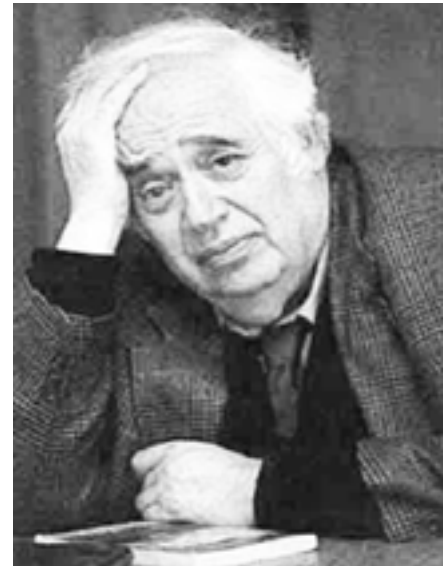




Composer John Cage

# EPIC CONVO BATTLES of Carleton HISTORY



Critic Harold Bloom

## Cage vs. Bloom on Reason and Art

BY JACOB HOERGER '14

*Okay, so "epic" may be a bit of an exaggeration – but gotta try to get your attention somehow ... anyway, this exchange took place at Carleton's 1967 Humanities Symposium. If it interests you, you can check out the full discussion yourself in the Carleton Media Archives online.*

In the spring of 1967 – a year before the mass protests across cities like Paris, Chicago and Prague that thinkers would later cite as the watershed moment of the postmodern era – Carleton assembled one of its finest panels ever to directly confront the most pressing mid-century challenge to the human condition: namely, that vanished is our supreme confidence in reason's ability to guide us in creating order – be it in global politics, art, language or merely an individual's life.

Harold Bloom, who would later blossom into America's most well-known (and crotchiest) man-of-letters, was the youngest of the panelists, though the then-37-year-old had already been teaching English Romanticism at Yale for a dozen years. Bloom's principle sparring partner was minimalist composer and music theorist John Cage. If you've never heard Mr. Cage's best known piece, *4'33*, well ... you actually have already heard it, since all it is is 4 minutes and 33 seconds of silence.

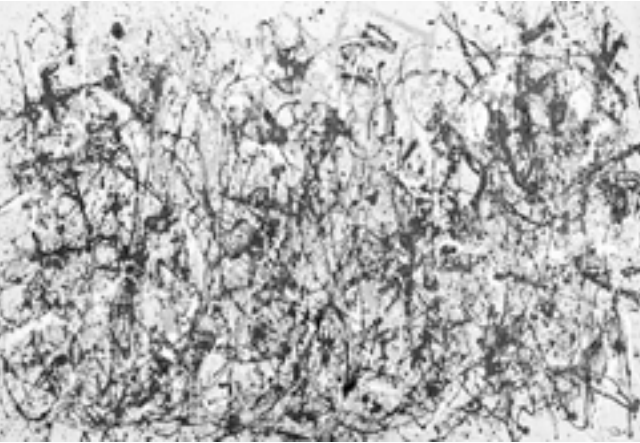
Also participating were Germaine Bree, a French émigré and friend of the absurdist Albert Camus who was influential in introducing his work to the US, and Wayne Booth, another important literary critic from UChicago.

"They are not arrayed as defenders or challengers of reason," the moderator introduced, "but are here to explore its scope, forms, limitations and how it relates to creating and preserving order." (Significantly, none of them came from a philosophical background but rather, were the representatives of the heights of the literary and artistic world).

From the start, Mr. Cage called out Rene Descartes, the founder of modern rationalism, for defining reason only as the power to create and preserve. "I am struck by the absence of destruction and quiescence. These, along with creation and preservation, traditionally represent the four seasons in Eastern thought." Because of this limitation, Cage says modern rationalism is necessarily domineering. To illustrate this, he unfavorably compared traditional European painting to the recent work of American painters like Jackson Pollack. In the former, there is a "center of interest" in which "elements are arranged according to their importance so the observer is obliged to look where the artist wishes him to look."

Those following the unorthodox Pollack, however, have destroyed all such centers of focus and traditional, prescribed associations. What Pollack did in painting, Cage aimed to do in his music.

"In every piece where I see a conception of order controlling the sounds, it then gives me a clue as to what to do next – namely, to remove the order that I was able to discern." This method allows the viewer to make of it what he or she will.

Jackson Pollack, *Autumn Rhythm*. 1950

He describes his purpose as "purposeless play ... simply a way of waking up to the very life we're living and not an attempt to bring order out of chaos nor to suggest improvements in creation."

The other panelists were dubious. "You can't literally mean what you said," Bloom started. "You can't really mean that you're trying to get deeper and deeper into chaos?"

"I do really mean that," Cage replied resolutely. "And if you say I've failed, I shall redouble my efforts to produce disorder," (adding an awkward "hmm?" at the end that drew chuckles).

To achieve this, Cage introduced a strong element of spontaneity and chance into his compositions. His 1967 piece *Musicircus*, for example, simply invites the performers to assemble and play together. He often composed with the help of the *Book of Changes*, a classic Confucian divination text that was once a requirement for the Chinese civil service exam. Cage would flip coins and then look up corresponding sections of the book in order to divine which notes to play. In doing so, he hoped to remove ego and personality from his creations, a goal he adopted from Zen Buddhism.

Like much of contemporary art, then, Cage's work is often derided for its apparent lack of artistry, an "I-could-have-done-that" quality.

"Think about all the hours you spend at work," Booth said condescendingly. "Some of your disciples don't know about work. They don't think you work. Americans want so desperately to be avant garde they fall for things like Mr. Cage."

Bloom called the strand of thought expressed by Cage (and the Canadian philosopher of communication Marshall

McLuhan, whom Cage cited regularly) a "momentary phenomenon" and "a form of mental laziness." When Cage retorted that Bloom's tastes were Victorian, he replied, "I take that as a compliment," admitting he's been forced to turn conservative due to the shallowness of new forms of expression.

By the mid-point of the symposium, it was clear that Cage's approach had few sympathizers. One Carl in the audience asked whether, since Cage holds that music is not characterized by linear progression, there was any distinction between music and other sounds. "Is the blaring of the car horn any different than a Beethoven symphony?"

"I will attempt to blur that distinction," Cage replied confidently. "I have found it perfectly feasible to listen to anything aesthetically."

"Car horns blaring in a traffic jam is aesthetically pleasing? Oh, okay. I think that's annoying," the student chirped back before a sea of laughs.

But the real meat of the discussion came when Bloom, ceasing *ad hominem* jabs, tried to show that there is something "inescapably linear" about even Mr. Cage's work.

"Art is art because it is not nature," he began. "It's one mode of romanticism or another; that is, a polemic against nature. Eastern art tries to be more in harmony with nature, but don't believe it is possible. It's a simple, decadent mode of Hegalian

From "The Idea of Order at Key West"

by Wallace Stevens

She sang beyond the genius of the sea.  
The water never formed to mind or voice,  
Like a body wholly body, fluttering  
Its empty sleeves; and yet its mimic motion  
Made constant cry, caused constantly a cry,  
That was not ours although we understood,  
Inhuman, of the veritable ocean.

The sea was not a mask. No more was she.  
The song and water were not medleyed sound  
Even if what she sang was what she heard,  
Since what she sang was uttered word by word.  
It may be that in all her phrases stirred  
The grinding water and the gasping wind;  
But it was she and not the sea we heard.

rationalism; that's why it appeals to East."

To back up this claim, Bloom cited Wallace Stevens's poem "The Idea of Order at Key West." In the poem, the speaker sees a girl singing in an unrecognizable language by a beautiful ocean. The speaker's meditation teaches him that what one hears through her voice is not the power of nature but of the mind. "The song and water were not medleyed sound," he says, before concluding "Even if what she sang was what she heard/ since what she sang was uttered word by word/ ... It was she, and not the sea, we heard."

Bloom continued, "We are Cartesian dualists whether we want to be or not; we don't chose the Western tradition. We are so locked up inside the mind that any irrationalism must be an over rationalism then and should not try to bring this into discourse."

Even the English Romantics are – contrary to popular opinion – not dealers in chaos at all, Bloom asserted. "William Blake is an immensely powerful rationalist. He knows too well what he's doing, he's at least as much of a rationalist as many of his opponents."

Cage of course objected, bringing the attention back to his own work. "We found ways in the early fifties to compose not by means of relationships between two things but by means of making musical compositions so that the sounds therein were in multiplicity of ones."

"And yet they exist within a continuum of time," Bloom retorted, pointing to the phrase "uttered word by word" from "The Idea of Order."

"I'm about to say that!" Cage exclaimed. "I was walking along the street with another composer and he said to me 'no matter what we do, it all turns out to be a melody.' This is what Mr. Bloom is saying."

"However," Cage said, "it is a melody which permits you to hear it in one way and another person in another. My refusal to accept the necessity of this linearity leaves each of us free to have his own experience untraveled by the others."

"It's Promethean and it's admirable – but it's doomed," Bloom interrupted again.

Cage, seeming not to notice, continued, "the reader becomes not a critic but a composer. It become evident that [listening to our work] you have to do your own thinking."

"There just aren't that many views to go around," Booth interjected and, pointing to the pitcher on the table, continued: "All I have to say is we both must say the pitchers contain water. We don't have that much individuality to go around."

"Yet I'm not seeing this as water in the way you were," Cage responded. Bloom stepped back in, addressing Cage. "The paradox you're caught in – which I think is a very exciting one – is that no matter how hard you try for an individuality that is disordered, you will end up – in so far as anything you can take real pride in and I can share an experience in in any form – having produced form, and belied your own pursuit of disorder."

Hearing everyone gang up on Cage makes for an enjoyable spectacle. But it also obscures the realization that the artistic instincts of contemporary Carls are likely to be much closer to those of Cage than Bloom, the panelists, or the then-Carls in the audience. Echoes of ideas prominent in Cage's work factored prominently, for instance, in the Troika Ranch production at the beginning of this term, or in last winter's player's show *Attempts on Her Life*. We, therefore, ought to listen to Bloom's charges against Cage with close attention.

From "Lecture on Nothing"

by John Cafe

I have nothing to say  
and I am saying it  
poetry  
and that is  
as I need it .

The conversation concluded with Cage echoing the *avant-garde's* call for the aestheticization of the political realm. "If the sense of doom becomes painful to many people, can we not see in that the possibility that people will find a way to release themselves from it? To make the necessary change? When an individual comes to such a sense in his personal life apart from many others, he has in the past and even now found ways to come to terms with his life so that he sees [this doom] as a good thing, rather than a miserable thing [i.e. 'that which does not kill me only makes me stronger']. Now if the whole society sees itself as being in a miserable situation, may we not hope that it become so miserable that there will be an insistence and a use of our intelligence to produce a change so that what one day may be realized by one person, namely, that every day is a beautiful day, may be seen by the whole people of the earth?"

First, Bloom gleefully pointed out that this line of reasoning already contradicts Cage's goal of impersonal disorder: "The logical process you just went through is strictly sequential: Perhaps by making things worse, we can make things better. It was when things got really bad in my life that change took place"

Next, Bloom expressed genuine concern by the dangerously naïve utopianism towards which Cage's argument points. "Large groups of peoples, like a nation, never have rational apprehensions of their miseries, and indeed it's usually a disaster when large groups have an apprehension of their misery because they will not behave in a rational way at all. Genuine apocalypticism of any kind can only take place within a single individual. If it comes upon a society as a whole it comes as deluge, as something terrible. As William Blake writes, a last judgment is something that any individual passes on himself. It's when you turn apocalyptic in the outward sense that you get many modern notions of messianism that have threatened all of us with destruction. There is the danger with trying to take an artist's genuine irrationalism in his private experience and trying to apply it as a tool of intellectual analysis."

Cage countered: "[Canadian thinker Marshall] McLuhan shows the physical means by which I can make this great leap. Namely, the media and their electronic nature, which takes this thing which was formerly individual in me, namely, mind, and makes it global. Now therein lies the great hope – that this leap that seems to you to be somehow risky may be taken as a hope."

He continued: "[My techniques] have been used by people in order to change their minds through their ears. And many people have done this. The result is that people are able to go around the world listening to things with interest, not making value judgments about whether the sounds are good or bad but rather enjoying their experience. Do you not see nature not as something fixed but capable of change?"

"How?" Booth asked.

"By means of yoga, the arts, by mythology, philosophy, religions, currently, by means of chemicals and electric shocks. Human nature is not discontented from the mind. When the mind changes, everything changes. One day, by changing our minds we can even ... move food around!"

The audience laughed, and the moderator – who had anxiously been searching for a moment to interject – found his opportunity to dismiss the audience for refreshments.

Rene Magritte, *The Human Condition*. 1933