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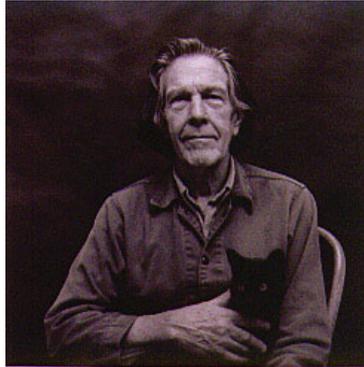
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“I dedicate this work to the U.S.A., that it  
 become just another part of the world, no more,  
 no less.”

BY KENNETH GOLDSMITH



## LECTURE ON THE WEATHER (1975) by John Cage

(courtesy of the John Cage Trust. Score available from C.F. Peters)

COMMISSIONED BY THE CANADIAN BROADCASTING  
 CORPORATION IN OBSERVANCE OF THE BICENTENNIAL OF THE  
 UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

## PREFACE

The first thing I thought of doing in relation to this work was to find an anthology of American aspirational thought and subject it to chance operations. I thought the resultant complex would help to change our present intellectual climate. I called up Dover and asked whether they published such an anthology. They didn't. I called a part of Columbia University concerned with American history and asked about aspirational thought. They knew nothing about it. I called the information desk of the New York Public Library at 42nd Street. The man who answered said: "You may think I'm not serious, but I am; if you're interested in aspiration, go to the Children's Library on 52nd Street." I did. I found that anthologies for children are written by adults: they are what adults think are good for children. The thickest one was edited by Commager (Documents of American History). It is a collection of legal judgments, presidential reports, congressional speeches. I began to realize that what is called balance between the branches of our government is not balance at all: all the branches of our government are occupied by lawyers.

Of all professions the law is the least concerned with aspiration. It is concerned with precedent, not with discovery, with what was witnessed at one time in one place, and not with vision and intuition. When the law is corrupt, it is corrupt because it concentrates its energy on protecting the rich from the poor. Justice is out of the question. That is why not only aspiration but intelligence (as in the work of Buckminster Fuller) and conscience (as in the thought of Thoreau) are missing in our leadership.

Our leaders are concerned with the energy crisis. They assure us they will find new sources of oil. Not only will earth's reservoir of fossil fuels soon be exhausted: their continued use continues the ruin of the environment. Our leaders promise they will solve the unemployment

problem: they will give everyone a job. It would be more in the spirit of Yankee ingenuity, more American, to find a way to get all the work done that needs to be done without anyone's lifting a finger. Our leaders are concerned with inflation and insufficient cash. Money, however, is credit, and credit is confidence. We have lost confidence in one another. We could regain it tomorrow by simply changing our minds.

Therefore, even though the occasion for this piece is the bicentennial of the U.S.A., I have chosen to work again with the writings of Henry David Thoreau. Those excerpts which are used were not selected to stress any particular points, but were obtained by means of I Ching chance operations from *Walden*, from the *Journal*, and from the *Essay on Civil Disobedience*. Thoreau lived not two hundred years ago but for forty-four years only beginning one hundred and fifty-nine years ago. In 1968 I wrote as follows: "Reading Thoreau's *Journal* I discover any idea I've ever had worth its salt." In 1862 Emerson wrote: "No truer American existed than Thoreau. If he brought you yesterday a new proposition, he would bring you today another not less revolutionary." In 1929 Gandhi wrote that he had found the *Essay on Civil Disobedience* so convincing and truthful that as a young man in South Africa preparing to devote his life to the liberation of India he had felt the need to know more of Thoreau, and so had studied the other writings. In 1958 Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote these words: "As I thought further I came to see that what we were really doing was withdrawing our cooperation from an evil system, rather than merely withdrawing our economic support from the bus company. The bus company, being an external expression of the system, would naturally suffer, but the basic aim was to refuse to cooperate with evil. At this point I began to think about Thoreau's *Essay on Civil Disobedience*. I remembered how, as a college student, I had been moved when I first read this work. I became convinced that what we were preparing to do in Montgomery was related to what Thoreau had expressed. We were simply saying to the white community, 'We can no longer lend our cooperation to an evil system'."

On Dec. 8, 1859, Thoreau himself wrote as follows: "Two hundred years ago is about as great an antiquity as we can comprehend or often have to deal with. It is nearly as good as two thousand to our imaginations. It carries us back to the days of aborigines and the pilgrims; beyond the limits of oral testimony, to history which begins already to be enameled with a gloss of fable, and we do not quite believe what we read; to a strange style of writing and spelling and of expression; to those ancestors whose names we do not know, and to whom we are related only as we are to the race generally. It is the age of our very oldest houses and cultivated trees. Nor is New England very peculiar in this. In England also, a house two hundred years old, especially if it be a wooden one, is pointed out as an interesting relic of the past."

I have wanted in this work to give another opportunity for us, whether of one nation or another, to examine again, as Thoreau continually did, ourselves, both as individuals and as members of society, and the world in which we live: whether it be Concord in Massachusetts or Discord in the World (as our nations, apparently for their continuance, as though they were children playing games, prefer to have it).

It may seem to some that through the use of chance operations I run counter to the spirit of Thoreau (and '76, and revolution for that matter). The fifth paragraph of *Walden* speaks against blind obedience to a blundering oracle. However, chance operations are not mysterious sources of "the right answers." They are a means of locating a single

one among a multiplicity of answers, and, at the same time, of freeing the ego from its taste and memory, its concerns for profit and power, of silencing the ego so that the rest of the world has a chance to enter into the ego's own experience, whether that be outside or inside.

I have given this work the proportions of my "silent piece" which I wrote in 1952 though I was already thinking of it earlier. When I was twelve I wrote a speech called Other People Think which proposed silence on the part of the U.S.A. as preliminary to the solution of its Latin American problems. Even then our industrialists thought of themselves as the owners of the world, of all of it, not just the part between Mexico and Canada. Now our government thinks of us also as the policemen of the world, no longer rich policemen, just poor ones, but nonetheless on the side of the good and acting as though possessed of the power.

The desire for the best and the most effective in connection with the highest profits and the greatest power led to the fall of nations before us: Rome, Britain, Hitler's Germany. Those were not chance operations. We would do well to give up the notion that we alone can keep the world in line, that only we can solve its problems.

More than anything else we need communion with everyone. Struggles for power have nothing to do with communion. Communion extends beyond borders: it is with one's enemies also. Thoreau said: "The best communion men have is in silence."

Our political structures no longer fit the circumstances of our lives. Outside the bankrupt cities we live in Megalopolis which has no geographical limits. Wilderness is global park. I dedicate this work to the U.S.A., that it become just another part of the world, no more, no less."

#### **COMMENT (1)**

On July 13, 2007 at 10:58 pm [stan apps](#) wrote:

Thanks for posting this Kenny. It's beautiful—Cage at his most humane and wise. I have to admit that I prefer his moralizing to his works written through other texts—is that sentimental of me? This is not to say I don't like his innovations, I do—but I love him when he takes on the role of a sage (though I suspect he felt a bit awkward in the role—and that awkwardness might be what makes him so appealing in it.)

Posted in [Uncategorized](#) on Wednesday, July 4th, 2007 by [Kenneth Goldsmith](#).

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