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**Mission Statement:** The purpose of An International Journal of Exploratory Meta-Living is to provide a resource for the dissemination of creative works relevant to the subject of meta-living. The journal welcomes both academic and artistic exercises expressed in any medium capable of being transmitted through the physical mechanisms of the journal. Due consideration also will be given to submissions that do not conform to these mechanisms. The journal explicitly forbids the establishment of a regular publication schedule.

**Meta-Living:** One useful avenue leading toward an understanding of the term meta-living is through analogy, particularly by considering meta-fiction. Wikipedia, the oracle of all contemporary knowledge, defines meta-fiction as “the literary term describing fictional writing that self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in posing questions about the relationship between fiction and reality, usually using irony and self-reflection.”<sup>1</sup> By straight-forward analogy, meta-living is the existential term describing a manner of living that self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in posing questions about the relationship between existence and reality, using irony and self-reflection among other devices. These other devices include, but are not limited to, scientific inquiry, ontology, various theologisms, sophistry, rhetoric, tomfoolery, transcendental perspectivism and, of course, the omnipresent specter of post-existential relativism.

<sup>1</sup><https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metafiction>, accessed 2014 April 16.

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**A Note on the Font:** This font is Dax Compact Regular, designed by the late Hans Reichel, musician, instrument maker and font designer.

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# Spring Thoughts In Pursuit of the Improvised Novel

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**Abstract:** In this letter, a few thoughts are shared regarding the nature of the improvisational creative process and its application to writing. Here, through a reliance on a continuing analogy with music, we state our hypothesis that there could exist (and may already exist) a class of improvised novels, which are distinguished from novels generated through the traditional composition-based creative process by many of the same characteristics that differentiate improvised and composed music.

In music, composition and improvisation lead to different outcomes. At the extremes, composition can lead to a symphony of classical music in which the many performers of the orchestra coordinate their efforts to reproduce a music transcribed into sheet music by the composer, often long dead. In this category, we could cite as an example almost any classical symphony, though if we pressed to identify a specific example, we could arbitrarily choose Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. Improvisation, on the other hand, leads to something distinctly different, in which the collection of musicians coordinate their efforts in real time to produce a music adhering often to some general principles but not to a note-by-note transcription. Again, one specific, widely acknowledged example of improvisation is Ascension by John Coltrane. At these extremes, the differences between the products of composition and improvisation are immediately recognizable to the ear. Almost as obvious is the fact that the musicians involved in the two processes had different motivations. We shall not at this time

attempt an exploration of the differences in motivations, we shall only make the point, important to our purpose here, that a symphony of Beethoven could not have been generated through an improvisational process. Similarly, a work like Ascension could not have been generated through a compositional process. It is important enough to restate that Ascension is a work unique to the process of improvisation. There are probably few who would argue these rather evident points. While we have cited as examples two works performed by ensembles, the same argument can be made for solo performances, e.g. a pianist performing the composition of a classical etude or a saxophonist performing a solo improvisation.

As an aside and to forestall common objections, we certainly accept that many musicians, for either esthetic, intellectual or commercial reasons, have intentionally blurred the lines between composition and improvisation, in attempts to create a music that exists between these two poles and that possesses

some characteristics of both. (One might, for the sake of argument, even advocate the position that there are no purely compositional or improvisational pieces—that all music falls somewhere along the spectrum between these two asymptotes.) There is evidence that even soloists in classical symphonies were once expected to improvise to some extent. Again, a thorough analysis of the combination of composition and improvisation is beyond the scope of this brief note. Our point remains that adhering to compositional or improvisational creative processes results in different attributes in the music thus produced.

Writing, on the other hands, is almost instinctively and exclusively regarded as a work of solo composition. In fact the primary definition of the verb, *compose*, is to “*write or create (a work of art, especially music or poetry)*”. Writing is synonymous with composition.

However, at the Poison Pie Publishing House, it has been our endeavor to support written works that are generated through an improvisational rather than compositional creative process. We are continually guided in this effort by the analogy with music. We define the improvisational creative process by studying the written and musical records of improvising musicians. We are motivated to create an improvised novel by our own personal experience in which we have found that the music of Coltrane speaks to us more clearly than does the music of Beethoven. This observation gives us the idea that there exists a class of novels, that can be generated uniquely through an improvisational process, and that necessarily could not be created through the traditional compositional process. It is to that ideal which we strive, to, in a phrase, aspire toward the realization of a novel that rivals Ascension as an improvised work of art.

That the fruits of such an effort should be derided or ignored by a fair portion of critics and rejected by many intelligent readers is a virtual certainty and likely an essential component of the confirmation of the success of the creative effort. Just as many in

this world favor symphonies over improvisation, how much more so will many favor the composed novel over the improvised novel? However, just as in music there are those listeners who prefer improvisation, we allow the likelihood that an analogous group of like-minded readers exists but is not readily identifiable owing to the absence of improvised novels. (That their absence is invisible rather than conspicuous only further supports the idea that writing is regarded as intimately tied to a compositional creative process.) There is hope that we shall find a channel by which we can bring these improvised novels to the attention of members of the reading public, no matter how few in number, who possess the peculiar (substitute perverse if it suits you) esthetic sense to appreciate such a novel.

“What,” one may ask, “are the attributes of such a novel?” That is a question we have answered at length previously.<sup>1</sup> Here we shall only provide a pithy statement. In an improvised novel, the author relinquishes complete control over the outcome of the effort, allowing the events of the local time and place to influence the outcome, resulting in an organic network of connectivity of characters and events that reflects not only the individual disposition of the author but anonymous elements of the day that would not have been judged sufficiently noteworthy as to merit inclusion in a formally composed work. The success of any novel, whether it is composed or improvised, relies on the skill and dedication of the author to his or her craft. As we have repeatedly noted, such a novel is written by an author and for an audience who possesses, in the words of the non-idiomatic, improvisational guitarist, Derek Bailey, “an impatience with the gruesomely predictable”.

## References

1. Keffer, D.J., *A Literature of Non-Idiomatic Improvisation*, <http://www.poisonpie.com/publishing/text/aliteratureofnonidiomaticimprovisation.html>, accessed Feb. 5, 2014.