Randy Fertel

A Taste for Chaos:
Creative Nonfiction as Improvisation

Reason is a faculty far larger than mere objective force. When either the political or the scientific discourse announces itself as the voice of reason, it is playing God, and should be spanked and stood in the corner.
Ursula K. Le Guin, *Dancing at the Edge of the World*

Since Montaigne, the rhetoric of spontaneity — spontaneity as a rhetorical device — has been a characteristic ingredient in creative nonfiction. "Is it reasonable," asks Montaigne,

> that I should set forth to the world, where fashioning and art have so much credit and authority, some crude and simple products of nature, and of a feeble nature at that? Is it not making a wall without stone, or something like that, to construct books without knowledge and without art? Musical fancies are guided by art, mine by chance. (611)

Montaigne points to the implicit dialogue with artifice that lies behind most claims of spontaneity. Why claim crudeness and simplicity when fashioning and art, as he says, have so much credit and authority in the world? His appraisal is right on target. We credit, we esteem, we lend authority, and we are convinced by those forms of discourse that display craft, care, and thoughtfulness. The scholar's footnotes or the lawyer's citations lend authority by their mere presence. They say: *I have researched this; I have thought long and hard; I have burnt the candle at both ends—believe me!* And the spontaneous writer? S/he asks to be believed because*, "guided … by chance," s/he has given this no thought or effort.* Claiming to be improvised, such texts place themselves outside the mainstream of what garners respect in the world.

The assertion of some degree of spontaneous composition is so characteristic and definitive that I choose to call such texts "improvisations."[1] I do not mean to rename the "Fourth Genre," or whatever we may choose to call it, but to signal its connections to other self-described improvised texts throughout literary history, connections I wish here to explore better to understand the tradition of essay writing. Ned Stuckey-French's *The American Essay in the American Century* has served the Fourth Genre well by tracing its roots in and its breaking free from The Genteel Tradition. But The Genteel Tradition is not just a nineteenth and twentieth century historical phenomenon. There is always and always has been some form of a genteel tradition for more modern voices to disrupt. As Terence Cave points out, "The notions of improvisation and inspiration" bring into play "some of the most deeply rooted conceptual structures of Western thought" (125). Montaigne's disruptive voice is an important springboard but his is not the first. The literary form such voices adopt I call "improvisation." The scare quotes—"improvisation"—which I will now dispense with, are meant to suggest that the claim of spontaneous composition is a matter of rhetoric rather than of provenance.

The rhetorical force of spontaneity as trope in improvisations usually gets lost in what I call the Goldilocks game, debates over whether a text's porridge, as it were, was too improvised, not really improvised (or not improvised enough), or improvised to just the right degree. In the "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose," Jack Kerouac recommends "swimming in [a] sea of English with no discipline" (482). Elsewhere he endorses "kickwriting": an art that "kicks you and keeps you overtime awake from sheer mad joy" (Chambers, "Introduction," xviii).

Too much? Assuming the arch, confident voice of the urbane craftsmen, Truman Capote famously judges: "That's not writing, that's typing."

---

[1] I offer a taxonomy of improvisation in *A Taste for Chaos: The Hidden Order in the Art of Improvisation* (Spring Journal Books, 2015).

Not really improvised? While Kerouac may have written the novel in three weeks on a long scroll to avoid changing sheets, he then spent six years, some remind us, editing to get it to press.

Just right? For Beat novelist John Clellon Holmes his friend got it: "Somehow an open circuit of feeling had been established between his awareness and its object of the moment, and the result was as startling as being trapped in another man's eyes" (Cunnell 36).

Choosing not to play the Goldilocks game enables us to consider spontaneity as a rhetorical trope — a device of persuasion — rather than a debatable and contentious matter of the facts of composition. Claims of careless, unpremeditated, uninformed, uneducated, unpolished spontaneity are legion in Montaigne's *Essais*, a title that, in its very name, hints at its tentative and unassuming character.[2] Montaigne thus exploits a rhetoric founded on "some crude and simple products of nature . . . guided . . . by chance." His opposition, between studied and artificial ornament and the simple, natural, and fortuitous, is absolutely central to Montaigne's program embodied in his free-associative, conversational style and often underscored thematically. Montaigne sees himself as "A new figure: an unpremeditated and accidental philosopher" (409). He employs the trope at the very start of his *Essais*, in his advice "To the Reader": "If I had written to seek the world's favor, I should have bedecked myself better, and should present myself in a studied posture. I want to be seen here in my simple, natural, ordinary fashion, without straining or artifice; for it is myself that I portray" (2). Not seeking the world's favor or assent, Montaigne eschews the decoration ("bedecked") and "studied posture" that might convince the usual reader that his essays should be taken seriously. Indeed, he insists the reader "would be unreasonable to spend [his/her] leisure time on so frivolous and vain a subject." It is as if, anticipating his future countryman, he were asserting in contradiction of Descartes, *non cogito,*

[2] Carl H. Klaus's chapter "Montaigne on 'Montaigne'" offers a useful compendium of these disclaimers, in *The Made-Up Self*, 7-18.

ergo melior sum! ("I do not think, therefore I am the better for it")—though the self-effacing Montaigne would never boast so overtly.

The point is that, despite appearances, and despite common sense, the claim of artlessness also authorizes. There is an art to artlessness—*summa ars celare artem* (the highest art hides art)—and a decorum of the indecorous. Scholars often explain away the gesture of spontaneity as the "topos of affected modesty," or as the convention of anticipatory self-defense: I'm not worth attacking because either I'm not worth your trouble or, if I am worthy, this is not my best effort (a gesture every underachieving schoolchild has mastered) (Curtius 63; More 4:580). Another scholarly response to the gesture of artlessness, and most *reasonable* of all, is to prove by careful textual and manuscript analysis that in fact the author was *care*-ful, blotting and emending many a line. Even so, the gesture of spontaneity haunts us still, refusing to be explained away. There it stands in all the unreasonableness and absurdity of its self-definition: this is a *text* unmediated by artifice or effort or thought, "an extemporaneous speech, unpremeditated" as Erasmus's Folly says, *"but all the truer for that.*[…] As for me," Folly adds, "the method I like best of all is simply '*to blurt out whatever pops into my head"* (17).

What these scholarly dismissals and explanations miss is the positive force of the disclaimer. Yes, such claims of artlessness have been used to cover many a backside. But they often have an aggressive, in-your-face power and effect as well. Perhaps we attempt to explain spontaneity away for the very reason that the claim makes us uncomfortable, cutting as it patently does across the grain of our everyday assumptions about what commands authority in the world. But that is just what it means to do: it means to make us uncomfortable, for, "we need to be provoked,—goaded like oxen," as Thoreau puts it (77). What it goads us *toward* is a reconsideration of the value of craft and rationality.

Montaigne subtly introduces the issue of reason's value at the outset: "But is it reasonable?" ("*Mais est-ce raison que* . . .") he asks. His opposition of the rhetorics of art and of artlessness says in effect: this is what you usually consider right and reasonable; do you still? Here is my wonderful, delectable book, suffused with life and experience, not authorities, and the mere product of thoughtless effusion. Which do you prefer? Which is truer to life? Which procedure has a better chance of getting at truth, a more complete truth? Montaigne's image of the wall ("Is it not making a wall without stone, or something like that, to construct books without knowledge and without art?"), in a sense a mere throwaway metaphor, also has this indirect and suggestive sense: to proceed this way is as absurd as constructing a wall without stones; but, he seems to ask, who wants to construct walls? We are here to engage experience, not to wall ourselves off from life. He writes of his intramural program in his key essay "Of Experience," "I would rather be an authority on myself than on Cicero" (822). So, as his rhetoric enforces, would he have us be our own authority. Of course, that his endless classical quotations gainsay him, proving that he is after all the authority he chooses not to appear, only makes his choice the more forceful. That he seems like Erasmus to quote so effortlessly, to be such a master of the classical canon, makes his disdain of bookishness and his embrace of carelessness the more persuasive. Having exclusively spoken Latin at home until he was six, Montaigne scorns bookishness out of desire, not necessity. If he scorns it at all, if the scorn, like the carelessness, isn't merely rhetorical.

Montaigne's rhetoric of spontaneity and craftlessness takes us to the heart of his project. Montaigne's opposition of rhetorics here and elsewhere telegraphs a question that permeates his book and anticipates the keynote of what is agreed by most to be the *Essais'* most seminal, the "Apology for Raymond Sebond" (318-457). There, his subject is the impotence and vanity of unaided human reason. Montaigne is no irrationalist, as more careful study than can be attempted here would make clear. Nor is he the primitivist that many of the terms he privileges—natural,

simple, crude—might suggest. Like many Renaissance writers who deploy the rhetoric of spontaneity, Erasmus, More, and Rabelais especially, Montaigne's is commissioned in the service of divine grace, employed to enforce our recognition of the limits of human reason. This recognition was central to the Renaissance humanists' program. Like poet and Anglican priest John Donne they sought "to trouble the understanding, to displace, and to discompose, and disorder the judgment" (2:282). While articulating with newfound pride the glories of being human in an age that discovered (or re-discovered) both classical antiquity and the new world, their purpose was ever to remind us of man's limits and his dependence on God's grace, to warn against pride becoming *hubris*. While usually argued away, or subjected to pointless scrutiny, in fact the figure of spontaneous composition—the rhetoric of spontaneity—subtly channels the improvised texts' central issue, whether we notice it or not: the nature, value, and limits of rationality in discovering meaning and truth.

"But all the truer for that"! Erasmus's *Praise of Folly,* a survey of the world's follies, is great fun, but his deployment of the gesture of spontaneity has the effect it will have a half-century later in Montaigne, to challenge our Reason. At the heart of the *Encomium*, Erasmus argues for the centrality of ecstasy to Christian experience. To the reader's surprise, the value of *whatever pops into one's head* takes on new meaning when we realize that sometimes such inspiration is a matter of God's grace. Here we stumble on a critical crux in the *Encomium*: just how ecstatic is the ecstasy this Christian humanist recommends? Is this monk and scholar urging profligate wildness? Worse, is he urging an experiential inner-light theology that circumvents the authority of the apostolic Church and anticipates its opponents, Luther and Calvin? A Catholic priest and then monk who, for the sake of his scholarship, received dispensation not to practice his vocation, Erasmus dedicated his life to trying to purify the Church while fending off Luther's Reformation. The target of his scholarship and of his theology was consistently the rigidity and formalism of

medieval traditions: the logic chopping of scholastic schoolmen, church authorities, monks and prelates who, rigid followers of Aristotle and Aquinas, seemed more interested in displaying their command of logic than in using logic to discover truths about the world. Ever true to the Church but always ready to attack abuses and corrupt practices, these, along with his hostility to outward forms, led to the charge that Erasmus "laid the egg that Luther hatched."

Nonetheless there are Renaissance scholars who would flay those who consider Erasmus's ecstasy in any other context than its very complex Christian theological underpinnings, anything more than a matter of rigorous Christian spiritual discipline, and well short of the Church's evangelical, inner-light theology opponents.

I know this to be so from personal experience. I was once flayed in a graduate seminar, told that "anyone who would apply the term Rabelaisian to Rabelais hasn't read him." Erasmus's near contemporary, Rabelais was another former monk and Christian humanist. His books, written in vernacular French, are filled with the low humor and sensuality for which he has become known, hence *Rabelaisian.* But as with Erasmus, modern scholars spar over how low Rabelais would have us go. On one side Mikhail Bakhtin, who celebrated Rabelais's carnivalesque world; on the other my professor, then chair of the Harvard French department.

Rabelais's books (*Pantagruel*, 1532, and *Gargantua,* 1534) are likewise saturated in the gesture of thoughtless spontaneity. Almost literally saturated: Rabelais addresses his works to "illustrious drinkers and you, precious syphilitics" (*"Beuveurs tres illustres, et vous, Verolez tres precieux"*).[3] He hopes his readers will think no more and drink as much as he did in writing:

> Yes, even though I, writing them, gave the matter no more thought than you, who were probably also drinking. I may add that in composing this masterpiece I have not spent or wasted more leisure than is required for my bodily refection—food and

[3] My translation.

> drink to you! Is that not the right time to commit to the page such sublime themes and such profound wisdom? (5)

Rabelais's hope is that his work will "smell more of wine than oil" (*"sentoyent plus le vin que l'huile*.").[4] Though Rabelais cribs this figure from the Latin poet Horace, he would have us believe his books are the product of lived life, and life lived to the hilt, rather that the product of cloistered scholarly lucubrations. This word, which has come to mean pedantic and labored, refers to the oil-fueled lamps (*lux* = light) that the scholar or pedant must use as he pores over his books late into the night. Inspired by more reliable (or more unreliable!) means, improvisers have better things to do with their nights. So inspired, they seek in Rabelais's words "to suck the essential marrow [of life]" ("*sucer la substantifique moelle*"). One may find the essential marrow in the low but only through God's grace, for which wine is the metaphoric stand-in.

At his first book's center—again spontaneity takes us to the center—Rabelais portrays a utopian monastic world, the Abbey of Thélème, where over the door all that enter are urged to "*do what you will*" ("*Fais ce que voudras*"):

> All their life was spent not in laws, statutes, or rules, but according to their own free will and pleasure. They rose out of their beds when they thought good; they did eat, drink, labour, sleep, when they had a mind to it and were disposed for it. . . . For so had Gargantua [Pantagruel's father] established it. In all their rule and strictest tie of their order there was but this one clause to be observed, *Do What Thou Wilt*. (144)[5]

The monks of the Abbey of Thélème enjoy the use of a swimming pool, chambermaids, and unctuous cuisine. A former monk who left monastic life to become a doctor and scholar, Rabelais

---

[4] My translation.

[5] Emphasis in original. Thélème is the English transliteration of the Ancient Greek noun θέλημα: "will," from the verb θέλω: to will, wish, purpose. Early Christian writings use the word to refer to the will of the Christian God, the human will. Rabelais himself explains, "Thélème in Greek means free will," Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, (154).

at first seems to be satirizing monastic excesses. And yet Rabelais is also dead serious about this portrait of an ideal society. "Do what thou wilt" works only for those properly inspired because, as Rabelais continues, "men that are free, well-born, well-bred, and conversant in honest companies, have naturally an instinct and spur that prompteth them unto virtuous actions, and withdraws them from vice, which is called honour" (154). Rabelais's monks are near kin to Blake's Jesus in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: "Jesus was all virtue, and acted from impulse, not from rules" (43). Free will works from instinct but only if not debased—"all virtue." Rabelais the humanist says that a gentleman's honor makes the difference; the Christian behind the gentleman would have spoken of grace. Blake will speak of vision.

The vulgarian *Rabelaisian* notion, which the head of the Harvard French department took me to be invoking, misses the refinement and discipline that Rabelais would have us employ as we embrace the world. Hence my flaying. Recommending drunkenness is an odd way to begin a journey achieved by means of refinement and discipline, but that is sometimes how the trope of spontaneity works, as an extreme metaphor, the tenor of which falls well short of the vehicle. What "Rabelaisian" captures, however, is that Rabelais envisions that, *if* properly inspired, we would embrace *all* the world, and *all* of our humanity, the low included*:* to the improviser, as to the Roman poet Terence, nothing human is foreign. Grace may come from above, but one of its effects is that it enables us to embrace the fallen world and redeem it. This is the grand gesture of the Christian humanist and the beginning of the modern world, the epistemological corollary of the age of exploration Rabelais inhabited and, by dissecting corpses, participated in.

My professor's target was not really me, after all, but Mikhail Bakhtin, who had launched a veritable industry of scholarship exploring the Rabelaisian carnivalesque throughout literary history. Bakhtin was the kind of theoretical critic back in the late 1970s that genteel Keepers-of-the-Tradition worked hard to dismiss. I do not merely wish here to settle old and petty debts. Our

teapot tempest is instructive and serves as an example of many others. The terms that the rhetoric of spontaneity invokes are loaded and meant to be. Missing the nuances, readers have generated tempest after tempest as they over- and under-respond to Erasmus's ecstasy, Rabelais's libertinage, or other improvisers' extreme tropes. Critical readers not only disagree but cannot hear one another. The problem snowballs. Michael Holquist, Bakhtin's great translator and champion, feels compelled in Bakhtin's last collection in English to urge "a note of caution…. Bakhtin's call to liberation is everywhere informed by a stern awareness of necessity's central place in the biological limits of our perception, the structure of language, and the laws of society" (xix). The *topos* of spontaneity and its embrace of freedom are always part of a binary, what Bakhtin called dialogic. What the rhetoric of spontaneity in the end proposes we embrace almost always lies somewhere in the middle: way past the constraints of reason and logic and well short of complete and unmediated freedom.

The tempests and misreadings called forth by the rhetorical embrace of spontaneity are not just for the teapots of Renaissance scholars. In Sigmund Freud's *General Introduction to Psychoanalysis,* first given orally as lectures, the founder of the free-associative talking method feels called upon, like Holquist, to warn with apparent anxiety that "it is out of the question that part of the analytic treatment should consist of advice to 'live freely'" (375). A rather humorous moment: rod-straight Herr Doktor Professor having to explain that he didn't mean *that* at all. The invitation to free-associate, or to improvise, may seem an invitation to be libertine. But, often, like a full-blooded version of Prufrock, "That is not what [they] meant at all/ That is not it, at all."

Challenging Reason's limits on the one hand means keeping it from hubristic overreach. But in practice the improvisers' dialogue with Reason also challenges it to break free of limits, to embrace other sub- or extra-rational faculties. The Great Chain of Being, the pre-modern vision of the orderly hierarchies that characterize all aspects of man and the universe, sees will, reason,

and judgment as our most divine faculties; through them we achieve a god-like objective knowledge that enables our mastery over the world (Tillyard). Improvisation explores the proposition, by contrast, that through our lesser faculties—instinct, emotion, and the senses, in sum, our subjectivity—we can achieve our full humanity, which paradoxically may better reflect the divine in us. Improvisation scorns mastery, often preferring to be mastered (e.g., by inspiration). It explores the value of submission to things larger or beyond the rational self. Ursula K. Le Guin in my epigraph speaks as a modern but for all improvisers when she challenges those discourses that assume the mantle of reason and thereby of God. "Reason," she says, "is a faculty larger than mere objective force" (85). I take this odd construction to mean that our Reason should not merely rely on the objective faculties. Improvisers have for a long time been spanking and standing in corners those who deploy merely objective Reason and cloaking themselves in its supposed authority. Like Donne, Le Guin seeks to "disorder the judgment." She is not rejecting Reason but trying to stretch its self-imposed boundaries.

What is at stake in the reevaluation of rationality that the rhetoric of spontaneity urges is not just epistemology, psychology, or religious doctrine but also politics. As Stephen Toulmin reminds us in his critique of the seventeenth century love affair with Reason:

> The humanists had special reasons to deplore, condemn, and try to head off the religious warfare that was picking up intensity throughout the sixteenth century, as antagonism between the two branches of Western Christianity deepened. Human modesty alone (they argued) should teach reflective Christians how limited is their ability to reach unquestioned Truth or unqualified Certainty over all matters of doctrine…. [T]he risk was that, pressed into the service of worldly political interests, doctrinal issues would become fighting matters. (25)

And they did, with a vengeance, witness the burning of heretics on both sides and the onslaught of the Thirty Years War (1618–1648). The paradox of the humanist improvisations of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is that they urge non-rational faculties as a reminder of Reason's limits, *in order to promote more reasonableness amongst doctrinal opponents.*

Their target were the medieval scholiasts, the schoolmen, followers of Aristotle and Aquinas who created what Alfred North Whitehead calls "the rationalistic orgy of the Middle Ages" (20). It is easy now to think of the scholiasts as straw men, hardly worthy of the humanists' rebuttal. But as Toulmin explains, Erasmus and Montaigne, "regarded human affairs in a clear-eyed, non-judgmental light that led to honest practical doubt about the value of 'theory' for human experience—whether in theology, natural philosophy, metaphysics, or ethics" (25). The problem is not just the kind of system scholiasts used, it is their commitment to system itself, to knowing the world through theory and doctrine not experience. This is the great shift the humanists like Erasmus, Montaigne, Thomas More, and Rabelais affected and they affected it in part through their brilliant rhetoric of improvisation. The schoolmen are worth rebutting in part because their commitment to abstract, systematic rationality had little chance in the face of the experiential theology that was bubbling up: Luther nails his *The Ninety-Five Theses on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences* to the door of the Wittenberg Cathedral in 1517, just six years after Erasmus publishes the *Encomium* and long before Rabelais and Montaigne flourish. If the humanists' combativeness seems hardly to merit our attention, Toulmin reminds us that the schoolmen's commitment to abstract theory and absolute system is revived by Descartes (20). Toulmin argues that Descartes's pursuit of the "Quest for Certainty," the foundation of modern philosophy that "(as [John] Dewey and [Richard] Rorty argue) leads philosophy into a dead end," is in part a response to the religious upheaval of the Thirty Years War, and in part a response to Renaissance humanists, our improvisers—Erasmus, Montaigne, Rabelais, and Bacon—whose urbane and

tolerant skepticism could not prevent that upheaval (80, 75). The humanists tried; Descartes's effort to do them one better, the "Quest for Certainty," is disastrous. Scientific positivism is its heir.

Creative nonfiction shares the humanists' objection to systematic rationality. If there is an unnamed *bête noire* in the open-formed, subjective Fourth Genre, surely it is Cartesian objectivity and commitment to system.

Erasmus's *Praise of Folly* and Rabelais's proto-novels are fictive and so perhaps do not fit comfortably under the creative nonfiction rubric. But what they share with creative nonfiction goes to the problem of defining another characteristic of the "Fourth Genre": a dramatized persona who presents him/herself as an outsider. If, as Aristotle argues, the speaker's "character may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses," then the improviser at first glance is disconcertingly unauthoritative (1329). For all their folly of the head, we forgive improvisers and come to trust them as we do because they convince us that they are moved and motivated instead by the folly of the heart (or whatever faculty the writer in his historical moment privileges in opposition to received notions of systematic rationality). Unmediated by rationality, his artless effort will therefore be true and worthy of our attention. The improviser's character is, despite appearances, a device of persuasion: it challenges us to re-evaluate our attitude toward rationality and judgment and the personae who rigidly embody them. Invoking these fictions, I am venturing well-beyond the boundaries of the Fourth Genre but do so in order to insist that one thing creative nonfictions share is a voice that somehow disrupts the mainstream.

Most familiar and recognizable is the fool or natural, traditionally thought to be God's or Nature's child, touched by a special grace: Erasmus's Folly incarnate; More's narrator Hythlodaeus, who is "expert in trifles" or "peddler of nonsense"; Burton's Democritus Jr., the laughing

philosopher *redux*; or the more or less provincial and libertine personae of Montaigne, Nashe, Browne, and Sterne. Swift's personae inhabit that urban but equally constricted "province" called Grub Street. The improviser represents himself as a bit out of the box, even a bit mad, if only for the moment like Pope outraged at some poetaster, or like Swift, whose modest proposals would ironically have us embrace infanticide, or worse, religious enthusiasm. Pantalon and Dottore, the two *senex* or *vecchi* of *Commedia dell'Arte,* serve as comic Faust figures who boast in ridiculous fashion, lampooning the scholastics' pretense to contain all human knowledge (Henke 137ff). At the furthest extreme, the improviser is the Wild Man of the green world, utterly free of civilization's constraints. In less extreme versions, the voice of improvisation is temporarily made a fool by drink, or madness, or some other impairment. Are they the narrative tradition's first unreliable narrators? Unreliable and yet, as in the fool tradition, improvisations are saturated in the Pauline injunction to be "a fool for Christ."

Eschewing the mainstream rationality of the dominant culture, the improviser's persona can also be understood in light of Lévi-Strauss's idea of the *bricoleur*. French for tinkering or collage making, *bricolage* means working with the limited range of things that happen to be available. The *bricoleur* creates value out of the tossed off or thrown away. In *The Homeric Hymn to Hermes,* Hermes, the ur-*bricoleur* perhaps, stumbles over a tortoise and on the spur of the moment tinkers together the lyre. Working with what is at hand, a *bricoleur* improvises solutions to both practical and aesthetic problems. Bricolage is related to the African American compensatory principle since the slave era of "taking advantage of the disadvantages," also expressed as "making a way out of no way." Toni Morrison explains that "the major things black art has to have are these: it must have the ability to use found objects, the appearance of using found things, and it must look effortless. It must look cool and easy. If it makes you sweat, you haven't done the work" (quoted in Panish xvii). Improvisations in various genres—epic, lyric, fiction, and

nonfiction—have been affecting to do these things for a long time. Creative nonfiction continues the tradition.

Lévi-Strauss contrasts bricolage to the goal-driven enterprise of engineering, a stand-in, in Lévi-Strauss's argument, for the scientific positivism that has long dominated our culture, our version of the scholiasts' "rationalistic orgy." Bricolage according to Lévi-Strauss is the method of myth:

> The characteristic feature of mythical thought is that it expresses itself by means of a heterogeneous repertoire.[...] The bricoleur's universe of instruments is closed and the rules of the bricoleur's game are always to make do with 'whatever is at hand', that is to say with a set of tools and materials which is always finite and is also heterogeneous because what it contains bears no relation to the current project, or indeed to any particular project, but is the contingent result of all the occasions there have been to renew or enrich the stock or to maintain it with the remains of previous constructions or destructions. (17)

That's an earful but the point is this: scientific positivism, here engineering, is characterized by being rational, instrumental, goal driven. Science has an infinite set of tools to draw upon and brings the right instruments to bear as needed to fulfill its goal. Its goal orientation is in itself a major difference: by contrast, myth — and Tricksters like Hermes — orient toward joy: the pleasure of knowing, experiencing, embracing the world, riding the present moment's edge. As Lévi-Strauss contends, mythical thinking — in our case improvisation — "can reach brilliant unforeseen results on the intellectual plane" (17) Un-fore-seen, that is, im-pro-visation.

Self-styled spontaneous writers—improvisers I have called them here—often reveal that the quest for unmediated experience is not as easy as they would like at first to make it seem. Improvisations—writing, or art in whatever medium, that claims to be improvised—are arguments *from* Nature—where "nature" and "natural" do much of the arguments' heavy lifting. But improvisations are not always finally arguments *for* Nature. Thoreau urges "the tonic of wildness," but he would not, he says, have us follow him into the woods (213). He goes there to get away from civilization ("Men labor under a mistake") but he has journeyed to the woods "to live deliberately" (from *de-liberare*, to weigh carefully) (7, 65). Improvisers like Dillard and Thoreau loudly challenge conventional, received definitions of rationality, but at the same time they subtly qualify their unconventional embrace and celebration of spontaneity and irrationality. Annie Dillard would like to have more weasel in her, but she doesn't seek to be any less Annie Dillard. Improvisers know that to achieve instinctive freedom can be, as Keats said of becoming the longed-for nightingale, to "become a sod." An improvisation often, in Melville's words, "spins *against* the way it drives" (55; emphasis in text). Having a taste for chaos doesn't necessarily mean making a full commitment to chaos.

Annie Dillard wants to live like a weasel. She has exchanged a long startled glance with one at Hollins Pond near her beloved Tinker Creek and tinkers an exquisite essay out of the unforeseen incident. Although she makes it clear she is just minutes away from suburbia and the highway, Dillard presents her encounter with the weasel as an unmediated experience of unbridled wildness. She has "been in that weasel's brain for sixty seconds, and he was in mine" (14). Directly confronted with wildness, she longs to embrace the weasel's life of instinctual purity. She wishes she "might learn something of mindlessness, something of the purity of living in the physical senses and the dignity of living without bias or motive" (15). This longing leads her

to her next wild vision where she is prepared to embrace not only the weasel's wildness but also its irrationality:

> I could very calmly go wild. I could live two days in the den, curled, leaning on mouse fur, sniffing bird bones, blinking, licking, breathing musk, my hair tangled in the roots of grasses. Down is a good place to go, where the mind is single. Down is out, out of your ever-loving mind and back to your careless senses. [. . .] Time and events are merely poured, unremarked, and ingested directly, like blood pulsed into my gut through a jugular vein. (15-16)

From the moment she imagines "calmly go[ing] wild," the passage is a tissue of exquisite paradoxes. Dillard longs for "mindless" experience ("Time and events . . . merely poured, unremarked, and ingested directly") and seems willing even to go "out of [her] ever loving mind." But getting there comes paradoxically with a plan that involves the mediation of care and skill. We learn that "the weasel lives in necessity and we live in choice, hating necessity and dying at the last ignobly in its talons." Dillard wants "to live as [she] should, as the weasel lives as he should," a life imbued with instinct and the "careless senses" (15). Yet Dillard's wish to embrace this instinctive life is a matter of will. "Could two live that way?" she asks, then exults, "We can live any way we want":

> People *take vows* of poverty, chastity, and obedience—even of silence—*by choice*. The thing is *to stalk your calling in a certain skilled and supple way*, to locate the most tender and live spot and plug into that pulse. This is yielding, not fighting. A weasel doesn't "attack" anything; a weasel lives as he is meant to, yielding at every moment to *the perfect freedom of single necessity*. (16; emphasis added)

The freedom of necessity: that is the paradox to which Annie Dillard's yearning for simplicity leads her, a kind of willed will-lessness. Indeed, most paradoxical of all, necessity is achieved by

choice, the thing she most longs to forgo. Fraught with so many contradictions, no wonder she longs for a "place [. . .] where the mind is single."

These are not unthinking contradictions but expressive tensions that tell us much about what it means to be human, the kind of human creative nonfiction envisions: not entirely reasonable, open to experience and to self-contradiction. We may not share the degree of Dillard's longing, but many of us, myself included, are aware of like moments. Sometimes they don't amount to more than passing thoughts, the urge to flee some Hamlet-like choice where a "single mind" would prove just the thing. If only instinct, a flash of insight, inspiration, some answer in a dream would come to our rescue. Then, usually, our longing unanswered, our choices uninspired, we return to what's needed of us, the hard work of life's hard choices.

Of course Annie Dillard is never patently simple and the dense and refined texture of her prose never invites us to rest with a simple reading. While displaying the mind at play, Dillard taxes us always, demanding a thoughtful, effortful reading. Readers will no doubt have to pore over Dillard's gnarled prose (and my reading of it) more than once to follow her argument. This is telling. Dillard overtly celebrates spontaneity and immediacy and yet force us to work hard to get her tension- and conundrum-filled meanings that the "mindlessness" she prizes surely could not readily resolve. What then is valued: effortlessness or the effort it takes to apprehend it? instinct or the conscious choice needed to embrace it? Most improvisers usually finally answer the latter: conscious effort.

In her longing for wildness Dillard shows herself heir to Thoreau who sought to "remember well his ignorance" and who believed that "in Wildness is the preservation of the World." But embedded in the notion of instinctive spontaneity—a notion that, as I've only managed to suggest here, has been around long before the Romantics and Transcendentalists brought it into vogue—are fundamental issues: What is the source of our best efforts? What are

the origins of our deeds and works, of our deepest and best selves? What is the ground of being, of knowing? Can we come into the presence of the transcendent? Where? How? Through which of our faculties? The higher? Or as Dillard suggests, "[D]own is a good place to go." Can the transcendent bring us to knowing, to truth? Can we become better than, can we go or be taken beyond ourselves? If the answer is yes to any of these questions, then how?

Whatever the answers, the questions are not the sort likely to be posed by mainstream rationality. They are the questions which creative nonfiction poses. The rhetoric of spontaneity is crucial in setting up those questions. The answers? Whatever they are they are more ambiguous and subjective and less likely to satisfy the Cartesian "Quest for Certainty."

We are all the Ancient Mariner: now killing the albatross in a moment of thoughtlessness, now blessing the water snakes with "A spring of love, gushed from my heart." How can the latter be his unequivocal redemption when the former, his *acte gratuit,* is equally spontaneous and unwilled? The improviser's final word is sympathy, all ultimately embracing Coleridge's favorite line from the Roman poet Terence, that "nothing human is foreign to me"—nothing, even our yearning to forsake, or to reach beyond, our humanity.

The "Fourth Genre," by whatever name we call it, deserves to be acknowledged as a distinct form of discourse. But it shares characteristics with other forms of discourse with ancient roots. What links them are the trope of spontaneity, the out-of-the-mainstream persona, the free-associative style and open form, and the themes of challenging reason's limits and enjoining us to embrace all of life. Challenging rationality, improvisation is the form artists *and* scientists fall into when the paradigm is shifting. Stephen Greenblatt persuasively makes the case that Bacon's scientific method, as well as modernity itself, comes out of the Renaissance rediscovery of Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura* (*On the Nature of Things*). In short, because of Lucretius, "the world swerved in a new direction" (11). Like other improvisations, *De Rerum*

Natura swerves from known genres, becoming a *didactic* epic far more supple and passionate than the classical model for didactic epics. Like other improvisations, *De Rerum Natura* is a *novum repertum,* a newfound thing claiming to have no precedent but clearly in Bakhtinian dialogue with epic. Like other paradigm shifters, Lucretius would have us push reason's boundaries, cleanse our doors of perception. If Lucretius inspired modern science and marks the beginning of modernity, the mode of discourse he deploys has ancient roots and modern and contemporary heirs. Modernity (and post-modernity) begin to seem the climactic triumph of the perennial improvisational space where the nature and value of our rational tools are always in question and the artist's ultimate theme is "a glorious affirmation of vitality." If creative nonfiction flourishes today it is in part because we question the nature and value of reason and the science that dominates our discourse. Like the long tradition of improvisation to which it belongs, creative nonfiction's ultimate message is that the results of our fall from grace offer a way back: passion and the instinctual life that feeds it; knowledge of good and evil; alertness to the fallen world itself. The trope of spontaneity and the formal conventions that express it together try kinetically and performatively to get us there. *Carpe vitam*: that is the buoyant message in improvisation's bottle. Don't just seize the day, *seize all of life*.

What makes improvisation possible is that *alertness* to the moment that Kerouac recommends. Being kicked and kept "overtime awake from sheer mad joy" prepares both improviser and his audience to respond to life as it happens. As Stanley Crouch writes about that improvisation with which we are perhaps most attuned, "part of the emotion of jazz results from the excitement and the satisfaction of making the most of the present" (159). New Orleans jazz may have put improvisation on the map for us, but it's been around a long time, serving our longing to be mastered by the moment. The "Fourth Genre" may mine the past and memory but its challenge to itself and to us is to be alert to any moment it inhabits, past, present, or future.

For the improviser, as for French theologian Nicolas Malebranche, "Attentiveness is the natural prayer of the soul."

Works Cited

Adorno, Theodor W. *Essays on Music.* Ed. Richard Leppert. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002.

Bacon, Francis. *The Works of Francis Bacon*. Trans. James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis, and Douglas Denon Heath. 14 vols. London: Longman, 1863-64.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Ed. Michael Holquist. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.

Belgrad, Daniel. *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America*. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1999.

Bruner, Jerome. *On Knowing: Essays for the Left Hand.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962.

Cassirer, Ernst. *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture*. 1944. Reprint. New York: Bantam Books, 1970.

Cave, Terence. *The Cornucopian Text: Problems of Writing in the French Renaissance.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979.

Colie, Rosalie. *Resources of Kind: Genre-Theory in the Renaissance.* Ed. Barbara Lewalski. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973.

Cunnell, Howard. "Fast this Time: Jack Kerouac and the Writing of *On the Road*." In *On the Road: The Original Scroll* by Jack Kerouac. New York: Penguin, 2008.

Curtius, Ernst Robert. *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages.* Trans. Willard R. Trask. 1953. Reprint. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973.

Detienne, Marcel and Jean-Pierre Vernant. *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society.* Trans. Janet Lloyd. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.

Donne, John. *The Sermons of John Donne.* Eds. George R. Potter and Evelyn Simpson. 10 vols. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Ed. Robert W. Spiller et al. 5 vols. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971.

Erasmus, Desiderius. *The Praise of Folly*. Trans. Clarence H. Miller. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979.

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925.

Gombrich, E. H. *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, 2nd ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961.

Goodman, Nelson. *Languages of Art*. Indianapolis, IN.: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968.

Gordon, George, Lord Byron. *Byron's Don Juan: A Variorum Edition*. Eds. Truman Guy Steffan and W. W. Pratt. 2nd ed. 4 vols. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1957-1971.

Greenblatt, Stephen. *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.

Greenblatt, Stephen. *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2012.

Havelock, Eric A. *The Muse Learns to Write: Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986.

Homer. *The Iliad*. Trans. Richard Lattimore. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951.

James, William. *Essays in Psychology*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983.

Johnson, Monte Ransome. "Nature, Spontaneity and Voluntary Action in Lucretius." Retrieved from www.humanities.uci.edu/classics/documents/johnson.pdf, retrieved November 22, 2013.

Keats, John. *Selected Letters*. Ed. Robert Gittings. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Klaus, Carl H. The Made-Up Self: Impersonation in the Personal Essay. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010.

Koren, Leonard. *Wabi-Sabi: for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers*, Point Reyes, CA: Imperfect Publishing, 2008.

Lanham, Richard. *The Motives of Eloquence: Literary Rhetoric in the Renaissance*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976.

Lord, Albert. *The Singer of Tales*. 1960. Reprint. New York, Atheneum, 1970.

McGann, Jerome. *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.

McGilchrist, Iain. *The Master and the Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009.

Melville, Herman. *The Poems of Herman Melville*. Ed. Douglas Robillard. Kent, Ohio: Kent University Press, 2000.

Milton, John. *Complete Poems and Major Prose*. Ed. Merritt Y. Hughes. New York: Odyssey Press, 1935.

Montaigne, Michel de. *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*. Trans. Donald Frame. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958.

Nagy, Gregory. *Poetry as Performance: Homer and Beyond.* London: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Ong, Walter J. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word.* 1982. Reprint. New York: Routledge, 2000.

Parry, Milman and Adam Parry. *The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.

Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*. Trans., Donald A. Russell. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001.

Ruskin, John. *The Elements of Drawing: In Three Letters to Beginners*. London: Smith, Elder, 1856-57.

Shapin, Steven and Simon Shaffer. *Leviathan and the Air-pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the Experimental Life.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011.

Swift, Jonathan. *The Writings of Jonathan Swift*. Eds. Robert A. Greenberg and William Piper. New York: Norton Critical, 1979.

Thompson, Robert Farris. *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*. New York: Vintage, 1984.

Wordsworth, William. *Poetical Works*. Ed. Ernest De Selincourt. 5 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940-49.