



Knowing as Instancing: Jazz Improvisation and Moral Perfectionism

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Knowing as Instancing: Jazz Improvisation and Moral Perfectionism

This one fact the world hates, that the soul *becomes*. ...
—Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance”

[Thelonious Monk] was also very interested in errors, and when someone made a mistake he would pick up on it and examine the *ramifications* (Duke’s word) therein.

—Steve Lacy, Foreword to *Thelonious Monk: His Life and Music*

In what follows I will sketch an approach to understanding improvised music—one that discovers in certain outstanding jazz improvisations an emblem of what Emerson typically calls self-trust and Stanley Cavell, in recent years, has called moral perfectionism. Thus perhaps the greatest burden of these pages is to show how a way of attending to improvised music might reveal a form of knowledge that is essentially moral. By extending this general claim to moral perfectionism, I will be joining my discussion to a broader philosophical project—as well as to a tradition of thinking—to which the present occasion permits only the briefest of introductions.

Moral perfectionism is best characterized not as a set of moral axioms or principles, as though it stood in competition with the dominant theories of morality (Utilitarianism and Kantianism), but as a kind of thinking that begins after or beyond such theories. It is a thinking whose distinctive features are a commitment to speaking and acting true to oneself, combined with a thoroughgoing dissatisfaction with oneself as one now stands. One might summarize these features by saying that they identify a way of living set against a life of conformity and a lifeless consistency. It is in his essay “Self-Reliance” that Emerson famously describes our human tendency to nullify ourselves in the face of our craving for conformity and consistency. The way out of this danger to the self is what Emerson means by self-trust or self-reliance; he speaks in similar contexts of heeding one’s genius. There are of course trivial as well as arrogant ways to take up Emerson’s call, exactly as many as there are trivial and arrogant ways of reading.¹ But that it can be read as belonging to a tradition of thinking in-

herited from such figures as Plato and Pascal, and continued in such figures as Nietzsche and Wittgenstein, was perhaps the most fertile conclusion of Stanley Cavell’s 1988 Carus Lectures published as *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*.² The central concern of those lectures, beyond that they identify this tradition of thinking, was to argue that the necessarily unending commitment to perfecting the self is not only in harmony with the equally unending or ongoing political commitment to democracy, but it is, in fact, democracy’s precondition, even its fullest meaning. The feature of interest to me here, however, as I set out to suggest some connections between moral perfectionism and the work of some exemplary jazz improvisers, is the understanding that emerges from this tradition of how we manage to do anything new or different or original at all: to check our habitual responses to the world—for example, our reliance, when improvising a jazz solo, on familiar solutions to a pattern of chord changes—in favor of newly discovered or newly charted desires.

This essay is divided into four sections. In the first section, I offer a critique of standard efforts to interpret improvised solos as though they were composed or preconceived, contrasting that approach to one that treats the procedures of improvisation as derived from and importantly at play in our everyday actions. The second section turns to a pair of discussions of artistic genius and originality: Kant’s account of artistic genius in *Critique of Judgment* §§46-50³ and especially Emerson’s concluding essay in *Essays: First Series*—the one he calls “Art.”⁴ My intent in this section is twofold: to show the extent to which Emerson’s essay is written in response to

Kant's understanding of the nature and function of artistic genius or originality, and to work through several levels of correspondence between the interest jazz enthusiasts find in improvisation and the demands Emerson makes in his writing. Emerson writes with an interest in the multiple meanings of words, i.e., in their potential for transformation. Because of this interest, whose moral intent is to set the reader on the way to her or his own transformation of thoughts, the reader can come to feel that she or he is no longer reading inert symbols, but rather that she or he is being addressed with an intimacy that defies the distance between page and eye, between writing and reading. But this is an artistic goal, and one not far removed from the interest I will be claiming for the best of jazz, in which a sense of immediacy and what has been called "the sound of surprise" are paramount.

In the third section, I give a reading of portions of three exemplary jazz performances by Charlie Parker and Lennie Tristano. Such remarks, which constitute an untried approach to jazz criticism, might be described as attempts to locate the genius in the solos, that is, to name the place where the soloist and the solo find themselves in such a way that what follows—by which I mean both what comes next and what makes sense—can be heard to be the result of the improviser's full awareness of his place and presence, of his working through his conventional responses. What I claim the best improvisers exemplify is something that Cavell, giving voice to a thought he finds in Emerson and Thoreau, has called the capacity for "checking one's experience." Such an expression is meant to capture, as Cavell says,

... the sense at the same time of consulting one's experience and of subjecting it to examination, and beyond these, of momentarily *stopping*, turning yourself away from whatever your preoccupation and turning your experience away from its expected, habitual track, to find itself, its own track: coming to attention. The moral of this practice is to educate your experience sufficiently so that it is worthy of trust. The philosophical catch would then be that the education cannot be achieved in advance of the trusting.⁵

If educating and being educated by your experience entail that you reveal yourself in your most ordinary and unrehearsed actions; and if, as I

argue, improvised music is best understood as a species of ordinary, unrehearsed activity—of thinking on one's feet or in the heat of the moment; then one should not be surprised to find examples of improvised jazz that exemplify this—that reveal the self heeding the self—and which command our interest for that reason.

I conclude in the last section by considering a recent and striking oral account by Steve Lacy of elements of the jazz instruction he received from Thelonious Monk when Lacy played briefly in Monk's band in the 1950s. It will become apparent how Monk's advice amounts to so many encouragements, or invitations, to the kind of thinking we will have located in moral perfectionism. Both the recorded performances examined below and the ideal of performance offered in Monk's words to Lacy can be heard as instantings, as I wish to put it, of a kind of knowledge that most moral philosophy at best hints at in its talk of practical wisdom. It might help to describe such knowledge as knowledge that one has only *in* its instantings; or less problematically, as knowledge that is *only* expressed. The import of such experiences, of knowing as instancing, lies beyond the scope of this essay. But if we could gauge its import, we would be on the road to explaining why moral philosophy seems unsure about its relation to the philosophy of art, and why philosophy has always felt uneasy over its attachments to art.

I. IMPROVISATION AND EVERYDAY ACTIONS

The two properties of artistic genius that Kant proposes—namely, originality and exemplariness (CJ, §46)—are complements to his antinomy of taste: The first half of the antinomy (that there are no principles of taste) demands as a result our recognition of artistic originality; the second half of the antinomy (that there are nonetheless judgments of taste) reminds us that there is such a thing as original nonsense, and so requires the clarification found in the notion of exemplariness. The requirements of originality and exemplariness themselves exemplify the tension that is present in the creation and acceptance of works of art in any art form old enough to have a history. It is that tension between an art's tradition and its most recent candidates for inclusion or between the current practice of an art form and where certain recent efforts would like to take

it. For Kant, this tension raises for the artist the challenge to make what Timothy Gould has called “original sense.”⁶

Now what if one were to ask, How does a jazz improviser experience this tension and how does he come to make original sense? Here are three regions of response. First, the improviser finds in jazz a history and tradition comparable in richness to that of Western art music. Familiarity with it leads one to discover various procedures for solo development, standard forms, characteristic phrases, innovations in technique, and so on. Second, the tunes that typically serve as the vehicle for a performance will themselves often have a history of definitive performances, of both conventional and unusual voicings and tempos, lyrics and other extramusical associations, and so on. Third and finally, perhaps most significantly, there is the history of development of the performer’s style, his evolving ways of making music in the moment.

All three of these areas of tradition and response have their analogues in other art forms. I mention them with respect to jazz improvisation only because of the tendency to think that what prompts the improviser is the desire to be free from tradition and learned ways altogether—as though the goal of improvisation were originality at the expense of musical sense. Yet even the most free of jazz improvisers come to their performances knowing some of the traditional ways around their instrument and preferring some part of their instrument’s sound possibilities to others. They know, for example, that if they want to sound free of a tonal center they better have some very familiar ways of avoiding certain intervals that could suggest a tonic. It is, as Wittgenstein would say, part of the grammar of the word “improvise” that we call *this* “improvising on a tune,” *this* “improvising a dinner,” *that* “improvising a dance step,” and so on. Improvisation always occurs in some context, as part of some practice or other. Where we improvise is where we might also (for better or worse) act from deliberation; and just as we deliberate *about* something, so we improvise with an aim toward something.

But while it is wrong to imagine that jazz improvisations proceed groundlessly or aimlessly, it is equally wrong to imagine that they should be understood as having the same ground or aim as written music, as though the procedures of improvisation brought nothing to our *interest* in mak-

ing music save for the convenience of getting it done more quickly and easily. This is not to say that improvised solos *cannot* be interpreted with the procedures of written music in mind. Indeed, this is how they are often interpreted, perhaps especially by those with an interest in giving jazz an air of respectability. The late Martin Williams, who was Director of the Jazz Program at the Smithsonian Institution and Editor of *The Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz*, gives in his remarks for that collection the following brief analysis of Charlie Parker’s well-known recording of “Embraceable You”:

The opening motive:



is repeated (variously pronounced and embellished) five times in the first five bars. But on its fifth appearance, it begins a burst of melody which (one breath being granted it) comes to rest with yet another echo of that opening motive in bars 7 and 8. From that point on, the motive appears and reappears in various permutations as a kind of organizing reference point. There is an ingenious use of it in bar 18, and there is a sequential treatment that begins after a rest in bar 27.

Then, as if in apology, he says:

Such comments are apt to make the most warm and lyric of ballads seem an exercise in ingenuity, I know, but that is the inevitable risk one takes in such descriptions. The ultimate remedy, of course, is to return to the record itself.⁷

(The jazz and classical trumpeter Wynton Marsalis takes a very similar approach to unpacking a jazz solo, judging by the few episodes I have heard of his National Public Radio series “Making the Music.”) If we listen as Williams does, the wonder of Parker’s solo will seem to be not that the notes follow one another in the particular way they do, but that this in fact quite conventional way of organizing a stretch of music could be *improvised*. I do not contest the musical facts Williams brings to our attention. But as long as we read such facts about the solo as exem-

plary of the solo's interest, we will find ourselves listening to the improvisation as if it were a completed work, born full-grown from Parker's head. Or at best we will listen ambivalently, as Williams seems to be advising, now attending to these and other familiar structural points, now marveling at the fact of the solo's nascence and evanescence, of its being born of the moment. But in that case, our marveling will be essentially abstract, not growing out of this or that moment of the solo itself but out of, as it were, the fact that the solo exists at all, out of its ontological significance.

If this way of attending to jazz improvisations produces in us a feeling of sublimity, it is a sense of the sublime captured by Thomas Weiskel's work on the Kantian sublime, with its peculiar oscillations between feelings of comprehension and imaginative frustration.⁸ Then, too, it suffers Weiskel's analysis of the experience of the sublime, which is that such experiences are reason's way of aggrandizing itself at the expense of reality and of our imaginative apprehension of reality—that is, at the expense of the ordinary or everyday.⁹ Reason seems to decree (and Martin Williams assumes) that to comprehend some improvised activity (e.g., a jazz solo) one must conceive it all at once, as if making sense of its moments means making sense of the contribution each moment makes to the whole solo. Such a commitment leads to a certain model of perfection, one in which every moment is related to every other, or in which each moment is controlled by some central idea or organizing device.

The experience of the sublime is felt, then, if one posits some unifying idea undergirding the ongoingness of the improviser's actions. The unifying idea, placed in opposition to the improvised act itself, produces the failure of imagination that reason requires for its own aggrandizement. Contrariwise, the experience of the sublime will be shattered—and this is what I am recommending—if one comes to experience improvised music as a species of ordinary, unrehearsed activity, and so begins to find interest in the details of what follows what, or of what makes continuing sense. If my topic were explanations rather than improvisation, I would describe this as an interest down at the level of excuses—the level at which J. L. Austin famously worked—rather than up at the level of creeds or tenets—the level at which, for example, Kant's categori-

cal imperative operates. I do not mean to say that we never find cause to explain our everyday actions in broad or fundamental terms. We may justify ourselves by saying, "I'm a Libertarian" or "I believe in eternal damnation"; we may feel that our particular actions take *this* as their determining ground. But more typically, we explain our actions—say I am rummaging through my desk drawers, piling their contents in a heap on top—by saying something like "I'm searching for a key" or "I've got a picture of it here somewhere," where this describes with perfect accuracy what I am up to. If the relevant structure for making sense of a jazz improvisation is given foremost through its nature as lived activity rather than as organized sound, then it is these last examples that illustrate the level of description jazz writers should be aiming for. And they embody the mode of attention one will need if one is to hear this music as emblematic of Emersonian self-trust.

II. EMERSON, KANT, AND ARTISTIC GENIUS

I hear the analogy between the structure of actions in art and in life in the opening sentences of Emerson's essay "Art":

Because the soul is progressive, it never quite repeats itself, but in every act attempts the production of a new and fairer whole. This appears in works both of the useful and the fine arts, if we employ the popular distinction of works according to their aim, either at use or beauty. Thus in our fine arts, not imitation, but creation is the aim. (CW, 2:209)

By the end of the essay Emerson will say that this "popular distinction" "must ... be forgotten," since "In nature, all is useful, all is beautiful" (CW, 2:218). But then what does Emerson's essay imagine as *its* use, and what beauty does it claim for itself? One might begin by noticing that it claims its aim is creation, however this is to be understood. For when Emerson writes, "in our fine arts ... creation is the aim," he is not forgetting already the popular distinction he had just underscored, according to which the fine arts aim at *beauty* (not creation), but rather he is dissociating himself from that distinction, and naming whatever art is at work in *his* writing. (The compactness and precision of Emerson's taxonomy, here, of the aims of art is one of many passages

overlooked by those critics who would disparage Emerson for being unsystematic.) Thus when Emerson says that the soul “in every act attempts the production of a new and fairer whole,” we should read this not as bad metaphysics, but as advertisement for the mode of thinking called for by the essay. It requires that our reading be guided by our desire, however poorly understood, to begin again, to rethink or bethink ourselves, to check ourselves—to carry out “that abridgment and selection we observe in all spiritual activity” (CW, 2:209).

That Kant is being addressed in this essay begins to emerge in the second paragraph, where Emerson writes, “What is a man but nature’s finer success in self-explication?” (CW, 2:209). One can read this remark as a transfiguring of Kant’s definition of artistic genius: “Genius is the innate mental disposition (*ingenium*) through which nature gives the rule to art” (CJ, §46). Emerson writes “man” where Kant has “genius.” But this is an ambiguous difference for Emerson, who identifies the personal or particular aspect of a human with his or her genius. Indeed, Emerson’s most radical rewriting of Kant in these pages, along with his erasing of the distinction between the fine and the useful arts, is what I choose to call his democratizing of artistic genius. Consider the following passage in “Art,” in which Emerson describes seeing for the first time the paintings of the great Italian masters on his first trip to Europe:

I remember, when in my younger days, I had heard of the wonders of Italian painting, I fancied the great pictures would be great strangers. ... When I came at last to Rome, and saw with eyes the pictures, I found that genius ... was the old, eternal fact I had met already in so many forms,—unto which I lived; that it was the plain *you and me* I knew so well,—had left at home in so many conversations. (CW, 2:214)

What one finds in the genius of others is never foreign; it is merely displaced. Recall Emerson’s more famous remark from “Self-Reliance”: “In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts: they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty” (CW, 2:27). My work for the next few paragraphs is to articulate what Emerson’s democratizing of artistic genius amounts to.

I begin by remarking that Emerson encodes this cluster of thoughts about the allocation and

education of genius in a sentence that appears in the third paragraph of “Art.”

As far as the spiritual character of the period overpowers the artist, and finds expression in his work, so far it will retain a certain grandeur, and will represent to future beholders the Unknown, the Inevitable, the Divine. (CW, 2:210)

On its surface, “the spiritual character of the period” is a name for the characteristic aspect of the artist’s era, or his time in history, and the entire paragraph gives voice to the assumption of at least one approach to art history: That every artist “is necessitated, by the air he breathes, and the idea on which he and his contemporaries live and toil, to share the manner of his times, without knowing what that manner is” (CW, 2:210). But consider for a moment that a period is also what you find at the end of a sentence, and that inevitably in Emerson the word “character” can be read to mean a written figure, so that the juxtaposition of these two, in the phrase “the ... character of the period,” lends support to the alternate meanings of each. What makes the character of the period, more than other written figures, “spiritual”—that is, expressive of a relation between what we might call spirits or minds—is not its ability to stop a course of words but its ability to start an independent train of thought. In a parallel passage in the essay “Uses of Great Men” Emerson offers the image of a sentence as a biological monad we view through a microscope, waiting for “the black dot” to appear on the animal. When this dot or period enlarges to a slit “it becomes two perfect animals” (author and reader). “The detachment,” Emerson continues, has “taken place. Any accident will now reveal to them their independence” (CW, 4:17).

What might it mean to be overpowered by the spiritual character of periods? For the artist it might mean the realization, on the one hand, that the reception of his work is in fact what constitutes its completion, its goal, and its full realization; and yet that the work’s reception is essentially beyond his control, hence beyond anything he can claim as *his*. But if the essential incompleteness of artistic production “finds expression in his work”—say, if the artist finds ways, as Emerson has, to encode this truth in it—then the work “will represent to future beholders the Unknown, the Inevitable, the Divine.” That is, the

work will represent the viewer's or reader's un-present self (hence "Unknown"), and yet also its inducement, the future self now made imperative (hence "Inevitable"), what Emerson also calls the higher self (hence "Divine"). The work of genius is one that reveals this understanding of itself: that it exists as unfinished or incomplete and that its task is to serve as representation to the audience of their own incomplete or ongoing work.

The idea that the function of the artist is to inspire originality in others presents us with another instance where Emerson is reworking something Kant said about genius. In the *Critique of Judgment* we read: "the product of a genius ... is an example ... to be followed by another genius, whom it awakens to a feeling of his own originality" (CJ, §49). But Kant adds, by way of specifying the arena in which this originality is to play itself out, that this second genius is stirred "so to exercise *his art* in freedom from the constraint of rules, that thereby a new rule is gained for *art*" (emphasis added). That is, art's ability to stir its audience to originality extends for Kant only to other (potentially original) artists, not to the public at large. Emerson has adopted Kant's terminology while seemingly universalizing, or democratizing, the potential field of players who would create in freedom from constraint—from the constraint imposed not only by the phantasm of artistic rules but by the drive for human conformity broadly conceived, something not unrelated to what Kant the moral philosopher means by heteronomy. Of course, Kant has his own formulation of the match between art and morality, between his third and second Critiques. My effort here has been to show why Emerson might have difficulty with Kant's rendering of his two universalizing claims: On the one hand, my moral maxim is justified through the universal rationality I share with others, while on the other, my aesthetic judgment's claim to universality is justified through nothing if not myself. By saying that Emerson's reworking of Kant democratizes artistic genius, I mean to characterize Emerson as suspicious of the ordering or priority of Kant's last two Critiques, as well as suspicious of their being two.

Emerson's interest in turning the audience around to the possibility of their own originality is an interest he shares with the artist, so we should see whether his writing manages to address the reader as a work of art can address its

audience. It would not be part of such an address, for example, to *inform* me that I am, or could be, original. Presumably I have had that thought. The task of art, the point of its indirection, is to prepare me for the experience of being struck by the thought so that, as it were, the thought has *me*, and I find it, now, inescapable. I will try to elucidate Emerson's approach by describing how I came to read the following passage near the end of Emerson's "Art," a passage that might seem to undermine what I am calling Emerson's democratic instincts.

There is higher work for Art than the arts. They are abortive births of an imperfect or vitiated instinct. Art is the need to create; but in its essence, immense and universal, it is impatient of working with lame or tied hands, and of making cripples and monsters, such as all pictures and statues are. Nothing less than the creation of man and nature is its end. A man should find in it an outlet for his whole energy. He may paint and carve only as long as he can do that. Art should exhilarate, and throw down the walls of circumstance on every side, awakening in the beholder the same sense of universal relation and power which the work evinced in the artist, and its highest effect is to make new artists. (CW, 2:215–216)

When I first puzzled over this passage some years ago I was led, as I think others are, to wonder what its subject is and in particular what "Art" (with a capital "a") names. There is no evident anticipation in the essay of this brief weighing of the claims of Art versus the arts. The passage struck me then as insidiously obscure, possibly to be taken as evidence of Emerson's unchecked fondness for the transcendental. But then I saw the word "Art" with a capital "a" appeared at the top of the page, as the essay's title, and so here in this passage as the essay's naming of itself. This turned out to mean, as I went back and reread the passage, that Emerson was offering in the words "lame or tied hands" and "cripples and monsters" an allegory for or characterization of one sort of reader of his essay. I realized I was not being named as that sort of reader and indeed no one would find themselves so named. Such is the elegant logic of this passage. But I was free to acknowledge I had been that sort of reader, even moments earlier. I could see next how the closing sentences (beginning with "A man should find in [Art] an outlet for his whole

energy”) were addressed to me, or say to one in my position. And I understood why the man who fashioned these sentences had praised Raphael’s *Transfiguration* one paragraph earlier by saying, “It seems almost to call you by name.” The particular originality of Emerson’s writing is to allow the reader to find herself or himself by a transfiguration of figures, or a shift in meanings, that turns the act of reading into a moment of self-knowing—a sudden awareness of one’s abilities to reroute one’s thoughts from the rut they may occupy to what Emerson in “Experience” calls simply “the highway” (CW, 3:36).

Thinking about the ways in which art brings us to ourselves, I turn to how my remarks on Emerson’s “Art” bear on jazz improvisation. I have located in Emerson the claim that all art is essentially incomplete, and represents to us our own uncompleted work on ourselves. And I have claimed that jazz improvisations are essentially incomplete in a further sense, in that their ground is ordinary ongoing activity rather than sculpted time. How might improvisation’s heightened incompleteness touch our own incompleteness? I would like to get at this question by thinking again about how artistic genius works. Kant tells us, “To express the ineffable element in the state of mind implied by a certain representation and to make it universally communicable ... requires a faculty of seizing the quickly passing play of imagination and of unifying it in a concept. ...” But if the communication of the unified concept (that is, if the work) should be flawed or imperfect, such is not necessarily cause to find fault with the artist, who

... must have let [the deformities] pass only because he could not well remove them without weakening his idea. ... A certain *audacity* in expression—and in general many a departure from common rules—becomes him well. ... The genius is, as it were, privileged to commit it, because the inimitable rush of his spirit would suffer from overanxious carefulness. (CJ, §49)

I mean for the importance Kant gives here to “a certain audacity in expression” and to “seizing the quickly passing play of imagination,” so as to produce a work worthy of praise despite its warts—to prepare the way for hearing what is at work in certain exemplary jazz improvisations.

There are, I believe, small anticipations both of the birth of jazz and of jazz improvisation in

Emerson’s essay. He writes, “The sweetest music is not in the oratorio, but in the human voice when it speaks from its instant life, tones of tenderness, truth, or courage” (CW, 2:216). Might not Emerson have in mind the courage of the American slave singing his or her work songs and church songs, the precursors of modern jazz whose words, like Emerson’s own prose, are typically encoded with denunciations of the status quo and calls for a new freedom? Consider that he continues, “The oratorio has already lost its relation to the morning, to the sun, and the earth, but that persuading voice is in tune with these.” Who, and of what, does Emerson hear this voice persuading? And then he says, thinking of the voice’s allegiance to both the earth and the promise of the moment, “All works of art should not be detached, but extempore performances.” Emerson put his devotion to the extempore into practice a few years later with his editorship of *The Dial*, wherein he introduced a regular section devoted to impromptu verses not yet worked up for publication. His most recent biographer explains this by noting Emerson’s long-time interest in “poetic first impressions, in what Melville would call half-formed foetal suggestions, in the latent, the promising, the first unselfconscious flowers of the mind,” and so on.¹⁰

But there is a more explicit and self-aimed embrace of the improviser in Emerson’s essay. It occurs in a passage in which he sets out to talk about sculpture, but soon turns his attention to the human form, and then turns again to take up living and breathing human beings:

I too see that painting and sculpture are gymnastics of the eye, its training to the niceties and curiosities of its function. There is no statue like this living man, with his infinite advantage over all ideal sculpture, of perpetual variety. What a gallery of art have I here! No mannerist made these varied groups and diverse original single figures. Here is the artist himself improvising, grim and glad, at his block. Now one thought strikes him, now another, and with each moment he alters the whole air, attitude and expression of his clay. Away with your nonsense of oil and easels, of marble and chisels: except to open your eyes to the masteries of eternal art, they are hypocritical rubbish. (CW, 2:212–213)

Notice that the phrase “this living man” in the second sentence has no referent to pick up from

the previous sentence; nor does it have any referent to pick up from any prior sentence. One is invited to read “this living man” as naming Emerson, and to read the passage as picturing for us Emerson improvising at his block of a desk, altering his single words and varied groups of sentences according to the thought of the moment—what in “Self-Reliance” he calls simply “Whim.” It is an image of someone both bethinking himself and revealing himself in his most ordinary and unrehearsed actions. Does such a reading imply that Emerson’s writing is self-absorbed? But why imagine that the claim to be working at thinking originally, or for oneself, cannot be voiced seriously or for another? That one’s faithfulness to originality can serve another is a claim one might want to make as part of a theory of art. On this Kant and Emerson are in agreement. The particular originality of Emerson’s writing, as I said above, is to intimate that commitment to the other through a transfiguration of figures that name the reader. Thus it is neither incorrect nor indecorous to say that for Emerson the end of art, and so its moral import, is achieved by inducing self-absorption, or, say, self-consciousness.

III. LOCATING INSTANCINGS OF GENIUS

If one now rereads Emerson’s remarks on the grim and glad improviser, imagining this time that the words belong to a Charlie Parker or Lennie Tristano—that is, if one substitutes for the references to Emerson’s writing references to each man’s playing, and replaces references to the reader’s eyes with references to the listener’s ears—one will begin to see what I will encourage us to hear when we turn, as we are about to turn, to the recordings themselves. My thought is not that Parker and Tristano make such claims for themselves or for their improvising as Emerson does, but rather that their improvising can be read as making such claims on us.

The following remarks on portions of three recorded jazz solos are meant as sketches of the impulse or impetus that at each moment informs the solo’s progress. In this sense one could call these remarks psychological. They are attempts, once again, to locate instancings of genius: to say what can inspire feelings of originality in the listener, as well as what has inspired musicians of all ranks—some to originality and others to imitation. As glosses on bits of recorded music,

they ought to be read and reckoned only after one has listened to each solo afresh, unencumbered by the weight that the following observations place on one or another stretch of music. This may not be an easy or simple matter to attend to, but neither is it insurmountable. The recordings I discuss are Lennie Tristano’s “C Minor Complex” from 1961,¹¹ and Charlie Parker’s two takes of “Embraceable You” from 1947.¹²

In Tristano’s “C Minor Complex,” listen to the passage in which he sets up a three-beat figure in his right hand and repeats this small figure over and over for close to twenty seconds. (The passage begins two minutes and nine seconds into the recording). The repetitions of this figure create tremendous tension both for the improviser and for those engrossed in his position, or his plight, once the figure has had its bearable play (after, say, five or six seconds). One anticipates that Tristano will go on and one senses that he needs to go on, and yet one is left unappeased as the moments pass. The tension is the result of one not knowing *how* Tristano is going to go on, or even whether he *can* go on in any coherent way given that he remains stuck on this figure. One might begin to imagine that Tristano is not attending but acting mindlessly, on reflex, unaware of how close he is moving toward unmusicality. And this uncertainty about where he finds himself and what he will do next makes for greater tension than is generated by the *mere* repetitiveness of some rock music and some minimalist music.

What Tristano does at this juncture is to first underscore the repeated figure in his right hand by bringing his walking left hand to a three- or four-note repeated figure of its own, drawing us into his maelstrom instead of letting us drift off. He thereby reveals his intention at this phase of the solo, and reveals as well that he *is* intent. After sending his left hand on its way again, he next inverts and then transposes somewhat higher up the figure in his right hand. But after one or two repetitions of the figure at that level he takes it back down and through its original field of play one last time, as though he wishes to prevent his leave-taking from sounding too abrupt, before he drops the figure altogether and moves on.

Now: What do we hear in hearing this? Let us imagine, by way of contrast, what we might have heard had Tristano been playing the repeated figure thoughtlessly or mindlessly. (The suggestion

that what we hear or fail to hear, in listening to the improviser, is evidence of *thinking* will be explored more fully in the next section.) Were he playing thoughtlessly, Tristano might have stopped the repeated figure suddenly, as if he were waking from a daydream. He might have jumped to another part of the keyboard and played an arpeggiated run for contrast, which would have sounded like a repudiation of the figure, just as when in conversation one heaves a sigh and changes the subject. Or he might have continued to play the figure while modulating down the keyboard with a gradual decrescendo, which would have been an expression not so much of continuous thinking as it would have been of thinking running down, or out, just as sometimes one does not so much end a conversation as stop for want of things to say, letting one's words trail off. Jazz musicians have done all of these things. They have also parodied their temporary obsession with a figure, just as, in our worst moods, we might parody ourselves. It is one of the maddening privileges or fates of humans that we can know we are not being ourselves (as we say) and yet find we cannot be otherwise, lack the will to speak in our own voice. And so we find a way out of something like Tristano's figure, a way that is not ours but one that we know serves more or less and that becomes for us a false necessity. Tristano, by dwelling in and then sitting on and then stepping away from and then sliding back into the three-beat figure the way he does, shows how Emerson's remark, "To believe your own thought ... is genius" ("Self-Reliance," *CW*, 2:27), is to be understood. It should not be understood the way "live for the moment" is, as a kind of debased moralism in which one forgoes all responsibility—which is one wrong way to read Emerson's saying in "Self-Reliance," "I shun father and mother and wife and brother, when my genius calls me" (*CW*, 2:30). Rather, what one is encouraged to attend to in the moment is one's voice at the place it finds itself, surrounded by its present commitments, which may continue to include father and mother and wife and brother—Emerson is not *predicting* what one's genius will say when it calls. (But perhaps Jesus, in the Gospel passage Emerson is alluding to,¹³ knows how his counsel will be received.) Tristano responds to the weight of the repeated figure by owning up to it and then going on in his own way. By trusting himself to his experience, by following his

voice, Tristano makes it possible for us as listeners, after a time, to find his voice worthy of our trust.

Turning to Charlie Parker's two solos on "Embraceable You," listen to the opening several bars of each version, one after the next. The first and most obvious thing to notice is that the two versions are substantially different. This in itself is not so remarkable: one can find significant differences on multiple takes in the playing of some of Charlie Parker's sidemen, for example. What is striking in Parker's two solos is not only their complementary beauty but the nature of their complementarity. In both takes the piano player seems to be working off of a written or otherwise agreed-upon introduction; his playing is nearly identical in the two versions. But there are minor differences: the second take is at a somewhat faster tempo than the first; the piano player seems slightly hesitant and plays more *sotto voce* in the first take but he walks along unremarkably in the second; and he phrases his third measure differently in the second take, dropping a sixteenth rest that slides in nervously in the first.

The detailing of the differences aside, I want to suggest that the differing characters of the two introductions foretell, by in their own way bringing about, the differing characters of Parker's two solos. The first introduction behaves as though it requires some assurance from some quarter. Parker responds like a sensitive confidant; his playing is sober and reflective. The second introduction is more matter-of-fact and Parker feels free to take up his part at will, a bit earlier, and go for a ride with it. Responsiveness of this caliber teaches that when one's genius calls, one's whim sometimes takes its bearings from another. The differences in the piano player's first few measures are like differences in staging or lighting for an actor; for someone with ears like Charlie Parker, they can change the anticipation of an entrance in a moment. It is such performances that serve, like Emerson's own writing, as representatives of originality and as provocations for solving the antinomy of one's own freedom.

IV. INSTRUCTING THINKING, REVEALING THINKING

Perhaps the preceding succeeds only in maintaining a sense of mystery in the claim that moral

knowledge is instantiated in certain outstanding jazz performances. For we have yet to consider how Charlie Parker, Lennie Tristano, or any exemplary jazz improviser becomes an exemplary jazz improviser. Several fine ethnomusicological studies on this question have appeared in recent years, culminating in Paul Berliner's groundbreaking *Thinking in Jazz*.¹⁴ My interest here is not to challenge the ethnomusicological approach, but to draw the study of musical doings back into the community of learning broadly conceived, so that even in jazz we might find cause for understanding music's traditional place among the liberating arts. In that vein, I want to conclude by turning to the question of how something one might consider moral knowledge is encouraged and directed by an education in checking one's experience—an element of moral perfectionism frequently encountered in oral accounts of jazz instruction, including those recounted by the jazz ethnomusicologists. As I think through this question I will be guided by an interview with the soprano saxophonist Steve Lacy that was conducted by Terry Gross and aired on her National Public Radio program *Fresh Air*.¹⁵ At one point in the interview Gross and Lacy discuss Lacy's four-month stint with Thelonious Monk in the late 1950s. Lacy conjectures that Monk hired him because Monk wanted to give Lacy the opportunity to see his music "from the inside." He then describes what he learned from the experience of working with Monk.

TG: And what did you learn seeing the music from the inside? What are some things you got from actually playing with Monk and talking with him?

SL: I learned to stick to the point, and to not lose the point, and not get carried away. And to play with the other musicians and not get all wrapped up in my own thing, and not to just play interesting notes just to be interesting, you know, weird notes just to be weird. He mostly told me what not to do, he never told me what to do. But he told me what not to do when I did something that bothered him.

For example, when I played—when we were playing together sometimes he would play something on the piano and I would pick that up and play that on my horn. I thought I was being slick, you know? And he stopped me, and he said, "Don't do that. ... I'm the piano player, you play your part, I'm accompanying you. Don't pick up on my things."

... He got me out of the thing of trying to be too hip. I was trying to be too hip and it wasn't swinging sometimes, you know? Then he told me, "Make the drummer sound good." 'Cause I was playing some things that confused the drummer, because I was confused myself. And so the drummer was not swinging, you know? And Monk told me, "No, make the drummer sound good." And that was an enormous help to me, really. It stopped me cold, really, and changed my focus.

And Monk's thing—he told me, "Let things go by, let certain things go by. Don't play everything. Just play certain things, let other things go by." It's what you *don't* play that's very important, really. And that's extremely important.

There is much of interest here. I begin with a couple of observations. (1) The tone of Monk's advice to Lacy is familiar to those who have heard skilled jazz improvisers give advice to the less skilled. It is a tone epitomized by the concise, one-sentence imperative ("Let things go by"; "Make the drummer sound good") that is more an invitation to thinking than a concrete suggestion. To see this, contrast Monk's advice with the following pair of instructions: "Try starting the next chorus on the fifth"; "Instead of playing this chord, substitute the chord built on its tritone." The difference between Monk's remarks and the more conventional advice can be compared to the difference between Kant's formulations of the categorical imperative with their invitation to autonomous thought and examples of moral casuistry. (2) Some of the advice can be heard as a fair summary of Monk's own inimitable and sparse style ("Don't play everything"; "It's what you *don't* play that's very important"). Such glimpses into Monk's musical approach are no doubt part of the education Lacy sought when he worked on Monk's music "from the inside." But neither Lacy nor we are thereby precluded from recognizing the perfect *generality* of the advice. To know Lacy's own subsequent and inimitable style is to know how to hear Monk's advice as prescriptive less of a style than of a genre, less a way of playing than of committing oneself. It is, again, an open invitation to think and not a prescription for improvising in the style of Monk.

This common feature of Monk's remarks—their call for a kind of thinking, as if the words ask to be not heeded but interpreted—is evident from the first of Lacy's comments, in which he

borrow a figure of speech associated with argumentation or discussion (“I learned to stick to the point, and to not lose the point, and not get carried away”). But one should not be too quick to hear this as simply identifying improvisation with discussion. For as I suggested above in considering Tristano’s solo in “C Minor Complex,” the danger to someone who does not stick to the point when improvising is not that he may be carried to some *other* point, as with a peripheral topic in a discussion, but that his playing can become pointless, or say goalless, and without direction. This suggests that “sticking to the point” is a metaphor more of journeying than of discussing. On the other hand, if one hears “sticking to the point” as a figure for thinking—thinking as attending or concentrating or minding—one may suddenly find oneself struck by the oddity of Lacy’s lessons and Monk’s advice. Why, in particular, does the exemplary improviser end up saying of himself—and why might we want to say of him as he is playing—that he is *thinking*? If we are talking about the performance of a classical string quartet, we might rather say that what the musicians are doing, beyond playing, is primarily expressing or feeling. (We “might rather say” this not as part of an aesthetic theory but simply to characterize our interest or involvement.) When we remind ourselves that classical performers do, of course, think as well, it becomes evident that to speak of the exemplary improviser as “sticking to the point” and as “thinking” is to speak equally figuratively. It is not to *affirm* that he is thinking, which is not something one might reasonably hold in doubt. The attribution of thought to the exemplary improviser is meant to picture his playing—not to sublime it (as Williams’s analysis of Parker’s solo does) but rather, one might say, to domesticate it. Yet, how is one to understand the seemingly natural suggestion that the hallmark of a good improviser is that he is thinking?

To begin to arrive at an answer consider one of the more striking elements of Monk’s advice: his request that when Lacy improvises he *not* repeat or replay Monk’s lines. (Lacy reports Monk as saying, “Don’t do that. ... I’m the piano player, you play your part, I’m accompanying *you*. Don’t pick up on my things.”) It is, let us grant, a piece of instruction in taste, and so open to dissent from various quarters. In interpreting the advice one imagines the recordings of Brubeck with

Desmond, or of Tristano with Konitz and Marsh and Bauer, to be among the counterexamples certain dissenters would offer. But while it cannot suit everyone’s taste, Monk’s advice can serve to initiate someone who has already achieved a certain level of performance—such as Lacy had done when he joined Monk—into the practice of perhaps the dominant ideal of jazz soloing at that or any time. My interest, accordingly, is in trying to understand how a musical move that is fairly completely tolerated in the classical tradition, even in the closing days of the twentieth century (think of any orchestral work in which a musical figure is tossed from instrument to instrument) could sound naive, or could be tolerated within a narrower range of taste, by most jazz practitioners.

Let us imagine Monk playing a line at the piano. Lacy, soloing, hears it, transposes more or less instantaneously its opening pitch and intervals, and plays the line back on his soprano sax, adjusting a note here and there in response to the altered place where he finds himself in the chorus. This is surely an instance of thinking, of thinking musically, and even of a musical thinking peculiar to jazz improvisation. How then is Monk’s advice to Lacy (“play your own part ... Don’t pick up on my things”) a *further* invitation to thinking, where “thinking” conveys an ideal of jazz performance that Monk means to impart?

It will help if one discards the notion that Monk’s advice to “play your own part” is identical to the new and old counsel to “do your (own) thing.” This maxim, which to my knowledge first appears in the tenth paragraph of an early edition of Emerson’s “Self-Reliance,” is—in the now all but universal way of taking it—another bastardized form of moral perfectionism. It is counsel by which one imagines that the thing that is one’s own to do demands that one break contact with society, not in order to critique it (as Thoreau did) but because the voices of others rankle one’s conscience. More than “live for the moment,” it is advice to slight one’s experience of others in deference to one’s present or anticipated pleasures. Monk’s advice to Lacy to “play your own part,” on the other hand, is accompanied by the corrective to that interpretation: Lacy says, “I learned to play with the other musicians and not get all wrapped up in my own thing.” There is not in Monk’s instruction the

suggestion that Lacy should close his mind to the musical thinking of the other musicians. Indeed, we have to hear the request to “play your part” in conjunction with the request that Lacy “make the drummer sound good.” As Lacy tells it, the effect of this request was not to show him his place in the group (as if Monk were doling out roles: “You’re the bass player—your job is to keep a steady beat,” and so on) but to reveal the confusion in his own thinking, a confusion directly expressed in the manner of his playing. That is, Lacy’s playing already showed, by his own account, he was thinking. But unlike Tristano’s and Parker’s mature performances, Lacy’s playing at the time did not so much reveal as expose his thinking, in its confusion. The question about instructing thinking now becomes: What confusion of thinking is removed by taking up the advice to make the drummer sound good?

It is not exclusively a musical confusion; it is also a moral confusion. (“I learned ... not to just play interesting notes just to be interesting. ... I was trying to be too hip.”) One might characterize it as the false conviction that my identity (musical or otherwise) is, since mine, best pursued in isolation¹⁶—perhaps, like Descartes, seated by the fire in my dressing gown, noticing the cloaks and hats passing outside my window. The thinking that Monk is advising is pretty clearly not the thinking of meditation. But this means more than that the thinking of the improviser typically happens in the presence of others, or that one is (of course, to some extent) listening to the other musicians. By contrasting the improviser’s thinking to Cartesian meditation I mean to suggest in part that the exemplary improviser is one who, unlike Descartes, resists the temptation to adopt toward his present experience the attitude of its being *given*, all-too-familiar. Where the question is the relation between my identity and my present experience, Descartes’s characteristic move is not his willingness to doubt systematically, to consider and reject the indubitability of (not individual beliefs but) principles of belief. His characteristic move is to assume that my present experience is given in some sense, so that the problem of my identity is clear in relation to it. (*Its* nature, he seems to say, while not clear, is distinct; and thus my nature must be distinct from it.) Wittgenstein speaks of our being similarly inclined to say, “The steps are *really* already taken,” as when we ask the child to con-

tinue a mathematical series and find that what comes natural to us is not (yet) natural to her or him.¹⁷ It is the false presumption of the *givenness* (not of language or forms of life, but) of experience that leads Wittgenstein’s interlocutors—and not them alone—to read human experience as a series of mental processes or states, even after they have been warned that their words may be bewitching them. Elsewhere, as if on another planet, the exemplary improviser finds the task of the present moment to be the reshaping of his experience of the present moment—by attending to the drummer, say, or by feeding the drummer, nourishing him with ideas—as if this were what his identity rested upon, or as if learning that “resting” is not the most unquestionable or indubitable attitude for one’s (musical) identity to assume.

Returning to Monk’s advice to not take up his lines but to play one’s own part, hearing it as an invitation to thinking, and finding the thinking it invites to be not exclusively musical but moral—a sample of moral perfectionism—I conclude with a quartet of observations and areas for further thought. (1) Monk’s advice, as Lacy himself characterizes it, is negative. That is, he says merely “you play your part.” There is no *further* specification of what “Lacy’s part” is—except for the pointed emphasis that Monk is to *accompany* it. (2) This is reminiscent of the posture Emerson adopts in his essays, as in the passage that includes “A man should find in [Art] an outlet for his whole energy.” Because this is Emerson, and because we read this admonition in an essay he titled “Art,” the entire passage becomes a commentary on our reading of it. But it cannot play its part of commentary until we play our part by reading actively (in this instance, by noticing that in saying “Art” the text names itself). Only certain readings will activate this text. (3) If one juxtaposes Monk’s remark (“I’m accompanying you”) and the task of reading called for by an Emerson essay, one gets a new simile for the ongoing activity of an improvised jazz solo. In jazz, the accompaniment—in this case, Monk’s playing—is like a text that asks to be read by the soloist, as it were, *between* the lines. But now it is easy to see how Lacy’s picking up and playing one of Monk’s lines on his horn could be interpreted as a certain too-literal-mindedness, an attitude toward the accompaniment that is more passive than active, more a dereliction of think-

ing than an instancing of it. (4) The requisite balance envisioned by Lacy's comments—one in which the soloist who would stick to the point is to feed off of the other musicians' ideas without being devoured in turn by them—is given expression in a sentence from “Self-Reliance” that appears just before Emerson advises the hippie in all of us to do our thing (or our “work,” as corrected editions have it). I close with his words: “It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude” (CW 2:31).¹⁸

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1. I detail some familiar debasements of Emersonian self-trust, and sketch a third feature—its recommendation that in abandoning our present selves we be aided by those representatives of humanity Emerson calls “great men,” and among whom we might include movie stars—in “Moonstruck, or How to Ruin Everything,” *Philosophy and Literature* 19 (1995): 292–307.

2. Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (University of Chicago Press, 1990).

3. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*; hereafter abbreviated CJ, followed by section number.

4. *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Robert E. Spiller, Alfred R. Ferguson, et al. (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), vol. 2, pp. 207–218; hereafter abbreviated CW, followed by volume and page numbers.

5. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 12.

6. Timothy Gould, “The Audience of Originality,” *Essays in Kant's Aesthetics*, ed. Ted Cohen and Paul Guyer (University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 184.

7. Martin Williams, accompanying booklet for *The Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz*, The Smithsonian Institution P6 11891, p. 33.

8. Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976; Johns Hopkins Paperbacks edition with a new foreword by Harold Bloom, 1986).

9. *Ibid.*, p. 41.

10. Robert D. Richardson, Jr., *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (University of California Press, 1995), p. 379.

11. Lennie Tristano, *The New Tristano*, Atlantic 1357. Unfortunately and inexplicably, “C Minor Complex” does not appear on the compact disk reissue of this material (*The New Tristano*, Rhino 71595).

12. Charlie Parker, Roost 2210 and Spotlite 104. Both takes appear on the compact disk release *The Complete Charlie Parker on Dial*, Jazz Classics 5010.

13. Luke 14:26: “If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.”

14. Paul F. Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (University of Chicago Press, 1994). See also Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* (University of Chicago Press, 1996).

15. Steve Lacy, interview by Terry Gross, *Fresh Air*, produced by WHYY-FM/Philadelphia, distributed by National Public Radio, 20 November 1997. Lacy recounts much of the same advice from Monk in Thomas Fitterling, *The Lonesome Monk: His Life and Music*, trans. Robert Dobbin, with a foreword by Steve Lacy (Berkeley Hills Books, 1997), pp. 13–14.

16. Pursuing one's jazz identity in isolation, while still assuming that one's experiences are representative of most competent jazz practitioners, is a fair summary of David Sudnow's error in his still classic *Ways of the Hand: The Organization of Improvised Conduct* (Harvard University Press, 1978; reprint, Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1993). I critique Sudnow's approach, guided in part by Wittgenstein's criticisms of Augustine's account of learning language, in “Jazz Improvisation, the Body, and the Ordinary” (forthcoming).

17. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1958), §188.

18. Portions and earlier versions of this essay were read at Harvard University as part of a seminar on moral perfectionism taught by Stanley Cavell, at the Universities of Calgary and South Carolina, at Le Moyne and Iona Colleges, and at The American Society for Aesthetics 1997 Annual Meeting held in Santa Fe, New Mexico. I want to thank faculty and participants at these various settings for their encouraging and often helpful remarks.