

William Day*The Ends of Improvisation*

The beginning of jazz—we might identify this with the music of New Orleans at the turn of the last century—had next to no solo improvisations. In the usual recounting of jazz history, the arrival of jazz as a mature art form is synonymous with the move from Dixieland's group improvisations to the prominence of the improvising soloist, exemplified by Louis Armstrong. But how do we account for, or assess, this recounting? What makes the improvised solo, as it has developed in the wake of Armstrong, a maturation of the possibilities of this art form? The following is an attempt to address this question in a small way by considering the significance of *one* distinguishable feature of an improvised jazz solo—how it ends—in light of Joseph Kerman's seemingly parallel consideration of the history of development of the endings in classical concertos. This effort will lead me to propose a counter-parallel, between the jazz improviser's attitude toward the solo's end and Wittgenstein's attitude toward our (or philosophy's) arriving at the end of justifications. The parallel will depend on one's granting that both the improviser and Wittgenstein are, in their distinct ways, doing battle against the recurring human fantasy of the fixity of experience. The essay concludes with an illustration of the jazz improviser's treatment of the solo's end that should help to bring out how that battle is waged—and, in exemplary instances, won—on the bandstand and in the studio.

I. THE ENDS OF CONCERTOS

In his *Concerto Conversations*, the book version of his 1997–1998 Norton Lectures at Harvard, Joseph Kerman devotes his last chapter to discussing the evolving approach to endings of concertos in the classical repertoire of the eighteenth through the twentieth centuries.¹ He notes that Frank Kermode (from whom Kerman steals his chapter's title “The Sense of an Ending”) finds the archetype for literary fictional form in eschatological history, that movement from creation to apocalypse found in the Bible. Kermode explains that we are attracted to this sweep or motion in storytelling because “man in the midst,” our common experience of human life, “needs such

models as solace, to make tolerable [our] own moment between beginning and end” (p. 103). That need might be described by a Romantic reader of Kant as an overlooked element of his transcendental aesthetic, an unacknowledged feature of our intuition of time: Kerman summarizes Kermode's point by saying that “literary genres such as the novel, tragedy, and autobiography are seen as answering a need to ‘speak humanly of life's relation to [time]—a need in the moment of existence to belong, to be related to a beginning and to an end’” (p. 103).

The movement toward an ending, even when works of literary fiction or of music employ conventional or ingenious ways to delay it, thus seems allied to the notion of tragedy as schematized by Aristotle. And yet, as Kerman reminds us, the rondo finale that closes the typical three-movement musical concerto is rarely associated with tragedy or apocalypse: “It spells accommodation, acceptance, and collusion, which it is easy to associate with high comedy as it flourished in the eighteenth century” (p. 104), and comedies, he notes, “are about beginnings, more or less confident beginnings, about getting along with a life after delays, diversions, setbacks, and general craziness” (p. 105).

Still, Kerman's lecture proceeds to identify a historical line of tragic or near-tragic concerto endings, beginning with Mozart's two piano concertos in the minor mode: his D minor, K. 466, and the C minor, K. 491. In the D minor concerto, for example, and despite its puckish, major-mode coda, it is the aggressive and disturbing battles between soloist and orchestra over the increasingly truncated theme that stay with the listener.

On Kerman's telling, this Mozartian eruption of tragic concerto endings in the late eighteenth century is followed by nothing—or rather, by an entire century of variations on the *lieto fine* or “happy ending” concerto. It is not until the early part of the next century, or the period surrounding World War I, that a veritable munitions stockpile of tragic concertos—by Prokofiev, Elgar, Walton, Berg, Hindemith, Britten, Shostakovich, Stravinski, and others—appears and multiplies, culminating in the “tragic landscape” (p. 120) that concludes Elliott Carter's Piano Concerto of 1965.

What I mean to underscore in Kerman's chapter, beyond the brilliance of his attention to the details of how these concertos end, is what he enumerates as the second of "two general points about these concertos of lamentation," namely, that in them "mourning is universalized by being apportioned between the two concerto agents: personal utterance is given to the soloist, while the orchestra speaks for the community through its chorale or its passacaglia. This apportionment arises naturally from the concerto's special kind of duality; it is not something that could happen in a symphony" (p. 118). It is "this intensive double projection" that Kerman finds "goes some way toward validating . . . the analogy between the concerto agents and the protagonist and chorus of Greek tragedy" (p. 119).

II. THE ENDS OF IMPROVISED SOLOS

Faced with Kerman's meditations on what one is left with at the end of the classical concerto, someone prepared to think about the logic or grammar of jazz is likely to notice the distinct parallel in the division of labor between the agents of the classical concerto, on the one hand, and the jazz soloist improvising within a small or large ensemble of accompanying musicians, on the other. So what sort of grand history can one discover in the approach to solo endings in the work of the exemplary jazz improvisers?

Let me sharpen this question by clarifying some real and some merely apparent differences between Kerman's discussion and the question I mean to be raising. First, there looks to be a clear difference between Kerman's concern with the sense of an ending in the concerto and my interest in the endings of jazz *solos*. I am not, after all, asking about the ending of a jazz tune (a song, a performance, a track on an album), for which the conventions, at least, are well established, few, and familiar. But the parallel to Kerman's analysis holds, because his focus is not on the closing bars or coda of a concerto but rather on the exchanges between soloist and ensemble; it is the resolution (or absence of a resolution) of that interplay whose history he wants to tell. Conversely, my brief summary may give the impression that Kerman's concern is with the whole of the ending *movement* in a concerto (in Mozart's and Beethoven's day, this was the rondo finale).

But this, too, is a false impression on two counts. (1) The significant development in the history of the concerto under scrutiny in Kerman's analysis is the move from the *lieto fine* or "happy ending" of the final movement to the merely ostensibly *lieto fine* of Mozart's two minor-key, tragic concertos, followed by an extended period of quasi-*lieto fine* endings, or variations on the *lieto fine* ending, and concluding with the World War I period and later concertos in which a tragic attitude is embraced by and enacted in the last pages of the score.² In other words, his analysis is an analysis of what changes over centuries within the final movement of concertos *to alter our experience of their ending*. And further, (2) Kerman's reading of this history recognizes that concertos, like literary fictions, love the diversions and reversals that delay the ending "without ever of course escaping it" (p. 104). So his attention on the closing movement is, from the beginning, concerned with the end, even as it takes note of how the end is set up (or, as in the case of Mozart's tragic concertos, how the sunny end is undermined) by the movement as a whole.

Perhaps it goes without saying, but if one wanted to characterize the structure of jazz improvisations generally as *either comic or tragic*—a line of thought I will not be pursuing in this essay—that would not resolve the question I am raising here. For while we might agree that the shape of comedy is more episodic than tragedy or that the conclusiveness of the end in tragedy yields a more complete or closed form than comedy, still, comedies have characteristic ways of ending, just as Mozart's *lieto fine* concertos have characteristic ways of ending. If the development of improvisation in jazz has *not* yielded characteristic approaches to ending a solo, it will not do to explain this by appealing to its associations with comedy—to its operating in the accommodating, accepting, getting-along mode of comedy. For in general, one can say that as an art form progresses, and as the possibilities of the medium become familiar to practitioners, certain artistic problems (such as how to end) will get worked out. Stanley Cavell has explained the development of a narrative or dramatic genre in similar ways: the creative artist comes to realize what the nature of her material is and what its particular challenges are; as these become apparent, her energies are directed increasingly toward satisfying solutions to those challenges.³ So with jazz, if the aim of a solo improvisation were to fulfill a compositional ideal—specifically, to

create a structure where the end recalls or fulfills or otherwise completes the beginning and middle, or where the direction of the improvised solo aims at its ending—then, as the jazz art form matures, one would expect that the shape of exemplary solos would progress to a clearer articulation of this compositional or formal ideal.

But that is not what one finds. Instead, the overwhelming impression for anyone, I venture to say, who listens to some representative assortment of jazz solos by exemplary improvisers—that is, those improvisers most familiar with and adept at finding satisfying solutions to the challenges of improvising a jazz solo—is that the end of the solo is, by and large, no *particular* concern for the improvising artist, *not* something aimed at, *not* a significant part of the story of this art form's development. If anything, the development of the solo ending within that larger development of jazz as an art form has been in the opposite direction, the patterned ways of the endings in the earliest jazz giving way to the aforementioned overabundance of approaches, or absence of an approach, to the ending—in direct proportion, one can say, to the art form's growing development of and reliance on improvisation.

It is not my intention to deny that there are patterns to be found in endings across different performances of the same tune by the same jazz artist, across different periods in a single jazz artist's career, and even across a range of jazz artists and periods. When Miles Davis soloed on "Bye Bye Blackbird" in the late 1950s and early 1960s, it was his practice to begin by stating the melody in a key one whole tone up from the rest of the band.⁴ He would then end his solo by beginning a new chorus with the first notes of the melody, again playing it in this wrong-sounding one-tone-up key. Davis is not alone in another practice—evident in a version of "If I Were a Bell" recorded by his mid-1960s quintet at the Plugged Nickel—of concluding a highly abstract solo, over loosely stated chord changes, with a straightforward return to the last four bars of the melody, as if to signal—with perhaps the most transparent aural device one can imagine—that his musings had come to an end.⁵

But these and other patterns are like the patterns across the sand of a quiet beach: small marks of regularity (perhaps bearing evidence of their genealogy) surrounded by whole neighborhoods of indistinctness, of nothing but individual grains.

At any rate, they are not the patterns of significance and inheritance and development of inheritance that one expects from an art form meeting some challenge or addressing some aspect of the medium that the history of the art form bequeaths to it. "When you solo, tell a story," the old advice of the jazz musician goes. But stories have endings, familiar ways of tying things together; so it can surprise us to notice that the exemplary jazz soloist has not devised such ways, that he does not see the end as having special importance.

Surprising, perhaps, but I assert that this is nonetheless an uncontroversial claim about what one hears from the best players in jazz. That is why my task here will not be to catalog some of the patterns of approaches that one could discern to ending a jazz solo, as if in that way one could exhaust them and in so doing satisfy one's interest in them. Instead, I am led by the absence of a sense of an ending in the practice of jazz soloing to some further ways of thinking about the moral structure of the exemplary jazz improvisation.

III. THE UNGIVENNESS OF EXPERIENCE

In an essay that appeared in this journal, I identified that structure as moral perfectionist, adopting Cavell's preferred name for a tradition of 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."⁶ There I characterized the best improvisers as exemplifying in their solos the moral perfectionist attitude of "checking one's experience"—that is, of revealing to the listener, through their negotiations of moments in the improvisation that threaten their implicit claim to be acting mindfully, the human capacity to step out of the ruts in one's thinking and heed the self.⁷

Late in that essay, I spoke in passing of the improviser as contesting in his or her playing "the false presumption of the *givenness* . . . of experience," and I want now to bring out how the jazz improviser's aversion to thinking about the solo's end as an ending, as a concluding utterance, is likewise to be thought of as exhibiting this attitude, part of jazz improvisation's moral perfectionist structure.⁸ What I am calling the false presumption of the givenness of experience is revealed in René Descartes' characteristic move in the *Meditations* to frame the problem of his identity in

opposition to his experience, which he takes, like the good skeptic that he is, as in some sense *given*.⁹ (Compare *Meditations* II, 24–25: “But I have already denied that I have any senses and any body. Still I hesitate; for what follows from this? Am I so tied to a body and to the senses that I cannot exist without them?”) He thereby simultaneously simplifies and falsifies the problem of identity: by opposing the “I” to its (fixed) experience, Descartes can raise his question about the *veracity* of this experience while setting aside, or being blinded to, questions about the *character* of his experience (call this its aesthetics) and questions about his *responsiveness* to his experience (call this its ethics).

Finding in Descartes a bad model for the attitude of the exemplary improviser, I turn to Wittgenstein. As I alluded to in that earlier article, Wittgenstein takes note of our Cartesian tendency to view our experience as given when he speaks of our being inclined to say, “The steps are *really* already taken”—as when we imagine that our “act of meaning the order [for example, the order ‘add 2’] had in its own way already traversed all those steps . . . as if they were in some *unique* way predetermined, anticipated—as only the act of meaning can anticipate reality.”¹⁰ It is some such picture of meaning—imagining that meaning is independent of our acts of speaking, and so independent of anything experience might (further) teach us about the attunements and implications of what we say—that produces the drama of confusion in *Philosophical Investigations* §185, when the child who has been taught to continue a mathematical series shows that what comes natural to us is not (yet) natural to her. While the section of *Philosophical Investigations* in which this drama plays out is referred to canonically as the “following a rule” section, and so is read as concerned primarily with questions of epistemological justification, we owe to Cavell the recognition that Wittgenstein is concerned no less (and possibly far more) with the question of our response, as titular teacher, to this “scene of instruction,” and in particular with whether we will view it as an invitation to elicit or to suppress our criteria for what we do.¹¹

The passage that serves as the climactic moment in Wittgenstein’s scene of instruction is *Philosophical Investigations* §217, which reads in part: “If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am in-

clined to say, ‘This is simply what I do.’”¹² Cavell’s reading of this passage is in stark contrast to Saul Kripke’s, who seems to view the words “I am inclined to say, ‘This is simply what I do’” as a (supposedly justified) threat to discontinue instruction—as if one were to say, “My inclinations are my (skeptical) justification for what I do.”¹³ Such an attitude expresses, as with Descartes, the false presumption of the givenness of experience: the self as married to, or fated to, one’s inclinations, impaled upon them.

Cavell acknowledges that these words express the onset of a crisis: the teacher and pupil are at a crossroads as to whether they can go on together. But rather than reading the position of the teacher (say my position) in Kripke’s quasi-Cartesian way, Cavell sees Wittgenstein proposing another possibility for I who find my justifications exhausted and my spade turned. The teacher’s subsequent expression (I am *inclined* to say: “This is simply what I do”) is not the assertion of a presumption but the mark that I have been *struck* by my own presumption. The moral we are to draw from those words is to see them not as presuming justification but as refusing a Kripke-like last word—an ending—in my response to the pupil. Instead, I will wait, I will see how (else) we might go on.¹⁴ I do this not out of confidence that you and I will find agreement in, for example, what counts as “adding 2.” Rather, I do it because my interest in what I call “adding 2” is no greater than my interest, here and now, in finding the extent to which you and I share a world. One could say that the original meaning of *talking* is rediscovered in the scene of instruction, and that my interest in it is to find out what you and I have to say to each other, to find out what we *can* say. Cavell reads this politically—though we might say equally that he reads it morally, or even maritally—as “a certain opening of the idea, or direction, of consent.”¹⁵

IV. “BIRD FEATHERS”

Now to say, as I wish to say, that the jazz improviser’s aversion to treating the solo’s end as an ending is akin to Cavell’s and Wittgenstein’s interlocutor’s aversion to treating the exhaustion of justifications as an ending may well strike one as fanciful at best. And one may already have grown impatient in terms expressed along the following lines: “There’s a very simply reason why jazz

compensate for the relative absence of thematic development in improvised jazz when compared to even the most workmanlike sonata-allegro composition from the classical tradition. But the gesture is too subtle, too quick, and mostly too little to serve that compositional, structural end.

Instead, I think, this gesture at the beginning of Davis's and Jordan's solos creates the impression (perhaps it is an impressionistic impression) that the previous solo has not ended, or at least that its driving idea has not, as if the aim of this playing or music making is to play on—not so much to never end as to never propose an ending. In that sense, or heard that way, the exemplary improviser's aversion to an ending that has the sound of an end is a gesture of invitation to the other performers, one that in the case of "Bird Feathers" is taken up quite literally. The jazz solo, in this most prominent line of the tradition (more prominent than the impromptu and at times combative cutting session), is not a means for setting oneself apart from, let alone casting out, the other performers ("This is simply what I have done; see if you can go on"), but a way of continually proposing a conversation, the end of which is always to discover whether you and I share a world. And we as listeners are invited, of course, to hear that invitation as made to us as well—that is, to allow our interest in the solos to be structured by the players' responsiveness to each other's musical utterances.

I should perhaps say more about this idea of responsiveness—in particular, about its differences from the ubiquitous responsiveness of musicians of any sort playing together—and about how it could serve as an emblem for the responsive demands that Wittgenstein's later writings make on his reader.¹⁷ But, instead, I will simply end here.

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1. Joseph Kerman, *Concerto Conversations* (Harvard University Press, 1999); in-text citations will refer to the page number in this text.

2. Kerman mentions, for example, "the ecstatic or heroic or triumphant finale" of Liszt concertos (*Concerto Conversations*, p. 112), written not for the collaborative and accommodating soloist but for the virtuoso soloist as Romantic hero.

3. See Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 27–30.

4. For example, Miles Davis, "Bye Bye Blackbird," recorded July 3, 1958, live at the Newport Jazz Festival, Columbia C2 38262; reissued in various CD collections, including *The Complete Columbia Recordings: Miles Davis & John Coltrane*, Sony 65833.

5. Miles Davis, "If I Were a Bell," recorded December 22, 1965, live at the Plugged Nickel (Chicago), *Cookin' at the Plugged Nickel*, Columbia CJ 40645; reissued in various CD collections, including *The Complete Live at the Plugged Nickel 1965*, CBS/Sony SRCS 5766/72.

6. William Day, "Knowing as Instancing: Jazz Improvisation and Moral Perfectionism," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 58 (2000): 99–111, at p. 99.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 100.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 110.

9. On the topic of the (false) fixity of *past* experience, see Garry Hagberg's excellent essay, "In a New Light: Wittgenstein, Aspect-Perception, and Retrospective Change in Self-Understanding," in *Seeing Wittgenstein Anew*, ed. William Day and Victor J. Krebs (Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 101–119.

10. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and Rush Rhees, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1958), §188.

11. Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 65.

12. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, pp. 71ff.

13. Saul Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language: An Elementary Exposition* (Harvard University Press, 1982), especially pp. 87–90.

14. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, p. 76.

15. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, p. 76.

16. Charlie Parker, "Bird Feathers," D1111-C, DIAL 1058; reissued in various CD collections, including *The Complete Savoy & Dial Master Takes*, Savoy Jazz SVY-17149.

17. I speak to the responsive demands of Wittgenstein's later writings in the concluding section of "Wanting to Say Something: Aspect-Blindness and Language," in *Seeing Wittgenstein Anew*, pp. 220–224.