Improvisation and the Making of American Literary Modernism

Rob Wallace
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Reviewed by Paul Watkins

The job of the critic would be to maintain the ability to be surprised at how the conversation goes, and to communicate that sense of surprise to other people, because a life infused with surprise is better than a life that is not.

So states the Greil Marcus epigraph that prefaces Rob Wallace’s Improvisation and the Making of American Literary Modernism. It is no surprise to literary critics that the modernists were making it up as they went, as the word “modern” connotes change, progress, and “newness.” It might come as a surprise, however, that they were, like jazz musicians, improvising—it is one thing to reinterpret the past, as Ezra Pound’s poetic dictum “make it new,” explicates, yet quite another thing to spontaneously create something new “live” on the spot. Perhaps our understanding of the modernist tradition, as well as our understanding of writing as a static and heavily mediated activity, needs to be challenged and ultimately made more open to constant mutability.

As Wallace’s book claims, improvisation is not completely free or new, yet is pivotal to our understanding of modernist literature. While Improvisation and the Making of American Literary Modernism is Wallace’s first major book, it is a meticulously researched (as evidenced by the extensive endnotes) and nuanced exploration of the role that improvisation played in the formation of modernist consciousness. Wallace’s musico-poetic interest in tying improvisation to literary and cultural studies stems largely from the fact that he is both a drummer (involved in improvisatory practices) and a literary scholar, one who recently completed a post-doctorate at the University of Guelph with the Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice project (ICASP), a multi-institutional research initiative. Wallace’s frustration with critics’ inability to adequately deal with the elusive nature of improvisation is shared by improviser and guitarist Derek Bailey: “Improvisation enjoys the curious distinction of being both the most widely practiced of all musical activities and the least acknowledged and understood [. . .] Improvisation is always changing and adjusting, never fixed, too elusive for analysis and precise description” (ix). Wallace seeks to expand Bailey’s provocation by taking the realm of improvisation into the often cloistered ambit of literary studies, something Wallace argues the modernists were already doing in their work and interactions with African American and global musical practices.

Improvisation and the Making of American Literary Modernism analyzes how modernist writing was influenced by or engaged with improvisation—perhaps the central feature of twentieth century American music—by looking at four modernist poets: Ezra Pound, Langston Hughes, Gertrude Stein, and Wallace Stevens. Before Wallace delves into each of these writers (with self-reflexive excursuses throughout), however, he posits a working definition of improvisation, acknowledging that defining improvisation, or using terms such as “black” or “white” to ethno-racially describe artists and writers, inevitably involves a level of strategic essentialism. Wallace models many of his notions of literary and pragmatist improvisation on William James, who philosophized that consciousness is an ever-changing construct. Thus improvisation is defined under a constellation of terms such as spontaneity and metaphor (from the Greek metaphorá, meaning “carrying over” or “transfer”), as well as metamorphosis: “the ability to change within a structure of rules which is itself constantly changing” (7). However, Wallace acknowledges that improvisation is not completely free, as sometimes it is thought to be, nor solely tied to notions of utopianism—it can be alienating, and even dangerous. His primary concern—given that this is a written book about writers and their craft (techné)—is to highlight how the writing process can be understood as an extended improvisation. This argument recalls Derrida’s argument in Of Grammatology against the “heritage of that logocentrism which is also a phono-centricism” (11), as well as Nathaniel Mackey’s claim in Discrepant Engagement that the “rush to canonize orality as a radical departure from the values of an ‘eye-oriented’ civilization runs the risk of obscuring the attention paid by recent poets to the way the poem appears on the page” (122). Just as Mackey claims that a poem can be both visual and oral, Wallace attests that writing can be simultaneously composed and improvised.
Working with the notion of mutability borrowed from James, Wallace describes the writing process as autochthonous to improvisation: before poems or novels take their final form, they go through many drafts, materials, and negotiations made in the alacrity of the moment. Pound’s Cantos, one of the primary texts of Wallace’s analysis, are fragmentary drafts after all, designed to change and adapt over time with Pound’s reedits. One of the central dilemmas to this approach (which Wallace self-reflexively addresses and which I will explore later) is that if a performance is improvisatory, and so is a written work, then what is not? If “Improvisation allows for constant change and adaptation within a predetermined structure” (Wallace 21), then is there such a thing as an undetermined structure? I ask these questions as a preamble to where this book ultimately ventures, to set up a framework that does not threaten to unravel Wallace’s major claims, but rather endeavors to provide a cursory explanation of how improvisation can fruitfully contribute to the ever-expanding field of literary studies.

Wallace occupies the most time and textual space exploring how Pound’s poetics can be read as improvisatory, setting up Pound as a blueprint for modernist aesthetics and consciousness. Pound signifies as the model poet (and occasional straw man) in relation to whom the other poets can be read. This is an apt and compelling way to open the exploration of the book, given that Pound’s poetics openly express racism (particularly anti-Semitism)—ironically so, since his poetry “borrows” from African Americans’ pioneering use of improvised musical practices. As Aldon Lynn Nielsen has critically remarked, Pound was (like all racists) a “complicated racist” (151): his Pisan Cantos, translations of Chinese poetry (Cathy), and the use of African material in his texts require a critical reading praxis that engages with racist elements markedly complex in their textualization. In fact, Wallace feels somewhat compelled, while still acknowledging Pound’s fascist politics, to show that “Pound’s use of improvisation inadvertently led his poetics—if not always his politics—into a more liberatory space than he might have intended” (31). But is Wallace merely trying to save Pound from himself, or is it possible that in borrowing (or perhaps stealing) aspects from African American vernacular and musical traditions, often parodying them in his Cantos, that Pound was improvising by opening up spaces for dialogism among differing cultural epistemologies? Once again, this depends on how we read Pound’s translations and poetry—as pluralistic, or rather as Eurocentric renderings of other cultures, be it Chinese poetry or African American musical practices.

Thus when the subsequent chapter focuses on the poetry of Langston Hughes, perhaps a more “authentic” (though improvisation often contests “authenticity”) counterpoint is established. For example, Amiri Baraka calls Hughes “the Jazz Poet” and one of the first writers to seriously “consider the blues as a laudable and important part of American culture” (qtd. in Wallace 68). This is not to say that Pound is not “genuine” within an improvisatory context. Wallace illuminates how the fragmentary nature of Pound’s long poems are improvisationally composed from various constituents—what Charles Bernstein equates to modern sampling—but also emphasizes that this approach is largely a rendition of a more culturally viable model found in Hughes. For example, improvisatory poetics and identity for Hughes offers an aesthetic of travel and movement—key aspects of musical improvisation—that differ greatly from Pound’s more privileged position. As Wallace argues, Hughes’ Montage of a Dream Deferred can be read as improvisational, operating under a “blues imagism,” because it uses the blues as a form that is “part of the larger network of poetic fragments in the poem as a whole” (91). Once the juxtaposition has been set up between Pound and Hughes, less space is spent on exploring exactly how musical improvisation functions in the last two poets: Gertrude Stein and Wallace Stevens. Rather, a more critically astute reading of the cultural complexities surrounding improvisation in relation to modernist poetic and written practice is expounded to highlight the ethical implications of improvisation and the efficacy of the last two writers’ approaches, as situated from their differing subjectivities of poetic expression.

Wallace constantly reminds his reader that improvisation does not mean “authenticity,” nor should it: it can surprise, but it can also alienate. This does not mean that Pound was not a brilliant improviser; William Butler Yeats asserts he was, and Wallace claims that he was “improvising in spite of himself” (27). While a critical exploration into modernist consciousness does not demand that we separate racist politics from aesthetic value, Wallace does highlight an undercurrent that seems to imply that improvisation can happen (with liberatory potential) beyond its creator: hence listening on the part of the critic is itself an improvisational act that struggles within the matrices of various and often contrasting intentions to form new ways of knowing. This is rather paradoxical in the case of Pound, who viewed thought itself as a process of constant movement and change, while congruently maintaining his pursuit of absolute totality and fascist stasis.

While Pound is set up as a minstrel poet of sorts, Hughes is contrasted as a more “authentic” improviser because he actually collaborated and performed with important jazz musicians, such as with Charles Mingus on Weary Blues. This does not mean that Hughes was free from critique, or that his notions of pan-humanity were unequivocally accepted among all African American writers/critics. James Baldwin criticized “The Weary Blues” as a musical piece that copies, rather than exploits, the cadences of the blues. Wallace asserts that many critics saw Hughes’ performances of his work as more like a musician reading a score than improvising (97). Yet, it is undeniable that
Pound and Hughes, as well as Stein and Stevens, were attempting something “new,” reminding us that improvisation is often about the risk of creating new amalgamated spaces upon an old standard.

In the chapter devoted to Stein, an even harsher critical possibility is set up: that Stein is improvising/performing in blackface—that her improvisations, particularly in her Melanctha, are appropriations of black culture and therefore perhaps inauthentic. While acknowledging this reading, Wallace quotes from M. Lynn Weiss, who argues that Stein “appropriated a black voice as much from an identification with the blues of black folk, particularly as a Jew and as a lesbian, as from its function as a distancing strategy” (115). And while Baldwin criticized the “inauthenticity” of Hughes’ “The Weary Blues,” African American writer Richard Wright praised the aural qualities of Stein’s Melanctha.

The final chapter focuses on Wallace Stevens, who Wallace argues that of all the writers explored, is the one who most eloquently asserts a theory of improvisation in his poetry. Like the other modernists, however, Stevens is not a jazz poet, but rather “an improvisational poet whose interest in black culture, like that of Pound and Stein, was primitivistic and contradictory, simultaneously attracted to and repelled by the black Other” (150). All the poets here appropriate an African American musical landscape within a somewhat contradictory or divergent written form. Despite this, Wallace believes that written and musical practice can and do coexist as two sides of the same spectrum.

Wallace does a fine job stressing that all the poets discussed had an interest in music; however, whether they were classically skilled or not is a matter of contest. Certainly, they were all better writers than they were musicians. It is the modernist preoccupation with music, and with creating something “new,” that aligns most closely with what African Americans were doing when they were creating music that was difficult for white musicians to appropriate. In this way, like improvisation, African American music often defers absolute meaning while also creating culturally specific contexts that mean and perform a certain way for the participants and communities who partake in it. This is why I find it both strange and elusive that Eric Prieto argues that poetry, given the limits of the page, can never become actual music, but rather only an analogy for something else (Wallace 34)—a peculiar statement considering that perhaps music has always been poetry and poetry music, not only in contemporary settings, but also in classical contexts where poetry was often accompanied by music. Further, we often assume that if something is not performed, it is not musical. Who is to say that a reader is not performing (or improvising) a poem when she reads it silently or aloud? For Pound, poetry borders on music, what he terms melopoeia in “How to Read.”

Perhaps (and I remain intentionally ambiguous) improvisation is a traversing of borders, a breaking down of walls—in the most utopian sense, a potential for intercultural, cross-cultural, and global community building. It is a venturing towards the unknowable edge, the space that critics Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble (inadvertently drawing on a phrase they later realized was first coined by Sun Ra) address as “the other side of nowhere”—as any improviser will tell you, an exciting place to be. This unknowability does not delineate our participation, but rather opens alternative possibilities to notions of absolute fixity. As Wallace states, “Stein’s ‘black voice’ is an analogue for the ‘jazz rhythms’ which Ralph Ellison claimed to hear in the Waste Land” (116). And the dialogue continues, as DJ Spooky has remixed and integrated the voice of Stein into an electronic soundscape that adds another polymorphic element into the mix.4 The problem with perceptions of writing is that we often view the written word as a fixed, immutable product, rather than as one produced via a multiplicity of dialogues, reactions, and intercultural relations that are continually made via interpretation. The modernists are worth revisiting, as Wallace shows, because they seem to have understood this.

While it is easier for a writer to embody a contradictory space—Wallace states that we “can write and play notes but never finish” (147)—it becomes a little more difficult for the literary critic to embody a space parallel to this. For the critic, however, this need not mean the throwing away of discipline, especially if we follow Sun Ra’s consistent reminder that “there is discipline in freedom, and freedom in discipline” (qtd. in Wallace 147). Alternatively, we could allow our discipline to be dialogically inflected with a variety of other disciplines, thereby producing a dialogue that is not monologically defined by critical parameters and disciplinary borders. Given its many different social and institutional contexts, improvisation can arguably function as anti-theory: it can challenge theories that claim absolute certainty. As Sander Gilman remarks in Fortunes of the Humanities, humanities research and teaching have for too long functioned on the faulty assumption that knowledge is a rigid, unchanging, and permanent commodity (36). Improvisation research is important not merely because it is cutting edge work that few academic institutions are engaged in, but also because it opens up new spaces of dialogue, social mobility, and opportunities for retooling the basic approaches to understanding how we learn. Such a disciplined adherence to improvised critical practice becomes something like poiesis (ποίεω): a poetic act of making, a musical process that embodies spontaneous creation, surprise, and transference into a (un)finished product.
To restate an earlier quibble: is composition ever free from improvisation? And in the same way, is improvisation ever free from composition? If you have to ask yourself these questions, you might not be aware that you are improvising, or that you are defining improvisation too narrowly. As Wallace demonstrates throughout his book, “improvisation is not the province of music or any other performing art alone. It is both an aesthetic practice and a life practice” (153). Wallace is aware of what some critics will insist: if even the jazz-wary Pound can be said to embody improvisational poetics, then who can be said not to be improvising? Ultimately, this is the point—we can all be said to be improvising. This does not mean that we will all live our lives to the fullest, or will become good writers or musical improvisers without practicing, but it does mean that we all participate in some form of our own poiesis. Is there anything more liberating than believing that our greatest endeavors, however structured, are ineluctably interwoven into a vegetative field of constant mutability? That we ourselves are not fixed, but like the modernists, are able to make it all up as we go? Wallace’s Improvisation and the Making of American Literary Modernism provides a stimulating and inviting place from which to explore such questions concerning the ecumenicity and boundless limits of creative improvised practices.

Notes

1 For example, we find improvisation as a unifying element in practically all twentieth century American musical forms, particularly African American forms such as blues, jazz, and Hip Hop. For example, in Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop Guthrie P. Ramsey discusses the idea of Afro-Modernism at length by exploring black music in the twentieth century as dialogically enmeshed in an ongoing, vibrant community largely concomitant with musical improvisation.

2 See Heble and Fischlin’s introduction in The Other Side of Nowhere for a full discussion about some of the inherent dangers and misuses of improvisational practices.

3 In a rather Eurocentric reading of Pound’s poetic translatory practice, T.S. Eliot went so far as to call Pound “the inventor of Chinese poetry,” further arguing that through Pound’s translation “we really at last get the original” (14).

4 In Rhythm Science, DJ Spooky talks about how “the mix breaks free from the old associations. New contexts form from old. The script gets flipped. The languages evolve and learn to speak in new forms, new thoughts. The sound of thought becomes legible again at the edge of the new meanings” (25).

Works Cited


