Book Review

A Taste for Chaos: The Art of Literary Improvisation

Randy Fertel  
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Reviewed by Rob Wallace

In one of his final poems, “July Mountain,” Wallace Stevens declares that we are all “Thinkers without final thoughts/ In an always incipient cosmos” (476). Stevens is one of the most prominent of the many guiding spirits in A Taste for Chaos: The Art of Literary Improvisation. Lines from his poems provide many epigraphs and chapter titles throughout the book, which is an “incipient cosmos” of its own—a book connecting perspectives from different scholarly disciplines and historical periods into a provocative synthesis. Literary scholar and philanthropist Randy Fertel has worked in, and on, this “cosmos” of interdisciplinary perspectives on literary improvisation for over forty years, as evidenced by the erudition and complexity of his insights throughout the text. Riffing on the common improv comedy adage, Fertel notes in the preface that he “said yes a lot and this book is a record of the adventures that ensued” (xv). A comic book—in the old sense of embracing the cosmos with a sense of optimism—A Taste of Chaos attempts what has rarely been done in English (or, at least to this writer’s knowledge, in any other language), which is to articulate a theory of improvisation as it relates to the history of literature. Phil Pastras’s unpublished dissertation, A Clear Field: The Idea of Improvisation in Modern Poetry (Rutgers University, 1981) is the only other text in relatively recent memory that attempts as deep of a chronological tour as Fertel’s book, but Fertel is the only writer to have attempted such a sweeping assessment of literature in the Western tradition. Ranging from the Old Testament/Torah to the work of contemporary novelist Ian McEwan, A Taste of Chaos is a dazzling display of literary and cultural history.

Some readers will be disappointed by the lack of attention to authors whose work seems more obviously appropriate to such a discussion—for example, writers from the African American tradition such as Toni Morrison or Ralph Ellison. However, as Fertel argues early on in the book, his guiding principle is not to investigate the various strands of improvisatory aesthetic that undoubtedly influenced and arguably created contemporary “Western” culture (such as the African diaspora), but rather to locate this seemingly “non-Western” impulse at the heart of the, supposedly, un-improvisational Western tradition. Many recent works of critical improvisation studies seek to expand the scope of artists and thinkers included in the intellectual discussion, often by valorizing improvisation as an oppositional practice and adopting anti-colonial/anti-racist ethics which originate in marginalized groups. Fertel addresses this by taking a different tack:

improvisation is . . . its own tradition and one that interweaves with and shadows the Great Tradition. Improvisation is a kind of dark disruptive version ever in dialogue with the mainstream . . . an alternative narrative of western culture, less linear and periodic than we usually see, more cyclical or spiral in nature. . . the effort to dismantle the entire edifice of authority: how we make and judge value, how we determine what is good and bad, and how we know the world. (xix)
Fertel here perhaps intentionally echoes Paul Gilroy’s emblematic Black Atlantic idea of “counter-culture of modernity,” but this improvisational counterculture predates even modernity itself.

Some readers will be dismayed by uses—even slightly ironic uses—of terms like “the Great Tradition” here. Likewise, many readers will note that there are hardly any women authors featured. But again, Fertel’s mission is to explore how improvisation, which has often been denigrated by white, male, straight, Euro-centric culture, is actually a key ingredient of even the most Euro-centric historical events. In other words, if improvisation—like femininity, blackness, queerness, etc.—has often been ignored or actively reviled, how is it that improvisation nevertheless seems to occur at key moments and in key texts of white, monolithic Western “high” culture? How is it that in a tradition premised on rational, composed, highly “artificial” texts (in the sense of “carefully constructed”), some of the most interesting and influential examples of those texts appeal to “artlessness,” spontaneity, and even irrationality? Fertel admits that “Non-western philosophy and literature are shot through with the same tensions between art and artlessness . . . But I have to limit myself somewhere, don’t I? I wish to bracket the Non-west while suggesting in passing that the conceptual field I seek to explore is essentially human and hence universal” (18).

Some readers may balk at seemingly unfashionable claims of essentialism and universality and quasi-structuralist theories of improvisation in literature, be it Western or not. However, the quality and depth of Fertel’s insights cannot easily be dismissed, even in this age of post-postmodernism.

Again, Wallace Stevens at his best is a useful guide for what Fertel is after here: a “supreme fiction,” a provisional order to chaos that is in fact what defines the chaos. And the chaos of Fertel’s title is no mere metaphor from poetry—one of his innovations is to convey a compelling lay perspective on late-twentieth century chaos science and link these insights to the earlier histories of literary and philosophical discourse detailed throughout the book. Just as fractals, the geometric patterns arising out of chaotic systems, can represent order and disorder at once, improvisation often occupies a space of organized spontaneity. As Fertel notes, “the questions chaos scientists pose are just what improvisations ask: Does the measuring device of ordered rationality answer the thing measured? Will rationality miss nothing of life’s profusion? Is it enough only to measure the predetermined? What about all the fortuitous, random aspects of life?” (175).

Focusing on “moments of historic upheaval when our way of knowing the world was changing,” Fertel argues that “improvisations were articulations of those paradigm shifts, expressing the inevitable tensions such upheavals engender” (xvii). While it is difficult to succinctly articulate Fertel’s complex arguments, A Taste for Chaos provides the reader with some clarity by outlining central points throughout its basic structure.

Divided into two large sections, the book essentially outlines a theory of literary improvisation in “Part 1: Methodological Groundwork,” and gives detailed readings of texts that exemplify the theory in “Part 2: Applications.” Like all good criticism, one of the effects of Fertel’s extended readings is to make us want to go and re-read the texts, some of which will be unfamiliar to even the most well-read audiences. In the “Applications” section, the chapters I find the most compelling are: “Free and Easy: The Politics of Spontaneity in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn” and “Pierce[d] . . . with Strange Relation: Jung, Joyce, and Mann Embrace the Back Streets”—yet other readers will most likely find something to their tastes as well, given the range of chronological and stylistic terrain covered.
Much of the book is devoted to literature and literary analysis, but readers interested in the broader domain of critical improvisation studies will also benefit from Fertel’s extensive theoretical discussion in the first section of the book. In fact, it is in this almost 250-page treatise that Fertel makes his most significant contributions to not only literary studies but also the wider world of critical improvisation studies, since he engages with profound interdisciplinarity to illuminate his ideas about improvisation. From religious studies to chaos theory, from psychology to jazz studies, Fertel assembles a taxonomy and rough and ready genealogy of improvisation in literary and philosophical thought stretching back thousands of years.

One of the most compelling elements in the book is Fertel’s impatience with arguments about authenticity and improvisation. He argues that, “evaluation [is] one of the least interesting things we can do with spontaneity” (7). In other words, was On the Road “actually” improvised, or is its claim of spontaneity and improvisational status noteworthy in its own right? Fertel argues that there is a kind of rhetorical strategy in literary texts that relies on a deep human desire for spontaneity, even (and perhaps especially) when those texts have been carefully crafted unspontaneously: “Improvisations may all fail ultimately in their claim of pure unmediated spontaneity. But far more interesting than their failure are the internal contradictions between an improvisation’s longing for spontaneity and its recognition of that impossibility, our longing for freedom and the inherent constraints on freedom we inevitably face” (10).

Fertel provides a helpful list of features (such as the appearance of spontaneity in a text, a text’s claim to be written under the influence of the supernatural, etc.) found in improvised-or-supposedly-improvised texts that are consistent across the ages, making it possible to locate various texts as “polytropic” examples of a “meta-genre . . . [an] umbrella mode of discourse” (46-7). His examples of such a meta-genre include everything from the Homeric poems to postmodern fiction—making it perhaps seem that everything suddenly looks improvised. However, as George E. Lewis and other notable critical improvisation studies scholars have often suggested, this ubiquity of improvisation even in supposedly “fixed” texts is a sign of the pervasiveness of improvisation in all facets of life and how naturalized it has become. Fertel’s arguments reawaken us to the improvisational qualities that are already present, but which now take on additional meanings in connection to ongoing traditions of human inquiry and curiosity.

Readers fluent in musicological discourse will note that Fertel relies on relatively older, even conservative (i.e., Stanley Crouch) jazz scholarship—focusing primarily on Louis Armstrong, his fellow New Orleanian—for his more musicologically-centred ideas on improvisation. Nevertheless, Fertel’s insights on Armstrong and his relationship to speech, text, and visual art are compelling and well-worth investigating. Overall, Armstrong’s comic spirit—if not the spirit of the old Mardi Gras Krewe, Comus—is a fitting parallel to Wallace Stevens’s more austere but comedic embrace of chaos that is featured throughout Fertel’s book. A Taste for Chaos reminds us that improvisation is everywhere, even where we least expect it, and that when we embrace it, we are more alive in “an always incipient chaos.”

Works Cited
