**Christopher Shultis**

**Saying Nothing: John Cage and Henry David Thoreau's Aesthetics of Co-Existence**

This analysis shows that John Cage shared many of Henri David Thoreau's views, including an acceptance and appreciation of the unintentional. It also shows, by describing the unopposed nature of sound and silence, that a 'reconciliation of opposites' is unnecessary to either Cage or Thoreau. Both of these views are grounded in a non-dual universe, where humanity and nature are not separate, where co-existence replaces control, and where there is no need for reconciliation because there are no opposites.

"Homme, libre penseur! Le crois-tu seul pensant
Dans ce monde où la vie éclate en toute chose?"
Céard de Nerval, *Vern dars*

"As the ocean so mysterious rolls toward me
closer and closer,
I too but signify at the utmost a little wash'd-up drift,
A few sands and dead leaves to gather,
Gather, and merge myself as part of the sands
and drift."
Walt Whitman, *As I Dh'all with the Ocean of Life*

One thing is certain, and it serves as the reason why a good working knowledge of Thoreau is so essential to any study of Cage. Had Cage never read Thoreau, he might have remained a musical outsider, relegated to an important position in the midst of a group of other distinguished outsiders known under the aegis of the American Experimental Tradition. Charles Ives, the 'father of American music' and founding member of such musical experimentalism, discovered his musical lineage among the literary geniuses of Concord. By aligning himself with Thoreau, Cage took his place alongside Ives as a truly representative 'American' composer. And yet, while Ives seems to be making his way into the American musical canon in the United States, Cage maintains his outsider status. Is it paradoxical when Jonathan Brent writes that "Cage's work cannot be assessed from the standpoint of traditional aesthetics" but then later in the same piece states: "In Europe he is seen as characteristically American; in America he is seen as an anomaly"? By answering yes to that question, one is able to place Thoreau in an equally paradoxical position. Cage's opinion of Thoreau takes him decidedly out of the Western aesthetic tradition as well. Does that somehow remove Thoreau from the American literary canon? Or does it open the way for Cage to enter the American musical canon? I would suggest that Europe has a much clearer sense of what is 'American' than does the mainstream American musical establishment. Cage wrote "Reading Thoreau's Journal I discover any idea I've ever had worth its salt" as an invitation. If Cage was right, as the following analysis intends to prove, scholars might well have to carve a new tributary in the mainstream of American music, making room for that so-called iconoclast John Cage.

In his "Lecture on Nothing", John Cage wrote: "I have nothing to say and I am saying it and that is poetry (...)." This statement clearly wishes to redefine the modernist view of 'nothing' as the void. What does it mean to 'say' nothing? Or to 'do' nothing: "The art of life, of a poet's life, is, not having anything to do, to do something." Having nothing to say and saying it and doing something when having nothing to do; are these statements saying the same thing? Does it matter that the second statement was written in a journal by Henry David Thoreau in 1852, almost one hundred years before Cage gave his "Lecture on Nothing"? I think it does even though if one took a more historical context into account a different Thoreau might emerge. What matters here is the Thoreau Cage responded to, whether that version is historically accurate or not. Nor is it in the spirit of Thoreau, whose overriding interest was in the 'present moment', to suggest that historical context is of the

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essence when discussing influence in the making of art. In 1991, I wrote Cage asking him about history. He responded as follows: “In my conversation with Arragon, the historian, I said, ‘How does one make history?’ He said, ‘You have to invent it.’” In the history that Cage invented, Thoreau played no small part.

When Cage wrote in his “Lecture on Something” that “something and nothing are not opposed to each other but need each other to keep on going,” he had not yet read Thoreau. But, when he read of “doing something while having nothing to do,” as he did in the 1960s, one can begin to imagine his excitement, for he himself had written similarly: “Having nothing to do, we do it nonetheless.” Nineteenth-century antecedents to his independently discovered ultra-modern views! Cage made that discovery, not through Walden, but in response to having heard writer and naturalist Wendell Berry read aloud from the Journal.

In what follows, I will examine similarities between the writings of Cage and Thoreau’s Journal. I will, in particular, address the connection between Cage and Thoreau’s non-dual approach to sound and silence and their resultant appreciation and acceptance of non-intention.

Cage believed that he shared Thoreau’s views on sound and music. In 1958, he wrote: “Where these ears are in connection with a mind that has nothing to do, that mind is free to enter into the act of listening, hearing each sound just as it is, not as a phenomenon more or less approximating a preconception.” If one ascribes to this aesthetic, many parallels between Cage and Thoreau can be found.

Cage saw Thoreau as “a modern thinker.” What did Thoreau regard as music? On June 25, 1852, Thoreau wrote in his journal: “(... the music is not in the tune; it is in the sound) (J. p. 436).” Charles Ives addresses this distinction in his Essays Before a Sonata: “Thoreau was a great musician, not because he played the flute but because he did not have to go to Boston to hear the Symphony.” Kenneth W. Rhoads interprets Ives’s statement as follows: “Ives was of course thinking of that same inner music which existed for Thoreau independent of concert halls, instruments, and performers.” Rhoads further explains that “on a somewhat more abstract level, he (Thoreau) perceived a music in the phenomena of nature.”

Cage would have considered Rhoads’s analysis to be incorrect. So would Charles Ives, whose opinion is perhaps unintentionally refuted by Rhoads: “at this point arises one of those ostensible paradoxes which the student of Thoreau encounters frequently: for, despite his euphoric exaltation of music as man’s supreme achievement, he not only knew very little about the art or its technical aspects but expressed an active antipathy for organized or formal music (…)” Ives considered Thoreau to be a “great musician.” Rhoads seems to be saying that Thoreau paradoxically paid little attention to music.

The problem concerns how music is defined. Is Thoreau praising music in its formal setting? Hardly. Thoreau paid little attention to formal music because that clearly was not what he meant by “music.” F.O. Matthiessen illustrates this point even though he also misunderstood it: “his remarks about music all lead to this point. He is never really talking about the art of music.” Cage also expressed an antipathy to more formal kinds of musical activity. Long regarded as one of the most influential composers of this century, he professed to have little of what might be traditionally regarded as music’s “technical aspects.” In an interview with William Duckworth, Cage offered these surprising remarks: “I don’t have an ear for music, and I don’t hear music in my mind before I write it. And I never have. I can’t remember a melody (...) all those things which most musicians have, I don’t have.”

Cage would say that Thoreau is talking about the “art of music” and it is precisely that which makes him a modern thinker. Thoreau’s perceptions are not abstract, they are descriptive. “Reading the Journal, I had been struck by the twentieth-century way Thoreau listened. He listened, it seemed to me, just...”

8 John Cage, Silence, p. 125.
10 John Cage, Silence, p. 23.
11 John Cage, in conversation with the author, July 6, 1990.
14 Ibid. p. 310.
15 Ibid. p. 315.
as composers using technology nowadays listen."

What the 'experts' regard as traditional musical expression may, in fact, run counter to Thoreau's views on the appropriate nature of music. Perhaps this explains why some scholars consider Thoreau's statements about music to be symbolic and abstract. But, for one of this century's greatest composers, Thoreau's ideas about music are not symbolic; instead they define music's true and actual nature.

Emerson believed that the perceptions of a child were purer than those of an adult: "Most persons do not see the sun. At least they have a very superficial seeing. The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and the heart of the child." In June 1852, Thoreau extended that idea into the world of sound: "Ah, that I were so much a child that I could unfailingly draw music from a quart pot! Its little ears tingle with the melody. To it there is music in sound alone" (J. p. 421).

Cage long believed that all sounds were valid as music. In 1937, Cage wrote: "I believe that the use of noise to make music will continue and increase until we reach a music produced through the aid of electrical instruments which will make available for musical purposes any and all sounds that can be heard." Noises were often part of Cage's sound palette, especially those not usually regarded as musical, "sounds like feedback, and fire and burglar alarms which we don't think of as music, the current musical underdogs." What links Emerson and Thoreau's preference for a childlike perception to Cage's views regarding noise as music? Thoreau believed that what was noise for adults remained music to the ears of children: "children are fond of and make what grown people call a noise, because of the music which their young ears detect in it" (J. p. 422).

Cage composed music that Thoreau himself heard by just listening. This is why Thoreau didn't have to go to Boston to hear the symphony. For him, as with Cage, all sounds, all noises were music. "Nature makes no noise. The howling storm, the rustling leaf, the pattering rain are no disturbance, there is an essential and unexplored harmony in them" (J. p. 21). When asked what he regarded as his most important legacy to future generations, Cage replied that it was "having shown the practicability of making works of art nonintentionally."" Cage's compositions place sounds into the unintentional context of silence: "(...) to me, the essential meaning of silence is the giving up of intention." Thoreau regarded sounds in a remarkably similar way. "All sound is nearly akin to silence; it is a bubble on her surface (...) It is a faint utterance of Silence, and then only agreeable to our auditory nerves when it contrasts itself with the former. In proportion as it does this, and is a heightener and intensifier of the Silence, it is harmony and purest melody" (J., p. 35). If there is an affinity between Cage and Thoreau regarding the nature of 'silence', the key to its discovery will be determining what role non-intention plays in their views on sound and music.

Cage believed that silence was the "giving up of intention". He also regarded the use of non-intention in artmaking as his greatest legacy. Can it be inferred that his music, being unintentional, produces a non-dualistic equality between sound and silence? Perhaps the following remarks by Cage himself will provide an answer: "People often ask what music I prefer to hear. I enjoy the absence of music more than any other, or you could say silence. I enjoy whatever ambient sounds there are to hear." For Cage, there was no such thing as absolute silence. Silence is simply unintended sound. Those sounds constitute what Cage regarded as music. He used the example of his visit to an anechoic chamber which was supposed to produce a silent environment: "I entered one at Harvard University several years ago and heard two sounds, one high and one low. When I described them to the engineer in charge, he informed me that the high one was my nervous system in operation, the low one my blood in circulation. Until I die there will be sounds. And they will continue following my death. One need not fear about the future of music." A correlation between sound and music has already been determined in the writings of Thoreau. The connection between sound and silence has also been established. How do Cage's views on non-intention relate to Thoreau's musical preferences? The telegraph harp produces what Thoreau regarded

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18 John Cage, M (in the Foreword, no pagination).
20 John Cage, Silence, pp. 3-4.
23 Ibid. p. 189.
as “the most glorious music I ever heard” (J. p. 329). This “musical instrument” sheds some light on the relationship between Thoreau’s views on non-intention and music:

“it began to sound but at one spot only. It is very fitful, and only sounds when it is in the mood. You may go by twenty times, both when the wind is high and when it is low and let it blow which way it will, and yet hear no strain from it, but another time, at a particular spot, you may hear a strain rising and swelling on the string, which may at last ripen to something glorious” (J. p. 518).

Thoreau cannot will the sounds of the telegraph harp. They independently exist. Sometimes the harp sounds while other times it does not. Thus, the most glorious music Thoreau ever heard manifests itself non-intentionally.

Elsewhere, Thoreau even more specifically proclaimed this music as unintentional. He suggests, as did Cage, that coincidence is preferable to a willed act: “Thus, as ever, the finest uses of things are the accidental. Mr. Morse did not invent this music” (J. p. 329). And if human invention is not the source of this music, what is? Clearly, it is/nature itself.

Thoreau’s love of the telegraph harp indicates his preference for non-intentional sounds in the natural environment: “I can tell the extent to which a man has heard music by the faith he retains in the trivial and mean, even by the importance he attaches to what is called the world itself” (J. p. 470).

Cage shared Thoreau’s affinity for the sounds of the natural world: “You know that I’ve written a piece called 4'33" which has no sounds. (...) 4'33" becomes in performance the sounds of the environment (...)”. This composition requires no action; it simply indicates the passing of time. As one of Cage’s most famous works, it does for sound what Cage thought Robert Rauschenberg’s White Paintings did to the visual image. It is a neutral surface, collecting the surrounding environment into the work itself. 4'33" embodies what both Cage and Thoreau regarded as music. The composer does not will any of the sounds. Nor does the audience. Both ideally become observers of the environment. What Sharon Cameron considers relevant to Thoreau equally concerned John Cage: “Man is in the natural world as its witness or beholder, not as its explicer.” Such observation centers around what the poet Charles Olson regarded as “process not goal.” For Thoreau, this process was the effort not the deed: “In a very wide but true sense, effort is the deed itself” (p. 57). Cage held a similar view to that of the Japanese potter, Shoji Hamada:

“I am not interested in the pot; I’m interested in the process of making it.” By removing willful intent, observation becomes the logical extension of silence into the world of sound. And for Cage and Thoreau, observation is central to the role of the artist. The focus is on the observed, not the observer. In 1851, Thoreau wrote of “the so much grander significance of any fact (...) when not referred to man and his needs but viewed absolutely” (p. 300). Cage applied a similar method “by giving up your likes and dislikes and becoming interested in things. I think the Buddhists would say, ‘As they are in and of themselves.” The role of the observer follows what Thoreau regarded as the highest form of communication: “to the highest communication I can make no reply; I lend only a silent ear” (p. 89). For Thoreau, “the highest condition of art is artlessness” (J. p. 56). To which Cage responds, “the highest purpose is to have no purpose at all. This puts one in accord with nature in her manner of operation.” John Cage suggests that “I have nothing to say and I am saying it.” Thoreau’s reply: “Silence alone is worthy to be heard” (J. p. 518).

Silence and speech working together: such is the non-dualistic nature of these terms for both Thoreau and Cage. As Norman O. Brown has written, “Instead of symbolism - in a Symbol there is concealment and yet revelation: here therefore, by Silence and by Speech acting together, comes a double significance - instead of words of silent power, the impossibility of language.” This directly opposes the symbolic view Sherman Paul professes: “For sound and silence were Thoreau’s grand analogy: silence was a celestial sea of eternity, the general, spiritual and immutale; sound was the particular and momentary bubble on its surface.” Even though other critics could be cited to
refute Paul's position, it is Thoreau himself who offered the best defense for a non-symbolic interpretation: "Why give each other a sign to keep? If we gave the thing itself, there would be no need of a sign" (J. p. 69)."

Not surprisingly, it is *Walden* that writers like Paul regard as primary and it colors their interpretation of Thoreau's other work. *Walden* is clearly a symbolic text. As Sherman Paul writes: "In *Walden*, at once his victorious hymn to Nature, to her perpetual forces of life, inspiration and renewal, Thoreau defended his vocation by creating its eternal symbol."* Walden was written for a public that saw "a ground for complaint if a man's writings admit of more than one interpretation."* Thoreau was writing to his "neighbors": "I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chintz and cincture in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up."* For John Cage, Thoreau's message to that public was directed through the question: "Is life worth living? *Walden* is his detailed and affirmative reply."* However, if *Walden* answers the question "Is life worth living," his *Journal* offers no such response. This text is rooted in questions. In his review essay on Sharon Cameron's *Writing Nature*, David S. Gross remarks: "What Cameron sees in the 'Thoreau' of the

The *Journal* is a man for whom all questions (...) come increasingly to remain questions."* This method of observation, which poses questions yet seeks no answers, is similar to Thoreau's distinction between looking and seeing: "I must let my senses wander as my thoughts, my eyes see without looking" (J. p. 488). For Thoreau, seeing was distinguished from looking by removing the intermediary of intellect: "I begin to see such objects only when I leave off understanding them" (J. p. 184). Thoreau sought experience (seeing) rather than understanding (looking). His preference for sensual experience rather than intellectual insight is what separates the *Journal* from *Walden*. Thoreau used symbols as insightful answers, thus *Walden*'s goal as a symbolic text. But Thoreau's journals document his life, a process of posing questions. Such unanswered questions are the result of unmediated observation. Philip F. Gura believes that the study of language "returned him to the things of this world, not to a shadow universe of transcendental forms."* Thus, the practice of his profession led Thoreau to the observation of life as art. The "impossibility of language" that Norman O. Brown suggests caused a move away from the symbolism of language toward a description of the thing itself."* Many scholars have been confounded by Thoreau's

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35 Sharon Cameron's *Writing Nature* (previously cited) and Joel Porte's *Emerson and Thoreau: Transcendentalists in Conflict* (Middletown, CT, Wesleyan University Press 1963) are two studies by prominent literary critics that refute Sherman Paul's symbolic or better yet "transcendental" approach to Thoreau. I address this issue more fully in *Silencing the Sounded Self: John Cage and the American Experimental Tradition* (Boston, Northeastern University Press 1998).

36 However, it is, as my analysis elsewhere suggests (see footnote 35), moving in the direction of the *Journal* away from humanly contrived symbolism and toward non-dualism.


39 Ibid. p. 76.


43 It should be noted at this point that Brown's remarks in his lecture "John Cage" (John Cage at Seventy-Five), are critical rather than supportive. The "impossibility of language" is a cited remark of John Cage's found in *For the Birds* (London, Marion Boyers, 1981, p. 113): "it is that aspect, the impossibility of language, that interests me at present." Brown's criticism concerns Cage's interest in the impossibility of language "instead of symbolism," Brown's original citation, quoting Carlyle, in: *Love's Body* (1966, reprint: Berkeley, University of California Press 1990, p. 100) reads: "Broken speech; speech broken by silence. To let the silence in is symbolism. 'In symbol there is concealment, and yet revelation: here therefore, by Silence and by Speech acting together, comes a double significance.' For Brown, symbolism is an essential unifier of brokenness. In 'John Cage' this is then followed by "instead of words of silent power, the impossibility of language" (p. 110). "Words of silent power" is a citation from James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939, reprint: New York, Viking Press 1959), p. 345. Brown is thus criticizing what he calls Cage's literalness: "Everything is taken literally, even the silence," (p. 110) while, at the same time, professing his preference for the symbolism of Joyce's "words of silent power." I mention this at length because Brown is one of Cage's best critics. Due to the enormous scope of his scholarship, he understands, perhaps better than anyone, the spiritual purpose behind Cage's aesthetic pursuits. While a comparative study of their opposite approach to a shared language (silence, empty words, nothing) doesn't fit the context of this analysis, it is an important next step in my research.
"ostensible paradoxes." Such confusion has led to opposing views regarding Thoreau's writings. Why, for example, would someone who apparently preferred experiential observation use language which communicates in symbols? Why would an author to whom Joel Porte believes wished to live the "purely sensuous life" write the following in his Journal: "Certainly the heart is only for rare occasions; the intellect affords the most unfailing entertainment" (J. p. 316).

The debate among Thoreau scholars has been oppositional because it is dualistically constructed. Cage regarded this as "dualistic thinking which opposes for example the Apollonian to the Dionysian." For Cage, "the separation of mind and ear had spoiled the sounds." Thoreau also removed such separations. Again, as he explains in his Journal: "All beauty, all music, all delight springs from apparent dualism but real unity" (J. p. 103). Thoreau's "apparent dualism" has confounded the critics. It is "real unity," the removal of separations between sound and silence, art and life, sense and intellect, that serves as evidence of the non-dualistic thinking of Thoreau. To fully understand the "both/and" perspective of Cage and Thoreau, one must be acquainted with the non-dualistic thinking that informs the Asian philosophies which so strongly influenced both men.

From 1960-1961, John Cage was a Fellow at Wesleyan's Center for Advanced Studies. While there, he was asked to compile a list of the ten books that most influenced his views. Several have roots in Indian and Chinese philosophical and religious thought. The list includes The Transformation of Nature in Art by Ananda K. Coomaraswamy and the Doctrine of Universal Mind of Huang Po. Thoreau was also influenced by both Indian and Chinese philosophy. As Arthur Christy has said, "(...) one could go through Thoreau's Journal, culling passage after passage to illustrate his fondness for Oriental books." Many of these Asian texts share an emphasis on process and non-dualistic thinking. (Process) is central to Indian aesthetic thought. Seasons are an important natural process which both Thoreau and Cage used in their work. Cage, in an early composition called The Seasons, "looks to their symbolic meaning as interpreted through Indian philosophy: spring as regeneration, summer as preservation, fall as destruction, and winter as quiescence." The obvious parallel is Thoreau's construction of Walden according to the four seasons. Walden is also built using the same formal structure as the Bhagavad Gita. As and Arthur Christy has noted, "no one Oriental volume that ever came to Concord was more influential than the Bhagavad Gita."

Indian aesthetics thus played an important role in the work of both Thoreau and Cage. As Cage has said: "I was very impressed as you know, years and years ago, by the reason for making art given by Ananda K. Coomaraswamy in his book, The Transformation of Nature in Art, in which he said that the business of the artist's responsibility is to imitate nature in her manner of operation." In his Journal, Thoreau writes in parallel with Coomaraswamy's belief that art must imitate natural processes: "music is the sound of the circulation in nature's veins" (J. p. 81).

Zen Buddhism had an enormous influence on John Cage. According to Cage: "Daisetz Suzuki often pointed out that Zen's non-dualism arose in China as a result of problems encountered in translating India's Buddhist texts." The Zen master Huang Po has said "as soon as thought or sensation arises, you fall into dualism. Beginningless and present moment are the same. There is no this and no that." According to Arthur Versius, "Thoreau did not know
of Zen Buddhism.” However, as Arthur Christy discovered, “Thoreau translated and edited portions of the Buddhist scriptures under the title of ‘The Preaching of the Buddha’.” The translation was from French into English. The French language does not specifically distinguish between here and there. The French equivalents, voici and voilà, are frequently interchangeable. Perhaps Thoreau became aware of non-dualism in the same fashion as the Chinese: through the problems of translation! John Cage had a well-documented affinity for mystics, from Meister Eckhart to Norman O. Brown. It is not surprising that many critics find Thoreau to be such a figure, with Stanley Cavell explicating the “open acknowledgment of his mysticism””, and Christy proclaiming that “his place is with the mystics.” Ananda K. Coomaraswamy describes an artistic genre that aptly characterizes the aesthetic to which Cage and Thoreau both subscribed: “Another kind of art, sometimes called romantic or idealistic, but better described as imagist or mystical, where denotation and connotation cannot be divided, is typically developed throughout Asia in the second millennium. In this kind of art no distinction is felt between what a thing ‘is’ and what it ‘signifies’.”

For Cage and Thoreau, there was no separation between music and sounds, sounds and silence. Nor was there a distinction between symbol (what it ‘signifies’), and the thing itself (what it ‘is’.) Thus, the question of dualism, either in the direction of the self or of nature, is at the heart of what separates scholars when interpreting Thoreau. The discovery that non-dualism is central to such an interpretation ultimately connects those opposing views. It also explains the remarkable affinity between Henry David Thoreau and John Cage.

Henry David Thoreau and John Cage’s experimental aesthetic of co-existence is characterized in the following ways. First, according to them, our relation to the world is non-dualistic. Their experiments do not require human imposition; they simply require attentive observation. Second, they do not practice the tenets of idealism; since humanity and nature are not separate, reality is not two-fold and dual. Observation need not be interpreted; one may instead seek to discover things “as they are.” Thoreau and Cage experiment without pre-ordained hypotheses. Their version of experience is non-dual; ideal and real do not need human reconciliation.

Thoreau’s two year residence at Walden Pond is his most famous experiment, an “experiment of living”:

“I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad path and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness out of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. For most men, it appears to me, are in a strange uncertainty about it, whether it is the devil or of God, and have somewhat hastily concluded that it is the chief end of man here to ‘glorify God and enjoy him forever’.”

This famous quotation is cited at length to demonstrate the open-ended nature of the Walden experiment. First, the experiment did not begin with a hypothesis but with a question: what is and isn’t life? Thoreau wrote about his experiment without the pre-conditions that normally inform a hypothesis. This is important because he emphasized disinterested observation rather than comparing humanly-predetermined conceptions with those discovered experiemen-

55 Arthur Versluis, American Transcendentalism and Asian Religions, Oxford, Oxford University Press 1993, p. 94. Versluis does, however, point out: “Now and then we find the most uncannily Taoist or Zen Buddhist observations in Thoreau’s work like them — though he could not have had any direct contact with those traditions - he wished to see truly, with the eye of an infant as it were.” (p. 93)
60 Henry David Thoreau, Walden and Other Writings, pp. 81-82. (Also see p.45: “How could youths better learn to live than by at once trying the experiment of living?”)
tally. In other words, Thoreau had no expectations of what he might find. Equally important is the quotation's stance concerning value judgments. It is presumed that Thoreau will accept his discoveries regardless of the outcome. Truth is not ideally pre-existent; it is, instead, experimentally present. Thus, Thoreau rejected the a priori acceptance of idealism. Even the metaphysical, if it is to exist at all, must be discovered experimentally. The self does not mediate between physical and metaphysical worlds. In his experiment at Walden pond, Thoreau sought to establish his place solely within the physical world. Unlike Emerson, who in his first book wrote: "Build therefore your own world. As fast as you conform your life to the pure idea in your mind, that will unfold its great proportions," Thoreau wished to discover the world as it is, not as the human mind conceives of and shapes it. That, in fact, was his experiment.

For John Cage, experiment was equally open-ended. In 1955, he wrote: "the word 'experimental' is apt, providing it is understood not as descriptive of an act to be later judged in terms of success and failure, but simply as of an act the outcome of which is unknown." This was not always the case. Earlier in his career, he saw composition quite differently:

"Formerly, whenever anyone said the music I presented was experimental, I objected. It seemed to me that composers knew what they were doing, and that the experiments that had been made had taken place prior to the finished works, just as sketches are made before paintings and rehearsals precede performances (...)"

"Now, on the other hand, times have changed; music has changed; and I no longer object to the word 'experimental'. I use it in fact to describe all the music that especially interests me and to which I am devoted, whether someone else wrote it or I myself did. What has happened is that I have become a listener and the music has become something to hear."  

Whereas he used to see experiments as preparations for a completed work (as Thoreau's journals are often viewed as preparations for Walden), Cage began to see the experiment itself as the work of art. Essential to that change was his re-evaluation of the composer's role. He had become a 'listener' and the implication is that once experimental means are established the ends will take care of themselves. In fact, whether a work ends is really not the issue. It is the listener's attention that determines such parameters, simply observing whatever happens without expectations (which is remarkably like the approach Thoreau applied to the writing of journal entries).

Cage's approach to composition radically alters the composer's place in the compositional process. By the mid-1950s (when he wrote the previous citations), Cage had stopped exercising total control over the compositional process. As a composer, he was no longer the single creative force behind the work. The experimental work had ceased being an object and had become the process of its occurrence. Cage himself was simply a part of that process.

61 This is but one instance where I take exception with Stanley Cavell's The Senses of Walden. My disagreement concerns the following quote from Walden: "The Universe constantly and obediently answers to our conceptions." (Henry David Thoreau, Walden and Other Writings, p. 87.) Cavell considers this an example of how Thoreau continues the Emersonian tradition of "building your own world." He writes: "The writer of Walden proposes himself many times and in many ways as the creator of his world." (p. 111) I disagree and think the quote cited from Walden exemplifies the opposite of what Cavell describes. Thoreau is discovering his world, not making it.

For Thoreau, the world and the life it offers are there already. The universe "answers to our conceptions" only as we experimentally discover them. Since Thoreau's experiment is a question, not a hypothesis, observation of the universe is the sole possible "answer". As I read Thoreau, the idea of pre-determined human conceptions matching those found in nature is not what he had in mind.

62 Cavell's The Senses of Walden at first seems to resonate with this point of view. I am thinking in particular of the following passage from Cavell's book: "these a priori conditions of knowing objects are not themselves knowable a priori, but are to be discovered experimentally." (p. 95) However, I question the connection Cavell makes between Thoreau and epistemology. It is experience, not knowledge, that I read as being important to Thoreau. As such, he holds no a priori conditions; he emphasizes discovery, not re-discovery. Consequently, Thoreau's quest is not what Cavell calls a "recovery of the self." (p. 80) "Recovery" presumes an a priori and thus pre-existent knowledge of self. It is, instead, the previously unknown experiential discovery of self.

63 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature", in: Selected Essays, p. 81.

64 My book (Silencing the Sounded Self) elaborates in greater detail concerning how Emerson and Thoreau differ and how those differences correspond to their respective musical disciples Charles Ives and John Cage.

65 John Cage, Silence, p. 13. It is this aspect of Cage's experimentalism that reflects his initial interest in Thoreau's Journal. If Walden is an "affirmative reply" (as per Cage's previously cited remarks, Empty Words, p. 3) it would not be experimental in the way Cage defines experiment here. The Journal however, which Sharon Cameron regards as posing questions which remain questions (Writing Nature, p. 154) better exemplifies Cage's preference for experiments without an evaluative response.

66 John Cage, Silence, p. 7.
Like Thoreau, Cage disapproved of idealism. Cage long spoke against correspondences between physical experience and metaphysical meanings. For example, one of the central issues of Cage's work was his wish to put an end to extramusical references. This is initiated by composers who remove their intellectual control over sound and let the sounds be sounds: “Something more far-reaching is necessary: a composing of sounds within a universe predicated upon the sounds themselves rather than upon the mind which can envisage their coming into being.”

However, since the composer, according to Cage, has become a listener, it is not just the process of making that removes such controls; the method of perception removes control as well. Thus, the result is a way of making that is grounded in listening: a listening that brings no expectations to the sounds other than allowing them to simply be: “Why should they imagine that sounds are not interesting in themselves? I’m always amazed when people say, ‘Do you mean it’s just sounds?’ How they can imagine that it’s anything but sounds is what’s so mysterious.” It requires ‘imagination’ to make references between sounds and extramusical meanings and that is one instance of Cage’s disapproval. For imagination, as part of a human self that interprets rather than observes, is what fuels the idealism of things corresponding to meanings that exist apart from their physical realities. Cage’s rejection of idealism, and his desire to experience rather than interpret the unknown, was a sign of his wish to make art free of the control of his intentions. One should not infer, as some do, that this means Cage was able to free the work of his intentions altogether. It is the control of intention, and its denial of non-intention’s existence, that Cage wished to expel from the process of making. Control assumes a hierarchical relationship between nature and humanity that disallows the presence of what we don’t intend. Cage’s move toward non-intention was an attempt to remove such separations: “If, at this point, one says, ‘Yes! I do not discriminate between intention and non-intention,’ the splits, subject-object, art-life, etc., disappear (...).” For Cage, acceptance and appreciation of the unintentional resulted in a non-dualistic approach to reality.

This analysis has shown that Thoreau shared many of Cage’s views, including an acceptance and appreciation of the unintentional. It has also shown, by describing the unopposed nature of sound and silence, that a “reconciliation of opposites” is unnecessary to either Cage or Thoreau. Both of these views are grounded in a non-dual universe, where humanity and nature are not separate, where co-existence replaces control; where there is no need for reconciliation because there are no opposites.

John Cage closes the introduction to his Norton lectures with the following remarks:

“In the nature of the use of chance operations is the belief that all answers answer all questions. The nonhomogeneity that characterizes the source material of these lectures suggests that anything says what you have to say, that meaning is in the breath, that without thinking we can tell what is being said without understanding it.”

Thoreau ends Walden with a remarkably similar statement:

“I do not say that John or Jonathan will realize all this; but such is the character of that morrow which mere lapse of time can never make to dawn. The light which puts out our eyes is darkness to us. Only that day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star.”

Opposites are not opposites; all answers answer all questions; what seems to be darkness is really light; suns are really stars. These are non-dual perceptions and comprise, in large part, the reason Cage so admired Thoreau. He believed that Thoreau shared his non-dual view of reality; that being awake, for Thoreau, was the ability to, without thinking, be able to “tell what is being said without understanding it.”

67 Ibid. p. 85: “I explained that I’d never been interested in symbolism; that I preferred just taking things as themselves, not as standing for other things.”
71 John Cage, I-VI, p. 6.
72 Henry David Thoreau, Walden and Other Writings, p. 297.