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978-0-521-89709-9 — Romanticism and Improvisation, 1750–1850
Angela Esterhammer
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CHAPTER ONE

"This lightning of the mind": improvisation and performance in the Romantic era

> This art, if art that may be named which depends so much, if not entirely, on a peculiar attribute of genius, may well be called a lightning of the mind; for so vivid are the flashes of poetry which escape, as it were, from the improvisatore, when in the heat of inspiration, that I can compare them with nothing but those gleams of lightning that in summer follow each other so rapidly in hot climates.
>
> Lady Blessington, *The Idler in Italy*

> And how and why we know not, nor can trace
> Home to its cloud this lightning of the mind,
> But feel the shock renewed . . .
>
> Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*

Picture a scene in Italy early in the nineteenth century. It's an illuminated theatre, likely in Rome, though it might also be in Florence, Lucca, Naples, or Milan. The pit is crowded, mostly with shabbily dressed students; the boxes are gratifyingly filled with ladies and gentlemen. The stage, as yet, is empty, although there is activity among the assembled audience. Snatches of conversation can be heard, in several European languages, and some of the spectators are writing on slips of paper that are being collected by attendants and placed in an urn. The performer appears – a slim, elegantly dressed Italian gentleman. He is accompanied by a musician carrying his violin, and by a young girl. The girl is requested to draw three slips of paper at random from the urn. She hands them to the gentleman, who announces what is inscribed on them: first, the aurora borealis; second, the glory of ancient Rome; third, the death of Hector.

The performance begins. As the violinist plays a few pleasant but unobtrusive measures, the gentleman stands pensively, head bowed. A moment later he begins to chant verses in Italian, completely extempore. In fact, he extemporises entire *ottava rima* stanzas, one after another. The poem depicts a group of shepherdesses in a meadow, awakened before dawn and

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awe-struck by the mysterious aurora borealis. The gentleman's voice is low, and there are some hesitations at first; but by the fourth or fifth stanza, inspired by the regular lilt of the music and the melodious Italian rhymes, pausing only in the few extra measures of music between stanzas, he speaks more rapidly, loudly, and fluently. The impromptu poem is twenty stanzas long. There is applause. Next, after only a brief pause, the accompaniment modulates and a second improvisation begins: a paean to the glory of ancient Rome. The continuously intertwined *terza rima* verse form of this poem is more challenging; but the names of heroes and poets, the models of virtue and statesmanship, as familiar to the audience as to the performer, crowd in on him and he arranges them in delightfully intricate rhymes. The obvious enthusiasm of the audience, excited by the display of mental agility as well as by the stirring subject-matter, inspires the improviser still further, until he chants so rapidly the accompanist is at pains to keep up. With practised gestures, the performer adds emphasis to his words, even as his body begins to show the first signs of strain. He is lightly flushed and obviously perspiring. After the acclaim for "The glory of ancient Rome" has died down, there is a longer pause – ten minutes, perhaps – as expectation grows for the *pièce de résistance*. The violinist now dismissed, the gentleman begins his improvisation on the third theme, "The death of Hector." This is not a poem, however, but a one-man performance of an entire tragedy, featuring five speaking roles and a tragic chorus. There are recognisable echoes of some scenes and images from Homer, but the performer is not reciting from memory. Instead, the verses are invented on the spur of the moment, infused with such intensity and immediacy that one could swear there were several actors on the stage, that the death of a prince had only just shaken the city of Troy. Most of the audience is enthralled – although there are a few who appear sceptical, who even keep up a running commentary, to the annoyance of their companions, about the tricks this sort of performer has been known to employ. In the end, though, these murmurs are drowned out by rapturous applause.

The gentleman on stage is obviously exhausted. He can barely control the trembling of his limbs as he acknowledges the spectators' appreciation. As he collapses in an armchair and recovers his composure, the theatre begins to empty. Later, one of the audience members, pensive on the ride home, stays up to write a letter in English to a distant friend: "I have now an account to give you of a wonderful and beautiful exhibition of talent which we have been witnesses of . . . The Signora B. said that it was *una cosa mediocra* to me it appeared a miracle . . . God knows what this man

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would be if he laboured and became a poet for posterity instead of an Improvisatore for the present."

The letter-writer who describes the performance as a "miracle" is Mary Shelley,[1] but the preceding account incorporates details from many descriptions by English, French, and German travellers who witnessed an on-stage improviser of poetry, a male *improvvisatore* or a female *improvvisatrice*, during the "Romantic century" (1750–1850). For northern European travellers on the Grand Tour, a poetic improviser was one of the must-see phenomena of Italy. It might be a popular street performer in a Venetian or Roman marketplace, or else one of the stars of the private salon or the theatrical stage whose names became internationally renowned: Corilla, Talassi, Gianni, la Fantastici, la Bandettini, Tommaso Sgricci, Rosa Taddei. In addition to hundreds of travel accounts, journals, letters, and periodical articles that conveyed reports of poetic improvisers to readers outside of Italy, there are, beginning just before 1800, dozens of fictional adaptations of the figure of the improviser in European novels, poetry, and drama. These texts record the cultural history of a surprisingly prevalent mode of performance – one that has, however, been comparatively neglected even during the recent surge of interest in Romantic theatre.

Today, improvisation as a mode of performance is most readily associated with genres that evolved during the twentieth century, from jazz and rap to contemporary theatre and improv comedy. What these genres have in common with one another, and with the solo extemporisation of poetry that is the subject of this book, is a special relation to *temporality* and to *audience*. Being spontaneous or "ex-tempore," this mode of composition is incommensurate with the normal span of time allotted to thought and writing – which makes it both "im-pro-vised," not foreseen from a point in the past, and "un-re-visable," not open to the possibility of looking back and making changes. Being "in the moment," improvisation demands a correspondence with both the speed and the direction of time's arrow that is different from what is usually associated with poetic or musical composition, where the pace of writing can vary and the writer can turn back with second thoughts. It is an art-form, as Pierre Bourdieu writes, quoting Merleau-Ponty, in which "thought and expression are constituted simultaneously."[2]

For the genre of poetic improvisation that is the subject of this book, an equally important defining criterion is the public venue and the presence of an audience. In the case of improvised poetry, the otherwise private, cognitive, temporally extended process of creation occurs simultaneously with the public recitation of verse: the time of composition is concurrent with

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the time of performance. The point of improvisation is to put the poet's skill at rapid versifying on public display before a live audience.

What distinguishes poetic improvisation from other kinds of literary activity, then, is the presence of an audience and the "real-time" framework. The Romantic improvvisatore, like the modern improviser in comedy or jazz, forgoes a pre-existing script or score in favour of a different set of factors that influence the direction that aesthetic production will take. These factors might be summarised as follows:

(1) The forward movement of time, which disallows erasing, editing, or revision;
(2) the immediate feedback provided by fellow performers or by the audience;
(3) a given theme and a limiting framework that make meaningful invention possible, precisely by constraining the possibilities of totally free creation. For the Italian improvvisatrice, the theme might be called out by the audience, announced by the judges in the case of a public examination, or drawn from slips of paper in a vase. The "limiting framework" might consist of a conventional metre or stanzaic form, sometimes also specified by the audience; in musical improvisation, the framework could be a musical key and tempo.

From the perspective of cognitive theory, writes one psychologist, "improvisation may be viewed as a special kind of aesthetically constrained motor performance that maintains a commitment to high levels of real-time decision making."[3] The improviser produces ideas and expresses them as music, language, dramatic action, and so on, based on very rapid processing of various kinds of input (e.g., a given theme, audience feedback, the already-improvised portion of the piece, memories of previous improvisations, or techniques that have become automatic due to training), choosing at any given moment from among many possible alternatives.

As an aesthetic experience, improvisation foregrounds time in its passing and its presence; it is an art of occasion that privileges the experience shared between performer and audience here and now. There is, therefore, a crucial distinction to be made between *inspiration* as a private, cognitive aspect of the act of composition, one that traditionally has religious or spiritual connotations, and *improvisation* as a performative, public, normally secular phenomenon.[4] The presence of an audience alters the nature of the compositional process as much as does the temporal exigency. It renders creativity collaborative and social, rather than solitary – an issue that merits special consideration in the context of Romantic poetry, where the paradigm of the isolated creative genius has recently begun to be questioned and

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qualified by studies of various forms of Romantic sociability.[5] The presence of onlookers also charges the moment with danger, making it what Marc Fumaroli calls the "*salto mortale* of improvisation in public, without premeditation, without preparation, without a prompter . . . a trial that Artaud could compare to that of a 'martyr on his pyre.' "[6]

In the eighteenth century, not unlike today, improvisation was most familiar and widespread in music – Bach's *Musikalisches Opfer*, improvised at Potsdam in 1747 and only afterwards noted down, being perhaps the best-known example. Hegel affirms the significance of musical improvisation to Romanticism in his *Aesthetics*, when, at the end of chapter 2 of "The Romantic Arts," just before turning to poetry, he considers the relationship of the musical work to its performance. He describes the "quite peculiar attraction" associated with extempore performances, "because we have present before us not merely a work of art but the actual production of one." These performances can produce an almost ecstatic experience in the utterly vivid present, where everything fades from consciousness except "the universal note of feeling." Hegel is referring primarily to musical forms like Italian opera, in which the composer leaves room for the performer to share in the process of live composition through displays of virtuosity. Under the right conditions, however, the performer may do more than fill in gaps and "ensoul[] what is soulless." The performance may become an outright improvisation in which feeling (*Empfindung*) interrupts the melody itself, giving itself fully to "the moods and suggestions of the moment." According to Hegel, the highest pinnacle of musical energy occurs when a virtuoso improvises, not with the voice, but on an instrument – for that ability reveals to the listener the complete coincidence of interiority and exteriority, conception and execution, in a "wonderful secret" that appears "like a flash of lightning": in Hegel's term, "*blitzähnlich*."[7]

While musical extemporisation was common to various national traditions in eighteenth-century Europe, improvised performances of *poetry* always had a special association with Italy. The ambivalent, often conflicted, responses to poetic improvisation on the part of foreigners are therefore also responses to their perception of Italy and the Italian "national character." The spontaneity, emotionality, ostentatiousness, and (sometimes) superficiality of the improvvisatore's performance are repeatedly identified as distinctively "southern" traits, and this perception is used, by contrast, to shape the "northern" observer's notion of his or her own national identity and aesthetic values as English, German, French, and so forth. The constructedness of cultural affiliations, the verbal and conceptual techniques by which national

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identities are negotiated, and the packaging and marketing of other cultures for various reading audiences: all these features are on display in the reaction of transalpine travellers to poetic improvisation. Issues of national identity and cultural affiliation come to the fore in chapter 2 of this book, which surveys the circulation of responses to the improvvisatore in travel literature of the later eighteenth century, during an era when he or she was conceived of as an "Italian curiosity."

If the reception, interpretation, and literary representation of poetic improvisers are germane to the evolution of national identity during the period 1750–1850, these factors are at least as significant for the evolution of Romanticism itself. Historically, the northern European reception of the improvvisatore and the improvvisatrice coincided with the emergence of new poetic and aesthetic values that would later come to be called "Romantic." Many of the foundational terms of Romantic ideology – genius, spontaneity, orality, sensibility, emotional expressiveness – are exactly the qualities that appear to be manifested by poetic improvisers. Indeed, for many early nineteenth-century audiences, the improviser seems to *embody inspiration*, putting the operations of poetic genius on display for a listening and observing public. In their accounts of performances of spontaneous poetry, and their representations of the improvvisatore and the improvvisatrice in literary works, high-Romantic writers construct this figure as a Romantic genius exhibited to the viewer's gaze. Yet the conventions, constraints, and foreignness of improvisational performance challenge the terms of Romantic genius as often as they fulfil them. The perennially conflicted reception of the improvvisatore and the improvvisatrice in northern Europe during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is the subject of the middle chapters of the book. Chapter 3 considers the first encounters of Mediterranean-style improvisation with alternative notions of spontaneity and natural genius that arose in Germany and France, and tracks some of the ways in which features of oral improvisation become absorbed into Romantic modes of writing and publication. Chapter 4 continues to analyse the experience of improvisation as an oral art-form in an age of proliferating print culture, with particular emphasis on the attempt to give modern improvisers a classical pedigree by likening them to Homer and other poets of antiquity. The specular and spectacular quality of poetic improvisation, especially in relation to female performers and women writers, is the subject of chapter 5, while chapter 6 focuses on the reception, and construction, of two improvvisatori who achieved the status of international celebrities in post-Waterloo Europe and Regency England.

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As the nineteenth century progressed and the poetic improviser became a familiar figure to novel-readers and theatre-goers in northern Europe, real and fictional improvisers increasingly turned into focal points for questions about the construction and stability of personal identity. The improvising performer seems to create not only new verses, but a *new identity*, on each occasion and for every audience, in a manner that may strike spectators as impetuous, opportunistic, or too overtly performative. Interestingly, a moral discourse surrounds many fictional and real-life improvisers in the nineteenth century: they are portrayed as manipulative, avaricious, alienated from society, mentally ill, or generally threatening to the stability of the bourgeois or gendered subject. The persona of the improviser thus becomes a lightning rod for anxieties about the construction and consistency of identity itself – issues that first appear in nineteenth-century novels, then re-appear a century and a half later when modern cultural and sociological theory adopts the notion of improvisation as an analogy for subject-formation. The second half of this book explores various aspects of the improviser-as-social-subject in nineteenth-century literature and cultural history, and in twentieth-century theory. Chapter 7 looks to the improvisational modes of commedia dell'arte and Carnival, which formed the context for the solo improviser in Italy and provided German and English Romantics with scenarios in which to explore improvised (as well as mistaken, disguised, and fantastic) identities. Chapter 8 considers the prevalence of improvisation as a metaphor in sociological theory, and its relevance to three novels from the 1830s that figure *Bildung* or social–spiritual education in terms of poetic improvisation. Chapter 9 identifies a wider-ranging nineteenth-century genre of "improviser novels": English, German, French, and Russian fiction that features improvvisatori and improvvisatrici as protagonists, representing these characters as adventurers, misfits, or transgressors of social norms. Finally, the diverse and sometimes bizarre elaborations on the paradigm of the improviser in mid-nineteenth-century literature, periodicals, and popular culture are the subject of chapter 10.

Following a loosely chronological organisation, this book attempts to identify a number of patterns and themes in the encounter between Romanticism and the "performance culture" of poetic improvisation over the period 1750–1850. Its chapters are interlinked essays that trace distinct but overlapping trends within this history. There is no single story to be told about Romanticism and improvisation; rather, the myriad representations of extempore performance that are to be found in fictional and non-fictional texts of the Romantic era make up a crucial part of the stories that

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the era told itself about the meaning of genius, the processes of subject-formation and socialisation, and the valorisation of different national cultures.

As a genre of public performance, in venues ranging from salons to theatres to public marketplaces, poetic improvisation is highly relevant to the recent, burgeoning interest in Romantic-period drama, theatre, and performance culture. Unlike the literary study of drama, though, the verses actually produced by improvvisatori are not themselves of primary interest – even if attempts to record and publish spontaneously composed oral poetry were surprisingly frequent, and these publications, including improvised dramas by Tommaso Sgricci and lyrics by Teresa Bandettini, among many others, are still extant. Instead, this study focuses on the *reception* of performances by improvvisatori and improvvisatrici, their description in eyewitness accounts and their representation in fiction, drama, and other literary genres, on spectators' interpretations of the experience of improvisational performance, and on the wide-ranging discourse it generates about spontaneity, orality, genius, and identity. Travel accounts and journals, as well as literary treatments of the improvvisatore and improvvisatrice, make it possible to identify patterns in the responses of German, English, French, and other writers to poetic improvisation, and hence to analyse the explicit and implicit relationships between "northern" and "southern" European aesthetics that emerge from these responses.

Although this book seeks to fill a gap in cultural history by focusing on the reception of the improvvisatore and improvvisatrice outside of Italy, some important touchstones in Italian literary history should be mentioned. Among Italian audiences and critics, as among foreigners, the valorisation of extemporised poetry is highly ambivalent. One prevalent theme in Italian literary histories is that poetic improvisers, if only because of their sheer number during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, coloured and even distorted foreigners' perceptions of Italian culture during this era. At times, there is a certain resentment about the predominance of improvisation as a paradigm for Italian culture. One infamous text in this vein played a part in the battle over an emergent Romanticism in nineteenth-century Italy. Pietro Giordani's article "Dello Sgricci e degl'improvvisatori in Italia" was written for the first (1816) volume of the journal *Biblioteca Italiana*, in a highly politicised context that makes it difficult to separate party allegiances from aesthetic principles. While Giordani is complimentary, in a qualified and patronising way, about the star improvvisatore of the day, the sensational young Tommaso Sgricci, his main point in the article is: those who can't *write* poetry, improvise. The essay quickly becomes a tirade against "the profession of the improvvisatori,"

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which "is nothing but LUDUS IMPUDENTIAE."[8] Holding to the principle that the criterion of the fine arts is beauty, not speed, Giordani maintains that beauty in literature can only be achieved by study, rigour, and rules, never "by an impromptu fury, by a sudden inspiration." Extemporaneous verses, Giordani concludes, are vulgar, barbarous, and worse than useless; they "horribly disgrace true poetry"[9] and discredit the nation that tolerates and listens to them. "What is this bunch of people – who, not having dared become *tightrope walkers*, preferred to become improvisers – supposed to do?" he asks, only slightly tongue in cheek: "Surely we cannot exterminate them. Forcing them to engage in more useful professions might be right, but it would also be very harsh; isn't it possible to adapt that idle, restless, and vagabond genius of the improviser for some practical purpose?"[10] Improvvisatori might be re-educated as rhapsodes or troubadours, Giordani proposes; that way, they might to be able to use their talent as performers to contribute to the education of a national public by well-trained recitation of passages of great Italian poetry – as long as it is not improvised poetry of their own. Giordani's much-quoted article is notable, not just for its vehemence, but because of the rhetoric of utility and public responsibility that he adopts. As the later chapters of this book will illustrate, those terms become significant touchstones for the reception and fictionalisation of the improvvisatore outside of Italy as well.

Giordani's anti-improvisational stance is reiterated a century later by Benedetto Croce in his 1910 review[11] of the single twentieth-century book-length study of the history of improvisation, Adele Vitagliano's *Storia della poesia estemporanea nella letteratura Italiana dalle origini ai nostri giorni* [History of impromptu poetry in Italian literature from its origins to our own times] (Rome, 1905). Croce agrees with Vitagliano that improvisation was always more popular among foreign tourists than among Italians. Returning to this subject in the chapter "Gl'improvvisatori" in his 1949 history of eighteenth-century Italian literature, Croce draws a direct line between foreigners' responses to improvvisatori and the development of Romantic aesthetics in Europe. Croce believes that nineteenth-century German critics mistakenly regarded improvisation as a manifestation of "the numen that speaks within and that imposes and dictates poetry upon whomever it fills."[12] That is, the Germans simply mistook the improvvisatore for the inspired genius that Romanticism valued so highly. Quoting at length from Carl Ludwig Fernow's 1801 essay *Über die Improvisatoren* (to be discussed in more detail in chapter 3), Croce argues that the reception of Italian improvisation was heavily mediated by Fernow's Kantian aesthetics. Improvisation was utilised by German writers,

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as well as by Madame de Staël, to support emerging Romantic attitudes, despite their misunderstanding of the derogatory connotations of this practice in Italy itself: "Never has the word 'improvvisatori' in Italy connoted something praised; on the contrary, it evoked something despised. The poetry, the legend of the improvvisatori, their presentation as poeticity *par excellence*, was moulded by foreign writers who were always generally well inclined towards them, and who erected a monument to them in Staël's *Corinne*."[13]

Croce has a point, but this is only part of the story. There *is* an identifiable current of reception and influence that "Romanticises" the improvvisatore and (somewhat later) the improvvisatrice, in which Fernow and other German philologists participated, along with the second generation of English and German Romantic poets, and (with heavy qualification) Staël and members of her Coppet circle. But the nineteenth-century history of improvisation is more complicated than that; its reception is characterised by other cross-currents. More often than not, rather than seizing on the art of the improvvisatore as a manifestation of natural genius, northern European audiences reacted with curious ambivalence. In some ways, the emerging aesthetics of Romantic spontaneity and genius even constructed itself in opposition to the foreign phenomenon of improvisation, a form of poetic composition that was considered conventional, superficial, stylised, or even duplicitous. After the moment of high-Romantic reception passed, too, the improvvisatore and improvvisatrice took on new associations in nineteenth-century European literature, coming to stand for the instability of identity, the transgression of social roles, and a host of anxieties surrounding celebrity and fame. Writing at a moment in the early twentieth century when the stock of Romantic poetry stood rather low, Croce over-simplifies the reception and influence of the supposedly despised improvvisatori by identifying this reception as one of the errors of a "vulgar Romanticism."[14]

It may be, as Françoise Waquet surmises in her recent study of the improvvisatore Bernardino Perfetti, that Croce's powerful influence on Italian criticism and aesthetics discouraged further studies of the improvisational tradition for most of the twentieth century.[15] But the same book that drew Croce's attention to the improvvisatori, Adele Vitagliano's 1905 *Storia della poesia estemporanea*, also elicited a substantial review article in French by Eugène Bouvy. Published in 1906, Bouvy's article combines succinct summaries of traditional nineteenth-century attitudes towards improvvisatori with a cogent modern analysis of the aesthetics of improvisation. As confidently as any transalpine tourist of a century earlier, Bouvy

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