

poethics, *epochē* and contingency

ian andrews

poetry now *and I am saying it ...* *I have nothing to say*
for we poss-ess nothing . *Our*
is the reali-zation *that we possess* *nothing*

John Cage—'Lecture on Nothing'

I want to say something about the ethics of non-intention. That is, I *mean* to say something regarding the meaning, and/or what is meant, in artistic works involving non-intentional procedures. The language that I am employing here, which is our ordinary common-sense language, seems to assure me that I am capable of writing something meaningful in regard to my intentions. This is the sense of the French locution *vouloir-dire* that Jacques Derrida often employs. In English, this is highlighted by the double sense of the verb “mean” where “to mean” signifies “to intend” and also “to signify.” When I make such statements such as “I want to

say...” I find myself in the rather uncomfortable relationship with what I “wish” to discuss in this paper, namely the writing of non-intention. This non-intentional writing is perhaps more appropriately associated with John Cage’s paradoxical phrase: “I have nothing to say and I am saying it.” In one sense, we can take this as signifying an attitude of non-expressivity. But, further, it can perhaps be taken in the more radical sense of *possessing* nothing to say, or that what can be said cannot be a possession of one’s own. The upshot of this certain non-possession is that what can be said is not *in* the subject but always already out in the network of differential traces. It is through this problematic that I will approach the possibility of an ethics of non-intention, which may be an ethics of *Gelassenheit* or an ethics of dissemination: a “po-ethics.”¹

Gerald L. Bruns regards Cage’s chance operations as practical form of Heideggerian *Gelassenheit* and links Cage’s work to the ethics of Levinas, while Joan Retallack describes non-intention as facilitating a reconfiguration of the structures of attention. For N. Katherine Hayles, non-intention leads to a subversion of the anthropomorphic perspective.² However, for another group of Cage scholars, non-intentionality has increasingly been viewed with suspicion. Frances Dyson associates non-intentionality with passivity, silence and a retreat from meaning,³ a view which is reiterated by Douglas Kahn, who describes chance and indeterminacy as silencing techniques to eradicate the sociality of sound.⁴ This line of argument is continued by Seth Kim-Cohen in a forceful dismissal of strategies of avoiding expression, since the intention to do so, he reasons, would void the principle of non-intentionality.⁵ There are certainly grounds for calling into question Cage’s separation of music and sound from politics and meaning. However, it would be quite wrong to equate chance and non-intentionality with a denial of articulation and signification, or with a will to silence.⁶ This paper seeks to argue that the chance operation, rather than constituting a law or principle, functions as a quasi-phenomenological *epochē* that suspends intention and decision in the course of the compositional process. Further, I argue that the nonintentional *epochē* opens up a kind of ethics. Here, I wish to contribute to this debate by examining the chance operation in terms of Derrida’s critique of philosophical voluntarism, from his early notions of iterability through to the later work on justice. Here I demonstrate that the later work of Derrida’s “ethical turn”—where it concerns the question or “madness” of decision—extends an inquiry which was already underway in the earlier work.

John Cage not only composed music and multimedia works but also generated a considerable amount of literature by means of chance operations, such as his mesostic⁷ poems. Like the poet Jackson Mac Low, who adopted chance procedures in 1954 after encountering Cage's *Music of Changes* (1951),⁸ Cage constructed a number of texts based on other texts, where aleatory operations are used to "write-through" the source text. Tyrus Miller suggests that the writing-through of Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, in separate instances by both Cage and Mac Low, function as an ethico-political gesture, that is actively anti-political rather than being simply aesthetic and apolitical.⁹

In one of the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures at Harvard (1988-89), a member of the audience puts a question to Cage concerning the experimental methodology of his writing. The participant points to an apparent contradiction between non-intention (taking things as they are) and intention (compositional choice) in Cage's description of the construction of one of his aleatorically determined mesostic poems. As the participant points out, when it came to words rather than sounds, Cage seemed to be violating his own compositional rules by censoring the results of chance operations—as Cage had stated in the previous week's lecture: "I went through and eliminated all the words I didn't like."¹⁰ In his defence, Cage explains his methods in the following terms: that he is "hunting" for ideas and in order to uncover them he must eliminate any other word that might get in the way of these ideas. Although Cage here speaks of musical or non-syntactic qualities (aesthetic qualities), the overriding determination for eliminating certain words would seem, rather, to be a concern with meaning. It would seem that Cage refuses to allow the limitless generation of meaning because such a relinquishing of authorial responsibility might inadvertently misrepresent his views on certain issues: such as his objections to militarism and government. Thus, Cage responds to his interlocutor:

...I don't know what it is that I will find but I'm looking in the mix for them [a series of words] and the only way that I can see them is to take out the ones that don't belong to them. And I use the word "like." It's because I'm in the position of writing a text that uses words. It's a different kind of language but it is every now and then highly suggestive, I think. And I want that suggestion to be in a spirit that I agree with.¹¹

This exchange raises some interesting questions about an experimental ethics, or the ethics of non-intentionality. In particular we might ask: how does the sur-

rendering of intentional agency come to terms with the call to ethical-political responsibility? Before returning to this issue I will briefly review Cage's project to see what is at stake here. We might say that his project can be best summed up in terms of the idea of "experimental action," which he describes as "simply an action the outcome of which is not foreseen."¹² In order to arrive at the unforeseen, the unexpected, or the surprising, Cage employs chance operations such as the use of the *I Ching* where coins are tossed in substitution of making choices (in the writing of the Norton Lectures [I-V] Cage utilised Jim Rosenberg's generative software "Mesolist"). For Cage, the chance operation forms a constraint that puts out of action "taste and memory."¹³ In his music composition, the constraint acts as a way of suspending judgments which might exclude certain sounds on aesthetic grounds (taste). Similarly, the constraint functions to prevent the habitual repetition of what the composer has done before or heard before (memory). I wish to argue here that the constraint functions as a form of bracketing, or an *epochē*, in phenomenological terms. In order to be effective, the rigor of the constraint must be observed. All outcomes must be accepted without revision. If one did not accept the final outcomes, and proceeded to consciously and subjectively alter the work then the whole point of the constraint would be voided. As Cage observes in an interview (with Joan Retallack): "It's very clearly stated in the *I Ching* that if you don't like the results of chance operations you have no right to use them (laughs),"¹⁴ and elsewhere: "chance operations are a discipline, and improvisation is rarely a discipline... Improvisation is generally playing what you know, and what you like, and what you feel..."¹⁵ It is this perceived departure from rigor that concerns the questioner. If Cage abides by the chance operation in music absolutely, then why does he not do so in the production of poetry?

It seems that, as Cage sees it, sounds can be taken as they are, in any contingent arrangement because, rather than being "suggestive," they merely fall into a non-meaningful, non-symbolic, regime of form, or are, alternatively, incorruptible indices of the real, while words and language, in contrast—possessing suggestion and connotation—carry the risk of ideological determination. Words and representation call for responsibility. In conversation with Joan Retallack he describes his removal of unwanted words as the consequence of a different way of working. He explains that when working with words rather than sounds he is paying attention to the nature of language, where: "The sound sometimes becomes so powerful that one can put meaning aside. And vice versa."¹⁶ Words, in the syntactical arrangement of sentence or message, on the other hand, represent for Cage "training, enforcement, and finally the military."¹⁷ It is not that Cage's ethics need

to be put into question. Cage argues for a strong libertarian ethics of individualism and freedom: a normative ethics of principals. However, a very different ethics presents itself in Cage's work, and the shift from the modality of sounds to the modality of words marks the site of contestation between these two kinds of ethics. When it is a matter of sounds, it is an ethics of *Gelassenheit*, where no sound is privileged over another in accordance with taste, likes or dislikes. Further the *epochē* (the chance operation) that enforces this letting contains within it the ethics of a promise that must be kept. When it comes to words, however, Cage seems to be tempted to overrule chance determinations in the name of an ethics of principle.

VOULOIR-DIRE

"I have nothing to say and I am saying it" might, at first, sound like an attitude of semantic irresponsibility or a declaration of emptiness and silence. But, on the contrary, Cage takes responsibility for his words (*I am* saying it), even though these words do not come from an *ego cogito* that would take ownership in the sense of an originary source in absolute proximity to a self that is fully present to the moment of their genesis (*I have* nothing to say). The need for intervention in Cage's chance-determined writing at first seems to confirm the common view that either such texts can have no meaning at all, since there is no intention involved, or that where intention is not present there will always be a risk of meaning betraying its author's principles. When Cage says he has nothing to say, we can understand this in the sense of having nothing to express or, better, of having no need to express something or to represent, or having no desire to impart anything from himself. Further, this can be read in terms of Meister Eckhart's stricture of dispossession of one's will to possess one's self—to sink into nothing (Cage was an avid reader of Eckhart). But still, he is "saying it" or, rather, letting it be said.

The artistic, or musical idea of expression that Cage eschews is synonymous to the linguistic idea of expression. The word suggests the projection of something inner, subjective and personal—an emotion, something envisaged or imagined, an inner hearing, or a mood—to an outside, where it resonates with the empathetic emotions of an audience or receiver. Thus, the common view of language regards speech as the voluntary expression of an inner stratum of pre-linguistic sense that is transported and made transportable by words. What is common to both aesthetic and linguistic conceptions of expression is the model which describes the outward projection of something inside, which is always privileged as primary,

original, and prior to the outside realm of social relations and fulfilled meaning. The root meaning of expression derives from the Latin *exprimere*, consisting of *ex*, meaning “out,” and *primere*, which signifies “to press.” Expression thus means to “press out.”

This metaphysical model of expression is encapsulated by Derrida’s observation in *Speech and Phenomena*: “Ex-pression is exteriorization. It imparts to a certain outside a sense which is first found in a certain inside.”¹⁸ Here Derrida examines the motivations behind Husserl’s move in the *Logical Investigations* to make a rigorous distinction between “expression” (*Ausdruck*) and “indication” (*Anzeichen*), where expression refers to meaningful signs (primarily those of living speech), and indication refers to empirical forms of signification including symbols, marks, indexical traces, and gestural/facial expressions. One of the aims of Derrida, in *Speech and Phenomena*, is to work towards the unsettling of what he sees as a “transcendental” voluntaristic privilege in Husserl’s work. It is important at this point to observe that the phenomenological term “intentionality”—which means, the aiming of consciousness toward something—should not be confused with the ordinary non-phenomenological usage (that I am employing in “non-intentionality”). But still, phenomenological intentionality remains, for Derrida, “caught up in the tradition of a voluntaristic metaphysics—that is, perhaps, in metaphysics *as such*.”¹⁹ As Derrida puts it: “for if intentionality never simply meant will, it certainly does seem that in the order of expressive experiences... Husserl regards intentional consciousness and voluntary consciousness as synonymous.”²⁰ The very idea of consciousness, for Husserl, cannot be disassociated from a spirit (*Geist*), a will, or a pure intention. Husserl wishes to exclude from the category of expression anything that escapes this animation of a “voice” (whether interior and silent, or externalised and sounded). In Derrida’s view, what Husserl cannot help reproducing is the traditional metaphysical model that consists of voluntary exteriorisation of a pre-expressive substratum of sense that is both pre-linguistic and self-transparent.

Expression is, thus, not only exteriorization but, moreover, voluntary exteriorization. What is expressed is meaning (*Bedeutung*), an ideal object with no real worldly existence. Meaning inhabits and animates the ideality of expression as a “wanting to say.” For Derrida, Husserl confines this operation to the act of speech, even if this act takes place within the isolation of solitary mental life (silently speaking to oneself). In the auto-affectivity of hearing oneself speak (*s’ entendre parler*) meaning seems to the subject to be produced from within itself. The

meaning—what the speaker wants and means to say—is auditioned in the immediate moment of its production and instantly presented to the consciousness of the speaker which secures it as the intended meaning. In expression, meaning—that which wants to say—goes out of oneself while remaining before oneself; in consciousness, inside oneself as self-present to oneself.

As far as Derrida is concerned there is a privilege given in both phenomenology and linguistics to the plenitude of intentional meaning; of wanting-to-say (*vouloir-dire*) that would exist ideally behind and before every expression, and would find its perfect vehicle in living speech. “*Vouloir-dire*,” is the locution used by Derrida to translate the verbal form of Husserl’s use of the German word *Bedeutung* (“meaning”).²¹ Although both words would be translated into English as “meaning” or “signification,” the literal sense is “wanting-to-say.” What Derrida is locating in Husserl is the metaphysical idea which insists that behind and before any expression there lies something originating and intrinsic to it. The conception of a silent intuitive presence before speech rests on a presupposition that “prior to signs and outside them... something such as consciousness is possible,” and moreover, “even before the distribution of its signs in space and in the world, consciousness can gather itself up in its own presence...”²² In the translator’s introduction to *Writing and Difference*, Alan Bass points out that Derrida’s deployment of *vouloir-dire* refers to the metaphysical concept of voluntarism, the critique of which, he observes, emerges from Heidegger’s confrontation with Nietzsche’s doctrine of the will. That is, it would seem to form a unique polar opposite to the later Heidegger’s notion of a non-willing thinking of *Gelassenheit*. What is at stake is the primacy of a certain fusion of will and consciousness, that wants to say and means to say, which, for Derrida, constitutes the illusion of voluntary meaning being present to itself. We might say that this critique of the primacy of the will is Derrida’s way of continuing Heidegger’s thought in a demythologised tone.

ITERABILITY

In 1971 Derrida published an essay, “Signature Event Context,” in which—in opposition to J. L. Austin’s conception of perfectly successfully communicating speech acts that serve as the basis of all communication—Derrida introduces the general condition of “iterability” in which meaning in each case is cut off from the original intention of the speaker. In 1977, the essay was translated into English and appeared in the journal *Glyph*, in which, in its second issue, there appeared a polemic response to Derrida’s essay from the American philosopher John R.

Searle. In response to Searle's attack, Derrida wrote "Limited Inc abc..." and an Afterword, "Toward an Ethic of Discussion," in answer to questions submitted to him by Gerald Graff (the editor of the book *Limited Inc*²³ which contains all three texts). What is in question, in Derrida's engagement with Austin, and subsequent argument with Searle, is precisely what is at stake in *Speech and Phenomena*: "the plenitude of intentional meaning [*vouloir-dire*], and all of the other values—of consciousness, presence, and originary intuition—which organize phenomenology" (*LInc*, 58). That is, the primacy of intention in the fulfilment of meaning. In order to cast doubt on the possibility of the ethico-political responsibility of non-intentionality the classical move would be to conceive of a model of communication that would be absolutely uncontaminated by aleatory effects, and this is what, in Derrida's view, Austin, and Searle, seek to achieve.

For Austin and Searle, successful communication depends upon an intentional force that is transparently delivered and received under the optimal conditions of the localised physical proximity of both parties, and an absolutely constraining context. This pure performative would be the kind of utterance against which all other (impure) utterances could be judged. Derrida complicates this model by arguing that not only are utterances able to be interpreted (and misinterpreted) in conditions where the source of intention is empirically absent but, further, in the pure instances of the performative speech act under optimal conditions, even when all parties are present, there is always some degree of interpretation involved. Meaning is not immediately present to all involved. Derrida seeks to undo the model of the pure exemplary performative by focusing on the elements that Austin wishes to exclude from successful communication, even though Austin himself recognises them as structural possibilities. Austin excludes the possibility of citation or "quotability" in the performative utterance—along with instances of non-serious intent, or non-ordinary linguistic exceptions as in the case of poetry—insisting that such "stage utterances" would be abnormal or parasitic. Derrida's conclusion is that any pure speech act is already contaminated by the very elements that would define an impure speech act. This, he says, is due to the condition that he calls "iterability" which structures not only the possibility of any linguistic act but also the impossibility of such acts.

In order for something to mean something it must be repeatable. There would be no communicable signification, no re-cognition, if something presented itself only once. Iterability is this possibility of repetition but, moreover, it is a repetition that alters, that never returns to the same place in the text, never returns

an unalterable univocal meaning. In this sense, for Derrida, pure repetition is impossible, and iterability is structured by both identity and difference. This is because iterability is already divided or split.²⁴ Each time a self-contained identity is constituted in a signifying element it is simultaneously split because this identity can only be maintained in accordance with a differential relation to other elements not present. In this way, there is always a non-present remainder of the differential and iterable mark. This also means that for Derrida, any utterance or signifying element can not only be taken out of context, but also radically disengaged from an originating intention. Every mark, whether it be spoken or written, has “the possibility of its functioning being cut off, at a certain point, from its ‘original’ desire-to-say-what-one-means [*vouloir-dire*] and from its participation in a saturable and constraining context” (*LInc*, 12). In this way, iterability divides intention, “preventing it from being fully present to itself in the actuality of its aim, or of its meaning” (*LInc*, 57). Each signifying element can further “be cited, put between quotation marks; in so doing it can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable” (*LInc*, 12, Derrida’s emphasis). Iterability contaminates what it enables to repeat. The consequence of this, as Derrida sees it, is that “it leaves no choice but to mean to say (to say) something that is (already, always, also) other than what we mean (to say)” (*LInc*, 62). In this way accidents in communication are never just accidents but are, rather, structural to all communications. The gist of this is that a speaker’s (or writer’s) intention can never be unquestionably relied upon as a way of determining the meaning or what is meant by a particular utterance.

It’s not that Derrida wants to annihilate intention—to declare it absent from any linguistic exchange—which is how Searle *mis*-understands him—rather, what iterability calls into question is any absolute guarantee that intention may seem to provide for the fulfilment and delimitation of meaning. Iterability does not limit or cause an absolute breakdown of intention or a failure to get things done in the world of social relations. What it limits is intention’s undividedness: its self-present securement of its own operation. However, the dividedness or cleft [*Brissure*] of iterability is very far from constituting a negative condition. Derrida employs the botanical term “dehiscence” which, significantly, relates iterability to another important word for Derrida: “dissemination.” Dehiscence refers to the propagation or dissemination of pollen by the anther (part of the stamen) by splitting in such a way that the two chambers appear to be one (dehiscence also occurs in fruit and seeds). As Derrida notes in “The Double Session,” it is a kind of “quasi-tearing.”²⁵ In this way, the dehiscence of iterability “limits what it makes possible,

while rendering its rigor and purity impossible” (*LInc*, 59). It has the workings of an “undecidable contamination”—and Derrida emphasises the positive sense of this—that is essential for the possibility of production and reproduction. It is both generative and disseminative. If non-intentional writing is generative, in this sense of dehiscence and dissemination, it is not due to an animating intention of an *ego cogito*; it is due to the generative possibilities of the system of language itself; or, better, of the systematic play of differences; the anonymous field of spacings.

THE ETHICO-TELEOLOGICAL VALUES OF PHILOSOPHY

Iterability may seem, at first like a kind of trivial inversion of the normal way of conceiving semio-linguistic communication but what is at stake here is an ethical consideration. That is, most importantly, the consideration of iterability leads us to a reconfiguration of the ethical. What is presupposed in the intentional model that Austin and Searle advocate is what Derrida calls the “univocity of ethico-teleological values in language” (*LInc*, 76), where “every methodological aspect of discourse involves decision... the more confident, implicit, buried the metaphysical decision is, the more its order, and calm, reigns over methodological technicity” (*LInc*, 93]. Those concepts that would seek to govern from the centre, Rodolphe Gasché describes as “desiderata,” which, since Plato, have been ethico-teleological values “not only of what is but what *ought* to be.”²⁶ In Derrida’s terms, these values, as we have seen, not only animate hierarchical binary distinctions where the negative term is subordinate to the positive, but also emphasise a priority in which one concept precedes another in such a way that the metaphysical tradition conceives “good to be before evil, the positive before the negative, the pure before the impure, the simple before the complex, the essential before the accidental, the imitated before the imitation, etc.” (*LInc*, 93). In such a way, a hierarchy of ethico-teleological distinctions are set up in Austin’s theory of the speech act: standard/non-standard, pure/parasitic, etc. Moreover, Derrida continues, the methodological strategy of first positing the pure, simple, normal, complete, in order to then think the derivative, the impure, the non-standard, and the accidental, conforms entirely to this metaphysical *telos*. By maintaining Austin’s opposition between serious or normative forms of discourse and non-standard or parasitic forms, such as poetry, and arguing that only the serious forms are able to fully realise an intention, Searle, in Derrida’s view, insists that normative linguistic exchange *ought* to be serious and literal since only such language can be fully intentional, and that language *ought* to tend toward such an ideal: the perfect

communicative transferal. This reproduces, according to Derrida, “the given ethical conditions of a *given* ethics” (*LInc*, 122, Derrida’s emphasis). There is, as Derrida cautions, nothing pejorative in such an ethics. The prescription of an “ought” that is normative, and subscribes to an ideal purity, does not produce a “bad” or “wrong” ethics. What it does, however, is to exclude or marginalize all other possibilities—possibilities such as Cage’s po-ethics—and disallows the opening of another ethics which may be an *an-ethics*—not simply an anti-ethics.

Derrida shows us the inherent problems that are built in to a model of ethics centred on intention as a wanting-to-say. But there still remains the question of how, or if, authors of non-intentional works, such as Cage and Mac Low, can be held responsible for what they produce? How can one, in the play, acceptance, or letting of language, bypass definitive semanticism without surrendering ethical-political responsibility? In the “Afterword” of *Limited Inc*, in reply to a question from Gerald Graff (the book’s editor), Derrida explains how the singularity of the undecidable “opens the field of decision” (*LInc*, 116):

It calls for a decision in the order of ethical-political responsibility. It is even its necessary condition. A decision can only come into being in a space that exceeds the calculable program that would destroy all responsibility by transforming it into a programmable effect of determinate causes. There can be no moral or political responsibility without this trial and this passage by way of the undecidable. Even if a decision seems to take only a second and not to be preceded by any deliberation, it is structured by this *experience and experiment of the undecidable* (*LInc*, 116, Derrida’s emphasis).

This establishes the framework for his later work on law and justice where, in “Force of Law,” Derrida maintains that justice depends upon an *epochē*, a suspension of the law in its generalizable form, in order to open a space for a decision that does not fall into programmable calculability: to provide the conditions for what Stanley Fish calls a “fresh judgment.”²⁷ He argues, “A decision that didn’t go through the ordeal of the undecidable would not be a free decision, it would only be the programmable application or unfolding of a calculable process.”²⁸ The law in each singular case must be reinvented but this reinvention involves both suspending and conserving an existing law. The decision of a judge cannot slavishly conform to the law, as if the judicial system were a calculating machine, but neither should such decisions be arbitrary without respect to the law. What is interesting here is the *epochē* or suspension and how it functions. The *epochē* of

chance that Cage utilises in his production of texts could be said to follow a similar rationale. Judgment is suspended for long enough for the possibility to open up for a “fresh judgment.” In this way, non-intentional writing opens up a space for an ethico-political decision that is largely unforeseen. If the decision were to be foreseeable it would be assured of its felicity to its own principles and, thus, be programmable. The final decisions that Cage makes are made possible, and even structured by, the experiment of the chance operation which allows for the unforeseen. In Derrida’s judicial case the law is intermittently suspended so that a fresh decision can come into view. In Cage’s case the decision is suspended in order that a fresh analysis or reading can be made, which then, in a supplementary step allows a free decision. But in each case, in each ethico-political decision, it is singularity that is prioritised over the generalising principle. This kind of “loose” *phronesis* of an ethics of dissemination—an ethics under erasure—is described by John D. Caputo in *Against Ethics*:

Judging attaches itself to the incommensurability of the individual, to the exception, and knows how and when to lift the universal, to put it out of action, which is what is meant by a suspension or *epochē*. It is not a question of suspending judgement in order to find the *eidos* or the law, as in classical phenomenology, but of suspending the *eidos* or the law in order to judge what is happening. In this perversely deconstructionistic untranscendental *Urteilslehre* (doctrine of Judgment), it is not a question of the suspension of judgment but of judgments of suspension, of judgments suspended over an abyss.²⁹

Such an operation involves, in the most basic terms, re-invention, and the bringing about of something new and different. At this point it must be emphasised that I am not equating iterability—or deconstruction or *différance*—with Cagean non-intentionality or indeterminacy. Derrida makes it very clear in his answer to Graff that neither undecidability (*LInc*, 148) nor *différance* (*LInc*, 149) equate to indeterminacy.³⁰ The undecidable, as we understand it in the Derridean sense, refers to a highly determined strategy of locating and deploying certain terms as non-concepts (such as *pharamakon*, hymen, *parergon*, etc.), which, by oscillating between two possibilities, resist the structure of binary opposition without necessarily forming a third term. It is by way of such strategies that Derrida puts the primacy of the self-presence of meaning-to-say into question in order to discover its force and necessity, and determine—in the act of tracing each exigency back to its deployment in the text of philosophy—its “intrinsic limit” (*LInc*, 93). But

at the same time these undecidables are “pragmatically determined” (*LInc*, 148). At many of the decisive moments in each text, meaning is, in a certain way, *found*, and any deconstructive intervention must proceed not by way of the imposition of a will, but by the necessity of what the text demands and according to its syntactical structure:

The *incision* of deconstruction, which is not a voluntary decision or an absolute beginning, does not take place just anywhere, or in an absolute elsewhere. An incision, precisely, it can be made only according to the lines of force and forces of rupture that are localizable in the discourse to be deconstructed... This analysis is *made* in the general movement of the field, and is never exhausted by the conscious calculation of a “subject.”³¹

Deconstruction, thus, always begins wherever we find ourselves in the text (of philosophy). We might say that there is some element of chance in Derrida’s work, but such contingency is far removed from Cage’s chance operations. However, we could say that if there is a certain constraint within Derrida’s methodology, it consists of finding the resources for the deconstruction of an author’s text(s) within the confines of the author’s text(s).

THE SWERVE

In Derrida’s response to Graff, he adamantly states that “I do not believe I have ever spoken of ‘indeterminacy,’ whether in regard to ‘meaning’ or anything else” (*LInc* 148). This is, however, not strictly the case. In 1983 (five years before the Afterword), in “Mes chances. Au rendez-vous de quelques stéréophonies épïcuriennes” (translated in to English as “My Chances/ *Mes Chances*: A Rendezvous with some Epicurean Stereophonies”)³² Derrida explores indeterminacy in a slightly different context. Asked to speak on the subjects of psychoanalysis and literature, at the Washington School of Psychiatry, Derrida questions the inherent possibilities of indeterminacy that may occur in a lecture which is destined to those addressees (*destinataires*) he does not know, and who belong to a field that is not his own. Drawing on the ideas of the Democritian atomists, Derrida suggests that the lecture may fall upon those to whom it may or may not have been destined, reach its destination by way of “a chance open to some *parenklisis* or *clinamen*.”³³ In the cosmology of Lucretius, atoms in the void are constantly falling downwards in parallel paths. The *clinamen* is the slight swerve in motion causing the atoms to collide with each other, which leads to the creation of phenomena. The swerve is

also related to the genesis of man's free will since it effects the atomic make-up of the mind. In Derrida's use, it constitutes the spacing and play of the trace between significance and insignificance, aim and fall, destining and destinerrancy. The *clinamen*, in these terms, is purely contingent.

Drawing on this Epicurean model, Joan Retallack describes Cage's chance operations as a composed *clinamen*,³⁴ belonging to a poethical attitude: "a certain poetics of responsibility with the courage of the swerve, the project of the wager."³⁵ The swerve, the unpredictable shift in direction, as Retallack proposes, redirects the "geometry of attention," and has the potential of jolting us out of the default set of predispositions that Pierre Bourdieu calls the "habitus."³⁶ The swerve constitutes "the collision with contingency that dislodges us from enervated patterns into a charged apprehension of something new."³⁷ In contrast to Derrida, the figure of the swerve, in Retallack's sense, is not something arbitrary but the result of an imposed and determined operation or process. For Derrida, on the other hand, there is a certain intertwining between chance and necessity. Drawing from cybernetics and theories of dynamic systems, he observes that the signifying elements of language "*simultaneously* incline toward increasing the reserves of random indetermination *as well as* the capacity for coding and overcoding or, in other words, for control and self-regulation."³⁸ In this way, the tension between randomness and code both disrupts and regulates "the restless, unstable interplay of the system."³⁹ Derrida falls upon Lucretius' characterisation of the falling atoms as being composed not just of matter but of letters or graphic marks (*stoikheion*), where the swerve causes random combinations. A slight deflection in one letter separates two words *voluntas* (will) and *voluptus* (pleasure), which are intrinsically linked in Lucretius' thought. The substitutability of the one letter in these Latin words has, due to a certain *clinamen* or destinerrancy in the early editions of Lucretius' poem *De rerum natura*, resulted in an indeterminate reading perhaps skewing Lucretius' notion of freedom toward pleasure, leading Derrida from Lucretius to Freud's pleasure principle.⁴⁰

LIMITED/UNLIMITED RESPONSIBILITY

The central question of poethics is, as Retallack puts it: "How can writing and reading be integral to making sense and *newsense* (sometimes taken for *nonsense*) as we enact an ongoing poetics of everyday life?"⁴¹ It is to a similar question that Derrida responds:

I try to *write* (in) the space in which is posed the question of speech and meaning. I try to write the question: (what is) meaning to say [*vouloir dire*]? Therefore it is necessary in such a space, and guided by such a question, that writing literally mean nothing. Not that it is absurd in the way that absurdity has always been in solidarity with metaphysical meaning. It simply tempts itself, tenders itself, attempts to keep itself at the point of exhaustion of meaning.⁴²

A writing that tenders itself at the boundary of the exhaustion of meaning, Derrida emphasises, is not absurd, nor, would we expect, irrational or aesthetic—either in the sense of formal autonomy, or the sense of functioning as a signifier for expression (or life) itself (wanting to express without meaning as much as wanting to mean). We are reminded of Heidegger’s insistence that the irrationality of aesthetic *Erlebnis* would be the completion of representational thinking (*Vorstellung*), and thus “in solidarity with metaphysical meaning.”

But this play, which involves a risk of meaning, does not escape from ethico-political responsibility. Or, by way of an inversion, we might say that it *is* an ethico-political responsibility to keep things in play. On the one hand, as Niall Lucy observes, “neither ‘text’ nor ‘writing’ can *avoid* being ethical-analytical.”⁴³ On the other hand, the discourse of philosophy cannot escape, as Lucy argues, the unwanted effects of what it claims to be purely different from, namely, literature and the “non-serious.” Thus, there can always be other readings or misreadings of any text. An author has responsibility for their text, but since intention is dispersed across various authorial motives, desires, citations, quotations, other authors, and so forth, responsibility, as Derrida claims in “Limited Inc a b c...,” can only be limited responsibility (*LInc*, 75). Or better, intention itself has only a limited responsibility. Language in the aleatoric poetry of the Language Poets, or of Cage, would call to be inflected according to an ethical-political decision that has only limited responsibility, yet the very necessity for keeping meaning in play is an unlimited responsibility.

Poethical texts inscribe the conditions of their own reception. They explicitly prescribe against the idea that there can be one singular univocal reading, and that such a reading could be directly attributed to an authorial intention. Part of the force of works engaging with non-intentionality, is their capacity to make explicit the implicit structure of iterability, and thus make legible that the conditions for reading the work do not involve a quest for authorial intentionality. The play of

the poetic text cannot escape the pull of ethico-analytic responsibility any more than philosophy can escape the effects of literature and the “nonserious.” What the structure of iterability shows is that any internality of an “expressed” meaning is already marked by an externality that consists of a textual spacing of differences and a citational network of referrals to other texts. This is no less true for the work of art. Expression, or the meaning to be expressed is, as Derrida maintains, “always already carried outside itself. It already differs (from itself) before any act of expression. And only on this condition can it ‘signify.’”⁴⁴ What is given in a work of art is irreducible to an artist’s intention. Consequently, the model of intentional expression cannot be a reliable means to accessing what is given in the work of the work of art.

Cage’s “I have nothing to say and I am saying it” is not a statement of intellectual abandonment, or of ethico-political irresponsibility. It does not just indicate a suspension of expression as meaning-to-say but constitutes a putting into question of the primacy of intention as the guarantee of meaning and self-coincidence. In such a way, it opens up a space for a different kind of ethics. At this point we might go back and address the substance of the question posed by Cage’s interlocutor: why does Cage take out the words he does not like, rather than rigorously abide by the outcomes of the chance operations? We might answer that ethical decisions come to be made in the space opened up by the suspension of aesthetic decisions; in the space *between* aesthetics and ethics. Derrida’s philosophy and the non-intentional artistic works of Cage and Mac Low have one thing in common: they both work towards putting intention in its place; to prevent it from governing all “meaning” and interpretation; to dislodge it from its position of authority; to disrupt its illusion of immediacy and the efficient expedited express delivery of meaning that we see as the “postal,” or transmission, service of expression.

University of New South Wales

NOTES

1. I take the notions of “an ethics of *Gelassenheit*” and “an ethics of dissemination” from John D. Caputo’s *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987). It must be noted, however, that Caputo in his later work despairs of any possibility of an ethics of *Gelassenheit* since Heidegger, by all indications, seems to exclude the idea of justice. The term “poethics” I take from Joan Retallack. It resonates with Caputo’s terms “theo-poethics” and “cosmo-poethics.”
2. Gerald Bruns, “Poethics: John Cage and Stanley Cavell at the Crossroads of Ethical Theory,” Joan Retallack, “Poethics of a Complex Realism,” N. Katherine Hayles, “Chance Operations: Cagean Paradox and Contemporary Science,” all in *John Cage: Composed in America*, eds Marjorie Perloff and Charles Junkerman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).
3. Frances Dyson, “The Ear that Would Hear Sounds in Themselves: John Cage 1935-1965,” in *Wireless Imagination: Sound, Radio, and the Avant-Garde*, eds Douglas Kahn and Gregory Whitehead (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 399
4. Douglas Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 189.
5. Seth Kim-Cohen, *In the Blink of an Ear: Towards a Non-Cochlear Sonic Art* (New York: Continuum, 2009), 114-5.
6. More recent arguments take a more positive view. Joe Panzner, in *The Process That is the World: Cage/Deleuze/Events/Performances* (New York, London: Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2015), providing a Deleuzian analysis, regards chance operations in terms of distributed agency. Mathew Mendez, in “...A Power of Sonorous Practices...’: Passivity, Singularity, and Indifference in Jean François Lyotard’s Readings of John Cage,” *Cultural Politics* 9, no. 2 (2013): 170-87, tracing Lyotard’s “Cage period,” sees non-intention as a kind of “active passivity.” Joshua Schuster, in *The Ecology of Modernism: American Environments and Avant-Garde Poetics* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2015), maps Cage’s poetics of non-intention to an environmental ethics.
7. A mesostic poem is much like an acrostic text but the vertical phrase, or spine—which in Cage’s poems often consist of proper names—runs down the middle rather than the edge. The term is attributed to Norman O. Brown.
8. See Liz Kotz, *Words to Be Looked At: Language in 1960s Art* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2007), 127.
9. Tyrus Miller, *Singular Examples: Artistic Politics and the Neo-Avant-Garde* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009), 70.
10. John Cage, *I-VI* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1990), 13.
11. Cage, *I-VI*, 15-6. The line “It’s because I’m in the position of writing a text that uses words,” is omitted from the written text. It can be heard in the recording [6’50” in] on the cassette tape supplied with the book.
12. John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (London: Calder & Boyars, 1968), 39, 69, and *A Year from Monday: New Lectures and Writings* (London: Marion Boyars, 1968), 129.
13. Cage, *Silence*, 59.
14. John Cage, *Musicage: Cage Muses on Words, Art, Music*. ed. Joan Retallack (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press: University Press of New England, 1996), 214.
15. John Cage, Interview with Stanley Kauffmann (1966), in *Conversing with Cage*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Limelight Editions, 1988), 223-4.

16. Cage, *Musicage*, 69.
17. John Cage, *Empty Words: Writings '73-'78*, 1st ed. (Middletown and London: Wesleyan University Press: Marion Boyars, 1979), 183. Cage writes: "Implicit in the use of words (when messages are put across) are training, government, enforcement, and finally the military. Thoreau said that hearing a sentence he heard feet marching, Syntax, N. [Norman] O. Brown told me, is the arrangement of the army," 183.
18. Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*. Trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 32.
19. Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 34.
20. Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 34.
21. There are two words in French that can be translated by the English word "meaning": "sens" and "vouloir-dire." The latter has connotations of volition as it is etymologically linked to *voluntas*, and can be translated as "meaning" or "to mean" but has strong connotations toward "want to say" or "will to say." Derrida translates *bedeuten*, the verbal form of the word Husserl uses for "meaning" (*Bedeutung*) as *vouloir-dire*, a necessity since "sens" is reserved for the translation of the German word "Sinn," and as Derrida explains in *Speech and Phenomena*, the French word "signification" presents problems because whereas in German and English one can say that a sign is without meaning (*bedeutungslos*), or that a sign is meaningful (*bedeutsame Zeichen*) to translate *Bedeutung* as *signification*, risks giving the sense of these expressions as the absurd "non-signifying sign," and the redundant "signifying sign." Cf. *Speech and Phenomena*, p. 17-18.
22. Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 146-7.
23. Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc*. Trans. Samuel Weber & Jeffrey Mehlman (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988). Henceforth cited parenthetically in the text as *LInc*.
24. See Samuel Weber, *Mass Mediauras: Form Technics Media*. ed. Alan Cholodenko (Sydney: Power Publications, 1996), 139-140.
25. Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*. Trans. Barbara Johnson (London: Athlone, 1981), 205.
26. Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 127. Gasché's emphasis.
27. Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'." Trans. Mary Quaintance. *Cardozo Law Review*, 11 (1990, 961). See Stanley Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1989), 505.
28. Derrida "Force of Law", 963.
29. John D. Caputo, *Against Ethics: Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constant Reference to Deconstruction* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), 106-107.
30. Derrida in his response in the Afterword is clearly irritated by Graff's mis-construal of the notion of undecidability. What is named "undecidable" here seems to be the product of (at least) two authors: Graff, Derrida, and "Some American critics" (Searle among them) that Graff credits with accusing Derrida of "setting up a kind of 'all or nothing' choice between pure realisation of self-presence and complete freeplay or undecidability." (*LI* 114). It could be said that the central theme of Derrida's reply (to John Searle's criticisms of "Signature Event Context") in "Limited Inc a b c...," is the inevitable misreading and the shift that meaning takes when we attempt to understand each other. Thus the shift in meaning of "undecidability" is an example.
31. Jacques Derrida, *Positions*. Trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 82. Derrida's emphasis.
32. Jacques Derrida, "My Chances/*Mes Chances*: A Rendezvous with Some Epicurean Stereopho-

- nies.” Trans. Irene Harvey and Avital Ronell in *Taking Chances: Derrida, Psychoanalysis and Literature*. eds Joseph H. Smith and William Kerrigan (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1984).
33. Derrida, *Taking Chances*, 4.
34. Joan Retallack, *The Poethical Wager* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 16.
35. Retallack, *The Poethical Wager*, 3.
36. Joan Retallack (Talk), “John Cage’s Anarchic Harmony: A Poethical Wager,” Chazen Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin-Madison, April 22, 2009. http://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Retallack/Madison_04-09/Retallack-Joan_Cage-Lecture_Madison_04-22-09.mp3, viewed 10/04/2017. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action*. Trans. Gisele Sapiro. ed. Brian McHale (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 1998), 7-8.
37. Retallack, “Introduction: Conversations in Retrospect” in *Musicage*, xv.
38. Derrida, *Taking Chances*, 2.
39. Derrida, *Taking Chances*, 2. Quentin Meillassoux makes the point that the notion of chance is dependent on the principle of sufficient reason. Thus, for Meillassoux, chance differs from contingency because the latter cannot be non-totalizable. He employs the example of the *clinamen* to make this point. See *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*. Trans. Ray Brassier (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), 99-101.
40. This indeterminate reading has been at the centre of as Derrida says “a classical philological problem.” Derrida, *Taking Chances*, 7. Natania Meeker points out that the early editions including the *Oblongus* and *Quadratus* manuscripts from the ninth and tenth centuries the lines in question are transcribed as: “*libera per terras unde haec animantibus exstat, unde est haec, inquam, fatis avulsa voluptas, per quam progredimur quo ducit quemque voluntus.*” The generally accepted rendering is: “*libera per terras unde haec animantibus exstat, unde est haec, inquam, fatis avulsa voluntas, per quam progredimur quo ducit quemque voluptas.*” See Natania Meeker, *Voluptuous Philosophy: Literary Materialism in the French Enlightenment* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006). Also see Cyril Bailey, *The Greek Atomists and Epicurus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1928).
41. Retallack, *The Poethical Wager*, 12. Retallack’s emphasis.
42. Derrida, *Positions*, 14.
43. Niall Lucy, *Debating Derrida* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1995), 24. Lucy’s emphasis.
44. Derrida, *Positions*, 33.