

A Literature of Non-Idiomatic Improvisation



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Author's Name Redacted[†]
Department of X,
University of X, City, State XXXXX-XXXX

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Abstract

In this document, a description of the literature of non-idiomatic improvisation is provided. An analogy with the established field of non-idiomatic improvised music is continuously employed to define a literary counterpart. Elements of both the non-idiomatic nature and the improvisational nature of literature are identified. Five works of fiction by established authors are evaluated in terms of these criteria. Finally, one work of fiction by an author who identifies himself as a writer of non-idiomatic improvised literature is discussed.

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[†]author to whom correspondence should be addressed: *author's email address redacted*

In so far as I listen with interest to a record, it's usually to figure out how it was arrived at. The musical end product is where interest starts to flag. It's a bit like jigsaw puzzles. Emptied out of the box, there's a heap of pieces, all shapes, sizes and colours, in themselves attractive and could add up to anything— intriguing. Figuring out how to put them together can be interesting, but what you finish up with as often as not is a picture of unsurpassed banality. Music's like that.

—Derek Bailey¹

I. Introduction

I.A. Music as a Puzzle

Among those music listeners familiar with the name Derek Bailey, he is generally considered to be a seminal figure in the development of a breed of music that came to be known as European Free Improvisation.² Like any experimental music, this music too experienced a variety of labels, including non-idiomatic improvisation. Today, some scholars, formal and informal, of music of the cultural margin eschew the label “non-idiomatic improvisation” as a general term, since it has become specifically synonymous with the brand of European Free Improvisation that began in the late 1960's and continues to the present (2013 at the time of this writing). Nevertheless, herein we shall invoke the term “non-idiomatic improvisation” and refer to its original, literal meaning, namely as improvisation outside of conventional idioms. Musically, non-idiomatic improvisation was to be distinguished from other musical traditions that employed improvisation, including Indian classical, flamenco, baroque, jazz and rock genres.³ We understand that once a particular methodology takes hold, it becomes its own idiom. Herein, we imagine an idealized non-idiomatic improvisation, which maintains a state of continuous evolution.

Bailey remained musically enigmatic even in a field in which individual creativity, spontaneity and originality are key features. His quote above captures many of his idiosyncrasies and articulates in a beautifully crafted metaphor the importance of the creative process in non-idiomatic improvisation. It is the process of creation that provides a subject of interest to creator and listener alike. The final product is, in this metaphor, an unavoidable by-product of the process.

Today, we live in an age of recorded music. For those (including the author) who live far from the international metropolises where support of artists of the cultural margin is largely focused, the primary means of access to this music is through recorded media. Few would argue with the contention that this recorded media, whether it presents audio alone or both audio and video, is capable of conveying only an incomplete portion of the entirety of the experience of the live event. (Some might argue it provides a superior experience, by culling the unpleasant aspects of the performance, such as paying for parking, staying up too late when having to work the following morning, standing next to someone who becomes progressively more drunk during the show, etc...) Regardless, it can be confidently stated in many cases that more people experience the music via recorded media than were present in the live event (not to mention improvisations in the studio occurring in the absence of a public presence) and thus the reality of the means of delivery cannot be ignored. Thus we have musical documents of improvisation.

The documents themselves are no longer improvised, for they are unchanging, as if written in stone. (Of course, we accept the distinction between the music and the physical object which carries the music, but bear with this argument as we come to our point.)

It becomes more difficult to distinguish the creative process from the musical product when the music is delivered as a product on a vinyl record or a polycarbonate compact disc or a silicon hard drive. Do our ears hear the creative process or the final product? The answer to this question is a matter only of interpretation by the brain located between the ears that are engaged in the listening process. The brain finds something beautiful or interesting (or repugnant or boring as the case may be) depending on not only the subject of investigation but the current environment in which the exposure takes place as well as the history of the brain's experiences, which has predisposed it to view the subject from a particular perspective, be it positive, negative or neutral.

When listening to the music of Derek Bailey and many other more or less well-known non-idiomatic improvisational musicians, while my ears capture the fluctuations in the pressure waves that carry the audio content, what registers with my brain is the cumulative sum of experiences in the musician's life that led them to the point where they chose to pursue a path that offered a creative outlet with little or no promise of the ability to make a living, large or small. In this music, I hear clearly the conviction of an artist who accepted a life of being unheard by the vast majority of the music listening population, ignored by institutions that would grant credentials of artistic merit, and hence ever engaged in a financial struggle to meet one's needs. Creativity under these harsh conditions possesses a greater significance and gravitas because there is real artistic and personal risk associated with the creative process.

So, we have these musical documents. They contain some aspect of the crucial creative process, the intriguing puzzle-like aspect of the music. Whether that message is delivered to the listener is a matter no longer in the hands of the artist who created the music, especially in the case of those like Bailey, who have since died.

I.B. Literature as a Puzzle

Let us think of Bailey's metaphor of puzzles as it applies to literature rather than music. The quote is reproduced below, in which obvious substitutions have been made.

In so far as I read with interest a book, it's usually to figure out how it was arrived at. The literary end product is where interest starts to flag. It's a bit like jigsaw puzzles. Emptied out of the box, there's a heap of pieces, all shapes, sizes and colours, in themselves attractive and could add up to anything—intriguing. Figuring out how to put them together can be interesting, but what you finish up with as often as not is a picture of unsurpassed banality. Literature's like that.

Read with these adaptations, one's initial response to the modified statement is perhaps that it is not appropriate in its application to literature. We have invented terms to describe just the opposite effect. For example, we say, "That volume ended with a cliff-hanger," or "That was a nail-biter of a whodunit novel," or we say, "I couldn't put the book down," so compelled were we to discover the twist of plot, the unlikely culprit, the impossible means of escape from what seemed the protagonist's certain doom. To those books, Bailey's adage does not seem to apply very well. While the uncertainty of the final picture is the driving force for creating the tension that engages the reader and drives them to keep reading, it can be said, as often as not, that once

the surprise is sprung, the picture is not one of unsurpassed banality. There are many talented writers in the world who have devised ingenious and creative final pictures.

Nevertheless, there does exist a body of literature to which Bailey's statement utterly and completely applies. Bailey explicitly identifies two attractive elements of music that intrigues him: the undefined possibilities of the constituent components and the actual process of deciphering them. The same can be said of literature. Interest can be generated by the choice, combination and juxtaposition of elements—particular words, styles, forms. As a reader encounters them, unusual content and technique can prompt them to imagine a host of outcomes, some potentially without precedent. As with music or a jigsaw puzzle, participation in the reading process contains the dynamic and potentially revelatory content of the book. Once the book is finished, even for a particularly thought-provoking book, the mental stimulation diminishes.

Many readers would likely agree that, of all books, a volume of poetry is suited to this description. In poetry literary invention is most accommodated. Experimentation with words, styles and form is not unexpected. Fitting the pieces together is part of the process of reading poetry. While each poem may be composed of many puzzle pieces arranged to form a large chunk of puzzle, it is still a fragment of the entire book. Volumes of poetry therefore do not depend for success upon the product as a whole, but rather the components and process, as do puzzles or the music that Bailey describes as interesting him. On the other hand, finished poems are rarely improvised, but rather are crafted through repeated editing and tinkering if not wholesale rewriting.

Rob Wallace has identified elements of improvisation in four modernist poets (Ezra Pound, Langston Hughes, Gertrude Stein and Wallace Stevens).⁴ In many respects, this document parallels Wallace's critical analysis of improvisation in poetry, including the reliance on a musical analogy. This document is, however, distinct from Wallace's analysis in two main respects. First, Wallace focuses on poetry, while fiction is the literary subject of interest here. Second, and more importantly, Wallace focuses on an idiom, that of modernist poetry, whereas, this document seeks to explore non-idiomatic improvisation.

There is to my knowledge, no pre-existing group of writers who have identified themselves as non-idiomatic improvisers of their art. Nevertheless, I postulate that there is a body of fiction that one could reasonably suggest satisfies the criteria of non-idiomatic improvisational literature. In order to identify works that exemplify this principle, we must first establish a set of defining characteristics of non-idiomatic improvisational literature.

II. The Defining Criteria of Non-Idiomatic Improvised Literature

What are the characteristics of non-idiomatic improvised literature? There should be perhaps only two criteria. First, the writing should be non-idiomatic. Second, the writing should be improvised. That much makes sense. I offer apologies in advance if what comes next is less satisfactory in both its clarity and brevity.

II.A. The Non-Idiomatic in Non-Idiomatic Improvised Literature

The literature of non-idiomatic improvisation is non-idiomatic, meaning that it does not sit within the existing genres of literature. What are the existing genres? The Book Industry Study Group has established a set of Book Industry Standards and Communications (BISAC)

categories by which books are labeled.⁵ These categories include ‘westerns’, ‘romance’, ‘science fiction’, ‘mystery & detective’, ‘fantasy’, as well as ‘gay’, ‘Christian’ and ‘African American’. Not surprisingly, there is currently no category for ‘non-idiomatic improvisation’. Of course, the creation of such a category would be by definition self-extinguishing.

Non-idiomatic literature sits outside these categories though it of course shares similarities with these existing categories. As a trivial example, the media will likely remain the same. Just as non-idiomatic improvised music is released on the same media (records, compact discs, mp3 files) as idiomatic music, so too is the literature of non-idiomatic improvisation released as physical and electronic books. We continue to rely on the established parallel with its musical counter-part to characterize how non-idiomatic literature is distinguished from other literature.

From Bailey’s puzzle quote, we understand that the non-idiomatic element of the music he describes is characterized by its originality or deviance from established forms. In another quote, Bailey rephrases the goal of non-idiomatic improvisers. “That’s one thing we had in common. An impatience with the gruesomely predictable.”¹ Thus the non-idiomatic part of the puzzle is manifested as an unpredictability, that what would emerge from a performance was not already documented as a categorizable quantity.

Joe Morris, a non-idiomatic improvisational guitarist and scholar, in his book “Perpetual Frontiers: The Properties of Free Music”, identifies three tools of non-idiomatic improvised music: synthesis, interpretation and invention.⁶ These characteristics, while not independent of the essence of Bailey’s quote, provide another useful perspective for the discussion of non-idiomatic improvisation. According to Morris, synthesis involves the merging of existing styles. It is the first rung of the ladder of non-idiomatic expression. It represents a deviation from the formulaic approach of a single genre by introducing elements of another genre. Interpretation involves using one’s individual voice or techniques in a way that violates the tradition of the genre. It is the second rung of the ladder of non-idiomatic expression because it involves a greater exercise in creativity than the combining operation of synthesis. Invention involves the creation of new avenues for expression. It is the third and highest run of the ladder of non-idiomatic expression. Invention requires awareness of influential work, a knowledge of existing styles, and also, according to Morris, a rationale for the invention. This requirement of purpose for creative invention is perhaps not a necessity in absolute terms but, following Morris, it is one to which we will adhere herein. These three tools developed for non-idiomatic improvised musical expression we shall apply to our study of non-idiomatic improvised literature. We will seek to identify the elements of synthesis, interpretation and invention in specific pieces of writing and logically draw from this the conclusion that the work is one of non-idiomatic improvisation. (Morris cautions, “My use of synthesis, interpretation and invention isn’t meant as a suggestion for *what* musicians should do but rather as a description of what musicians actually *do* in the process of formulating a methodology.”⁷) It is hopefully not too great a liberty to suggest that the unpredictability sought by Bailey can be created through the use of Morris’ tools of synthesis, interpretation and invention. It is not clear that these three tools present either a necessary or sufficient set of methods, but since we are not traveling upon a path of mathematics, we can forego such rigor and proceed with a comfortable flexibility (or ambiguity, depending upon one’s point of view). However, before we apply these criteria, we must address the second criteria of non-idiomatic improvised literature, namely that it be improvised.

II.B. The Improvised in Non-Idiomatic Improvised Literature

What does it mean for a literary work to be improvised? Again, our understanding benefits from a comparison with music. The intuitive answer (again according to Bailey) is: “Improvisation is not knowing what it is until you do it, composition is not doing it until you know what it is.”¹ In music there is a fundamental distinction between composition and improvisation. In composition, musicians perform a score that has previously been created either by themselves or by another composer. In improvisation, musicians create spontaneously in response to the criteria of the moment, including their own state of mind, the presence of other musicians, and the environmental conditions of the performance space. Thus the essential distinction between composition and improvisation lies in the process, not in the final product. There are many other subsidiary distinctions between composition and improvisation, but none so clear as the description of the process. Some may argue that a crucial distinction between composition and improvisation is the respect for tradition, which is embedded in the existing score. However, numerous examples to the contrary exist. There are experimental (non-idiomatic) composers. There are also conventional improvisers, who comply with the established forms for improvisation within their genre. As an example, in George Lewis’s analysis of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), members of the AACM invoked both composition and improvisation and in neither case was there a strict demonstrated adherence to established musical structures.⁸

On the distinction between composing and improvising, British bassist, composer and improviser, Barry Guy, noted⁹,

The first thing to say about improvising and composing is that the music emanates from the same body the brain and the heart (soul) working at the music in a totally committed way. This fact is indisputable and inescapable. In my case there have been many years of assimilating different musics, so in one sense the marriage between the two does not present a problem. It is just a matter of discipline and being aware of the potential conflicts that may lay ahead for the unwary creator. The act of freely improvising constructing and reacting in real time represents and recognises an absolute in communication. In the right circumstances this embodiment of intention/implementation, process/realization and receiving/giving provides for an often euphoric sense of being. Performer and composer as one. Composing alone has similar objectives but exists in a different time frame without the obvious physical involvement and (naturally) of course the composer has a singular discourse where the main physical activity is in the mental gymnastics rather than in the body. Creativity is the key. In these days of diminishing liberties and increased surveillance, improvising and composing possibly represent one of the last bastions of freedom. Whilst composing and writing down music, I try to preserve that sense of spontaneous creativity and freedom which then (If I achieve my goal) affects and liberates the interpreting musicians.

Guy’s distinctions between composition and improvisation, which share a common origin, center on communication and time frame. The element of communication is largely confined to group improvisation as opposed to solo improvisation. As writing is an individual activity, we can imagine that from Guy’s point of view, the key element identifying a work as improvisation

lies within the time frame. The time frame is again a fundamental element of the creative process. Thus, the key distinctive element of improvised music from composed music lies in the process of creation.

Thus we come to the question, “Can a novel be improvised?” On the surface, the novel provides a written document, akin to a score, which tends to make us think of it automatically as a composition. However, as noted above, the distinction does not lie in the media by which the final product is distributed. Just as both composed and improvised music appear on the same media, so too are composed and improvised works of literature available in the same form—the book. The distinction, again, is in the writing process.

Improvised writing describes a process in which one writes spontaneously, without knowing the end result, at the time of writing, although during the process a destination for the writing may gradually come into being (rather than simply bursting into existence at the moment the last sentence is written). Ideas that have long gestated in the mind of the author, not spontaneous of their own right, may spontaneously emerge in the writing. From this point of view it is the author and not the reader that makes the determination if a work is composed or improvised.

One wonders if one can reliably ask a reader to act as judge as to whether a particular literary work is composed or improvised based on reading it. Again, we rely on the analogy with music. Can one ask a listener to judge a song as a work of composition or improvisation? In many cases, a listener can so judge because music is often the work of a collective ensemble and the traits of cooperativity among musicians are very different for a composition than for improvisation. This observation is especially true of an idiomatic composition. No one will mistake a piece of classical western music performed by an orchestra as improvisation. However, among non-idiomatic works, the distinction is not so clear. For example, some of the orchestral works of Anthony Braxton, a saxophonist, improviser and composer, are difficult to dissect by ear (at least by me) in terms of which portions are composed and which are improvised.

When a song is performed by a solo musician, the distinction between composition and improvisation is more difficult to determine by ear, since one can no longer rely on the cooperativity among different musicians. In listening to a solo work by a practitioner of non-idiomatic improvisation, one automatically assumes that it is an improvisation, because of the musician’s reputation or because the musician has said that the piece is an improvisation. Thus there is a precedent from music in allowing the creator of the work to define its status as composition or improvisation. The declaration is not verifiable by the listener, who is not privy to the internal creative process of the musician. There may be, however, various characteristics of improvised music, which provide indicators to experienced listeners of the improvised nature of the work.

Thus in writing, which is generally a solo creative exercise, it is natural to expect the author to define the work as a composition or an improvisation. That we infrequently think of writing as improvisation makes us perhaps reluctant to accept what on the basis of this music/literature analogy seem relatively obvious. Clearly, it remains in the purview of the reader to state, “I don’t believe this writing was improvised on the spot,” just as a listener could state, “I don’t believe this music was improvised on the spot.” To that I congratulate the vigilant reader/listener; nothing should be taken at face value and questioning the statements of the artist can ultimately serve as an attribute of greater receptivity to the work.

As in music, there are gradations of composition and improvisation. In jazz as in other idioms, there are improvisations around a central theme. So too in non-idiomatic music can

there be improvisation around a non-idiomatic score or score outline. In writing, the presence of an outline is intended to organize the work prior to writing. The presence of a general outline is not necessary for improvised writing, however such an outline also is not sufficient to disqualify work from being improvised. There can be improvisation within a framework laid down by a general outline. In fact it is often said that the presence of constraints stimulate the creative process.

In general, improvised music is not subject to post processing, and such recorded releases are proudly marketed as “recorded as heard”. Improvised writing, in order to maintain its status as a work of improvisation should be subject to minimal editing and “read as written”. The correction of typographical, spelling and grammatical errors in order to conform to basic standards of language is perhaps acceptable, much in the way that normalization of a performance is required to provide some minimal standards for recording quality. Complete rewriting of sections or of the whole removes the status of improvisation, although it may result in a manuscript that is by some standards more cohesive, polished and marketable.

To some the idea of a well-polished piece of writing without extensive editorial modification is an oxymoron if not anathema. Perhaps, this is why literature is not commercially presented as improvisation. The devil’s advocate might argue that improvised literature, if it exists at all, is unknown because it is not polished by a post-writing process. Similar arguments could surely be voiced against improvisational music, which, despite these arguments, exists.

To take our continuing analogy with music one step further, the argument that improvisational writing could be improved through editing or structural transformation (or perhaps petrification) into composition is akin to arguing that improvised music could be improved by modification of the original and transformation into a composition, which is an obviously ludicrous supposition. The idea that, for example, a jazz improvisation, can be improved by a transformation into a classical composition, is based on a fundamental absence of understanding of the purpose a jazz, a topic of such vast breadth that we skirt it here for fear of becoming perpetually lost within it. As a concrete example, consider the work of Thelonious Monk, which can be characterized as compositions that invite a significant degree of improvisation. Of the many interpretations of Monk’s repertoire, some are wholly composed, e.g. the Kronos Quartet, while others are largely improvised, e.g. Steve Lacy. The esthetic preference for one style (representing a point along the spectrum from wholly improvised to wholly composed) over the other is simply a matter of the individual taste of the listener, some of whom may very well enjoy both!

Regardless, we observe that, in the absence of extensive post-writing editing, putting something meaningful down in the first and final draft is essential. In order to make the “first draft” an acceptable “final draft”, it takes practice. This too is held in common with improvised musicians. Both Bailey and Morris are on record as noting the importance of practice. An improviser does not practice the exact sequence of sounds that will emerge during a performance, but they do extensively practice the development of their technique. Thus, when they are called upon to perform, they are able to spontaneously produce improvised music as if it were second nature to them. So too is it with successful improvised writing. Constant practice is essential.

In Wallace’s examination of improvisation in modernist poetry, he identifies three modes of analysis for improvisation in poetry.⁴ They are (1) investigating the “compositional technique”; in other words, showing that the work was done in one sitting, in a rush of inspiration, (2)

locating and naming the improvisational effects in a text, and (3) developing a theory of improvisation. While our criteria are distinct, there is certainly a great deal of overlap.

There does exist a field known as ‘automatic writing’ (or psychography), in which the writer claims that the writing is produced from a subconscious or external source without conscious awareness of the content. Spiritual issues aside, improvised writing bears little in common with automatic writing. While the source may be traced to the subconscious, in improvised writing, the consciousness is very much engaged in committing words to the page in a sensible manner in real time.

There also exists a practice known as ‘free writing’, which is considered a prewriting technique in which a person writes for a set period of time without regard to spelling, grammar or topic, producing raw material that may help overcome writer’s block. Improvised writing is related to free writing but is distinct in many respects, including purpose. Improvised writing elevates free writing to a finished form through continuous practice. Improvised writing can no more be labeled as strictly a prewriting or practice routine than musical improvisation can be called a practice technique. As noted in the Guy quote above, both improvisation and composition require discipline and awareness to be successful.

II.C. Non-Idiomatic Improvisation and Memory

It should be enough that there are the two characteristics of non-idiomatic improvised literature given above. However, we suggest a third trait here, which is poorly documented and perhaps not well understood, having to do with memory.

It is considered an essential feature of a successful pop song to have a catchy hook that sticks in one’s mind, that one finds oneself humming after the song has finished. I propose that a successful attribute of non-idiomatic improvised music has exactly the opposite characteristic; it does not stick in one’s mind. To go further, the best non-idiomatic improvised music cannot be captured by memory at all. Each time a person listens to a piece of recorded non-idiomatic improvised music, it should be like they have never heard it before.

From my own experience, I find this to be true. If I was asked to hum my favorite Derek Bailey tune, I could not do it, although I can certainly recognize some songs that I have heard many times, when they are played. At the same time, the inability to recall this song cannot be strictly attributed to a poor memory since I am capable of recalling many popular melodies heard decades ago in my youth.

Before I gave this curious aspect of non-idiomatic improvisation conscious thought, I imagined my inability to recall it as a personal fault. I attributed it to my admittedly poor memory or incomplete concentration during the listening experience or simply access to more music than I could properly internalize. After some consideration, I have come to the belated realization that this elusiveness is a characteristic not of the listener but of non-idiomatic improvisation. The brain does not have a ready-made manner in which to characterize and store information that (by definition) defies categorization. Evolution has endowed the human brain with physiological pattern recognition capabilities. Rhythm, melody, harmony are characteristics of patterns. The absence or intentional distortion of these characteristics perverts the brain’s best efforts to store this information. Consequently due to incompatibilities between the structure of the music and expectations of the brain, the music is either lost or at least not easily retrievable. I propose that non-idiomatic literature shares this memory-defying quality.

As an aside, such a characteristic of music requires that if I am to describe a piece of music, I must do so either while listening to it or in silence within a few minutes of the piece having finished or preferably not at all. Perhaps others share this experience.

III. Case Studies in Non-Idiomatic Improvised Literature

III.A. Five Published Works by Internationally Recognized Writers

In Joe Morris's book on non-idiomatic music (freely improvised music as he would prefer it to be called), he provides three concrete examples of musicians (Anthony Braxton, Cecil Taylor and Ornette Coleman) who demonstrate the three tools of synthesis, interpretation and invention, in order to better clarify the general concepts that appear earlier in his book.⁶ Here we follow this example and provide some concrete examples of non-idiomatic improvised literature. Our task is perhaps more difficult because, in the case of music, Braxton, Taylor and Coleman are universally recognized by those who know of them as improvisers who significantly expanded the boundaries of their musical heritage. In writing, to my knowledge, no authors have owned up to writing along an improvisational path.

We have already established that it is the musician (or writer by analogy and artist in general) who possesses the final authority in terms of identifying a work as a product of composition or improvisation. Herein, I examine five books to determine to what extent they satisfy the above listed criteria of non-idiomatic improvised literature. I choose books that are relatively well known, written by critically (if not popularly) acknowledged authors. These five authors happen to all be dead. Therefore, since they never identified themselves as non-idiomatic improvisers during their lifetimes and since I lack any skills for direct query beyond the grave, we shall have to rely on our best attempts at objective evaluation of these books based on the criteria for being non-idiomatic and improvised as described above.

As a perhaps unnecessary disclaimer, I unequivocally state that I do not endeavor here to provide an exhaustive list of such works (I am not so driven nor so learned). Here I simply list five examples, with publication dates in the original language and English translation.

- *The Box Man*¹⁰ – Kobo Abe (Japanese, 1973; English 1974)
- *Snow White*¹¹ – Donald Barthelme (English 1967)
- *Invisible Cities*¹² – Italo Calvino (Italian 1972; English 1974)
- *One Thousand One-Second Stories*¹³ – Taruho Inagaki (Japanese, 1923; English 1998)
- *The Monkey's Wrench*¹⁴ – Primo Levi (Italian 1978; English 1986)

In this list, I consciously limited myself to one work per author. In several cases, there are other books by the same author to which the adage non-idiomatic improvisation may apply equally well but were simply not included. From the list, one can see that we have a collection of authors, containing respectively a “surrealist with modernist sensibilities”, a “playful post-modernist”, a “a neo-fantast”, an “aesthetic eroticist with dadaist tendencies”, and “an anti-fascist chemist”—too many “ists” to be sure, who are not confined to a common idiom. What do the authors share in common? That they were men, that they lived and died in the twentieth century, that they were given the opportunity of education and made the most of it. What is the common link between these works? That reading them in their entirety is immaterial. There is no end product crucial to the appreciation of the book. There is instead, a book of puzzle pieces

that fit or don't fit together in various ways. They defy conventional form and taste and succeed miraculously either despite or because of it.

I postulate that the five works listed above are well-described by Bailey's metaphor for non-idiomatic improvisation. Perhaps, in my ignorance, I am only transferring the existing label of non-idiomatic improvisation from music to literature, where an analogous body already existed, though under a different name. Then I am in effect guilty of simply relabeling or rebranding. In my defense, I offer only this argument: if I am indeed guilty of rebranding, at least my motives are pure, because had I wanted to commercially exploit this label, I would have chosen a more likely handle than non-idiomatic improvisation, which has as a core feature its utter unmarketability due to absence of pre-existing audience!

III.A.1. A Case Study: "Invisible Cities" by Italo Calvino

"Invisible Cities" by Italo Calvino (October 15, 1923—September 19, 1985) was published in Italian in 1972 and in English translation in 1974. Within "Invisible Cities", Marco Polo regales Kublai Khan with descriptions, both profound and fanciful, of imagined cities that lie within the emperor's vast domain. There is a poetic element to the book, in which the individual descriptions of cities are linked together by a text describing the interactions between Polo and Khan that take place between the city descriptions. There is largely no plot. The value of the book lies in the enjoyment of the language and in the multiple messages conveyed by the descriptions of the cities.

"Invisible Cities" is non-idiomatic because there is, to my knowledge, no other book like it before or since. Bailey's puzzle analogy fits well. Each description of a city is an individual piece. While the assemblage of pieces taken together represents a catalog of sorts, it is not in the final product that the literary merit is found. Because of its segmented nature, it is a book ideal for traveling in large cities by mass transit, in which one city can be read on a bus to the subway station, another city on the subway, another city on the next leg of the trip.

In terms of Morris's tools—synthesis, interpretation and invention, Calvino employs each to some degree. The idea itself is a synthesis of historical fiction, architectural non-fiction, philosophy and poetry. "Invisible Cities" is essentially description of architecture, city layout and social customs presented as narrative entertainment. There is also the obvious interpretation of the nature of the relationship and exchanges between two historical figures, Polo and Khan. Most importantly, there is the invention of an entire catalog of cities that have never existed, not in the time of Polo and Khan and not in the time of Calvino. "Invisible Cities" is an example of a creative exercise of a prodigious imagination. Although described as either a novel or a collection of short stories, "Invisible Cities" is neither.

The question of whether "Invisible Cities" is improvised is a more difficult matter to resolve, since we have already established that it is not an unambiguous exercise for the reader to judge whether a work is composed or improvised. In Calvino's case, we do have a series of lectures, titled, "Six Memos for the Next Millennium", in which Calvino outlines criteria for the literature of the future.¹⁵ His six criteria are lightness, quickness, exactitude, visibility, multiplicity and consistency. Of these, five lectures were written. Calvino died before the sixth lecture on consistency was finished. Of these criteria, one could argue that lightness and quickness are attributes of improvisers, who act spontaneously. The next three criteria, exactitude, visibility and multiplicity, can be invoked perhaps equally well through well-edited composition or well-practiced improvisation. The last criteria, consistency, is perhaps better accommodated by composition, since in the editing process one can mend errors of contradiction that appear only under repeated scrutiny of the writing. I score it two points in favor of improvisation, one point

in favor of composition and three points ending in draws. Regardless, it seems reasonable to allow the possibility that Calvino's "Invisible Cities" is a work of non-idiomatic improvised literature.

In terms of the final criterion, namely how the book interacts with memory, I can only offer my own observations. I recall the overall concept of "Invisible Cities", that of Marco Polo describing imaginary cities to Kublai Khan. I can recall a few, memorable phrases from the description of the cities. The individual names of the cities and the details of their descriptions are lost because there are no broad over-arching structures by which the brain can characterize the novel and commit it to memory. Primarily, I recall a sensation of the reading process (many times by now), in which the feeling of euphoria emerged as the stories unfolded, unconnected but part of the same whole, undeniably like puzzle pieces, possessing a non-quantifiable and miraculous appeal.

At this point, we close the first case study. Surely a more comprehensive analysis is possible, involving extensive citation of biographical documents. However, for the purposes of this initial foray into the concept of non-idiomatic improvised literature, this succinct discussion is sufficient. The four remaining case studies will follow this same general form.

III.A.2. A Case Study: "Snow White" by Donald Barthelme

As a second case study in non-idiomatic improvised literature, we examine the novel "Snow White" by the American author, Donald Barthelme (April 7, 1931—July 23, 1989). "Snow White" was first published in 1967. That Barthelme was a non-idiomatic writer is beyond dispute. He typically avoided plot altogether in favor of leading the reader through episodic fragments, wordplay, non sequitur and direct or indirect references to subjects ancient and contemporary, enlightened and mundane. His technical forms involved extremely compact stories but he also wrote four novels, of which "Snow White" is the first.

Barthelme's writing techniques are well studied. Of one of his most non-idiomatic pieces, "Bone Bubbles" (1970), he said, "I wrote a story once called "Bone Bubbles" which did just this—put together unlike things—and everyone who has ever read it has loathed it. The editor of the book in which it appears didn't want it in there. I insisted that it should be in there. I am still interested in that story and intend to work more on this rather simple-minded principle of putting together more or less random phrases—but not so random as all that. This particular piece—which is only about eight pages long—was not easily written, was not whacked out, it was rewritten and rewritten and rewritten, and in one sense it still is as nonsensical at the end of this rather arduous process as it was in the beginning except that to me it seemed right."¹⁶ From this quote, we see that this particular piece of writing was consciously non-idiomatic and expressly composed.

"Snow White", as well as other Barthelme novels, e.g. "The King" and "The Dead Father", are called meta-fiction because there is a self-awareness within the piece that it is a literary work. In essence, meta-fiction calls attention to the writing process by making it clear that it is not the sole intention of the author to immerse the reader in a world of indisputable reality, but rather to create an image of a world in which the artificiality of the image is one of the characteristics of the world. Thus meta-fiction is at least partially aligned with Bailey's criteria of taking pleasure in investigating the creative process during reading. In Barthelme's "Snow White", the reader knows the story is a fairy tale and the reader understands that there is a playful attitude in telling a second story with the same characters that unexpectedly diverges and only at times returns to intersect with the original version.

In terms of Morris's tools for non-idiomatic expression, Barthelme too used synthesis, interpretation and invention. There is synthesis in the collage-like appropriation of unlike elements into a single story. All of "Snow White" exists as a re-interpretation of the original fairy tale. There is invention in the post-modernist actions of the discarding of old forms and the adoption of new less restrictive narrative forms. In the novel, "Snow White", there is appropriation of the fairy tale character and her insertion into an entirely different genre, one in which for example each of the seven dwarves vies for her sexual favors. This intentional derailment of the traditional fairy tale is a manifestation of Barthelme's inventive powers.

Again, the identification of Barthelme as an improviser is a more difficult task, made yet more uncertain by our stubborn inclusion of a quote to the contrary, in which he makes it clear that despite its appearance of stream-of-consciousness, there was meticulous composition of the piece. There are other stories composed strictly of dialogue, which have such a natural and vernacular flow to them, that one imagines the words were written as quickly as they would have been spoken. Again, there is no way to eliminate the possibility that in fact these passages are the product of careful composition. Of the four case studies presented here, Barthelme provides the most difficult example of defining as an improviser. At the very least he is a non-idiomatic composer, who echoes the words of Barry Guy provided in the quote above, in that in his composition he allowed for improvised forms.

With regard to memory, what I remember most from "Snow White", are the opening lines,

She is a tall dark beauty containing a great many beauty spots: one above the breast, one above the belly, one above the knee, one above the ankle, one above the buttock, one on the back of the neck. All of these are on the left side, more or less in a row, as you go up and down:

o
o
o
o
o
o

The hair is ebony, the skin white as snow.

The other memorable line (to me) is Snow White cry in the shower for "Perturbation! More perturbation!" because her plea functions on multiple levels, requesting more physical stimulus from the shower head, release from the mundane routine of her life as well as greater deviation of the literary work from the original fairy tale. (I thought of this line often when I studied statistical mechanical perturbation theory.) As for the rest of the work, what comes to my mind is only the wholly unrelated images of the Disney versions of Happy, Sneezy, Bashful, Dopey, etc.

III.A.3. A Case Study: "The Box Man" by Kobo Abé¹⁷

The Box Man by the Japanese writer, Kobo Abé, was published in Japanese in 1973 and in English in 1974. Abé was trained as a medical doctor, though he never practiced. However, his clinical attention to method, detail and organization is a readily apparent trait of his writing. At the same time, the element of absurdity is also a crucial component of any Abé novel. Just as life baffles the protagonist of an Abé novel, so too should the reader expect to be baffled by Abé.

In *The Box Man*, Abé explores the isolation of the individual by creating a psychological study of a “box man”, one of the homeless who live in cardboard boxes. Abé extends the allegory into hyperbole by making his box man not only sleep in the box, but live in it at all times, even moving about in it by peering through a carefully cut hole. We see that Abé indeed intends for the box man to be an allegory for the existential man when he writes, “Paralysis of the heart's sense of direction is the box man's chronic complaint.”

The novel not only studies the internal sensations of the box man but also examines the effects a box man has on those in the external world. The relations between the two are strained at best, and involve the box man being shot at and being paid to simply get rid of the box and, ceasing his existence as box man, rejoin the external world.

As in all his novels, Abé fills “The Box Man” with digressions which flesh out and give depth to the motivations and idiosyncrasies of the protagonist. One of the reoccurring digressions in “The Box Man” regards vision. Abé writes, “In seeing there is love, in being seen there is abhorrence.” This idea, which drives the box man to hide within the cardboard box, is also reflected in Abé’s incorporating photographs into the text of the novel. The psychological response to seeing and being seen is one of the central tenets of the book, not only in bringing the man into the box but in the private relationships he has with the other characters.

“The Box Man” is perhaps not as clearly fragmented into puzzle pieces as some of the other case studies, but the novel as a whole is fractured into numerous pieces by the presence of lengthy digressions, which present self-contained arguments, that when combined provide a larger picture of the box man. There is little plot driving the novel. The movement is due to the advance in the understanding of the box man provided by each anecdote.

The fundamental element of synthesis in this work (and in many other novels and plays by Abé) is the juxtaposition of a clinical eye toward an absurd topic. One expects this meticulous description in a medical journal, not in a description of an imaginary, hyperbolic lifestyle. The interpretation of the absurd, which has been treated in many different tones (as a contrasting example, consider Kafka’s matter-of-fact manner), by a clinician, probing the psychology of the box man in terms of his own self-perception and his social role within the community is original and in fact magnifies the absurdity subject by viewing it through the absurd application of this magnifying lens. This approach rises to the level of invention in some of Abé’s work, creating a literary style without precedent. In later work, particularly in “The Kangaroo Notebook”, a tone similar to Kafka’s is adopted. However, in a number of earlier works, including “The Box Man”, the primary purpose is to investigate in order to develop a superior understanding of the subject, without special regard for the absurdity of the subject.

The improvisational nature of the writing in “The Box Man” is perhaps hard to defend. The writing is often formal and stiff. The arguments lengthy and methodical, not all what one would associate with improvisation. However, there are elements of the novel, in which one senses a bending of the rules of writing that one can attribute to an improvisational process. Consider the opening lines of “The Box Man”:

*This is the record of a box man.
I am beginning this account in a box. A cardboard box that reaches just to my
hips when I put it over my head.
That is to say, at this juncture the box man is me. A box man, in his box, is
recording the chronicle of a box man.*

This passage reads as if it either flowed in a stroke out of the author's hand or ruminated in his mind for a thousand years before springing of its own accord onto the printed page.

In terms of memory, though I have read this novel several times over the past decades, I have retained almost nothing, except these opening lines reproduced above. It is, I think, sufficient.

III.A.4. A Case Study: "The Monkey's Wrench" by Primo Levi¹⁸

"The Monkey's Wrench" by the Italian chemist and writer, Primo Levi, was published in Italian in 1978 and in English in 1986. Any discussion of Levi cannot proceed without acknowledging that he was a survivor of the Auschwitz concentration camp, largely in part due to his training as a chemist. In Levi's writing, his training as a chemist is evident in his choice of subject matter, the reasoning of his protagonists, and his analytical descriptions. On the other hand, Levi's harrowing experiences in Auschwitz are the source of an insuppressible sense of wonder present in his work, a wonder over every detail of the animate and inanimate world, coupled with a profound appreciation of simply being alive to observe the details. What arises from this combination of science and mystery are stories, which are as uncategorizable as they are unusual. For example, Levi's tale about the construction of a bridge progresses not by the traditional plot sequence of introduction, conflict, and resolution; but rather by the scientific description of the engineering process, tempered by an omnipresent delight in just being able to witness the construction of a bridge. These stories, the odd children of the unplanned pairing of science and atrocity, comprise Levi's non-idiomatic gift to modern literature.

In "The Monkey's Wrench", the protagonist, Libertini Faussonne, is a "rigger;" a type of construction worker who directs the practical assembly of cranes and other equipment used in the construction of bridges, dams, and other industrial structures. Faussonne has worked in various constructions sites all over the world, and the novel is anchored by these sites, which lie at the center of Faussonne's colorful tales. Neither the entire novel nor the individual tales follow the traditional pattern of introduction, conflict, climax, and resolution. Nor do the stories have much in the way of plot. Yet despite this lack of active movement, two mechanisms serve to keep the reader suspended in a state of curious engagement. The more obvious, though less important of the two, emerges through Faussonne's description of the various problems that he's encountered in his work. As each story progresses, the reader wants to learn if a remedy to the problem exists, and if it does, just what form the solution will take. If a solution does not exist, we're morbidly drawn to know the magnitude of the resulting disaster. For example, when Faussonne describes a job building a bridge in India for which he hung the suspension cables, numerous hints are provided to the reader that the project ended in disaster. Exactly how that disaster will manifest is the central question that permits suspense to build despite Faussonne's leisurely pace in unfolding the story. The second way that Levi keeps his reader actively engaged is through the careful building up on the character of Faussonne. The gradual revealing, story by story and layer by layer, of Faussonne's personality is what proves to be ultimately satisfying about "The Monkey's Wrench". Levi takes great relish in the unveiling of his storyteller, and that delight is transmitted directly to the reader, often through rapport with his literary double, the narrator. For example, after a discussion where Faussonne and the narrator compare the trades of a rigger and a writer, Levi writes,

We agreed then on the good things we have in common. On the advantage of being able to test yourself, not depending on others in the test, reflecting yourself in your work. On the pleasure of seeing your creature grow, beam after beam, bolt after bolt, solid, necessary, symmetrical, suited to its purpose; and when it's

finished you look at it and you think that perhaps it will longer than you, and perhaps it will be of use to someone you don't know, who doesn't know you. Maybe, as an old man, you'll be able to come back and look at it, and it will seem beautiful, and it doesn't really matter so much that it will seem beautiful only to you, and you can say to yourself, "maybe another man wouldn't have brought it off."

A second aspect by which "The Monkey's Wrench" deviates from the traditional novel, as well as Levi's previous work, can be found in the language of Faussonne, the storyteller. In the narrator's own words, "He's not a great story-teller." Faussonne digresses frequently and often quite lengthily, and his speech is filled with stock clichés. While the narrator acts as a translator, rendering Faussonne's dialogue into readable print, he is careful not to edit out Faussonne's mannerisms, which provide color and depth to the story. At the same time, he balances Faussonne's rambling, rustic tone with his own careful, concise descriptions of the storyteller himself. In a sense, Levi is forced to maintain a precarious balancing act between the two extremes in terms of descriptive style. That the book reads effortlessly is a testament to Levi's skill at seamlessly blending Faussonne's stories with "his own" commentary.

"The Monkey's Wrench" satisfies Bailey's puzzle criteria. The stories can be connected but function independently. What ultimately makes "The Monkey's Wrench" hold a special place in the world of literature is Levi's ability to transform into a masterpiece a series of stories that are not only essentially plotless tales about work, but are related by an inferior storyteller as well. Despite the fact that we can recognize this transformation as the crux by which Levi's magic works, it is nevertheless difficult to identify the specific mechanism or mechanisms by which the transformation operates. This is the interesting part of the reading as puzzle assembly process. "The Monkey's Wrench" is a book that has from my first reading utterly perplexed me and it is only through reconsideration of it through the lens provided by Bailey that the picture begins to come into focus.

In terms of Morris' tools, the synthesis in "The Monkey's Wrench" is obvious; the combination of the civil engineering of structures and literary character sketches is unique. The interpretation of these stories through the eyes of a narrator who has survived horror is also very evident. The element of invention is present as well through the construction of a book that functions along lines (the aforementioned "plotless tales about work related by an inferior storyteller") for which there is no (literary) precedent.

Again, we can only speculate regarding the improvisational nature of the writing. It remains entirely possible that these stories are well-edited to achieve the careful counterpoint between the two very different voices of the protagonist and the narrator. Still, counterpoint does not necessarily lie in the provenance of composition. Beyond that, there is the undeniable vernacular fluidity of Faussonne's stories and voice, which comes across as natural and instantaneous, a product potentially of an improvisational process.

In terms of the memory, the most memorable element of "The Monkey's Wrench" for me was my persistent inability to understand the mechanism by which the literature succeeded. Perhaps, that is a hallmark of the best non-idiomatic improvisation.

III.A.5. A Case Study: "One Thousand One-Second Stories" by Taruho Inagaki

The first four case studies were published in their original languages within a dozen years of each other. This last case study was published fifty years earlier. "One Thousand One-Second Stories" actually is composed of seventy short stories each of which take longer than one second

to read. They were published in 1923 in Japanese and in 1998 in English. Inagaki is often referenced for his essay on the “aesthetics of boy love”, but obvious themes of homosexuality or pedophilia are absent from “One Thousand One-Second Stories”, which rather presents abstract vignettes, in which the reality of human life on Earth and the existence of celestial bodies (stars, comets, the moon) in the heavens are intermingled and confused. An excerpt from one such story is provided here.

Mr. Moon pulled a dagger I hurled a chair Mr.
Moon’s gang and my pals tussled and tumbled about
Somebody switched off the lights In the pitch
darkness...a chair flew a curtain fell down a flow-
erpot got shattered I landed a kick in Mr. Moon’s side
and sent him flying Mr. Moon knocked my legs out
from under me Somebody was swinging a table around
and the corner of it struck my head While I was
staggering to my feet Mr. Moon took flight I drew my
six-shooter and fired *bang bang!* But Mr. Moon got
away

“One Thousand One-Second Stories” is perhaps the example that most naturally can be presented as literature of non-idiomatic improvisation, although it precedes its formal musical counterpart by several decades. The individual stories rather obviously fulfill Bailey’s puzzle role. They are interesting individually. They repeat themes and characters but the whole, in the Dadaist tradition, is not intended to be a neat integration of all of the parts. The interest lies in the reading process and in discovering how the pieces fit together and in how the reading of each piece causes the reader to reinterpret the stories that came before.

Morris’ tools of synthesis, interpretation and invention are also readily apparent. The unphysical combination of the literal interaction of celestial bodies in human activities, especially rowdy and violent activities, is a manifestation of synthesis. The interpretation of these events through the Dadaist philosophy and the explicit statement that “nonsense has value” reflects the unique and personal perspective of Inagaki. The actions, though violent, communicate a lightness, humor and frivolity. There is literary invention even in the form—seventy stories, many of which do not span more than a single page, connected at times by characters, both human and cosmological, and by reoccurring violent actions.

In terms of memory, these vignettes are, I suppose, intended to be remembered as images, the moon seen through the panes of the window, the splintered chair, the gas lamps overhead seen among the stars. It is in these disconnected images that this book finds a place in my memory.

III.B. One Published Work by a Self-Identified Non-Idiomatic Improvised Writer

As noted above, to my knowledge there has not been a historical example of a writer who has identified themselves as a non-idiomatic improviser by that term specifically or any synonym. (The only even vaguely relevant example is the improvising percussionist, Edwin Prévost, who writes of his essays, “The *Meta-Musical Narratives* were constructed, as an act of writing, in a manner parallel to a musical improvisation—or as near as I could make it.”¹⁹) It would be useful to this study to obtain input from a writer that self-identifies as a non-idiomatic improviser. There is at least one such writer. Given that even for the much more established non-idiomatic

improvised music, the most famous practitioners, such as Derek Bailey, are relatively unknown in broader circles, it should come as no surprise that an author of non-idiomatic improvised literature will be wholly unknown to most literary audiences. In fact, the anonymity of this author is almost a necessity since the field of non-idiomatic improvisational writing is unknown.

It took me many years to hunt this author down. Our encounter came about by a circuitous route, which I shall now relate. In the fall semester of 2012, an engineering professor began to teach a course titled “The Golden Age of Non-Idiomatic Improvisation” at the University of X, *City Redacted*. It was a one-hour course for first year undergraduates. The professor later admitted that in the initial course proposal, he noted his lack of formal credentials to teach such a course. Nevertheless, the proposal was accepted by the university administration, who should be commended for their open-mindedness in this regard. In the first offering of the course, the students and the professor studied one musician per week, which ended up including thirteen musicians—Derek Bailey, Hans Reichel, Keiji Haino, Peter Brötzmann, Evan Parker, Cecil Taylor, John Zorn, George Lewis, Jim O’Rourke, Christian Fennesz, Otomo Yoshihide, Sachiko M and Thurston Moore. (Subsequent offerings have expanded the list of musicians.) The list of reference books on the course website overlap with many of the books cited in this essay, including those by Lloyd Peterson, George Lewis and Joe Morris. During this semester, the professor realized that what he admired about these musicians was not so much their music as it was their courage in following their artistic convictions.

The engineering professor had never had any musical training nor exhibited any musical talent. He was rather a writer, working in two domains. First, he had published more than ninety technical papers in archival, peer-reviewed scientific journals. Second, he had at that time written eighteen novels over the previous twenty years. Once each novel was finished and he had received the prerequisite wave of rejections from agents and editors, indicating in sometimes eloquent and sometime terse terms that they were either poorly suited or simply disinclined to represent the work, the manuscripts lay undisturbed on a hard drive. It was by teaching the course on non-idiomatic improvised music that the engineering professor realized (1) that these novels were works of non-idiomatic improvisation and (2) that musicians in this field had to create the avenues by which they could release their own work. For example, Bailey was at the lead of creating Incus Records in 1970, which released his work and that of other like-minded individuals until his death in 2005.²⁰ (Some posthumous releases are issued through Incus by Bailey’s partner, Karen Brookman.) If the engineering professor wanted to create even the opportunity for the books to be read, it belatedly occurred to him that he obviously had to release them himself. He discovered in 2012 that the mechanisms for self-publication of paperback and electronic books has been made extraordinarily simple and economical. Thus, the *Name Redacted* Publishing House emerged from the realm of his imagination where it had dwelt for many years and stepped into this physics-based reality.²¹ In the first year of its existence, the *Name Redacted* Publishing House released fourteen novels written between 1993 and 2013.

Although it has been in the professor’s mind for some months, he noted that he chose a day in May, 2013 to formally begin calling himself an author of non-idiomatic improvised fiction. (The engineering professor admits that it is an ostentatious title and that he is embarrassed by claiming it for it is surely too grand for him.) He had never known of any other writer who had adopted this genre as their own. As such, he was alone in uncharted territory. There is no other way this could be, since the non-idiomatic path by definition avoids well trod territory.

In this document, we have already discussed five books in terms of non-idiomatic improvisation. So our engineering professor is less an explorer than he makes himself out to be.

When confronted with our list, far from being dismayed he claims to feel a sense of encouragement since the authors of these five works are giants whose writing he has admired immoderately.

This engineering professor furthermore claims that all of his published novels are non-idiomatic. Most, as near as he can tell, are improvised. That most of these novels have not sold a single copy is immaterial, he insists, since the point of non-idiomatic improvisation is demonstrably not to optimize the profitability of one's time. (Fortunately the engineering professor has a day job to meet such mundane financial obligations as putting food on the table and paying down the mortgage.)

In the five case studies provided above, we were able to clearly see the non-idiomatic nature of the writing. It was a more speculative exercise to establish the improvisational nature of the writing. Here we examine this final case study, in which the improvisational nature of the writing is not to be disputed because the author has explicitly stated that it was improvisational.

At this point we abandon our admittedly rather flimsy charade and accept that the author of this essay and the engineering professor are one and the same person.

"Novel Title Redacted" by the American writer, *Author's Name Redacted (birth date redacted—)*, was published by the *Name Redacted Publishing House* (a commercial entity wholly owned and operated by the author) in 2012. In describing one of my own works, I remove the speculative nature of discussion.

The non-idiomatic elements of the *"Title Redacted"* are less obvious than those of Calvino, Barthelme, Abé, Levi, and Inagaki. There is no obvious deviation in form or function. On the contrary, in *"Title Redacted"*, there is evidence of an organized three-part structure, further broken down into chapters. Also, there is a traditional narrative plot that runs through-out the novel. On the face of it, there is only one non-idiomatic element in the novel, namely the inclusion of a ghost named Charlie Ankleyard, the grandfather of non-idiomatic improvisation. (It should be noted that in 2001 Derek Bailey released a cd-r featuring spoken word and guitar titled *"The Appleyard Files"*²², in which a character named *"Charlie Appleyard"* is the sardonic, self-acknowledged *"creator of improvisation"*.) In the novel, the ghost of Charlie Ankleyard teaches the protagonist that life itself is one grand exercise in non-idiomatic improvisation and that learning to appreciate the elements of non-idiomatic improvised music is therefore tantamount to coming to comfortable terms with one's own existence.

There are other non-idiomatic elements in the novel. We return again to Morris's tools of synthesis, interpretation and invention. In this novel, there is a conscious attempt to integrate a palatable, readable traditional narrative in which a philosophical exposition has been either seamlessly interwoven or hidden, depending upon one's point of view. This itself is a synthesis of techniques. There is also the synthesis of characters from other genres. The author is largely an auto-didact in the area of Chinese classical fiction. In the first third of the novel, the protagonist interacts with the spirit of a Chinese dwarf named Earth Traveler Sun, who first appeared in the novel, *"Creation of the Gods"* (Feng Shén Yanyi), written by unknown Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 A.D.) authors. The characters of Earth Traveler Sun and Charlie Ankleyard demonstrate the use of synthesis, or combining of elements.

There are elements of interpretation in the novel as well. Just as Calvino interpreted how Polo and Khan would interact or Barthelme interpreted how Snow White and the Seven Dwarves would behave under other circumstances, so too has the author interpreted how Earth Traveler Sun and Charlie Ankleyard would interact with the protagonist in a small town in Eastern

Tennessee. The voice of the artist can be heard both through the narrator of the story as well as to a lesser extent through the protagonist.

Finally, there is invention in "*Title Redacted*". One mechanism of invention is the use of the form of the novel to convey a philosophical point. That in and of itself is not very new. One might argue that, for example, the novels of Albert Camus exist primarily to convey the philosophy of the existential point of view. There is however, the invention of an idea that possession by a demon or spirit (or in this case reverse possession, since it is the protagonist who captures and refuses to release the spirits from within himself) can be a vehicle by which one explores different attitudes for examining one's role in the world and for providing a series of experiments by which the protagonist intends to discover superior approaches to being a husband and father. There is less conscious violation of the traditional novel form in "*Title Redacted*" than in some of the previous examples, because the manipulation of narrative form is, in a phrase, an idiomatic technique of the twentieth century.

We also examine the improvisational nature of "*Title Redacted*". There was an outline that defined three parts of the novel, corresponding to the three spirits (or demons or ghosts) that the protagonist encounters. There was furthermore some general idea of a narrative structure that would lead the protagonist through the novel. There was, however, no detail given to each chapter. When the author sat down to write each chapter, he cleared his mind and the writing emerged as conceived in a single session. Each chapter has been edited only for grammatical, spelling and typographical errors. The book is "read as written" to the greatest extent possible. Certainly a great deal of practice went into this process, but this practice did not involve writing drafts of these chapters or in fact anything associated with the novel. Instead, the practice of writing simply involved improvised writing every day through correspondences, essays and other unrelated technical exercises of the author's day job.

Perhaps, one might argue that this is how all authors write. They sit down. They write. Then they follow with extensive polishing, a step that this author has (perhaps lazily) skipped. Although I have admittedly never been another writer, I don't think this is the case. There are many writers who make extensive, detailed outlines of the work before it is written. There is less allowance for the chance input from some otherwise extraneous event of the day entering the writing that improvised writing brings. There are other writers who work and rework a story, including starting over from scratch when dissatisfied with the initial result.

For improvisers, musical and otherwise, each performance is an experiment because the outcome is unknown. There is no guarantee of success. The possibility of failure is essential to the improvisational method. It is the reliance on continuous practice that allows one to craft successful results much of the time. Therefore, weeks and months could transpire between the writing of chapters, because practice was needed and, perhaps more importantly, the mental incubation of the material during the day and at night while one was asleep was required. The act of committing a chapter to paper (or in this day and age the hard drive) was often accompanied by a sense of exhilaration because it was a manifestation of the ejection of an idea that had been incubating internally for some undefined period of time. There is a looseness in the writing, a flexibility between the joints that connect each chapter, due to the improvisational process. All of the bolts have not been tightened down through extensive re-writing. There are certainly those that might argue that a (subjectively) improved manuscript capable of being recognized as commercially marketable by agents and editors could have been sculpted from the novel in its current form. To this the only reply that can be made is that such a revision would have changed the manuscript, obscured the process and delivered a product that was

incompatible with the original intentions of the author. A similar statement of course exists for the music of non-idiomatic improvisation.

There is one other metaphor that may help the reader better understand improvised writing. Writers often speak of muses as inspiration. Frequently muses are characterized as unreliable, failing to appear when needed. One understands then that the description of the writing process as being a gift from an external power, such as a muse, is a metaphor for the improvisational process. In the improvisational process, the brain is expelling material that has been stored and maturing in its subconscious parts. We have no direct, conscious access to this material, so we often attribute it to “a muse”.

From my personal experience, I have a comment to offer on muses. I began writing novels more than twenty years ago. I always felt compelled to write but I never understood where the words or the inspiration for the words came from. I too was a believer in the elusive muse. Even as I finished one novel, I harbored a constant phobia that the muse might not return and I would never be able to write again, at least not in an inspired way.

Curiously, it was only through the study of the music of non-idiomatic improvisation, including decades of listening to the music of many players (a long and incomplete list is not appended to this document) and reading the books of Derek Bailey, Joe Morris and George Lewis and the interviews of many others, especially those in Lloyd Peterson’s book²³ that I gradually came to the self-realization that I am a non-idiomatic improvisational writer. The non-idiomatic nature was always fairly easy to see based not only on the content of the writing, but also the accumulation of rejections from literary agents and editors at publishing houses. There was no market for this work, a calling card for non-idiomatic expression. (One might reasonably note that rejection by agents and editors is also the calling card of poorly written material, but I would argue that, in my best attempt at objectively comparing my own work to published writing, that the quality of the writing is not the primary impediment to publication. What evidence can be offered to support this claim? I provide only one comment. There are over ninety technical papers authored or co-authored by me that passed through a rigorous peer-review process to be published in various chemistry and physics journals of the American Chemical Society, the American Physical Society and others, which demonstrate at least a basic understanding of the mechanics of writing.) The improvised nature of my writing I always knew from firsthand experience but did not recognize it as such. This belated recognition had one unexpected consequence. It destroyed the illusion of the muse. There is no muse. There is only practice. A muse is a poor substitute for dedication to the constant practicing of one’s craft.

I end the analysis of “*Title Redacted*”, with a comment on writing and memory. In 2012, when I pulled ten or so old novels off the hard-drive, I had no recollection of what they were about. I could neither guess the contents of individual chapters nor predict the outcome at the end of the novel. It seemed unbelievable to me, but so it was. I read each book with a sort of dumb-founded disbelief that I couldn’t remember the general outline of the book. I have long known that I have a selective memory. All the same, it was difficult to come to grips with my memory being so poor that I could not recall the barest elements of the plot of a novel of which I was the author, no matter how many years had passed. The idea that non-idiomatic improvisation possesses the proclivity to elude memory provides a modicum of relief that I am not, perhaps, experiencing the symptoms of early onset dementia.

IV. Conclusion

In this document, a description of the literature of non-idiomatic improvisation was provided. Elements of both the non-idiomatic nature and the improvisational nature of literature were identified. The criteria include (i) Bailey's puzzle-like attributes, (ii) Morris' three tools of non-idiomatic improvisation—synthesis, interpretation and invention—and (iii) the ability to resist memory. An analogy with the established field of non-idiomatic improvised music was continuously employed to define an analogous literary counterpart. Five works of fiction by established authors, Italo Calvino, Donald Bartheleme, Kobo Abé, Primo Levi and Taruho Inagaki, were evaluated in terms of these criteria. Finally, one work of fiction by an author who identifies himself as a writer of non-idiomatic improvised literature was also discussed.

Acknowledgments

The author expresses his gratitude to the First Year Studies program at the University of X for allowing an engineering professor to teach an unconventional music class. The author expresses his sincere thanks to Dr. Alan Cummings of the Department of the Languages and Cultures of Japan and Korea at SOAS, University of London for his continued willingness to share his expertise despite the uncertain outcome of this endeavor. The author also acknowledges the valuable advice of Joe Morris in reading a previous version of this manuscript. Finally, the author expresses thanks to Prof. George Lewis, who provided suggestions for additional references in the area of critical analysis of improvisation.

Disclaimer

This document is categorically not a work of non-idiomatic improvisation.

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Supplementary Information

This supplementary email contains two pieces of correspondence.

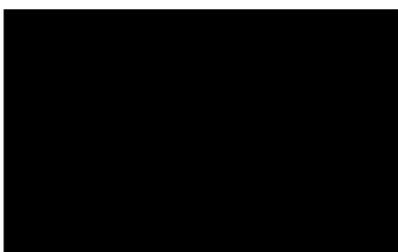
The first item is the cover letter, which accompanied the essay exactly as it appears above, for the submission of the essay to “Critical Studies in Improvisation/Études critiques en improvisation” on July 26, 2013.

The second item is the reply dated October 15, 2013 from the editor of “Critical Studies in Improvisation/Études critiques en improvisation”, declining to publish the manuscript and citing its flaws.

In both pieces of correspondence, names have been redacted.

The motivation in including these two pieces of correspondence as an appendix to this essay is to provide context to the document. The author could provide his own commentary on the unsuccessful publication process but has opted rather to let the documents speak for themselves. The author expresses his appreciation to the journal for taking the time to consider the manuscript.





July 26, 2013

Dear Editor at Critical Studies in Improvisation/Études critiques en improvisation:

Please find enclosed a manuscript for an article that I am submitting to “Critical Studies in Improvisation/Études critiques en improvisation” for consideration of publication. The manuscript is titled, “A Literature of Non-Idiomatic Improvisation” and I am the author. The abstract of this work is reproduced below:

In this document, a description of the literature of non-idiomatic improvisation is provided. An analogy with the established field of non-idiomatic improvised music is continuously employed to define a literary counterpart. Elements of both the non-idiomatic nature and the improvisational nature of literature are identified. Five works of fiction by established authors are evaluated in terms of these criteria. Finally, one work of fiction by an author who identifies himself as a writer of non-idiomatic improvised literature is discussed.

In terms of my credentials, I am a professor of *Department Redacted* at the *University Redacted*. Relevant to this manuscript, I teach a course titled, “The Golden Age of Non-Idiomatic Improvisation” at *University Redacted*. This past summer, I had this manuscript read by Joe Morris, improvisational guitarist and author of “Perpetual Frontiers: The Properties of Free Music”. I also sent the manuscript to Prof. George Lewis, improvisational trombonist and author of “A Power Stronger than Itself” (and journal advisory board member), who brought to my attention this journal as a potential destination for this work.

A suggested reviewer for this work is Rob Wallace, author of “Improvisation and the Making of American Literary Modernism”, and who is listed as Book Reviews Editor. I have adhered to all of the requirements in the journal’s “Submission Preparation Checklist”, including removing the author’s name from the manuscript, although that practice seems peculiar to me. The work has not been published before, except for portions of two case studies (section III.A.3. and III.A.4.), which appeared on a website in 2000.

I note that the length of this manuscript exceeds the stated 6,000 word limit (It is 12,000 words.), but in looking at the first entry in the most recent issue, I found that work to be 16,000 words, so perhaps this is a soft guideline.

Finally, I note that the inclusion of sections II.C. and III.B. cause this document to deviate from standard academic formulae. In choosing to leave these sections in the manuscript, I was guided by the words of Charles Musès, “In fact, our greatest contribution to others, and to our self-development as well, lies in the direction of developing precisely along the lines where our greatest uniqueness lies.” [“Destiny and Control in Human Systems”, Kluwer-Nijhoff Publishing, Boston, 1985, p. 171.] If their inclusion renders the entire manuscript unpublishable, so be it.

Sincerely,



Professor

[CSIECI] Editor Decision

Editor's Name Redacted [email address redacted]

Sent: Tuesday, October 15, 2013 11:52 AM

To: *Author's Name Redacted*

Dear *Author's Name Redacted*,

We would like to thank you for your submission of "A Literature of Non-Idiomatic Improvisation" to Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation. Please accept our apologies for the delay in responding. While our editorial committee found your article an interesting consideration of Non-Idiomatic musical improvisation as applicable to certain works of literature, they could not recommend it be sent out for peer review to be considered for publication with our journal.

Please find below a summary of the reasons put forth.

The author attempts to show that the characteristics of non-idiomatic musical improvisation can be applied to certain works of literature. The arguments however rely on generalizations and metaphors ("Literature as a puzzle" and Joe Morris' three tools of non-idiomatic improvised music "synthesis, interpretation and invention") that do not sufficiently support how a work of literature can be considered non-idiomatic and improvised. The literary analyses in the case studies fail to underwrite the common characteristics that the author is trying to bring out. The analogies identify correspondences that only apply on a very general level to music and literature. Finally, the criteria of memory, or rather the impossibility of remembering a piece of music, does not sufficiently support the characterization of non-idiomatic improvisation.

We thank you again for considering Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation as a venue for your work and wish you all the best in your future endeavours,

Editor's Name Redacted

Managing Editor

email address redacted

Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation
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