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This Is Not an Improvisation: Letitia Landon and the Slipperiness of Taxonomy

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ABSTRACT
Writing in 2007, in *The Wordsworth Circle*, Jeffrey Robinson remarked on the “ephemerality” of improvisational poetry, its fundamental resistance to being “preserved.” Printed poetry is typically regarded as “fixed” and static: what any poem represents as improvisation is, at best, only a record, executed in a fixed medium, of a performance whose infinite variability is inherent in the nature of improvisation itself. Partly an homage to Rene Magritte’s *This is Not a Pipe* (1928–29) and to Michel Foucault’s 1973 essay on that painting, and using as a test case *The Improvisatrice* (1825), the long poem by Letitia Elizabeth Landon, herself a devotee of interdisciplinary and multimedia performance, this essay considers the physical, structural, and methodological challenges and limitations posed to printed “word art” by works that purport to be, or aspire to the condition of, “improvisations.” The improvisatrice who is the poem’s narrator claims to be both a painter and a songstress, but her “speech,” captured and rendered in printed words by Landon (who ventriloquizes that speech), can neither “be” nor even “represent” a work produced (“performed”) in visual art or vocal song. In her long poem Landon effectively creates a literary trompe l’oeil, an illusion that depends for its “completion” upon the reader’s implied participation in that performative act of completion. In the process, Landon’s poem reveals the fundamental incompatibility of improvisational literary production with the performative nature of improvisation.

KEYWORDS
Improvisation; British Romanticism; women writers; Letitia Elizabeth Landon; interdisciplinary; poetry; performance/performativity; multistability; illusion; narrative/narrativity; poetic voice

Improvisation: The creation of a musical work, or the final form of a musical work, as it is being performed. It may involve the work’s immediate composition by its performers, or the elaboration or adjustment of an existing framework, or anything in between. To some extent every performance involves elements of improvisation, although its degree varies according to period and place, and to some extent every improvisation rests on a series of conventions or implicit rules. . . . By its very nature—in that improvisation is essentially evanescent—it is one of the subjects least amenable to historical research.

—Grove Music Online

La trahison de la taxonomie

This essay asks how and to what extent a poem intended for and rendered in print can employ structural and methodological procedures associated with improvisation and improvisatory performance. Using as a test case “The Improvisatrice” (1824), the early
long poem by Letitia Elizabeth Landon ("L. E. L."), herself a devotee of interdisciplinary and multimedia performance, I consider here the physical, structural, and methodological challenges and limitations posed to printed “word art” by works that purport to be, or aspire to the condition of, “improvisations.” The improvisatrice, who is the narrator of Landon’s poem, professes to be both a painter and a songstress, but neither her “speech” nor her “song,” both of which Landon purports to capture and render in printed words (ventriloquizing both speech and song), can “be” or even “represent” a work that has been produced (“performed”) within the physical and temporal time and space represented in a vocal performance. Neither can a painting or drawing that is described in the poem any more “be” or “represent” that visual work, no matter how carefully and extensively the poet describes it. In her poem Landon effectively creates an extended literary trompe l’oeil, an illusion that depends for its “completion” or actualization upon the reader’s implied participation in the performative act of completion, an act that merges author/artist with reader/auditor/viewer (or audience). In the process, Landon’s poem reveals the fundamental incompatibility of ostensibly improvisational literary production with the actual performative nature of improvisation. In effect, Landon’s authorial performance in the poem de-constructs both the poetic artifact itself and the performative experience that it purports to describe and re-create.

Writing in 2007, in The Wordsworth Circle, Jeffrey Robinson remarked on the fundamental resistance of improvisational poetry to being “preserved.” As he notes, a popular strain of poetic performance in Italy during the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries involved delivering “extemore breath-taking sustained ottava rima poems on topics ranging from the glories of Italy to the tragic death of Hector” and, he continues, not just Byron and the Shelleys (all of whom personally knew the Italian improvisatore Tommaso Sgricci), but also Keats, Procter, Beddoes, Hemans, Coleridge, and Landon all wrote poems “with direct or indirect reference to the improvisatori and to poetry as improvisation.” In exploring what aspects of the improvisatori’s poetry the British Romantics wished “to incorporate or translate” into their own poems, Robinson inevitably confronted improvisation’s sheer ephemerality: it is “a poetry that cannot be preserved” and that tropes “the poet’s own mortality.” The incompatibility of this ephemerality with the fixed, static nature of printed poetry on the page becomes particularly apparent when we consider “The Improvisatrice,” in which issues of improvisation, spontaneity and the static fixity of the poetic text take center stage in Landon’s virtuoso interdisciplinary performance.

Robinson’s essay underscores the fundamental difficulty of attempting to write a poem that in some way re-presents (i.e., both “stands for” or “appears to be” and “re-performs”) an improvisational performance. Printed poetry is typically regarded as “fixed” and static—because that is what it is: what any poem represents as improvisation is, at best, only a record, executed in a fixed medium, of a performance whose infinite variability is inherent in the nature of improvisation itself. Works of art executed in media other than that of typographically printed literature have their own terminology for this sort of work. In music, for example, there is the impromptu (a “form”) and the cadenza (a “performance value” or soloist’s ostensibly extemporized showpiece). But these, too, involve problems both of semantics and of logic. What we call a work—in this case an “improvisation” or some variant upon that term—is in actual practice a misnomer: the work is neither what it purports to be nor what we have chosen to
call it. This point was made brilliantly—and paradoxically—by the French Modernist painter René Magritte in his famous 1928–29 painting, *Ceci n’est pas une pipe* (*This is not a Pipe*), that presents a logical puzzle that seems to defy logic no matter how we elect to “solve” the problem the image poses to us. I shall return to Magritte in a bit, but I will observe here that the musicologist is no better off than the literary scholar when it comes to dealing with the logical impasse that Magritte illustrates and that I have been discussing.

Indeed, the dilemma one faces when it comes to discussing improvisation is even worse than it seems. The work—any work, musical and literary alike—is typically studied by multiple types of students and specialists, each intent on different though interrelated purposes. In music, for instance, when it comes to the *impromptu*, the work may be taken up by the musicologist (scholar), the music teacher (pedagogue), and the musician (performer)—and of course the listener (auditor) or audience. The literary *improvisation* may be engaged by the literary historian or critic (scholar), the teacher of poetry writing or literature (pedagogue), and the reader, who is also a performer or, more properly, a co-performer. Jean-Paul Sartre wrote in *What is Literature?* that “reading is directed creation”: when they begin reading, readers enter into a *de facto* compact with the author to “realize” or “complete” the work represented in kernel form in the printed text. The difference, of course, is that what is meant by “performance” is not entirely the same in each medium, although there are close parallels. The performance of the literary improvisation may be audible (presuming a physical audience, even if the performer reads aloud but alone) or silent (the performer reading silently to her/himself). For the musician, the performance may likewise be audible (alone or in company) or silent (“sounding” the notes silently as part of “reading” the score). But neither of these captures the essence of improvisation, which has no fixed text or score but is, as Robinson says, ephemeral and infinitely variable.

In both cases, however, the same problem inheres when it comes to what is meant, assumed, or inferred by the terms “improvisation” and “impromptu.” A musical improvisation is the production of largely or even wholly unscripted (unscored) music by the performer: it is the essence of the jazz solo improvisation (on one hand) or the classical cadenzas and free ornamentation in solo performance (on the other). It is tempting to cite contemporary “slam poetry” (as Robinson does) as a popular-culture example of modern improvisational poetry. And yet, in slam poetry the poem is typically written out in advance and then memorized. The live presentation is where the variables come into the picture: presumably the poetic text stays the same but the *performance* varies (of course, misremembering produces “accidentals,” or unintended variations). In the live performance of a musical work, whether a solo performance or an ensemble one, the *score* remains identical: what differs are the performance values (the score, plus the performer’s or conductor’s interpretation, rendered as a unique, time-dependent performance). Another variation upon musical improvisation is evident in the performances, increasingly popular in 2018, by the virtuoso Venezuelan pianist Gabriela Montero (born 1970)—the protégé of Martha Argerich—who dazzles audiences with complex real-time improvisations upon classical compositions and popular tunes alike. During solo recitals and performances with orchestras, Montero often invites her audience to suggest music, upon which she extemporizes unique improvisations. As she says, “I connect to my audience in a completely unique way—and they connect with me. Because
improvisation is such a huge part of who I am, it is the most natural and spontaneous way I can express myself.⁴ Several important issues are visible in Montero’s comments: naturalness, spontaneity, expressiveness and personal identity; these issues figure prominently in what follows.

Neither the sort of ad hoc improvisation that Montero performs nor the classical solo cadenza is quite the same as the sort of extemporized improvisations we find in Baroque music, however. There the solo instrument’s score is minimally notated, based upon the assumption that the performer will add individual ornamental flourishes, augmentations, cadenzas, et cetera, to demonstrate her/his virtuosity, so that each performance is even more individualistic and unlikely to be precisely repeated from performance to performance, regardless of the level and rigor of practice that informs the soloist’s riffs. Angela Esterhammer, whose *Romanticism and Improvisation* (2009) offers perhaps the fullest examination of Romanticism and improvisation, underscored the fact that Romantic-era “live” audiences understood that *improvisazione* were in fact performance events—not static texts: what audiences sought in these performances, she writes,

was not primarily the improvised poetry itself, but the experience of the production: the wonder generated by the spectacle of the mind weaving together words, sounds, images, almost without hesitation; the heightened emotional intensity that accompanies a unique, real-time performance; also the frisson of danger, shared by the performer and audience, lest the performer’s ability fail in full view of the assembled spectators.⁵ “Primarily” is important here: besides (or perhaps beyond) the performance values attendant upon the occasions and the interplay among audience, performer and “text” (or performance), there remained still another element beyond the performative that retained the temporal event’s inseparable tie to an atemporal scripted text, even if the “enacted” text combined on-the-spot extemporized narrative and descriptive elements with the sort of ready-to-hand space fillers long associated with oral-formulaic poetry. In some respects, then, *improvisazione* illustrate the distinctions that Roland Barthes and others have examined between works and texts.⁶

Esterhammer has observed in a separate essay that what literary and cultural scholars have historically thought of as improvisation is fundamentally associated with spontaneity, and that improvisatori are (or were) understood “to perform natural spontaneity.”⁷ The idea of a poetry grounded in spontaneity of course recalls William Wordsworth’s oft-repeated (and usually incompletely quoted) claim that “Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” whose origin lies in “emotion recollected in tranquility,” the intellectual and imaginative activating mechanism that enables the poet to recreate the emotional state that accompanied the original experience which the ensuing poem documents.⁸ The imagination generates a secondary stimulus that substitutes for the original primary stimulus of immediate physical, sensual and emotional experience, in other words, and according to Wordsworth the poet’s “more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness… greater knowledge of human nature, and… more comprehensive soul” elevates her or him above what is “common among mankind.”⁹ What is especially relevant here is Wordsworth’s explicit rejection of the notion that poetry is purely spontaneous and his emphatic embrace of the complex mental processes involved in creating any poem. Poetry is not just “tossed off,” in other words, in a sort of freewriting act akin to what has been called “automatic writing,” nor is it that variety
of oracular "prophetic utterance and divine inspiration" that Milton famously called "my unpremeditated Verse" in *Paradise Lost*. Nor is it that sort of transcription of dream-dictation to which Coleridge ostensibly attributed "Kubla Khan." And yet, as Esterhammer observes, the Romantic poets often posed as inspired seers whose works—including the production of those works—might be regarded as transcending temporality: as utterances quite literally "out of time." Even their terminology, she writes, reflects this atemporal orientation: "ex-temporaneous (i.e., "outside of time") or improvised (i.e., "unforeseen" according to normal past-present-future progression). . . Improvisation, whether in poetry, music, or other art forms, is a mode in which composition and expression occur simultaneously."¹¹

"Improvisational poetry" is frequently linked with what Melissa Ianetta calls "extemporaneous performance adapted to an immediate exigency."¹² Indeed, Glennis Stephenson, who has written extensively on Landon, insists on this very characteristic as a hallmark of Landon's poetry. George Bethune wrote condescendingly in 1848 that women poets "write from impulse, and rapidly as they think... without the slow process of reasoning through which men have to pass... [so that] as the line first came to the brain, so it was written, so it was printed,"¹³ a comment that seems, paradoxically, to anticipate Freud's theories concerning the nature and function of the subconscious. For Stephenson, judgments like Bethune's explicitly identify "female improvisation" with "the spontaneous, confessional outpouring of emotion" as opposed to verse that is "reflective, contrived, and linked to the intellect."¹⁴ As she reminds us, however, "improvisational eloquence was the end result of careful study and abundant practice" rather than what from our post-Freudian perspective we might now regard as some extemporaneous manifestation of the subconscious. Routinely cited as the Romantic period's "improvisational ur-text" and the model for all such impassioned heroines as Landon's seems to be, Germaine de Staël's *Corinne; or, Italy* (1807) stands as the era's best known treatment of women's rhetorical eloquence through its eponymous protagonist's affiliations with both Sappho (and rhapsody) and Aspasia (and "practiced rhetorical ability").¹⁵ These interrelated models (and modes) make regular appearances also in Landon's works, and in "The Improvisatrice" in particular. Interestingly, while Staël does not give us actual transcriptions of Corinne's improvisations but instead provides a prose summary, Landon includes in her poem what are offered as transcripts of the improvisatrice's songs—as well as versified descriptions of her paintings that are analogous to Staël's prose summaries.

The fact remains, however, that an improvisation, which is inherently a performance in real time and space, is fundamentally unlike a literary (or musical or visual) work that is a temporally and spatially fixed entity whose physical form is the product of the process toward which it points but with which it can never be truly identical. This is precisely the paradox of Magritte's *Ceci n’est pas une pipe*, whose alternative title (*La trahison des images*, or *The Treachery of Images*) reminds us of the inflexibility of terminology and the mind-bending nature of our attempts to render sequential, ongoing experiences by means of static, fixed artifacts. In his brilliantly witty 1983 essay, which he naughtily titled *This Is Not a Pipe* to complicate matters still further, Michel Foucault wrote this:

Let us reconsider the drawing of a pipe that bears so strong a resemblance to a real pipe; the written text that bears so strong a resemblance to the drawing of a written text. In fact, whether conflicting or just juxtaposed, these elements annul the intrinsic resemblance they
seem to bear within themselves, and gradually sketch an open network of similitudes. Open— not onto the “real” pipe, absent from all these words and drawings, but onto all the other similar elements (including all “real” pipes of clay, meerschaum, wood, etc.) that, once drawn into the network, would take the place and function of the simulacrum. Each element of “this is not a pipe” could hold an apparently negative discourse—because it denies, along with resemblance, the assertion of reality resemblance conveys—but one that is basically affirmative: the affirmation of the simulacrum, affirmation of the element within the network of the similar. 16

The characteristic complexity of Foucault’s thought and language (even in translation) notwithstanding, his point is immediately relevant to the present discussion. “Resemblance,” Foucault tells us, “reveals the clearly visible” in an essentially one-to-one relationship, while “similitude reveals what recognizable objects, familiar silhouettes hide, prevent from being seen, render invisible.” While the former makes “a unique assertion, always the same,” the latter “multiplies different affirmations, which dance together, tilting and tumbling over one another.” Foucault’s metaphor of dance is, I believe, no coincidence, coming as it does amid his playful but paradoxical analysis of the play of elements (or ideas, or images, or signifiers or signifieds) upon and within the cognitive faculties of the audience member. (S)he is forced, finally, to accept what Foucault concludes about all of the elements in Magritte’s painting—both the ones that are “actually” there, physically stated, and the ones that “seem to be” there, contained in the endlessly multiplying rings of similitudes that radiate from the painted text: “at bottom, all of them can say either of themselves or of their neighbors: This is not a pipe.” 17 Foucault’s translator, James Harkness, cites as a relevant analogy another comment about visual art from his The Order of Things (1971):

The relation of language to painting is an infinite relation. It is not that words are imperfect or that, when confronted by the visible, they prove insuperably inadequate. Neither can be reduced to the other’s terms: it is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say. And it is in vain that we attempt to show, by the use of images, metaphors, or similes, what we are saying; the space where they achieve their splendor is not that deployed by our eyes but that defined by the sequential elements of syntax. 18

Responding to Foucault’s essay in 2005, G. S. Evans restated the dilemma posed by Magritte’s painting in this way: “here is a pipe, and yet here is a statement (carrying equal validity) saying that this pipe isn’t a pipe.” But, Evans continues, “in that moment when the viewer suspends the judgment, ‘this is a drawing of a pipe’ (at which level the title of the drawing is very much true), and accepts the drawn pipe as being a ‘real’ pipe (at which point the title becomes absurd), he or she doesn’t… reach for the pipe to smoke it.” In other words, having “accepted the picture as being fully (if temporarily) analogous to the existing objects that they designate, the contradiction between the picture and legend [presumably the painted words that are part of the painting itself] forces us to directly confront the inherent ambiguity of matter itself,” because Magritte’s painted “pipe” has “the potential to be so many more things than just a pipe.” 19 But Evans’s formulation seems to confuse Magritte’s “title” and the inscription that is part of the image, an apparent confusion that ignores Magritte’s other “title,” The Treachery of Images, which itself reminds us of the fundamental inadequacy and incapacity of all taxonomy, critical or otherwise.
An earlier reviewer of Foucault’s essay took him to task for not undertaking a sufficiently “self-reflexive” assessment of “how Foucault participates in the making of meaning.” In a reader-response-theory mode, James Porter wrote that in writing about Magritte’s painting (or any subject, for that matter) for an assumed audience of “critical theorists” Foucault’s assumptions about this already interested readership “could not help but affect how he chose to write about and view the painting”:

the anticipated audience for discourse shapes the discourse to be sure, but it shapes the referent of the discourse as well. In some sense, then, Foucault (or any writer) is an instrument of the audience, of the entire discursive community that he chooses to be a member of. He tries to stand apart from the discursive formation inhabited by Magritte when he analyzes the painting but of course he cannot do this. In analyzing the painting he has merely shifted the boundaries of the discursive formation to include himself and us.\(^\text{20}\)

Sartre’s point about the contract into which the audience enters with the artist is a still earlier manifestation of this sort of approach, whose roots can be traced back even further, to Louise Rosenblatt’s discussion in 1938, in her *Literature as Exploration*, of what she called a “transactional” approach to reading (and understanding).\(^\text{21}\) But what Porter is really getting at in his discussion is the notion of *intertextuality*, which he understands to encompass and embrace not just “texts” but also their producers, their consumers, and the expansive discursive community that shapes all three. Indeed, he asserts that “‘discursive communities’ are perhaps like disciplines with open borders, which individuals cross and recross… joining other communities in one moment, returning to a ‘home’ community the next.”\(^\text{22}\)

The issues of discourse communities that both Evans and Porter raise via Foucault and Magritte are relevant to the present discussion because Landon’s “Improvisatrice”—and other Romantic-era literary works that pose as improvisations (or improvisational performances)—depend on the presence of just such permeably-bordered communities of audiences whose inhabitants willingly suspend their disbelief in those ephemeral and illusory structures that artists invite them to accept as, somehow, “real”—as entities that, like Shakespeare’s Viola (*Twelfth Night* III.i.148) and Iago (*Othello* I.i.71) are not what they are—and they know it and they say so.\(^\text{23}\)

Writing in Italy in 1821, in the wake of the Greek uprising against the Ottoman occupiers, Percy Bysshe Shelley began the Preface to his complex lyrical drama *Hellas* with this remarkable statement: “The Poem of *Hellas*, written at the suggestion of the events of the moment, is a mere improvise, and derives its interest (should it be found to possess any) solely from the intense sympathy which the Author feels with the cause he would celebrate.” Notably, Shelley associates what he explicitly identifies as the improvisational nature of his poem with his own “intense sympathy” for the cause of Greek independence, which cause he asserts constitutes “a portion of the cause of civilization and social improvement.”\(^\text{23}\) At the same time, he underscores the intense but highly transitory nature of those temporal events that have ostensibly prompted his performance. In other words, he positions both the Greek uprising and the “nonce” nature of his poem (whose ultimate “interest” for reader and world he twice questions in the Preface) as portions—as microcosmic representations—of the macrocosmic universe of human experience. The seemingly self-effacing rhetorical posture is, of course, itself an improvisation, given both the intellectual, philosophical and rhetorical complexity of
Hellas itself, on one hand, and the extraordinary sociopolitical ambitions for reforming the world that the rest of the Preface articulates. I introduce Shelley’s words here because Hellas, finished in 1821, predates by a mere three years Landon’s “The Improvisatrice.” In c. 1836 Landon called Shelley “the most poetical” of all poets, whose “versification has a melody peculiarly its own” that “can only be described by similitudes” and that “suggests the notes of some old favourite song.” That Landon anticipates by a century and a half the word that Foucault and his translators use underscores my contention that she was fully aware of the destabilizing trompe l’œil effects she was manipulating in “The Improvisatrice.” Although Landon’s poem claims no such aspirations about changing the (sociopolitical) world as Hellas does, its multiplicity of voices, perspectives, and “represented” performances and artifacts associates it, as I shall argue in what follows, with the implied acts of multivocal ventriloquism inherent in Shelley’s drama—and indeed in all drama. Harriet K. Linkin remarks insightfully about “The Improvisatrice” that “Landon’s refusal to station herself as narrator, or to fix the improvisatrice’s narration, opens an unmarked space within which she reserves the right and means to critique the project of masculinist Romantic aesthetics. Within the “unmarked space” of her interdisciplinary and synaesthetic poem, Landon may indeed be both engaging and interrogating in remarkable fashion that masculinist model to which Linkin refers.

“The Improvisatrice” and the Instability of Improvisation

“I write poetry with far more ease than I do prose, and with far greater rapidity. In prose I often stop and hesitate for a word; in poetry never. Poetry always carries me out of myself. I forget everything in the world but the subject which has interested my imagination.” So Letitia Landon wrote in 1837 to Samuel Carter Hall (1800–1889) about her creative process, for an entry he was preparing on her for the anthology he was assembling, The Book of Gems: The Modern Poets and Artists of Great Britain (1838). What Landon describes strikingly anticipates what Isobel Armstrong has called “the gush of the feminine,” the “fallacy” that women’s poetry was—and, according to the entrenched essentialist, masculinist tradition of literary criticism, must necessarily be—“nonrational” and characterized by “excess of emotion.” Thirteen years earlier Landon described her compositional process to Alaric Watts: “I like to show how much I can do in a little time. I wrote the “Improvisatrice” in less than five weeks, and during that time I often was for two or three days without touching it. I never saw the MS. till in proof sheets a year afterwards, and I made no additions, only verbal alterations.” Julian North observes that “[t]he image of Landon inferred from the poetry” by her contemporaries (and many subsequent commentators) was “one of artlessly embodied, feminine sensibility,” a “melancholy vessel of feelings, the lining image of her own representations of the tragic poetess... a fount of spontaneous utterance.” North calls this view “problematic,” however, as does Angela Leighton, who sees in both Landon and her contemporary, Felicia Hemans, an attempt to “reclaim women’s poetic selfhood as a physical identity translated as a kind of writing.” For many of her contemporary readers, Claire Knowles writes, “Landon exemplified the particular brand of melancholy femininity evoked by metaphors” like “a burnt-out hearth, faded summer
flowers and the forgotten song of a lute,” a performance of “suffering poetic sensibility” that remained “incredibly attractive to Landon’s audience.”

While she may have habitually plumbed the depths of the cult of Melancholy in delineating her love-devastated female protagonists, though, Landon was no perpetual melancholic herself, as is indicated by the records of friends and acquaintances over the several decades of her public life in London, among whom her characteristic lively wit and social effervescence were well known. Despite Landon’s repeated comments over the years about the rapidity with which she composed and the sparsity of revisions or corrections, then, it is impossible to regard poems like “The Improvisatrice” as mere spontaneous effusions any more than we can take Shelley at his word when he called Hellas “a mere improvise.”

Germaine de Staël’s Corinne; or, Italy (1807) is of course regularly cited as the model for all such impassioned female heroines as Landon’s seems to be, as countless commentators have observed. De Staël “lends credit for her readers to her heroine’s prophetic genius,” John Isbell writes, “and the prestige of author and heroine are mutually reinforced.” Corinne and Sappho were by 1824 widely considered to be “the two key figures in the literature of female improvisation.” But Landon’s improvisatrice is neither some prophetic exile speaking for her nation, as Corinne is, nor a despondent suicidal lyrical exile like Sappho, but rather a self-exiled sufferer who bears full responsibility for that fatal self-exile and who is in some respects reminiscent of the heroine of Mary Robinson’s 1796 Sappho and Phaon. Technically an extended dramatic monologue, Landon’s poem presents the first-person account of the eponymous character—whose name (significantly) we are never told—of her fatal infatuation with the seemingly enigmatic object of her love (or desire), Lorenzo. This account is imperfectly “bracketed” by a concluding passage (lines 1531–78) spoken/written after the improvisatrice’s death by an unidentified third-person narrator. Embedded within the poem are the texts of seven “songs,” a narrative “tale” and the descriptions of three paintings, two of which are attributed to the improvisatrice, who identifies herself in the opening lines as both a songstress and a painter (30). Landon’s text is insistently interdisciplinary, both in its emphasis on these two artistic media (as well as sculpture) and in its persistent amalgamation of descriptive data drawn from multiple senses. Moreover, the speaker’s self-introduction marks her as a child both of art and of nature: it recounts the shaping influence of “statues,” “paintings,” “music” and “language” (products of human activity) as well as of “skies,” “flowers,” “leaves,” and “fountains” (features of the natural world), a list that culminates in “songs whose wild and passionate line / Suited a soul of romance like mine” (23–24). As critics have noted over two centuries, the speaker calls hers “but a woman’s power” into which she has nevertheless “poured [her] full and burning heart,” a declaration that, coming so early in the poem, has seemed to some to subscribe Landon to that impassioned model of composition rather than to the more intricate and self-conscious mode with which Armstrong associates women’s poetry. Stephenson contends that Landon recognized the inherent danger, observing that when she turned to “The History of the Lyre” (1829) she introduced into that work “a type of disapproving male critic” whose objections, she suggests, reveal his deficiency of sensitivity and understanding alike.

Careful reading, however, reveals in the poem’s complex layering of descriptive (external) and psychological (internal) details the care that actually went into its composition,
regardless of the rapidity with which Landon claims to have written. In other words, her poem about an improvisatrice, which ventriloquizes that invented character’s voice, at once both reflects and contradicts those elements of spontaneity and extemporaneous performance it purports to demonstrate. It turns out to be, in fact, a poem of remarkable multistability, as the concluding section dramatically reveals. There, after the improvisatrice speaks her “last! FAREWELL!—FAREWELL!” the new and previously unremarked first-person narrator takes refuge from a storm (of course) in what turns out to be Lorenzo’s “lone and stately hall” where the storm “won me entrance” (1531–37). Stephenson remarks of this passage that “L. E. L. appears to report how she” encounters Lorenzo. Even though Stephenson characteristically distinguishes between Landon herself and her constructed public literary persona “L. E. L.,” in assigning voice to either, Stephenson hazardously ascribes a more definitive authorship (or “speakership” or voice) to that first-person narrator than Landon may have intended. Authorship (and therefore authority) has to be ascribed to someone, presumably, but a disequilibrating and perhaps Foucauldian observer might object that this concluding voice may be anyone, including the reader-as-voyeur. The speaker (and the speaker’s words) manifest the similitude of presence, of physical personhood, and of credibility and witness—but how can we know?

One temptingly easy answer might be simply to observe that “The Improvisatrice” is an “early” work and so may suffer from technical flaws of form, as is often observed about Mary Shelley’s (also “early”) Frankenstein, one of whose narrative framing devices, Walton’s letters to his sister (and his subsequent journal) is never actually closed at the novel’s end but is left largely “hanging” in the journal’s final entry. But Landon’s vexing conclusion is consistent with other subterfuges she engineers earlier in the poem. The improvisatrice’s first song, Sappho’s death lament (“Sappho’s Song,” 141–60) ventriloquistically performs Sappho’s “latest, wildest song” (140). The four-line stanzas are set off typographically from the surrounding verse paragraphs, and when the song concludes a mere short horizontal line substitutes for a discursive transition back into the main text. The second song, “A Moorish Romance” (219–411), significantly longer and more complex, is more directly integrated into the main narrative. The nocturnal sights, sounds, and fragrances of nature “raised my sweetest minstrel power” (204), the improvisatrice recounts, and into that enhanced emotional state “came / A tale, just one that Memory keeps” (215–16). Embedded within the improvisatrice’s sung “Moorish Romance” is a “hymn” sung (the singing reported rather than textually “reproduced” and said to have been “taught her” by her mother [299], which adds yet another layer of singing). Only when the improvisatrice finishes her song do we learn that she has had an appreciative audience that includes “the youth” (Lorenzo, 453) who is profoundly moved and whose presence likewise so moves her that she cannot leave off touching her lute, her hand “wandering” while “unconsciously” her “pulses throbbed” and her “heart beat high” in a “flush of dizzying ecstasy” (464–67).

Another tale of doomed romance follows in the third song, “The Charmed Cup” (532–686), the only sort of tale that the miserable improvisatrice now appears capable of performing: “old songs of sorrowing— / Of hope betrayed—of hearts forsaken,” 528–29. Merging her emotional state with her sung tale (which follows), she reports in the line that immediately precedes the song, “I sang, but as I sang, I wept” (531). Landon’s insistent melding in “The Improvisatrice” of the singer with her songs (and both the tales they contain and her own consistently elevated emotional intensity), her
instrument, and her auditors (both in general and Lorenzo in particular) uncannily anticipates William Butler Yeats’s famous question in “Among School Children”: “How can we know the dancer from the dance?”

Things become more complicated still with the fourth and fifth songs (“The Hindoo Girl’s Song,” 761–82, and “The Indian Bride,” 787–88), which songs the improvisatrice reports she performed while “garbed as a Hindoo girl” at the “gorgeous feast / For maskers in COUNT LEON’s hall” (743–47). Let’s think about this for a moment. Letitia Landon, who has—according to Glennis Stephenson—assumed the public persona of (i.e., disguised herself as) “L. E. L.,” creates in this poem’s first-person narrator the fictional unnamed improvisatrice who at this point in her narrative disguises herself as a “Hindoo girl” who sings two supposedly improvised songs while also playing her instrument, and who reveals her true identity only after the second song, after hearing “amid the gazing crowd, / A murmur of delight” (752–53). The shifting roles assigned to improvisatrice, impersonator, speaker in the concluding section (1531–78), “constructed” popular author (“L. E. L.”), and actual author (Letitia Landon) figures the analogously shifting roles among the assigned auditors in the main poem (both the generalized appreciative listeners and the primary intended audience of one, Lorenzo) and those within the interpolated songs, all of whom respond to both the words of the songs and the harp / lute strains that accompany them and that the improvisatrice in particular performs. But they hint also at the roles of the many viewers who appear in the poem (including the speaker in the concluding section) who admire various paintings (of which at least two are the productions also of the improvisatrice), sculptures, works of architecture, and even dance (912), further reinforcing the poem’s insistently interartistic aesthetic texture. Furthermore, the poem’s appropriation of both the “Hindoo girl” and her song—collectively by Landon, “L. E. L.” and the Italian improvisatrice—is itself a manifestation of how Britain’s emerging colonialist and imperialist culture had already by the 1820s begun to appropriate for domestic cultural and ideological purposes the persons, voices, and cultural behaviors of “exotic” or subaltern cultural “others,” even though Landon partially masks this colonizing British cultural gesture in her poem by attributing it to her Italian improvisatrice. A comparable gesture is evident, too, in the previous scenario involving the improvisatrice’s “Moorish Romance” and the song embedded within it.

Emma Francis insightfully regards Landon’s characteristic interdisciplinarity, here and elsewhere, as an integral part of her “complex account of specularisation,” in which “women occupy positions on both sides of visual space, they are looked at, but they also look.” What Francis observes about later works like Landon’s Subjects for Pictures (1836–38) applies equally to the descriptions of visual works in the 1824 “Improvisatrice”:

Each text presents itself as a poetic depiction of a postulated visual text. . . locating the reiterated images of static, suffering femininity these lyrics present precisely as an image. . . [T]he text negotiates a position within representational space which foregrounds the gap between the production of the image and its reception. . . Landon’s texts are not just falling prey to the process whereby femininity collapses back on itself into the state of specularised object, rather they are drawing attention to and interrogating the process of specularisation itself.

This shifting relationship between the agent(s) and the object(s) of the specular gaze in “The Improvisatrice” is continually underscored by Landon’s insistence on intermingling verbal, visual, sonic and tactile description.
In the section following the fifth song Lorenzo again appears, now apparently more emotionally conflicted (although we are not yet told why) and characteristically silent as the (significantly) statue “of Parian stone / Of the Antinous” that “Was not more noble than his own!” (934–36). The tormented Lorenzo seems about to pronounce her name “in music” (948) before flinging away her hand and fleeing, leaving her disconsolate. So deep is her desolation (“My poisoned shaft of suffering,” 996) that her arts abandon her:

...[in] vain I sought
My pleasant home of song and thought.
There was one spell upon my brain,
Upon my pencil, on my strain;
But one face to my colours came;
My chords replied but to one name—
LORENZO!

(999–1005)

Distraught, and ominously, she took her “lute, which had all day been sleeping / Upon a cypress tree” (symbol of death and mourning; 1019–20). Her sixth song is undisguisedly her own, a lyrical liebestod (1023–66) that is quickly followed by her tragic, sung tale of Leades and Cydippe (1081–1224). Unable to bear her separation from her lover, Cydippe declines and dies (at 1187); not surprisingly, Leades soon returns, learns her fate, visits her grave, despairs, declines and dies as well (at 1221).

Landon’s improvisatrice now recounts a subsequent melancholy nighttime walk, during which she hears, first, “sweet voices singing” outside palaces, accompanied by “many a rich-toned instrument” (1233–34), then, inside “the walls / Of San Mark’s old cathedral halls” the “deep-voiced music” of “white-robed choristers” singing, the “cheerful peal” of the bells and the music of the “stately organ” (1049–53). These sounds are accompanied by the sights of “ten thousand wax-lights” and “fair bands / Of young girls” singing as they strew violets on the cathedral floor and the smells of fuming incense and the strewn violets (1247–56). This richly synaesthetic experience is too much for the speaker, who retreats to a side chapel and tomb of another tragic victim of love’s grim fatality. Here she contemplates a sculpted funerary “monument” on which are carved “a blighted pine— / A broken ring—a wounded dove” and “two or three words” memorializing the deceased (1266–74). Taken as a whole, this passage epitomizes Landon’s rich interweaving of sensory data and its associated emotional freight. Even the dead woman is translated both through and into artifacts from two media (a monument and an inscription) and their associated symbols (tree, ring, dove, as well as the “two or three brief words” that necessarily can only suggest or imply all the biographical “content” that the brief inscription elides). Landon’s speaker continues:

I could but envy her. I thought,
How sweet it must be thus to die!
Your last looks watched—your last sigh caught,
As life or heaven were in that sigh!

(1275–78)

The victim is captured both in the monument and its semiotic signals and in the poem that superadds its own complex interdisciplinary semiotic “signaling” to the reader’s reading experience.
Now follow the “gush” (1286) of bridal songs at Lorenzo’s wedding, which the horrified improvisatrice witnesses. Overwhelmed, she faints, and when she awakens she forsakes her music as “too bitter” (1313–16). Resolute in her despair, however, she turns again to painting, this time to “paint that Cretan maiden’s fate / Whom Love taught such deep happiness, / And whom Love left so desolate” (1322–24). As she had earlier likened Lorenzo to a statue, she now likens her image of Ariadne to “a statue” (1335). The intricately intertwined themes, plot lines, images, and aesthetic strategies to which the poem has insistently led us culminate in the speaker’s hope that her painting might eventually wreak its mixed “vengeance” on Lorenzo by reminding him of all he had missed:

I had now but one hope:—that when
The hand that traced these tints was cold—
Its pulse but in their passion seen—
LORENZO might these tints behold,
And find my grief;—think—see—feel all
I felt, in this memorial!

(1243–48)

Her last word here, to which I shall return shortly, is at once both rich and slippery, a sort of determined indeterminacy.

Finally, and predictably, Lorenzo eventually appears and reveals the convoluted history of how he came, from a sense of obligation and honor, to marry the “fair orphan” to whom he had long been betrothed and who had (also predictably) eventually withered and died (whether from natural causes or a preternatural sense of Lorenzo’s fatally divided affections is not spelled out). Unlike the seven songs that precede it, “Lorenzo’s History” (1375–482) is called “a tale” by the narrator (1373). The tragedy is completed when the improvisatrice reveals that she is herself dying, apparently of tuberculosis (“the crimson hectic’s flame”, 1494). In her dying speech she links herself, as she had at the outset, with both art and nature:

Thou wilt remember me—my name
Is linked with beauty and with fame.
The summer airs, the summer sky,
The soothing spell of Music’s sigh—

(1519–22)

We are left at the end with only that unidentified first-person speaker who draws the final curtain beginning at line 1531. This narrator likewise speaks in verse, and her (we assume) verse form and style resembles that of the improvisatrice. So, too, is her interdisciplinary approach. Indeed, as soon and Lorenzo appears, this narrator likewise describes him in terms of sculpture (“His brow, as sculpture beautiful”, 1539), and she notes that he has filled his “hall” with “graceful statues” and “pictures” (1545–50). Interestingly, though, this narrator makes no reference whatsoever to making anything herself, musical or otherwise, despite her detailed impressionistic description of the harp and the singing of the woman in the “gloriously fair” painting of “HIS MINSTREL LOVE” (1578) that has pride of place in Lorenzo’s gallery.
Conclusion: “Is You Is or Is You Ain’t My Minstrel Love?”

I have brazenly adapted the title of Louis Jordan’s 1943 pop hit because, for one thing, it aptly captures the fundamental multistable dilemma that the final section of “The Improvisatrice” poses to the reader. At the same time, it presents us (as it did Jordan’s 1943 audiences) with a troublesome cultural appropriation analogous to that which involves the “Hindoo girl” in “The Improvisatrice.” In the segregated climate of 1943, the racially and ethnically distinctive idiom of “Is You Is or Is You Ain’t My Baby” entertained the same predominantly white consuming public that routinely denigrated and subordinated the minority culture to whose musical and linguistic idiom the song belonged, exploiting the one while disparaging the other. The more that times and cultural attitudes appear to change, it seems, the more they stay the same.

In Landon’s poem, the picture that hangs on Lorenzo’s wall and that the unidentified speaker in the concluding section describes, is apparently one that he has commissioned from another unnamed artist; it is very definitely not that image of Ariadne that the improvisatrice describes having painted. As a painting, it is a memorial that delineates in a complex visual image the subject—the improvisatrice herself—which the poem renders through a comparably complex verbal passage. But as a memorial it is a touchstone, a talisman, a secondary stimulus that stands for that which it re-presents without actually being it. A memorial is not the same as a memory, nor is a memory the same as that phenomenon which is the object of memory’s action. Each representation “re-presents” that for which it can never be more than what Foucault called a “similitude” in discussing Magritte’s painting. The originating event (or, in the case of Lorenzo’s painting, the person) that is memorialized in the artifact is both “like” that which the artifact represents and “unlike” it: the memorial artifact can at best trigger a complex imaginative activity that seeks to (re)create (within the mind) the similitude of the person, event, or phenomenon that is memorialized in the artifact. What is on Lorenzo’s wall, “HIS MINSTREL LOVE,” in other words, is not her but rather a subjectively suggestive visual record (a “recording”) of her physical appearance as it may (or may not) have been in some past physical time and space. His painting is in that sense analogous to a modern audio (or audio-video) recording of a performance of a musical improvisation—whether of Gabriela Montero improvising on “Besame Mucho” or Miles Davis riffing on “My Ship” or Yo-Yo Ma inventing a cadenza for a Haydn concerto. When the daffodils “flash upon” Wordsworth’s “inward eye” in his famous poem, they function as both a secondary stimulus that stands (or stands in) for his original experience with the “real” daffodils and a memorial of that experience as well as of the process of consciousness-expansion the poem documents and also of the process of composing that poem. Reversing the Wordsworthian formula I cited earlier, we might say that the recollection in tranquility engenders a (new) spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling. We might say so; but can the product of tranquil recollection be considered spontaneous, actually? Spontaneity and purposeful mental engagement would seem to be mutually exclusive, but perhaps one of the lessons that Landon’s poem teaches us is that they are not so, after all, but rather that they exist in the dynamic tension of indeterminacy that is the essence of multistability.

The complex, sensual sensory detail in “The Improvisatrice,” superabundant almost to decadence, both figures and performs the dynamic volatility of art, which is never
truly static, its static forms and formulations within the various media notwithstanding. That Keats understood this is evident in *Endymion*, whose opening lines assert that

A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:  
Its loveliness increases; it will never  
Pass into nothingness;"^44

That loveliness increases because it is experienced by an ever increasing audience, to be sure, but also because the more we engage the “thing of beauty,” the more our minds work upon its sensory stimuli to amplify the work itself in new and unanticipated ways. In this sense, the increase in beauty inheres in the performativity of the work itself: both how it “works” (or performs) in interdisciplinary fashion and how it engenders other, new performances within the cognitive and critical activities of its audiences.

Landon’s long poem about improvisations and those who perform them, then, is no more an example nor a performance of improvisation itself than Magritte’s pipe “is” a pipe. But in the paradoxical manner of multistability it is also no less so. If, as Emma Francis claims, “The Improvisatrice” is in large part about “specularisation,” it is also very much about the performative aspects themselves of looking, perceiving, judging and performing—or, perhaps more correctly, co-performing—or, as Sartre might say, co-creating. And that recalls Wordsworth again, and his point in “Tintern Abbey” about what the senses “half create / And what perceive” (106–7). Perhaps Landon is suggesting something that may strike us as very “modern”: that all experience is in some sense improvisational.

**Notes**

2. Ibid., 98.
6. See Barthes, “From Work to Text”; and Eco, *The Open Work*.
8. Wordsworth, “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads,*” in *The Poems*, vol. 1, 886. He similarly claimed that “poems to which any value can be attached, were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man, who being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply” (871). In “Romantic Aesthetics,” Linkin observes how these two elements (feeling and thought), which Wordsworth explicitly links, figure in Letitia Landon’s poetry, where she appears by design to embrace the former while eschewing the latter (159–88).
12. Ianetta, “ ‘She Must Be a Rare One,’” 94.
15. Ianetta, “ ‘She Must Be a Rare One,’” 94, 101–2.
16. Foucault, *This Is Not a Pipe*, 47.
17. Ibid., 46, 48.
19. Evans, “This could be a pipe.”
21. See Rosenblatt, Literature as Exploration.
24. It’s worth recalling that in the Preface to his previous lyrical drama, Prometheus Unbound, Shelley had explicitly acknowledged that he himself possesses “what a Scotch philosopher characteristically terms ‘a passion for reforming the world’” (Shelley’s Poetry and Prose, 208). Shelley is referring to Robert Forsythe, in whose Principles of Moral Science (1805) the phrase appears as the title of chapter 16.
25. Landon, Letters, 146 (my emphasis).
27. Landon, Letters, 168.
29. Landon, Letters, 17–18. F. J. Sypher, editor of this collection of Landon’s letters, tentatively dates this letter as August 1824. The poem had appeared earlier that year.
31. Ibid., 197; Leighton, Victorian Women Poets, 58.
34. Knowles, Sensibility and Female Poetic Tradition, 106.
35. Robinson’s well-known Sappho and Phaon offers a proto-feminist critique of the excessive sensibility popularized by much later eighteenth-century writing that Robinson identifies as the sources of Sappho’s fatal love for the unfaithful boatman Phaon, and that leads her to choose suicide as the only viable manner of exit from that ultimately self-destructive moral and intellectual sensibility.
36. The opening “bracket” is represented by the “Advertisement,” signed by “L. E. L.” and explicitly referencing “The Improvisatrice.”
37. Quotations and citations are from the first edition, Landon, The Improvisatrice; and Other Poems (1824). Line references are stated parenthetically in this fashion.
38. Stephenson, Letitia Landon, 111.
39. OED: Multistable: 1. Of a system: composed of a number of interconnected or interdependent subsystems each of which can achieve stability independently of the others 2. Stable in more than one state; multiply stable.
40. Stephenson, Letitia Landon, 63 (my emphasis).
43. It’s worth recalling that in “Tintern Abbey” Wordsworth says that this process of purposeful, meditative recollection leads to “tranquil restoration” (30; my emphasis) (Wordsworth, The Poems, vol. 1, 358).
44. Keats, Endymion, lines 1–3, in Poems of John Keats, 103.

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