, in “Lecture on Nothing” we can see a further dimension of how these techniques complicate our experiences of the work. By being a score, a literary text, and a commentary, “Lecture on Nothing” builds on and plays with the tension that exists between the text as score, the text as a thing in itself, and the text as self-reflexive commentary.

Section 2: Exemplification & Instantiation

On a structural level, we can begin noting the tension between score and text by looking at its typographical arrangement. The lecture is prefaced by a remark that is indented and set in italic script and that precedes the heading in bold capital letters: “LECTURE ON NOTHING.” The prefatory note gives information about where and when the piece was first published, and concise instructions as to how the piece should be read (not unlike the “note” for “Tacet”). The lecture consists of five main sections, and forty-eight subsections. Each subsection is twelve lines long, and these are broken up by the symbol ☽, the astrological sign for Virgo (Cage was born on September 5, which makes him a Virgo). To mark the end of one section and the beginning of a main section, Cage uses two of these signs, ☽☽, and he does so again to mark the completion of the lecture (before the “Afternote,” which is one and a half pages in length). Each page of each
section is broken up into four columns. While some lines follow the columns, some seem only loosely connected to this columnar structure. These columns recall Cage’s compositional background: they resemble the bar structure of musical notation, indicating an underlying rhythm for the reading of the lecture. Here is a small extract from the beginning, where the isolated punctuation gives a sense of the columnar scaffolding that lies behind the work:

I am here, and there is nothing to say. If among you are those who wish to get somewhere, let them leave at any moment.

(109)

Cage goes so far as to say in his prefatory remark that: “the text is printed in four columns to facilitate a rhythmic reading” (109), explicitly applying a notational technique to his typographical layout of the text. One can almost see, particularly when confronted with a whole page of the lecture, the bar structure that is used to “facilitate rhythm” in the work.

Cage makes an even more provocative gesture towards musical notation by using certain types of words and particular sentence structures, utilizing characteristics such as tense, repetition and empty space, alongside techniques of textual exemplification. Let us consider one particular piece or potential moment from approximately halfway through the lecture:

But quiet sounds love, Life, Time and I still feel this way— intellectualization— not worn out new sounds. And if one stops thinking about were like loneliness, or friendship values, Coca-Cola, but something else is the ones I had thought worn out, the old sounds worn out as thinking had worn them out them, obviously, they are audible as the suddenly they are

(117)
We are taken from the past tense at the beginning of this excerpt, with “quiet sounds // were like loneliness,” “I thought,” and brought into the present tense in line five, with the words “I still feel this way,” and “something else is / happening.” At the same time, Cage draws attention to the presence of the word “happening” on the page by allowing it to stand on its own, within one of the constructed columns. The word “happening” is followed by a colon, white space, and then an explanation of what is actually happening: Cage himself is “beginning to hear.” It is through this word “happening” that we are drawn into the actual reality of the piece. Cage is telling us that “something else is / happening” at the very point where something else is happening: we switch to the present tense and there is silence. Then he tells us he is beginning “to hear.” The words “is / happening” attempt to perform or exemplify their own utterance, by both saying what is happening, and providing an instance of that actual happening, illustrating an instance of Cage both doing and saying. His statement “something else is / happening,” is an indication that there is the space through which he is beginning to listen, or encourage his audience (both readers and listeners) to pay attention to the sometimes-abstract language of his lecture.

The use of this kind of utterance leads us to a reading of Cage through J. L. Austin. In his book, *How to Do Things with Words* (1962), Austin argues for a departure from the exclusive focus on statements that act in a purely constative framework, that is, statements that comment on something that is about to occur or has occurred: a state of affairs that can be said to be true or false. Instead, Austin proposes another category of statement, that of the performative utterance. Jonathan Culler suggests that the performative utterance creates the reality to which it refers (2010, 99) and argues that its use “helps us conceive of literature as act or event” (96). Cage’s use of the performative utterance in this instance enhances this conception of the literary text as event. He is using the act of uttering the words *and* their meaning to explore the potential of the text, doing *and* saying at the same time. The event that the words partake in becomes both sonorous and literary: the words are both heard and understood within a particular space in time.
The formalized nature of the layout and form (and his instructions) suggests a rhythmic reading, and his actual performing of the piece in performance extends this, thereby connecting the text with duration. The deliberate and conscious use of performatives—as opposed to constatives—illustrates his attention to the here and now of the work. Cage’s repeated assertion that “something else is / happening” consistently returns our attention to the space and time that the action of reading or listening is taking place in. Rather than just commenting on what is happening, Cage is attempting to make it happen. From the last line of the above excerpt: “And if one stops thinking about / them, / suddenly they are” The use of “them” in the extract refers directly to the sounds that “he is beginning to hear.” Rather than focus on the “sound,” or try to put that sound into words, Cage is attempting to create the space through which his reader might “stop thinking about them,” and start listening. This is also stressed by the open-ended line and the ending of the subsection with “are” without any punctuation. The performative element is the sense that the piece is opening up to the event that would take place if these sounds simply “are.” Cage does not provide a suggestion or description as to what the sounds might be (which would be a constative statement); rather, he provides the space for the sound to be heard, “saying what he wants to say in a way that would exemplify it” (Cage 1961, ix). Instead of describing the sounds, in which the readers would then imagine them for themselves, Cage opens up a space in which the language leads the reader to listen to the sounds. He also stresses that any word, once one stops thinking about it, is just as “audible” once one stops thinking about it. In this way, our attention is drawn to the everyday, rather bland words that Cage is using: “worn,” “sounds,” “thinking.” But of course, in being directed by Cage’s words we are actively thinking, and so the paradox is that the lecture seeks to provoke us into pure experience of its words as sounds by telling us to attend to them through the meaning of the words. He tells us how to attend to the sounds of the words by using words, and thereby drawing our attention to both the meaning and the sound of those words.
This paradox is similar to what we have seen in Cage’s treatment of silence and is also present in other aspects of “Lecture on Nothing,” alongside the use of the performative utterance. With “Tacet,” we saw Cage signal the very impossibility of silence and instead use apparent silence to frame sounds that are otherwise not listened to or heard. We can reflect on Cage’s “Lecture on Nothing” in a similar way. Consider the title: the word “nothing” is serving as a performative utterance, but not in the sense that Austin described. Instead of creating the reality to which it refers, it brings into being the very opposite of that: the word “nothing” is not nothing but a tangible word for something, and so “something,” not nothing “is happening.” In “Lecture on Nothing” Cage inverts the very meaning of the word “nothing” by seeking to exemplify exactly what it is not. By writing a “lecture” on “nothing,” he turns the concept on its head: that “nothing” becomes the very “something” he is attempting to enact. In the lead up to the passage quoted above, Cage says that he has discovered that even abstract discursive language can be made to mean nothing (where “nothing” itself is, of course, an abstraction). He writes: “I used noises / / / They had not been intellectuallyized; the ear could hear them / directly and didn’t/have to go through any / abstraction about them” (116; where each slash denotes a new column). Cage says that language can be sounds that one can attend to rather than the abstractions or dead language of “Life, Time, and Coca Cola.” Yet the only way Cage can convey this idea is by using exactly that: abstract discursive language. Thus, if he succeeds to convey this idea, then the very idea has failed: his words do not mean “nothing.” They have become the very “something” that carries the meaning to which he refers.

In this regard, Cage stretches the frameworks that regularly enable our understanding of a text. He wants to say something, but that something is nothing: “I have nothing to say and I am saying it and that is poetry as I need it” (109). This is not unlike Cage’s conception of silence, as discussed in the previous chapter, where in his gesture towards a pure silence, he then acknowledges and attempts to illustrate that there is no such thing. Here, with the use of text, we see him try to “say nothing,” where the very act of saying nothing makes it the opposite:
“something.” Cage comes to embody a paradox, similar to the “thought experiment” of 4’ 33”, where “silence is always ideal, illusory” and “provocative and unverifiable” (Dworkin 2013, 134). Cage’s use of “something” to mean “nothing,” remains always slightly beyond grasp, “unverifiable.” This also reflects Austin’s separation of the performative utterance from the constative, where the latter is the kind of statement that can be made about something that is true or false. Furthermore, this “unverifiable” element sits outside our structures of interpretation, the “verifying” of it being a kind of cognitive categorization of the utterance. This is an idea that I examine further the next chapter, were I look specifically at the affective dynamics that occur in these “unverifiable” spaces.

To draw our attention to the frameworks and tensions inherent in “Lecture on Nothing” Cage also uses the technique of performance exemplification. The text serves to describe what the performer does, not just what he or she hears, so that the text must be instantiated by being performed, by following the instructions of the text. This kind of text works in a similar way to a score: it provides directions, according to which the text is read, performed, acted upon, or instantiated. Yet, the text for Cage’s “Lecture on Nothing” not only provides instructions as to how the piece is supposed to be read or performed, it is also presents a framework through which the piece is enacted. Firstly, Cage stresses the component of duration at the beginning of the lecture:

…There are four measures in each line and twelve lines in each unit of the rhythmic structure.

There are forty-eight such units, each having forty-eight measures. The whole is divided into five large parts, in the proportion 7, 6, 14, 14, 7. The forty-eight measures of each unit are likewise so divided.

The text is printed in four columns to facilitate a rhythmic reading.

(109)
In this prefatory remark, Cage says that the reader should enact the piece through “a rhythmic reading,” thereby suggesting there is a particular way that the piece should be performed. This is not unlike a musical score in the way that it regularly provides a performer with specifications like time signatures and metronomic measures, which indicate how the composer has envisioned the performance of a piece of music.

We can take a closer look at the way Cage utilizes performance exemplification through the typographical layout of the lecture. By choosing to divide the text into four columns, he is invoking an act of performance through a reference to duration. Had he simply provided the instructions or note at the beginning of the piece, saying that it should be read “rhythmically,” and then proceeded to convey the piece in a regular manner (without the columns and spacing), we would not be given a template or illustration through which the piece should be read. The instruction would have remained an abstract framework, against which we could apply our regular preconceived ideas of reading a literary text (without the imposed rhythm of the four columns, but simply from left to right, top to bottom). The columnar arrangement also allows certain words to be given greater weight, such as the word “happening” as discussed above; as it stands alone in a column, its presence is enabled and enhanced by both the white space surrounding it and its singularity inside one portion of a column.

Beyond the layout and instructions for performance, we can examine the semiotics of the piece by paying attention to the words themselves. There are a number of points where Cage draws attention to the meaning of the words and there are points where that meaning is further enhanced by its placement on the page:

As you see, I can say anything. It makes very little difference what I say or even how I say it.

(112)
The words “I can say anything,” followed by the absence of text for the remainder of the line insinuates or provokes an act of performance. He could say anything, but instead he says nothing (followed by the disclaimer “It makes very little difference…”). This relates to the aforementioned paradox: his substitution of something for nothing, and vice versa. Cage is also opening up the space for the reader or performer to say anything. The “I” could apply to anyone who is reading the piece and the blank space seems to invite the performer to fill it with a word or sound of his or her choice. The combination of meaning and typographical placement enables Cage to utilize this element of performance exemplification, where we see him conflating the space between language as a system of representation and language as a system of exemplification. The text provides meaning (representation) but also demonstrates that meaning (exemplification).

The type of words Cage uses in the note attached to “Lecture on Nothing” also demonstrates his stress on the lecture as a score for performance. The remainder of the instructions read:

*Each line is to be read across the page from left to right, not down the columns in sequence. This should not be in an artificial manner (which might result from an attempt to be too strictly faithful to the position of the words on the page), but with the rubato which one uses in everyday speech.*

(109)

*Rubato* is a musical term, and means, “to be performed with a certain freedom as to time, for the purpose of giving the music suitable expression” (Jacobs 1977, 351–52). While the idea seems fairly straightforward, Cage contradicts himself by saying the work should be read in a particular way, but not too much in that particular way; not “in an artificial manner.” Furthermore, *rubato* comes from the Italian, meaning “to rob,” or “on stolen time,” so not only does Cage blur the boundaries between text and musical composition (using musical terminology to describe a
literary text, “robbing” or appropriating a word from one art form and using it in another), he also uses text to describe what is to be done with the piece. Using the term *rubato*—and providing a set of instructions—suggests the need for exemplification in performance. The piece not only describes what we say, but it also offers a musical term towards what we do. The term implies a presence *in* time: it suggests that we move forward through the text in a certain way, and offers up a kind of time-rhythm perspective through which we can produce the desired effect. It points the reader towards the notion of duration, making us pay attention to the ways in which we deliver the words, either to ourselves, or to those who are listening. In this sense, the text exists or can be instantiated only through performance, bringing it closer to the capacity of the musical score.

These instructions also lend themselves to a sense of the absent other. By giving directions, Cage insinuates that another, outside of his own presence, will perform the piece. The fact that it is a “lecture” signifies that it is written to be said and not just as words on the page. The title, while it also shows the Cagean paradox at work—a “lecture on nothing” that is actually *something*—brings to the reading-space the idea that either it was once “given” (as a lecture in the conventional sense), or that there is an element of performance that is implicit to its very construction. This relates to the word *rubato* which describes how the piece should be performed rather than just read. Whether this is in the mind of the reader, through silent reading, or enacted through speech is irrelevant in this particular instance. The fact that Cage is drawing attention to the strategy of reading shows him employing the technique of performance exemplification: describing what we do, not just what we hear.

While it could be argued that this “describing what we do” is a regular function of the musical score, the distinction lies in the fact that Cage attempts to do with language what he might have otherwise done with music. The musical score often includes elements of language, such as the word *rubato*, to describe a type of performance. However, Cage goes to language to do this work, to have the literary text describe what we do. Here, he approaches language in
similar ways to how he had approached music and the musical score, in that he makes language provide a set of instructions, just as the musical score does.

There is something to be said here about the capacity of a musical score to be read by those who are fluent in reading sheet music. For someone who can read notation, the musical score can also do and say. While the score has no literal meaning, the sounds connected to particular signs have the capacity to produce a meaningful response in a listener, performer or fluent score reader. Musical notation can be read silently, for example, and still produce a reader-response; the reader will still react to particular rhythms and spacing, signs and the contexts of those signs. In this regard, musical notation can perform the same techniques as those I have outlined, and towards which I posit an observation: by saying that Cage goes to language to do this work he is allowing his verbal score to be accessed by the vast majority, those who can read words on a page, as opposed to just those who can read musical notation. Again, he is opening the score up to a larger readership simply by just using language.

Where music fails Cage, and where language succeeds, is in the ability to inhabit the space between two functions: the ability to be performed, and the capacity to give instruction for future performances. The text is both a thing in and of itself and a functioning score, where by contrast, a musical score is not conventionally thought of as a thing in itself, but only a set of instructions, a system of representation. On both these levels, Cage’s use of text is instructional: the central text informs in the way that all language informs its reader: by providing signs that refer to something outside of itself. The additional comments instruct how to express or perform the primary information. The instruction and the action of that instruction build a series of complex links with each other, enabling and disabling themselves at the same time: in one instance, the instructions enable an entry point into the process; on the contrary, the ensuing action of that instruction diminishes the autonomic role of the performer. This is the point where Cage’s work in the literary text begins to straddle the space between music and text, where exemplification starts to produce an affect, and where we see the boundaries between music and text becoming
blurred. In this sense, Cage turns to text to achieve qualities of both art forms: language and music. The next section of this chapter will look at how we come to experience this type of literary text in both its recorded form and the printed text, and how the variations in interpretation or experience pertain to the framing of the work as literature or music, or as both.

**Section 3: Experience**

Through his use of various linguistic and typographical techniques Cage straddles the space between musical composition and the literary text, and effectively blurs the boundaries that conventionally lie between them. By applying musical terms to the literary text and using performative language, Cage attempts to both do and say. He also plays on the difference between the spoken and the written word by providing instructions for how the piece should be read and by performing the piece himself. To examine this interplay between the written and the spoken, I turn to Derrida’s ideas about written and spoken communication and the variations in experience of these two mediums. This will lead to an examination of the varied experiences generated by reading the text “Lecture on Nothing” and by listening to it being performed. By attending to these contrasting formats, we start to unfold some of the tensions and paradoxes that occur in our interpretation and experiences of “Lecture on Nothing,” and where exemplification begins to produce an experience of language that lies outside our regular systems of signification and representation. Do we, on one hand, treat the text as a thing in and of itself, like a poem, or do we use it as a set of instructions for performance, or both? What are our expectations and how are they affected by the presentation of the work as a musical score or a literary text? Finally, how do these expectations dictate our interpretation?

The spoken and the written word both afford different kinds of experience, and thus our consequent interpretation of the text varies. When we examine the spoken word on a primary level, we can recognize its use (by the speaker) as the intention to communicate something (to the listener). The written word, however, differs slightly. Rather than existing in only one time
and space, the written word remains fixed over an extended period and has the ability to be acted upon by its readers.

Certain kinds of participation with language might draw us closer to or further away from the experience of a musical performance or score and, as such, an examination of this kind will lead us to understand what lies in the space between music and language. In his seminal work, *Margins of Philosophy*, Derrida explores the concept of exemplarity as a phenomenon in philosophical and linguistic development. In doing so, he considers that the value of the written text is, in some ways, superior to the spoken word:

The range of the voice or of gesture certainly appears to encounter a factual limit here, an empirical boundary in the form of space and time; and writing, within the same time, within the same space, manages to loosen the limits, to open the same field to a much greater range. (1986b, 311; emphasis in original)

In praising the written over the spoken word, Derrida is signaling that there is an element to the written word that cannot be contained within the spoken. The spoken word arrives and dissipates through time and space, whilst the written has a longevity through which it achieves “greater range.” This greater range is, for Derrida, the semantic content of the word, the meaning that the word contains. By being written, he argues, the word and its meaning can travel a “greater distance” (311). Derrida, quoting Condillac, writes that historically “men capable of communicating their thoughts to each other by sounds felt the necessity of imagining new signs apt to perpetuate them and to make them known to absent others” (312; emphasis in original). It is along these lines that I would like to look at the binary of the written and spoken word in Cage’s “Lecture on Nothing.”

If Cage had not wished to have this piece published, he would not have needed to provide notes or instructions as to how the piece should be read, nor would he have had to
signify these strategies through typographical means (as we have seen in the columnar structure for “Lecture on Nothing”). By acknowledging this, we can recognize the importance of Cage’s typography and therefore his written work, and examine the strategies that Cage uses to enable the absent other to read the work in certain ways—the ways his layout of text “facilitates a rhythmic reading” for example (from the foreword to “Lecture on Nothing,” as quoted above).

Returning to the origin of Cage’s idea of exemplification—“to say what I had to say in a way that would exemplify it” (1961, ix)—provides an entry point to this typographical and textual analysis. Cage wants to “say” in a way that “exemplifies” what he is saying, thereby providing an experience of what he is describing. To do this with the written word, Cage needs to indicate how the piece should be read beyond the regulated left-to-right, top-to-bottom strategy of everyday reading, hence the typographical constitution of the piece. However, if we go beyond the layout of the lecture we can also attend to the grammatical tense of the language:

\[
\text{We need not destroy the present, it might reappear and seem to be the only present.}
\]

Consider the words “it is gone.” What stands out about this arrangement if we look closely is the irregular tense. Speaking about the past like this (“we need not destroy the past”) would conventionally be determined by past continuous tense: “it has gone.” In this case, the “it” is referring to “the past,” but the “is” assigns it to the present tense. The words “it is,” when put together, procure a sense that something actually takes place: the past has “gone.” The tension between “it is” and “gone” enables Cage to allow for an actual event to take place inside the text: the past is “going” at the very point where he states it has “gone.” By attending to this present tense, in the case of speaking about something that is in the process of becoming “gone,” Cage enables the words to both do and say. The conflation of the present and the past tense directs the reader’s attention to time, and encourages the reader to be engaged in the very time and space of
the statement, thus allowing Cage to exemplify through the written word. There is also something of the performative utterance in this: by being spoken, the words create the very reality to which they refer. “It is gone,” means that whatever “it” is, has now entered into the realm of the past tense, but is still in a state of occurring: it still “is.” Had Cage used the word “has,” as in “it has gone,” he would have finalized the event, and assigned it to the perfect past.

Through the examination of tenses in the written word we are able to imagine the words written across a “temporality”: something that also enables the words to both do and say. Their doing and saying exists within the space and time through which they are written: being written down allows them to be perpetually present, perpetually happening. The fact that they are written is essential to their ability to be instantiated; their being written down thereby allows them to do and say. By using language like this, Cage is producing a certain effect: he is appealing to something beyond the simple signification of the words. The statement “it is gone” effectively performs a certain nullifying of its own factual basis by bringing the reader’s attention to the language itself. It is the potential for both doing and saying in the written text that enables Cage to activate a sense of duration, while still being wedded to the written word, and thus straddles the space between music and text. By drawing attention to itself, the statement “it is gone” seeks to exemplify the act of “going” by the performative utterance “it is.” The text “produces or transforms a situation, it operates” (Derrida 1986b, 321), and it operates as a written text: it activates itself upon being read again, beyond the original writing of the statement, in the perpetual present and presence of its reading.

To consider the lecture further I now refer to a specific recording made by Cage in 1969 (Cage 1972/69). When we listen to this particular recording of “Lecture on Nothing,” it is striking how unlike the written version it actually is. As the words conflate into sound and arrive in our hearing through space and time, we have only a short time to interpret the proposed meaning of these words. Instead of paying attention to the literal meaning, we might begin to fall under the sway of the various techniques of rhythm, duration, repetition, and iteration—the sound
of the piece. Of course, we cannot distance ourselves from meaning altogether: even when sound dominates, disrupts or distracts us from it, words maintain some sense of meaning. Even so, if we were to inspect them on the page perhaps we would notice their syntactical strangeness:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>pleasure</th>
<th>if one is irritated</th>
<th>,</th>
<th>it is not a pleasure</th>
<th>,</th>
<th>Nothing is not a pleasure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>,</td>
<td>it is a pleasure</td>
<td>,</td>
<td>and then more and more</td>
<td>,</td>
<td>and then more and more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>,</td>
<td>it is not irritating</td>
<td>,</td>
<td>(and then more and more)</td>
<td>,</td>
<td>Originally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>,</td>
<td>and slowly</td>
<td>)</td>
<td>and now, again</td>
<td>,</td>
<td>and now, again</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>,</td>
<td>we were nowhere</td>
<td>;</td>
<td>we are having the pleasure</td>
<td>,</td>
<td>we are having the pleasure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>,</td>
<td>slowly</td>
<td></td>
<td>nowhere.</td>
<td></td>
<td>nowhere.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This excerpt begins with conventional syntax and sentence structure: “if we are irritated it is not a pleasure.” Yet it pushes the boundaries of syntax: “and then more and more and slowly.” We know what Cage is saying here, but we expect there to be a noun following the use of the adjective “more,” such as “more words,” “more cake.” Or, an adverb, such as “more slowly,” “more carefully.” Alternatively, we anticipate that we might already have contextual sense of what the “more” refers to: “yes, I would like some more [cake],” where we would know it was “cake” because it had already been previously referred to. The “more” here is syntactically detached from the words around it. Instead of “more and more slowly,” the “and” intensifies the rhythm and so the feeling of repetitive “more-ness” by breaking the expected pattern of repetition (we expect “more and more and more” or “more and more slowly”). Cage’s use of repetition both amplifies and instantiates the very notion of going “nowhere.” Thus the repetition seems crucial to the confusion that Cage is trying to provoke: the multiple instances of “more” create confusion and syntactic disorientation. The possibility that this piece is going nowhere (or, around in circles), Cage says, could be either irritating or pleasurable.

We can consider other moments in the lecture where beyond this “going nowhere,” Cage brings the words back to the actual space they inhabit within the text. For example, throughout
the piece, he offers signposts of our location within it: “Here we are now at the beginning of the third unit of the fourth large part of this talk” (119), or “slowly, as the talk goes on…” (118).

What we can see demonstrated in these locators is something happening in the text, where his use of exemplification makes us attend to the diachronic qualities of the text. When Cage says: “Here we are now,” he makes it so, by occupying a typographical space on the page or temporal moment in performance. He attempts to bring the reader into the here and now of the text, an effect enhanced by the use of both the directive “here,” and the collective “we.” “Here we are now” is ultimately a performative utterance: it creates the reality to which it refers. The effect of Cage’s use of performatives is that we come closer to the experience of the words, rather than remaining at the periphery, where the signifier sits and points to things beyond the parameters of the text itself. The text’s self-reflexivity heightens our attention to the work as made of words and their place in space and in time of reading or performance. Through his use of textual exemplification and performative utterances, Cage invites us to inhabit the space and time in which the words occur, thereby giving our experience of the words an added element of presence or urgency.

It is worthwhile exploring these techniques of repetition and iteration further in that they bring a certain experience to both the written and spoken renditions of the text. Marjorie Perloff argues that “Lecture on Nothing” is “…heavily influenced by Gertrude Stein’s mode of repetition, […] which takes sentences and places them in constantly shifting contexts” (Perloff 1981, 306). This idea of “shifting contexts” relates to Derrida’s account of iterability, whereby he refers to the idea of repetition (or reiteration) with a “difference” (Dooley and Kavanagh 2007, 38). Derrida, in discussing the power of the written over the spoken word (its ability to be able to appeal to an absent other across a “greater range”) calls for attention to the difference that each repetition contains. He argues, in *Speech and Phenomena* that: “our task is rather to reflect on the circularity which makes the one pass into the other indefinitely,” and that “by repeating this circle in its own historical possibility, we allow the production of some elliptical change of site, within
the difference involved in repetition” (1973, 128; emphasis in original). Iterability is “not the simple repetition of the same but a repetition that always has the potential to produce something new” (Dooley and Kavanagh 2007, 38) and thereby gives rise to the possibility of “shifting contexts” through the accumulation of different semantic references. Moreover, iteration and repetition can be looked more directly as a technique that encourage us to attend to both the sound and the meaning of the words in both written and spoken forms, therefore enabling Cage to attend to systems of exemplification rather than just representation. From the text:

We find the most obvious example of Cage’s use of iteration here in the words or expressions for erosion or depletion: “worn out” (five times), “worn them out,” and “wore them out.” As the word “worn/wore” is repeated it accumulates different semantic resonances. Furthermore, the concept is exemplified through the repeated use of the word: Cage is demonstrating a case of erosion by the very act of using the words that relate to that concept, and by presenting them in shifting contexts. If we look at what Cage is actually saying in this context, he is presenting the idea of replenishing “sounds”: “I begin to hear the old sounds—the ones I had thought worn out.” On the contrary, if we look at what Cage is doing with the text, we get the sense of him actually replenishing those “sounds” by repeating them, and placing them in a renewed context: “and if one stops thinking about them, suddenly they are fresh and new.” This is also a call to
experience in terms of affective engagement, rather than an intellectualization. He is trying to get
the words to affect us in ways that transcend our regular intellectual understanding of words and
meaning. They demonstrate something beyond their singular function of representation.

In hearing a word said repeatedly and in slightly shifting contexts, we attend more closely
to both the meaning and the sound of the word. We are drawn to the sound of the word by its
repetition, which encourages us to pay attention to the evolving strands of content and so
shifting meaning. On the one hand, when we repeat a word enough we start to lose a strong
sense of its meaning, as we get caught up in the repetitions of sound. On the other hand, we are
made increasingly more susceptible to the meaning also by its repetition and its shifting context.
Our hearing or reading the words “worn out” a number of times encourages us to cast our eye or
mind back to the previous context through which we received it, and thereby sheds a different
light on the way we will then interpret the word. By repeating a particular word, Cage encourages
the reader not to ignore it, but instead to take notice of it in a self-reflexive way. This use of
iteration then brings us back to his original goal: the attempt to say what he had to say in a way
that exemplifies it. Rather than using language to describe what he doing, Cage is using language
that both represents meaning and exemplifies that meaning. He is talking about something being
“worn out,” while literally “wearing out” the actual parameters of the concept. Our attention is
pushed beyond the literal interpretation of the language towards the application of the language,
by pushing the parameters of grammar and syntax.

Given the existence of sound (and therefore the spoken word) within a certain time and
space, we cannot reflect on the meaning of a particular passage if we are to remain within the
listening present. While we might extract the literal meaning of the words being spoken at the
very moment that they are being uttered, we are also subjected to their sound and presence in
time and space, and therefore the experience of the words as aural gestures. As the words
dissipate through time and space, we are unable to retrieve those words from the past, as we
might be able to upon reading, and thus we are subject to their own movement as being spoken.
In contrast to this, if we are reading the words on the page, we can exercise a certain amount of
control over the way we experience the work. Try as he might to direct our reading of a text,
Cage cannot control the amount of time we spend on this or that particular page, with that
particular word or sentence; nor can he maintain that there is only one specific way to read a
version of his text. It also means that there are further possibilities of repetitions and iterations,
all governed by our own agency as readers. Through the consideration of the various experiences
of Cage’s “Lecture on Nothing,” we can explore the possibility of Cage’s manipulation of these
different forms for their capacities of exemplification. This further enhances Cage’s use of text—
his turn to types of language that would “permit the listener to experience what [he] had to say
rather than just hear about it” (Cage 1961, ix).

The discrepancy between the two primary experiences of the piece—written and
spoken—opens up an interesting question regarding phenomenological domains of perception.
Our experience and interpretation of Cage’s work comes to us through two different primary
senses: sound and vision. In constructing a thorough list—or litany, as he calls it—of “gross
generalizations,” Jonathan Sterne posits some interesting points of difference between sound and
vision (2003, 14–15). He attempts to map the progression from pure physical affective
experience of sound to the cultural understanding of musical phenomena. He notes (amongst
other things) “hearing places us inside an event, seeing gives us perspective on an event” (15).
The use of this term “event” offers valuable insight into Cage’s work at this point, reiterating the
necessity of his own performance and reading of his texts, in his attempts to reduce this gap
between text and music. Cage could not rely solely on the written version of the piece to provide
his reader with the effect that the piece was capable of producing through sound, and so also
performs the work himself on occasions.

The underlying question that remains is whether or not we approach the
reading/performance as an exemplification of the score, or whether we attend to the experience
of each reading/performance as a thing in itself. We can examine Cage’s lecture in a multitude of
ways, and it resists being tied down to any one version or interpretation, thereby enhancing his ideas of indeterminacy. However, given that he has turned to language to do this work, we cannot help but treat the text as a thing in itself; in comparison, we cannot ignore his inclusion of instructions and typographical pointers for reading. What we can establish from this multiplicity of potential interpretations is that Cage never intended to categorize the piece as any one art form. By doing so, he comments on the frameworks that had previously dictated his compositional and textual enterprises, and encourages us to experience his text outside of our preconceived frameworks for interpretation, to open ourselves to an affective engagement rather than just the structured or categorized response to these art forms. Whether he succeeds in doing this or not is something I pay attention to in the next chapter, where I look at the affective dynamics of performance and the sets of expectations we take to listening and reading.

With this in mind, I argue that “Lecture on Nothing” sits uncomfortably in the space between text and music. The text is, in some ways, an invitation for performance, in the same way as a musical score is: it provides us with a set of instructions. Yet it is also a text in and of itself: it functions on the page through meaning and thereby upholds qualities of the literary text. It is simultaneously a set of instructions to be activated and an example of a literary text.

By navigating the space and blurring the boundaries between the written and spoken word, Cage draws attention to the manifold nature of his “Lecture on Nothing.” In one sense, we are encouraged to treat it as a score, to be activated by an absent other and thereby iterated and instantiated into the indefinite future. On the other hand, by using exemplification, Cage urges us to think about the written text, or his own performance of the lecture, as the essential item, the thing in itself. Yet its very manifold nature is built on the tensions that exist between these contrary impulses, thereby complicating and multiplying the possibilities of our experience and interpretation of the piece. Cage’s use of language is governed by his navigation of the space between music and the literary text, thereby taking language to the score, and the score to language. As his work evolved in the 1960s and 1970s, Cage’s navigation of these two forms
encouraged a new kind of interpretation and experience: the “musicated” text (Perloff 1997, 136). It is this to which I now turn.
CHAPTER 3: The Musicated Text: A Return to Music?

Which is more musical: a truck passing by a factory or a truck passing by a music school?

—John Cage, *Silence*

Having seen what Cage was attempting to achieve by turning from music to language, this chapter now examines the ways in which and the reasons why Cage then sought to turn language back into music. Having considered the ways Cage deals with the literary text in the previous chapter, I now investigate the tensions between meaning and meaninglessness, text and music, in Cage’s 1974–75 piece, “Empty Words,” and how these tensions alter our affective engagement with the work.

Written fifteen years after its conception, “Empty Words” exhibits some of the same paradoxes that are at work throughout Cage’s oeuvre. It also provides a link with both the impossibility of silence discussed in chapter 1, and the inherent “something” that lies in trying to say “nothing,” as examined in chapter 2. In chapter 1, we saw that by trying to achieve a pure silence, Cage came to realize its impossibility, recognizing that sound occurred in everything. His push towards silence and the imperceptible then became a kind of “thought experiment” (Dworkin 2013, 134), in which he began to turn to language for its capacities of instruction and performance. In chapter 2, I discussed how in “Lecture on Nothing” Cage negotiates the paradox that saying nothing always means saying something. This led to an investigation of the different types of experience this literary text could provoke and how language, in its spoken and written forms, can both mean and be emptied of meaning. Similarly, and as the following analysis of “Empty Words” shows, Cage’s attempt to “empty” words of their syntax and signification—in his process of “demilitarizing” (Cage 1998, ii)—saw him attempting to “musicate” text (Perloff 1997, 136). Cage attempting to do with language what he did to music while playing across the boundaries between the two art forms illustrates the larger, overarching argument of this thesis.
Cage himself said that the published text of “Empty Words” is a “transition from language to music” (Cage 1981, 65), and in this transition we can see him building on the tension between a self-exemplifying text and a structure for performance.

In this chapter, through a close reading of “Empty Words,” I show how Cage navigates the space between text and music. I show that in the process of musicating language Cage attempts to dissolve the space that had previously kept these two art forms separate. However, as we shall see, the reductionism that led Cage towards this musicating of language saw him not so much dissolving the space between language and music, but attending to the tension that occurs within this space and that generates the semantic and affective dynamics of “Empty Words.”

For clarity of reference, when I cite directly from Cage’s “Empty Words,” I am referring to the printed version that appears in his 1981 book, Empty Words: Writings ’73–’78. The typographic arrangements of the excerpts have also been altered to remain true to Cage’s original layout.

Section 1: Form & Code

“Empty Words” can be seen as an attempt to make language into music. In it, Cage stresses the aural experience of words as a thing in itself and attempts to transform language into pure sound. He tries to strip the signifier of its signified, so that the word can stand alone as a sound. Words, however, continue to exist within the system of language and structure, and so continue to hold some meaning. In a sense, this implies that by using the constructs of language, Cage’s “Empty Words” is also a structure rather than a sound in and of itself. Furthermore, by attempting to reduce the words to sound, Cage actually opens the words up to a larger degree of polysemy: the meaning is not fixed and static, and therefore Cage multiplies the possibility of potential meaning. To explore the limits of meaning in language in Cage’s “Empty Words,” we need to examine his stretching of the limits of language, and so some of the tensions played out between language and music in his work.
While some of Cage’s reasons behind his edging towards a less understandable language flirted with politics—he was driven by the desire to make language free of syntax, as a way of demilitarizing it—it is clear that he remained rooted in the actual mechanics of language. “Empty Words” is a follow on from “Mureau” (which takes its name from combining “music” and “Thoreau”) in that it is also based on Henry David Thoreau’s journals, and manipulates these journals according to combinations gathered from using the I Ching. A much longer text however, “Empty Words” is made up of four parts, each initially published separately, but combined in his 1981 book of the same name. It was his most sustained and extensive work towards this philosophy of demilitarizing language.

In writing “Empty Words” Cage went about reducing language, stripping away the regular codes of meaning. To do this, Cage identified five kinds of linguistic units in Thoreau’s journals: letters, syllables, words, phrases, and sentences. He then took text from Thoreau’s journals and arranged it into the four parts of “Empty Words” as follows:

1. Phrases, words, syllables and letters
2. Words, syllables and letters
3. Syllables and letters
4. Letters

Part IV of “Empty Words” thus omits the first three of Thoreau’s units of language from the above list, leaving only the fourth: letters. In doing so, the work attempts to tune in to the sound of the letter, leaving nothing but a virtual lullaby of letters and sounds. If Cage’s previous writings have been referred to as “compositions,” this particular piece might be referred to as a

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5 Part I was published in *Active Anthology*, 1974; Part II in *Interstate 2*, 1974; Part III in *Big Deal 3*, Spring 1975; Part IV in *WCH WAY*, Fall 1975 (Cage 1981, 11).
“decomposition” (Weiss 2000); Cage reduces language by stripping away the components through which we attach meaning.

At the beginning of each of the four parts of “Empty Words” Cage provides a small block of prefatory text. While these do not feature in Cage’s performances of the work (I discuss one particular performance later in this chapter), they remain an important part of the written work. These prefaces are also reduced as we move through the piece, going from a full page of block text in part I, to a mere eight lines in part IV. They act as instructions, providing information about potential conditions for future performances of the work, and so point to the role of performance as a necessary exemplification of the text. Let us consider one particular passage, the preface to part III (figure 3.1). Here we see Cage bring to the text a set of instructions for potential performance, in a similar way to the verbal score “Tacet,” and the literary text “Lecture on Nothing.” Comparably, here we are given a set of instructions that are to be applied to the piece in performance, comments towards how the piece could be performed and how the performance is not fixed: “do without whatever’s inflexible,” and “continue to search.” This also highlights the tension between the two approaches to the text: Cage provides a set of instructions that tell us how the piece should be performed, which forms part of the work as a text, while he also insists that there is no single way to perform the piece and that we should resist such inflexible thinking. The paradoxical instructions themselves perform the unsettling of a single interpretation through their internal self-contradiction.

In the preface to part IV, Cage plays further with the text to exemplify the desired experience: the text doing as much as it says, or what I have previously referred to as textual exemplification. We can see this in moments like: “At first face to face; finally sitting with one’s back to the audience (sitting with the audience), everyone facing the same vision. Sideways, sideways” (65; emphasis in original). The repetition “sideways, sideways” provides a textual instantiation of the act of performance: the audience and performer come to be sat side by side,
Searching (out loud) for a way to read. Changing frequency. Going up and then going down; going to extremes. Establish (I; II) stanza’s time. That brings about a variety of tempi (short stanzas become slow; long become fast). To bring about quite of IV (silence) establish no stanzas time in III or IV. Not establishing time allows tempo to become naturally constant. At the end of a stanza simply glance at the second hand of a watch. Begin next stanza at next 0 or 30. Instead of going to extremes (as in I and II), movement toward a center (III and IV). A new breath for each new event. Any event that follows a space is a new event. Making music by reading out loud. To read. To breathe. IV’s equation between letters and silence. Making language saying nothing at all. What’s in mind is to stay up all night reading. Time reading so that at dawn (IV) the sounds outside come in (not as before through closed doors and windows). Half-hour intermissions between any two parts. Something to eat. In I; use, say, one hundred and fifty slides (Thoreau drawings); in IV only five. Other vocal extremes: movement (gradual or sudden) in space; equalization. (Electronics.) Do without whatever’s inflexible. Make a separate I Ching program for each aspect of a performance. Continue to search.

Figure 3.1: Page 51 of “Empty Words”
in the same way the two instances of the word “sideways” sit side by side. Cage uses the techniques of exemplification to provide a way in to the reading of “Empty Words” and directs the audience and the performer into a formation that parallels the formal movements of the text.

To go to the main body of the work, we can see that by stripping linguistic components away as he moves through each stage of the piece, Cage attempts to draw his readers’/listeners’ attention to the sounds of the letters themselves. By the time we get to the final part of the piece, we are presented with single letters that sometimes stand alone and are sometimes arranged in formation with others. From the second page of part IV:

```
  b th a e s. M pl
  u ck; th
  n r s chh
  t m
  yhmo
  t dw
```

(68)

The letters seek to represent language—they are letters and punctuation marks from our alphabet—but are purportedly stripped of all linguistic meaning. This is further illustrated by our arrival at this final part of the work through the process of stripping away each regulatory component of normal syntax, such as syllables, words and phrases. In the reduction of the possibility of meaning Cage motions towards the deconstruction of language in order to “make it free syntax” (Cage 1981, 11). He attempts to “empty” the words: to rid them of their signification and allow the signifier to stand on its own terms as simply a sound (without a potential signified).

When faced with the piece as a written text on the page, there is very little that one could potentially read; there are no “words” in the form of a language that we know. However there are still signs: Cage is still using the common Latin alphabet. By doing so, he hints at the sounds of those signs in English: the letters represent the phonemic code in our linguistic system. He still calls on a common semiotic code to be read, but rather than attach meaning to the code, he
attempts to disembowel the signifier from the sign. The sign or signifier remains, but it is no longer connected to anything other than its phonetic sound. In reading the letters off the page, we then attribute a kind of sound-meaning to the piece. In a 1970 interview with French philosopher Daniel Charles, Cage says: “I must say that I have not yet carried language to the point to which I have taken musical sounds. I have not made noise with it” (Cage and Charles 2009, 113). By taking this further step in “Empty Words”—by stripping the signifier of its signified—he begins to treat language and the literary text as he would treat sounds, bringing the work closer to a musical score. The literary text becomes a set of directions that waits for activation, in the same way a score waits to be played. The text’s meaning then becomes entwined with its capacity to provide instructions.

To look at how Cage attempts to make the transition from language to music we need to attend to the way he treats language as pure sound, as language emptied of meaning, and the idea of phonemes or letters meaning nothing returns us to the paradox of saying nothing. If the meaning behind the text is that it does not mean anything at all, does Cage actually create non-meaning out of meaningful language? If Cage attempts to reduce language to basic phonemes and to take them beyond the possibility of meaning, then we can examine the point where language becomes simply “organized sound” (Cage 1961, 3).

The reductionist process that Cage uses in “Empty Words” provides an example of what Umberto Eco terms the “open work.” Having gone from full semantic sense to simple phonemes and letters, Cage not only empties the words of their significance but also opens the text. As we move through the text, supposedly from sense to non-sense, we are made aware of this increasing lack of sense through the process of reduction, simply because we know what had come before it. Not only is this an exercise in demilitarizing text, but the very act of demilitarizing also becomes simultaneously an act of opening the text to further indeterminacy. Eco posits that “blank space surrounding a word, typographical adjustments, and spatial composition in the page setting of the poetic text—all contribute to create a halo of indefiniteness and to make the text pregnant with
infinite possibilities” (Eco 1989, 8–9). Cage could have started “Empty Words” with only the use of letters (as he does in part IV). Instead, by actually reducing markers of syntactic relation, we are made increasingly aware of this process of reduction. This then heightens our susceptibility to the sound of the language, or conversely, makes us more aware of the meaning that lurks behind the sounds: Thoreau’s letters that Cage has deleted. By reducing the sense of conventional syntax as we move through the piece, Cage brings our attention to the sound of each letter and increases the polysemy of the text, rather than making it mean nothing or simply be a sound in and of itself.

If we take the first three lines from each of the four sections, we are able to observe how Cage opens the text:

From part I:

notAt evening
    right can see
    suited to the morning hour

Part II:

s or past another
    thise and on ghth wouldhad
    andibullfrogwasina – perhaps blackbus

Part III:

theAf perchgreathind and ten

    have andthewitha nae
    thatas be theirofsarrermayyour

Part IV:

ie thA h bath
    i c r t
    o

(12)  (34)  (52)  (66)
It is not difficult to see the opening-up process in the course of the work, even through this small example of the first three lines of each consecutive part. As explicated above, Cage proceeds through the work by stripping components of language away, from phrase to word, to syllable, to letter. While part I does not make complete syntactical sense, there are semantic hooks we can hang on to: it is made up mostly of complete words (bar “notAt,” which could easily parse as “not. At” or “notate”). Moreover, while it is without regular punctuation, it does contain phrases—“suited to the morning hour,” for example. We can obtain some commonplace meaning from the excerpt.

Looking at parts II and III however, we are faced with the exclusion of phrases and words, respectively. There is a sense of part II being made up of phrases, but when we compare it to part I, we see the reduction of these phrases: “suited to the morning hour” contains two or more words arranged in grammatical construction, whereas “thise and on ghth wouldhad” is beginning to lose some of the capacity to function as a grammatical phrase or a unit in a sentence. Similarly, the same thing happens with words in part III: words are made up of letters and syllables, but unlike part I, we cannot easily split these compounds up into words. For example, “andibullfrogswasina,” could, if we pushed it towards regular meaning, be parsed as “and I bullfrogs was in a.” While this does not make complete grammatical sense, it is still made up of words. In contrast to this, a construction from part III reads “theirofsparrermayyour,” which cannot so easily be broken up into word-like components. We might liken it to words: “their of sparrer may your” or, more loosely “the irof sparre rmay your.” Either way, there is an increase in the number of possible signifiers and signifieds, and thus an increase in the possibility of polysemy. Cage removes the words from part III, which leaves simply letters and syllables, and to a far greater extent in part IV, when we are simply presented with letters. The letters are grouped in such a way so as to constitute clusters, but these clusters do not lend themselves to syllables, as we know of the English phonemic code. Apart from the one word that remains intact—*bath*—the arrangement is made up simply of letters, to the extent that this one word
seems out of place or accidentally regular. While it does not contain much beyond the informational level, it continues to conjure up the possibilities of multiple contexts. There are various, polysemous ways that we could interpret the word “bath”: Thoreau’s descriptions of living in the natural world; a bird bath; Thoreau taking a bath; or even, to a more exemplifying extent, the contrasting of our so-called civilized acts (taking a bath) with those of living in nature (without conventional structures).

This reductionism can be seen as an opening up of the text, and is a conscious move towards indeterminacy by Cage. In part I, at the point where we can extract some regular meaning from the excerpt, we turn to our collective semantic code: we read regular meanings from regular words. We can, if necessary, look them up in the dictionary. They contain both a signifier and a signified; they are nouns, verbs and compounds, as our regular semantic code informs us. The meaning is somewhat contained within the words themselves, although we still have to work out the relation between the words, and in doing so, generating multiple possible meanings. In contrast, by the time we get to part IV of “Empty Words,” we are presented with individual letters and diphthongs or letter clusters, and increasing quantities of white space. Our regular semantic codes begin to take on a degree of irrelevance or uselessness; they do not lead us to connect, as a reader, with the presented text. Thus the possibilities for our interpretation of these clusters and spaces increases: there is no definitive meaning to draw on; the work is “open” to our interpretation. As Eco puts it, with regards to *Finnegans Wake*, “the work is finite in one sense, but in another sense it is unlimited. Each occurrence, each word stands in a series of possible relations with all the others in the text” (1989, 10; emphasis in original). While there are no specific words (in a complete syntactic sense) in part IV of “Empty Words,” we can look at an “occurrence,” and so consider the myriad of possible relations between the letters and interpretations:
Looked at in isolation, this excerpt fits to some degree, in a grid-like pattern (four aligned vertical columns, similar to that which we saw in Cage’s “Lecture on Nothing”). This structure encourages the reader to think that there might be various ways to combine these letters to form words. For example, if we start at the “a” and move down we make “as”; then, if we continue this pattern, we make a second word “ecpcri” and so on. Alternatively, we could read this in the same way that Cage instructed readers to read “Lecture on Nothing,” in which the vertical columns are there to assist a “rhythmic reading,” and one should still read left to right, top to bottom. If so, we could make “epr trth acci,” which we could liken to the phrase “per truth accident.” The number of combinations of the letters in the text is vast; the possibilities for interpretation of these potential combinations even more so.

This provides a valuable link with the musical score and the questioning of its conventions in modern music. Eco posits that in composing traditional classical music, the composer “converted his idea into conventional symbols which more or less oblige the eventual performer to reproduce the format devised by the composer himself” (1989, 3). He contrasts these templates for performance with “new musical works” (of whom he is referring to Boulez, Stockhausen, Berio and Pousseur), where the composer rejects the conventions of musicological composition, and with that the “definitive, concluded message,” suggesting that the composers “multiply the formal possibilities and the distribution of their elements” (3). Having been through a similar process himself in his musical composition, we can see Cage’s actions of opening the text up to possibilities in a similar vein. If we apply these ideas directly to the excerpt above from “Empty Words,” we can see a kind of instantiation of these ideas. Cage takes what we know to be the rules of language, and reduces those rules to their very basic components. He then goes about rejecting conventional syntax in order to “multiply the formal possibilities and
the distribution of their elements.” By doing so, he succeeds in opening up the text to further possibilities: when he works just with letters, the composer/author is not restricted to letter orders that form words, but can use any letter string he or she likes. Just as the performer of the indeterminate piece is invited to draw their own interpretation of the composition, by the time we arrive at part IV of “Empty Words,” we (as readers/listeners) are placed in a position of interpretive autonomy. As the score or text waits to be activated, through reading or listening, the polysemy of meaning extends beyond our basic semantic codes. We bring as much meaning to the clusters of letters as Cage does: he opens the text to allow our reading and interpretation to be of infinite possibility.

Beyond the immediate correlation between Cage’s compositional background and his writing—and the links that Eco makes with music here—is the relevance of Cage using Thoreau’s journals to create “Empty Words.” Cage’s philosophies share strong links with Thoreau, and this is not the first of Cage’s texts to use Thoreau’s journals to generate his own text (“Mureau” was written in 1970, several years before “Empty Words”). However, with “Empty Words,” the connection is slightly more substantial. In the process of selecting the pieces that he would appropriate, Cage went through the index of Thoreau’s journals, selecting passages that appeared “as references to sounds, silence or the telegraph harp” (Bock 2008, 183). The selected passages were then rearranged according to instructions Cage generated from the I Ching. In some instances throughout “Empty Words” we can locate the source in Thoreau’s texts, particularly in part I. For example, the final part of this passage “I thought of the time when he would discover his parentage, obtain his inheritance and sing a strain suited to the morning hour” (Thoreau 1851), can be found at the beginning of part I. As we move further through the piece however, it becomes nearly impossible to locate the actual source text in Thoreau’s journals. The process through which the material was selected is precise, according to Cage’s methods, but unlike “Mureau,” we are not given any direct reference to the page or line numbers from which “Empty Words” is derived.
That there are so many references to “sounds, silence or the telegraph harp” in Thoreau’s work implies the extent of the connection between Cage and Thoreau, both of whom attempt to redirect our attention towards the sound and silence of our surroundings. Bock, in her study of Thoreau and Cage in *Concord in Massachusetts, Discord in the World* (2008), states that in “Empty Words” Cage substituted Thoreau’s discussions on music (as he does in “Mureau”) with Thoreau’s comments on the telegraph harp. Bock argues that this “more closely parallels [Cage’s] understanding of music, which is inextricably tied to the question of nonintention, environmental sounds and technology” (183). The term “telegraph harp” is probably one of Thoreau’s own names for the sound that the telegraph wires make when they vibrate. In his 1851 journal he writes:

> As I went under the new telegraph wire, I heard it vibrating like a harp high overhead. It was as the sound of a far-off glorious life, a supernal life, which came down to us, and vibrated the lattice-work of this life of ours. (Thoreau, Searles and Stilgoe 2009, 73)

> Yesterday and to-day the stronger winds of autumn have begun to blow, and the telegraph harp has sounded loudly. I heard it especially in the Deep Cut this afternoon, the tone varying with the tension of different parts of the wire. The sound proceeds from near the posts, where the vibration is apparently more rapid. I put my ear to one of the posts, and it seemed to me as if every pore of the wood was filled with music, labored with the strain,—as if every fibre was affected and being seasoned or time, rearranged according to a new and more harmonious law. (81)

The telegraph harp becomes a synonym for the sounds and vibrations of nature, or in Thoreau’s words, the “supernal life.” This harks back to chapter 1, where I discussed Cage’s awareness and use of vibration in his attempt to make a framework for listening. However, when discussing it
with regards to “Empty Words,” we can see that Cage’s use of references to the telegraph harp are pertinent. Cage was also concerned with “nonintention, environmental sounds and technology,” and attempts to bring “Empty Words” closer to Thoreau’s work by reducing his references similarly. Thoreau’s observation of the telegraph harp signify his broader message: that people had forgotten how to pay attention to nature. By living at Walden and writing about nature, Thoreau attempted to address this problem. Cage selects passages from Thoreau that concern the telegraph harp, but deconstructs the language so that the phrase “telegraph harp” never appears in “Empty Words” in its totality. In doing so, Cage thereby gets closer to a sense of pure environmental sound and nonintention, eschewing the human impulse to name the sound, to fix it as an instrument. Although, as we have seen, he remains within language: whether he can get closer to the actual sound is still debatable.

Another paradox surfaces in the examination of Thoreau’s treatment of language: the problem of meaning, and the gap between doing and saying. As we have seen in previous examples of “Empty Words,” Cage’s attempt to collapse the distance between the signifier and the signified results in a kind of musicating of the text. The description of “sounds, silence and the telegraph harp” is something that Cage seeks to exemplify in “Empty Words,” thus bringing them closer to sound of the thing, as opposed to the language for the thing. Thoreau’s Journals show a drive to turn back to nature, to make language do what nature does, in a way that would transcend the very bounds of language. As he says in the Journals, “it is in vain to write the seasons unless you have the seasons in you,” and “I would be in society as in the landscape; in the presence of nature there is no reserve nor effrontery” (Thoreau 1891, 237). His philosophy meant channeling the transcendental through his writing about nature, where “the smallest aspects of the natural world would reveal the greatest truths of the universe” (Weiss 2000). This paradox is reflected in Cage’s own: by trying to transcend the boundaries of language, both Thoreau and Cage turned to language to do so. Neither could escape the framework of language, that which allows us to communicate ideas, notions, or affects. The very thing that they were
turning to remains bound up in the construction of language itself; the impetus to “transcend”
cannot be mediated by anything other than language. Given what we know about Cage’s ideas of
silence, the music of one’s surroundings and his interest in the paradox of trying to attend to
silence and music through language, it is no coincidence that Cage would use Thoreau’s journals
to attempt to move language into another framework. As the title “Empty Words” suggests, Cage
draws on the tensions that language embodies: to empty words of their meaning reduces their
capacity to exist as words, similar to the paradox of listening to silence or saying nothing. The
title illustrates the tension: it says what it is by attempting to be something else.

The title also suggests a reading that is connected to Cage’s interest in linguistic systems
other than English. On first examination, and in the light of the discussion regarding Eco’s
“open work,” we might begin to regard the title as an extension of the process that is occurring:
emptying the words of meaning. However, there is another connection regarding the interest Cage
had in the Chinese language at the time. In his book The Roaring Silence (1992), David Revill relays
a conversation Cage had with a scholar of Chinese, William McNaughton, in 1973. In discussing
the Chinese language, McNaughton told Cage that Chinese can be “classified into ‘full words’
and ‘empty words’” (249). Revill goes on to explain that “a full word has a specific, in a loose
sense referential, meaning; nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, are full words…Empty words are
conjunctions, particles, pronouns, which refer only to other terms: a, at, it” (249). These are
called 虚词 (虚词) in Chinese, literally “empty words,” and refer to words that have a grammatical
function but no meaning (Chinese-English Dictionary 1998, 1406). Looking directly at the text for
evidence of these “empty words” we can see them being used from the outset. From part I:

not i o the in in and that heSt and and
on all but the terminal leaves

(15)
In contrast with the linguistic function of “empty words” in regular semantic codes, these “empty words” do not serve a grammatical function per se. Where “empty words” are usually extremely context dependent, these “empty words” have very little context through which to be interpreted. Consider “the in in and that heSt and and”: every word except “heSt” (not a word in the modern English usage, but could be an abbreviation of the archaic “behest,” or could be parsed as “he Stand” if combined with the following “and”) is an empty word: an article, preposition, demonstrative pronoun/adjective, or conjunction that is normally used to connect “full words” (nouns, verbs, adjectives etc.). The passage continues with “on all but the terminal leaves,” which consists of four “empty” words (“on,” “all,” “but,” “the”) and two “full” words (“terminal” and “leaves”). The empty words form the greater part of the piece, as seen through this short excerpt. In contrast to this, in part IV of “Empty Words” we see further disintegration of this taxonomic structure:

At this point, “empty words,” if there are any, remain the only constructs we might recognize as words. The “and,” “he,” “a,” and “i” is an article, a conjunction, and two pronouns. As context-dependent words, these “empty words” are potentially more full of meaning. For example, “I” could refer to anyone in the world in the right context. The disintegration of the context in which these sit, however, illustrates the increasing indeterminacy through which the piece moves, and also points to the importance of the context in which the words are performed. Cage empties words by using “empty words,” and in doing so, draws the reader’s attention to the sound of the
letters, as opposed to the meaning of the letters. He empties the signifier of its signification, alerting the reader/listener to the constructs of the linguistic system, what makes a word carry meaning and how much of it is dependent on context.

With regards one particular recorded performance of “Empty Words” there is a socio-linguistic observation that can be made in reference to this concept of “empty words.” In 1977, Cage performed part III of “Empty Words” to an audience at Teatro Lirico in Milan, Italy (Cage 1977). The relevance of this particular performance is the fact that Cage performs it to a non-English speaking audience. For the Milanese, what Cage was performing was, for the most part, nonsense. However, to Cage, the audience’s reactions were also nonsense. Ten minutes into the performance (which lasts for more than two hours) the audience begins to shout and jeer back at Cage. At times their feedback is synchronized and comes through in the recording as a kind of chanting; at others, there are single words or phrases being thrown out from single members of the audience. What is interesting about this is that while Cage was strongly influenced by notions of multi-lingualism, there is no evidence of him ever speaking Italian, or more specifically, understanding what was being said by that audience in Milan.

The possibility of Cage’s text being understood is also enhanced and electrified by his own lack of understanding of his audience’s response. Discussing Cage’s contact with McNaughton, Bock observes, “When you first hear a foreign language, as for instance Chinese, words appear to be nothing more than random sounds. They carry no meaning for you; they are empty” (2008, 186). In the Milan performance then, we get a sense that the audience are as much a part of the performance as Cage is. In the face of the audience response, he simply carried on with his reading of the text. We can only assume that he was fully aware that these jeers and shouts would become part of the recording of the piece, for as much as we know he had consented to the recording of the piece. In this regard, the piece is not only his “emptied” words, but also the “empty” words of the audience. Recalling that, for Cage, music is the organization of sound (Cage 1961, 3), we can start to see the potency of the open work in the process of
emptying words, or musicating language. As Allen S. Weiss observes, “Empty Words” “is one of the relatively rare works effectively scored to let ambient sounds emerge as an integral, and not incidental, part of the music” (2000). Thus, the apparently “empty” words of his audience become part of the overall effect of the performance.

Beyond the socio-linguistic analysis of Cage’s openness and indeterminacy as exhibited in “Empty Words,” we need to attend to a further paradox that Cage is invoking, as a way of understanding how Cage plays on the tension between our frameworks for interpretation. The idea that he pushes the boundaries of a regular linguistic framework beyond our normal understanding is worth examining more closely with regards to his idea of demilitarizing language. When we consider the syntactical frameworks that govern our own understanding of semantic and phonemic codes—the rules which we consciously and subconsciously adhere to—we can see Cage push beyond our regular, perhaps complacent use of these. However, by opening up the possibilities of meaning and thereby extending the limits of syntax and semantics, Cage actually adheres to another set of rules. In his attempt to mean nothing or to empty meaning from the language, as he claims to be doing, he in turn creates another framework through which meaning takes on a different substance.

To look at the possibility of another framework for interpretation, we can again consider the text functioning like a score. As we have seen, Cage manipulates the text in a similar way to the verbal score “Tacet,” and the literary text “Lecture on Nothing.” It provides a score for performance, while also exists as a thing it itself; it serves to do as much as it says. The signifier or mark on the page represents simply a sound, not a signified that lies beyond the actual language itself; it has no meaning in any regular sense. Bock claims that in “Empty Words,” Cage reduces language to “asyntax,” and says that by not following “grammatical rules,” the work becomes a series of sounds that “[carry] no meaning”(2008, 189). But this is precisely the point that poses the paradox: can a letter—a sign that carries linguistic and phonemic codes—ever have “no meaning”? Can it simply be a sound?
In the process of reducing the literary text to letters, I suggest that Cage creates a renewed code, which, in turn, comes to mean something else. This can be attributed to the idea of polysemy, as discussed above, but also goes beyond this premise. It links back to the paradox posited in chapter 2, where we see Cage “saying nothing,” by doing exactly the opposite, “saying something,” and that “something” can never be “nothing.” In the same respect it is arguable that the supposed non-meaning of “Empty Words” is the very thing to which we assign meaning. As long as Cage is using a language, or the phonemic code for a language, he cannot evade the possibility of meaning something. Or, as Umberto Eco suggests: “there is nothing more meaningful than a text which asserts that there is no meaning” (1990, 7).

As we saw in the excerpt above (from page 75 of “Empty Words”) the fourth and final part of the piece resists being “emptied” of semantic codes entirely. Likewise, we can see this resistance in another excerpt from part IV:

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o nhmngwm n m wnywy r n thng? (70)
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If we consider what meaning remains after Cage has “emptied” the words, there are a number of potential meanings that even a quick glance might provoke. “O” readily becomes an exclamation of some sort; “ewnywy” seems a phonetic translation for “anyway”; “thng” lies very close to “thing” and “thong,” or even the more vernacular “thang.” These possibilities are pressured by the use of the question mark at the end; the tone of the “emptied words” is altered with our recognition of a familiar grammatical sign appearing at the end of the line. We assume these words have the capacity to ask a question, even if we are not sure what that question is.

An examination of excerpts like this and those used throughout this section allows for an analysis of the affective structure of the work: the formal arrangement of the text as integral to its ability to move the reader. Once the words have been “emptied” of semantic content, what affective structure do they continue to hold? The next section of this chapter explores the types
of affect induced by Cage’s “Empty Words,” and how the work’s affective structure opens up an examination of intensity in one particular performance of the piece. Looking at the affective structure of this performance will also allow us to attend to the ways Cage navigates the space between music and text, performing a “transaction” between literary media and music (Pritchett 1993, 171). By musicating the text, Cage attends to the something other of language, and by doing so, he effectively writes a “linguistic composition” (Fetterman 1996, 224). It no longer remains within the bounds or frameworks of text, nor can it be considered music. Rather it straddles the space between the two.

Section 2: Affect

In chapter 2, I suggested that by using various techniques of exemplification, Cage creates an experience inside the text. I argued that by remaining inside the text he attends to an actual time and space as it is occurring within the text, bringing the reader/listener closer to the actual happening of the words in that diachronic realm. I suggested he does this through his attention to both the informational and symbolic levels of the text (the signified and the signifier) and related this to Austin’s ideas of performative language: the language performs an act by its being uttered; the text does as much as it says. Cage not only seeks to describe experiences (through constative language), but he also seeks to enact experiences in his text (performative language), as seen in the previous chapter, and in his attempt to follow Thoreau’s idea of creating a language that approaches the character of natural sounds in “Empty Words.” To understand this approach, and the kinds of experiences that Cage might induce, I want here to turn to affect theory, because it focuses on precisely that pre-semantic, pre-structural content and response in which Cage is interested.

Affect, or the affective dynamic, refers directly to the bodily sensation or feeling that occurs in response to an event. For cultural theorist Brian Massumi, affect or affection is “a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and
implying an augmentation or diminution in that body’s capacity to act” (Massumi 2004, xvi). The term I would like to focus on here is “prepersonal.” By using this qualifier, Massumi refers to the space where something is happening, but before we can apply our structures of the informational and the symbolic. For him, it is the interpretation of particular phenomena through the body, and occurs in a pre-semantic, pre-cognitive state. There is, however—as Massumi intimates in his definition—a difference between this notion of affect and the regular first-person experienced emotion. The distinction lies in the recognition that affect is, in this case, something Cage hopes for his audience to receive and observe, as opposed to the emotion that Cage is himself feeling when performing the piece. For the purpose of this chapter, when I refer to affect I will be attending to the phenomenon as that which is received and observed by the listener/reader.

In addition to this difficulty in defining it, the term affect consistently evades the capacity for being written about: the moment we try to name it it is the very moment it begins to dissipate. It occurs in the place before language, and therefore resists some of our attempts to classify it. Relating this to some of the paradoxes that I have addressed throughout the thesis, we can also see that to speak about affect is, in some ways, an attempt to categorize it. This categorization goes against its sensorial immediacy in a similar way to Cage’s attempts to create works of “silence,” “nothing,” and “empty words.” Cage is interested in emptying out semantic content and interpretation in order to emphasize the experience of the moment, precisely the area with which affect theory is concerned. With this in mind, I apply this concept to Cage’s “Empty Words.”

As we know from previous discussions, it is through the use of techniques of exemplification that Cage attempts to collapse the distance between the signifier and the signified, in a bid to “say what [he] has to say in a way that will exemplify it” (1961, ix). By doing so, and as we shall see in “Empty Words,” he appeals to the otherness that is contained within the actual event or happening, rather than the form, structure or content that occurs in the area surrounding the actual event. This is the place where the linguistic structure of signifier and
signified give way to something beyond, something that we cannot express, that which remains within the very substance of the “direct experience” (Fetterman 1996, 224). This “direct experience” is, I suggest, the affect: the point where there is something happening inside the text. The place where Cage successfully exemplifies is the place where the affect happens. It is the place where an obtuse meaning occurs, beyond the informational and symbolic (Barthes 1977).

To understand this further, we need to go directly to the work, with these considerations in mind.

In the performance of “Empty Words,” Cage states he wants the piece to occur over the course of an entire night. In the preface to part III he says: “What’s in mind is to stay up all night reading” (1981, 51). He states that the reading should be timed so that part IV can occur with the dawn, and allowance should be made for the “sounds outside to come in” (that is, the windows and doors should be left open). The entire piece, which consists of thirty-nine columns (sixty-six pages), is to be drawn out over a period of close to twelve hours. To put this into context, in the performance in Milan (Cage 1977), the first column of part III (figure 3.2) lasts for over fifteen minutes.

Each letter, cluster of letters, diphthong or arrangement is sounded out individually, and those letters that appear in italics are made lengthier through vocal intonation. In line six, “-shaped wk; wid n pɔtw ety” the word “shaped” is said as we expect it to be, albeit with slightly more extension than how one might normally pronounce it (Cage 1977, 1:53). It is followed by “wk,” which Cage pronounces more like “wicker,” in that it seems to have more than one syllable count, and the “k” obtains a flick of emphasis at the end (instead of “kay” it becomes “ker”). When we get to “pɔtw” (2:01) there are a number of things going on. Where the other intonations in this line have taken one to two seconds to sound through, the “pɔ” of this cluster is drawn out to a full six or seven seconds. Not only that, but the beginning of the arrangement begins abruptly, with a popping sound for the p, which then moves into the asp-like sound of the s. The entire line is around eighteen seconds in duration.
This attention to the mechanics of Cage’s timing opens up a discussion regarding the affect of the piece. When we consider the ongoing, tedious nature of this kind of performance, we start to recognize the affect that Cage was intending. Sianne Ngai argues that the “prominence of tedium” is an aesthetic strategy of avant-garde poetic practices of the twentieth century and she likens the response we have to boredom with the “sudden excitation of shock,” where she refers to both “tedium” and “shock” as affective dynamics (2000, 10). She posits that: “the sudden excitation of ‘shock,’ and the desensitization we associate with ‘boredom,’ though diametrically opposed and seemingly mutually exclusive, are both responses that confront us with the limitations of our capacity for responding in general” (10).

In reference to the previous mention of the italicized letters that occur throughout “Empty Words,” particularly in the first lines of figure 3.2 we can apply some of Ngai’s ideas about tedium and shock. When we listen to the recording of the Milan performance of “Empty Words” we observe that in the moments where Cage comes across italicized letters in his text, and sounds those letters out accordingly, the audience respond in a very different way. Their vocal protests against the tedium of the piece differ when Cage comes upon an italicized letter. The monotony is jolted and the audience begins to react accordingly: they jeer and yell, cuss and whistle, but with more volume and intensity at these moments, and as the piece goes on. Coming into the fifteenth minute of the piece, once the audience has been somewhat lulled by the tedium of the piece (perhaps collectively realizing that this was going to be it, all the performance is made up of), their jeers and shouts become louder and more aggressive with each variation in Cage’s intonation. What this shows, I suggest, is proof of the affective dynamic of tedium at play. In arriving at the sound of the “ps” in the example above (Cage 1977, 2:01), and rising above the monotony that is the underlying tone of the piece, Cage provides some kind of hook for the audience to clutch onto; some diversity, a kind of dénouement.

We can also apply Massumi at this point. Further to the above definition, Massumi breaks event down into two categories: qualification (form and content), and affect or intensity. By
Figure 3.2: First column of part III, page 52 of "Empty Words"
demarcating these categories, Massumi argues that qualification is the modulated space of conscious response and reaction. These measured responses often follow the form of narrative continuity, and are closely linked to the subject’s expectations of a particular event. This is also where we find emotion or emotional response. The affect or intensity of the event, then, is the unmodulated, autonomic bodily reaction, and attributable to the unconscious mind. It is the space that occurs outside expectations, and is “disconnected with meaningful sequencing” (Massumi 2002, 25). The combination of these two aspects—qualification and affect—is the overall, embodied experience a spectator has in witnessing an event, what Massumi calls “image-expression event.” He also argues that there is a cognitive half-second delay, whereupon the affect of the event occurs, and which is closely followed by the conscious emotional response.

The Milan performance (Cage 1977) is particularly rich when we consider Massumi’s categorization. As we have seen, there are variations in the responses to Cage’s selective modulation and intonation of the text. If we consider Massumi’s hypothesis, we start to decipher the various elements of the audience’s reaction to “Empty Words,” and thus the possibility of an affect. The audience response in this particular performance can be broken down into two categories. The first is that of the shouting and yelling of audible (albeit Italian) words or linguistic constructions. The second category is what I have previously discussed with regard to the response to Cage’s italicized letters and intonations: the cussing and whistling, with a higher volume and vigour. In these moments there is an increased intensity that underlies the response to Cage’s variation in pitch and timbre (when he pronounces the italicized letters), as opposed to structured, conscious responses of particular words. There is a sense that there might be something sycophantic occurring within the crowd-space: when one person responds with an increased intensity, the affect seems to ripple through the room. It is as though it begins with Cage and moves out, into the crowd. When a calm falls again, or when Cage moves into a more regulated activation of his text, members of the crowd start to say things, words that form part of an organized semiotic system.
To take this one step further, we can observe that the monotony and tedium that is conjured up during Cage’s performance is the component more directly related to expectations. The audience has brought to the performance preconceived ideas about what they will see and hear, and in 1977 Cage was more or less unknown to his Italian audience. Had they not heard anything like this before (of this avant-garde persuasion), their responses might have been dictated by their preconceived ideas of what a reading or performance should be like. In conversation with Richard Kostelanetz, Cage observes that the 1977 audience of some 3000 people in Milan divided into camps (Kostelanetz 2003, 132). Cage comments that some members of the audience tried to destroy the slide projector Cage was using, while others fought them off. One member smashed the bulb in Cage’s reading light while another supplied a new bulb and successfully screwed it in. Someone took off Cage’s reading glasses, and then, perhaps having doubts about their actions, placed them carefully back on Cage’s face (130–33). Suffice to say the audience may have felt to some degree, threatened, perhaps by what they did not understand. Cage says that at the end there was “wild applause,” and that he “was told later that it had all been very successful” (133). However, he goes on to say that he “didn’t see how it could be termed successful in terms of my work, since it was impossible for anyone to hear what I was doing; but it was a kind of social occasion” (133). The idea of the “social occasion” further connects the performance with the open nature of the text and the contributing audience, while the idea that “it was impossible for anyone to hear” what Cage was doing suggest that the success of the performance lies in its pre-semiotic, affective dynamic.

The comments of the audience are all partly considered, conscious responses, predominantly directed at Cage, but occasionally steered towards other audience members (who are perhaps chanting or cussing, causing disruption for Cage in any case). Comments include statements like “2500 lira” (as in this cost 2500 lira) and “sei fuori di testa” (you’re off your head), “sei uno scemo” (you’re an idiot) and “futurista” (futurist). However, these statements and comments are made during less intense moments in the performance, either in silent periods or at a point where
a kind of tedium has kicked in. Their emotional response to the piece is that of “owned and recognized” words and phrases (Massumi 2002, 28). They are, in this case, examples of emotional and responsive expectations of the audience. Consider “2500 lira”: the statement is loaded with suggestions that 2500 lira is too much to pay for such a performance. Without the possibility of expectation, the statement itself has no substance: it works purely on the notion that there was an expectation to begin with.

Additionally, the points where the audience responds with the most intensity are those when Cage varies his intonation and timbre with the aforementioned italicized letters and is, I argue, the point of the affective dynamic. This is a place where the audience responds to the meaninglessness of the piece, to the sound of the letters, before they can order them into any narrative continuity or syntactic structure. Their response also lies beyond a possible structure: chants like “eh! eh! oh! oh!,” and “whoaaaaa!” lie slightly outside of linguistic structures and illustrate further examples of “empty words.”

This is not to say that tedium or boredom lies on the side of the qualified emotional response, the “owned and recognized.” As Ngai posits in her discussion of “stuplimity” (2000), the affective dynamic that produces boredom or tedium is not divisible from the affective dynamic that produces shock. Where the two meet, and where we see the affective dynamic occurring in Cage’s “Empty Words,” is in the intensity of both shock and tedium.

When we consider the possible tedium of the proposed twelve-hour concert we might start to recognize that, in Lacanian terms, “repetition demands the new” (Ngai 2000, 10). By extending this piece of musicated language out over a period of twelve hours, and providing very little regular (informational and symbolic) meaning, Cage attempts to lull his listeners into a new framework for listening. Ngai goes on to say that “astonishment and boredom ask us to ask what ways of responding our culture makes available to us, and under what conditions” (10). As the audience’s response to this particular performance suggests, they do not know if what Cage is doing before them is reading or music-making. The fact that he reads off the page suggests a
literary element. Taking that one step further, the variation in intonations of letters and
diphthongs (according to roman and italic typography) suggests something more closely related
to music. However the listeners are not privy to that information: while part IV of the
performance does have visuals, it is not contiguous with the typography of the piece (rather,
there are various slides of sketches from Thoreau’s journals).

For Cage, this affective dynamic is mediated by language, just as it was for Thoreau.
Among other things, both Cage and Thoreau share a desire to transcend the boundaries and
frameworks of language and exist in a space where we receive sensation without knowing its
meaning or deciphering its structure. More importantly perhaps, both Cage and Thoreau share a
desire to jolt people into experiencing the world anew. But for Cage, a new experience—or
transcendence from the old—becomes about stripping the frameworks and logic of language, in
an attempt to make it pre-semantic. The trouble—and the continual paradox—Cage is presented
with is that by using language to not “mean anything”—by producing an affective dynamic
through the event of his performance—he comes to mean “something.” That “something” may
be “nothing,” but the existence of this “nothing” is the something in itself. As Perloff suggests in
Poetics of Indeterminacy: “both words and images are on the verge of representing something” (1981,
338). By inhabiting the edge-space of meaning and representation, Cage continually points to the
borders of that very meaning and representation. The meaning and representation of the piece is
that it does not quite mean or represent, in the regular sense. The meaning lies at the border of
our knowledge, or the edge of the structure that we impose to enable our understanding or
comprehension of the piece. Similarly, Brian Massumi says, “structure is the place where nothing
happens” (2002, 27). In other words, where the happening does occur is in the place of no
structure: pre-semantic, pre-meaning, pre-representation. It is through the use of tedium and non-
meaning that Cage produces this affective state.

In her account of the 1979 performance of “Empty Words” at the Los Angeles County
Museum of Art, Perloff says “linguistic units are broken down and become increasingly
nonsensical, until, in the long fourth part, the audience hears only sounds in all possible combinations.” She also notes that the “auditor is gradually drawn into the performance; one wants to articulate one’s own sounds, to create one’s own phonemic patterning” (1981, 336–37). Where this coincides with the discussion of affective states is in the idea of the auditor, or listener, being “drawn into the performance”: upon witnessing this performance, and in the absence of meaning, the person listening wants to apply his or her own system of patterning to the piece. In the fourth part of the performance that Perloff is referring to, Cage has eliminated all linguistic codes and “patterns” (phrases, words, and syllables). What remains are letters, or the sounds of letters:

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sww
ue
ntr rg ttl o n h h r rthr sn ld
ea
   d m
   t
ff e lThth
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(70)

In listening to Cage perform this excerpt, however, we are wont to produce some kind of pattern through which we can draw some understanding. Prior to doing that though, we are subjected to the sound of the letters, before we realize that these particular letters could in fact represent anything. It is at this point, this “saying what [he] had to say in a way that would exemplify it” (Cage 1961, ix) where the happening, or the event, actually occurs. The affective state that we are subjected to—boredom or tedium—is the very thing that encourages questions about the frameworks through which we interpret language. Cage suggests that there are other frameworks through which we can experience language, and these frameworks are the result of the affective state through which we come to experience the piece. By remaining outside regular linguistic codes and structures, Cage attends directly to the affect of language, before these codes and
structures apply. He draws our attention to the very happening of the event, through techniques of decomposition and exemplification.

Towards this end, the affect of “Empty Words” lies in its conceptual capacity. Cage’s encounter with language and its subsequent decompositions encourage and enable his readers/listeners to attend to their preconceived frameworks of understanding. The affect, or affective dynamic, of “Empty Words” lies in its ability to produce a feeling in us. That feeling then forces us to renegotiate our understanding of the work and the world, by forcing us to question the fundamentals of our regular behaviour and reality. As Perloff comments, “‘Empty Words’ is Cage’s way of making us look at the world we actually inhabit, the sights and sounds we really see” (1981, 338). Cage wants to push our attention to the limits of understanding, for the affective dynamic to show us what is being done, rather than tell us, regardless of his using language to do so. Rather than remove or distance the reader/listener from directly experiencing the affect of the piece, Cage uses modes of exemplification to bring the reader closer to the inside of language or the text, closer to the actual happening. By attending to the happening of the language, through his use of exemplification, Cage thereby produces an affective dynamic, through which we come to feel what he has to say, rather than just hear about it. His decomposition of language into hypnotic chants and trance-like tedium enables his readers/listeners to receive the experience through their own response, rather than by trying to understand it, and thereby produces an affective state.

This affective state remains bound up in the performance of the piece. It does not reside in the static text, or if it does, it is only if and when the text is treated as a score, awaiting activation, or what I have previously discussed as performance exemplification. In this regard, the affect of “Empty Words” assumes the presence of an audience. Perloff suggests that the written text of “Mureau” and “Empty Words” is “fairly uninteresting, for everything [here] depends on Cage’s enormous register, his astonishing timbre, his individual timing and articulation” (1981, 337–38). She states that in order to “respond to Cage’s language construct” we need to be
present at his own performance of it. By pointing out the limitation of the written text, Perloff also directs our attention towards the text-as-score, and thereby the use of performance exemplification: in order to be attributed these affective states, the piece must be activated through performance. What Perloff does not mention here, however, is Cage’s use of instructions in the prefaces to each section. This contradicts the possibility of these instructions providing sufficient information to produce the same affective state in other, alternative performances of the work. It also reduces the capacity of the text to perform as a score; her mention of characteristics such as “register” and “timbre” are things that cannot be illustrated in the written text. The affective state may be only something we can experience in Cage’s performance, which diminishes his attempt to provide instructions for future performances where he is not the performer, and reiterates the previously considered concepts of the essence and exemplar, whereby his own performance maintains an originality that other instantiations do not.

We encounter problems when we try to write about or describe these affective states, as our description becomes post-semiotic, a mediation of the affect through our understanding of language. What Cage is approaching in “Empty Words,” I suggest, is an affective state that presupposes our frameworks or conscious understanding. To do this, he works backwards, stripping the layers away and musicating language, where language is the very construction that we use for communication. At this point—where the affective dynamic lies in the space of our sensory perception, before we apply structure and meaning to it—the question arises: is this language or is this music? Is this particular affect what Walter Pater referred to as “the condition of music” (1873, 111)? If so, does Cage succeed in straddling the space between the two art forms? Alternatively, does his dissolution of the frameworks for interpretation of a work like “Empty Words” involve the reinstating of another framework, and is that framework the same as that we apply to our interpretation of music?
By taking a circuitous route through silence, the literary text and the musication of language, I have argued that Cage does something of a full circle, and returns to music-making. The effect of “Empty Words,” once “emptied” of potential meaning, does not however transcend the boundaries of text, regardless of its increased musical content or musication. His use of text to provide an affective experience maintains the necessity of text, while he pushes the limits of meaning and opens the text up to large degrees of polysemy. The musication of language, however, belies the attempted return to the affective experience of music. As long as Cage uses text, regardless of how “empty” that text is and how rooted it is in musical references, he cannot escape the pre-existing frameworks of language. This has to with response and expectation of the listeners/readers, as we take expectations to both music and language, the latter of which is irredeemably wedded to meaning.

Some critics have claimed that Cage’s “Empty Words” turned language into music, robbing words of their meaning, turning language into pure sounds (Bock 2008, 187), or that it is difficult to say whether it is musical composition or poetry (Pritchett 1993, 179). On the contrary, I have argued that by using text to create sound, Cage could never escape the bounds of language and that the work depends on this unresolved tension between language and music. By musicating language, and provoking an affective dynamic through that musication, Cage achieves exactly that—a musical language, not a linguistic music. “Empty Words” fails to mean any one thing within our regular frameworks for understanding. Its meaning, or absence of meaning, lies in its affect. Its affect, regardless of any attempt to make it otherwise, is a product of language, and of the tension that Cage exploits in “Empty Words” between the art forms of literature and music.

CONCLUSION
In recognizing the impossibility of silence, Cage began to pay attention to the music of the environment, to the sounds that would have otherwise been imperceptible, and endeavoured to create a framework for listening. To do this, he began working with language, and incorporating language into his musical scores for his silent composition. The use of language in his notations for silence would enable him to create a less bounded structure of silence than even his open musical scores. By using language in his final arrangement for the silent composition, “Tacet,” Cage began to exploit the capacities of language in new ways. Not only could language create a structure with an infinite number of possible exemplifications in performance, the text could also do what it described: it could make the work happen inside the language. “Tacet” thereby raises a series of questions regarding originality and the exemplar. Cage insists that “Tacet” is the essential version from which all performances follow. Yet he also rejects the idea of an essence by providing an example of a performance and advocating further wildly varying possible instantiations. By looking deeper into the ontology of the exemplar in Cage’s verbal score, I have shown how Cage’s literary text embodies the tension between two characteristics of exemplification: Cage manipulates the text to provide a prescription for action, encouraging each performance to be a thing in itself, while also stating that any performance of the score is only ever an example of the original idea.

In “Tacet,” Cage plays on the tensions between the two main characteristics of his verbal score: its ability to provide instructions for performance and therefore be activated, and its capacity to remain a text in and of itself. Cage applies these same techniques to his writing of the literary text and builds on these tensions in “Lecture on Nothing.” In “Lecture on Nothing,” Cage plays on the tension between doing and saying. He develops different experiences of his text, and these experiences are governed by our various modes of interpretation. To look at the different types of experience garnered from Cage’s “Lecture on Nothing,” I considered the capacities of language in both its written and spoken form. By attending to a range of phenomenological experiences—how we receive Cage’s literary text—I demonstrated the
importance of the tension between experience and interpretation to Cage’s work, and how the interpretative mode is generated by the way the lecture tells us it is about “nothing,” even as it also seeks to generate an experience of “something.” By looking at these different domains of experience—spoken and written—I was able to show how they relate to Cage’s techniques of exemplification. Cage plays on the borderline between audio and printed text, and between music and literature, in order to stress the tensions between the work as a score to be performed and the work as a thing in and of itself.

Having navigated and successfully blurred the boundaries between music and literature in his “Lecture on Nothing,” Cage then took to musicating language. As we have seen, in “Empty Words,” Cage sought to strip language back, firstly from syntactic and grammatical sense, and further, to a place of non-meaning. Cage attempted to musicate the language, to do with language what he had otherwise done with musical composition. As he says in the preface to *Silence*, “I have employed in [the lectures] means of composing analogous to my composing means in the field of music” (1961, ix), where, for Cage, “music is the organization of sound” (1961, 3). By attending to the openness and indeterminacy of Cage’s literary text, specifically that of “Empty Words,” I have shown how, even when stripped of all semiotic structures (phrases, words, sentences, syllables), Cage could not escape the capacity of language to mean something. Using the 1977 Milan performance as an example of an execution of “Empty Words,” I have shown how even the most minimal of linguistic structures, such as that used in part III of this large work, produces an affective dynamic. Recognizing this affective dynamic allowed us to pay attention to a possible pre-interpretative space and the potential of the reader’s/listener’s response moving between the pre-interpretative and the interpretative, the pre-semantic and the semantic, the pre-structured and the structured.

Critics have argued that Cage’s musication of language allows him to slip between the art forms of music and text, or effectively to disintegrate their boundaries, in what Perloff has called “verbal and visual and musical” (1981, 338). In contrast, I have argued not only that
disintegrating the frameworks of the two art forms is impossible—that as readers or listeners, we take to Cage’s work a set of expectations shaped by generic and institutional frameworks of each art form—but that Cage’s work depends on an ongoing tension between the two art forms. This tension involves our preconceived ideas of language and music, and the potential fulfilling or neglecting of these expectations profoundly shapes our affective and interpretative responses.

The musicated text then can never be simply music, and so Walter Pater’s Renaissance ideal that all art aspires to the condition of music (1873), in this case, becomes defunct or nullified. By musicating text, by stripping away semiotic codes and emptying it of meaning, Cage actually reinstated the boundaries that keep these two art forms apart. Language and therefore the literary text can never evade meaning, regardless of Cage’s attempts to do so. They are always going to communicate something, even if that something is nothing.

Cage’s own words gesture towards this conclusion. He states in his “Lecture on Nothing”: “I have nothing to say and I am saying it and that is poetry as I need it” (1960, 109). I ask the reader to briefly consider these terms: say and saying. For something to be said, it must consist of a linguistic code. To have nothing to say, suggests that there is no linguistic code to be used, no idea to communicate. So where then, I ask, is the poetry? For Cage, poetry remains inside music, in the “organization of sound” (Cage 1961, 3). It is precisely at the point of saying that Cage straddles the void between music and language: instead of using music to say something, he is using language to say nothing. Is this a return to music? In one sense, yes: Cage is doing with language what he had previously done with music. In another sense, no: by using language, Cage cannot escape the possibility of linguistic codes, of saying something.

Cage’s work in both the fields of music and text tell us a great deal about the characteristics that constitute the condition of these art forms. By attending to the boundaries that keep these two art forms apart, or the tensions that a potential collapse of the boundaries causes, I have argued that the two forms can never merge completely. Instead, I suggest that by examining the boundaries that conduct our understanding and interpretation of these art forms,
we are able to shed light on the space that lies between them. From here, and from the important work that Cage has done in both fields, we can start to look with a more penetrating eye at the history of these forms and how our knowledge of them dominates our understanding. Cage’s work demands a renewed examination of the space between music and language, and further attention to the affective dynamics of that space. Thinking about the affective and experiential dynamics of Cage’s work opens up new possibilities for scholarly inquiry into the space between music and literature, a space into which Cage’s work can offer us deep and enriching insights.

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