

De Improvisatione · Gerald L. Bruns

Here's a man wants me to revise, to put in order. My
God what I am doing means just the opposite from that.
There is no revision, there can be no revision—

William Carlos Williams
The Great American Novel

FROM A MILDLY ETYMOLOGICAL point of view an improvisation is a species of unforeseen discourse. One cannot predict anything about it. It is discourse that makes no provision for a future, not in the reader's mind nor, certainly, in the writer's; its teleology is entirely in the present. It is discourse whose beginning is what matters, because to improvise is to begin without a second thought, and under the rules there is no turning back. It is discourse that is governed by no provisos, and so differs from nearly every other discourse one can imagine: it is ungeneric almost by definition; it is a close semblance of free speech.

At the outset it will appear that its defining categories are composition and performance. Improvisation is the performance of a composition in the moment of its composition. One preserves such a moment by refusing to revise its results. To call a thing an improvisation is to say: This is as it was when originated. Or, again, an improvisation is an extemporaneous utterance, except that (speaking precisely) to speak *ex tempore* is to compose in the heat of performance, and what is composed may seem less an improvisation than, say, an epic or a song in *ottava rima*, wherein much is prepared for, or less than one imagines is left to chance. An improvisation that is not a public or salon event may be performed under no pressure to compose, and vice versa; it is not necessarily a thinking out loud, and perhaps it never is. It is, to be sure, speech that is allowed to stand as written; it is unrevised utterance. But mainly it is discourse that proceeds independently of reflection; it does not stop to check on itself. It is deliberate but undeliberated. Improvisation is thus accessible to simple definition: it is unplanned discourse. One cannot say beforehand how it will end, what it will say or resemble, or whether it will bear repeating. To improvise is simply to write without an end in view; it is perhaps to write with nothing in view, not even an audience. Improvisations are therefore naturally intransitive: they are an innocent or unfallen kind of speech, unused and unusing because undesigned and undesigning; they have designs upon no one, because they are themselves unprepared and unprepared for, uncared for and wild in virtue of improvident authorship.

Imagine, therefore, a guileful improvisation: it would have a secret purpose and a secret history (a providence): as when Cicero advises us to write down our Senate speeches the night before, the better to speak extemporaneously without misdirection. Premeditation is guilt, but it is also politics and the better part of public wisdom. An improvisation that is repeated

is an improvisation fallen, used, sullied by experience: one repeats it, but only by design. In this event it becomes a *pensée*, part of an inventory or tradition, something found, a replenishment of memory, a sign of copiousness, a lesson.

Improvisation is a specialized form of artless discourse, an evasion of Adam's Curse. It is unpoetic because wilfully unmade, more event than work, an effect whose system of causes has been made to work contingently, as if to no effect (as if? no doubt here is the contamination of art: an improvisation is contingent, but not accidental; it is not automatic writing). An improvisation is conceived in forgetfulness or in studied ignorance; it is what happens without respect to previous statements. A poetics of improvisation would never seem applicable in the moment one takes pen in hand. An improvisation is arguably the most original of utterances because it is unprompted and unprecedented, impromptu and unlearned, unimitating and inimitable. It is never the cry of its occasion, and differs therefore from the sally or the barb, wit as riposte, because it is unprovoked as well as unpremeditated. It is therefore doubly innocent.

Innocent, but not witless, and therein lies a true complication. Unprovoked wit is one definition of genius, imagination, etc.: spontaneities of talent, mythologies of unconscious or at all events unschooled generation. To such mythologies the improvisator naturally appeals for the sanction of his utterances: he will always claim a native or divine authority. It is clear, however, that what we call the unconscious is, quite as much as tradition or learning, a natural enemy of improvisational desire. The unconscious is full of artful subterfuge; it shapes our unplanned utterances with unforeseen forethoughts—or foreforms, if one permits such things, for the mind is a repository of hidden and ready formations, a dark library of grammars whose nature it is to make possible the inspired and the rash: dreams, talk, solemn unbreakable vows. The unconscious is the great beforehand where everything is in rehearsal. It is made up of quotations waiting for words. It is our metaphor of awful power, the muse of sorts whose dictations produce our “unpremeditated Verse.”

Here it will be good to distinguish between rhetorical and Romantic improvisation. Rhetorical improvisation is related to embellishment and ornamentation; it is an art of doing something to what has already been done. In music and in poetry it is a way of exceeding what is written by working between the lines or in the margin, or by using the text as a point of departure or as a program of intervals. Improvisation in this case is not an art of free origination; it begins instead with what is received, which it then proceeds to color, amplify, or fulfill, never to abolish or forget. Rhetorical improvisation presupposes invention as an art of finding or figuring, whereas, for the Romantic, invention is unschooled and autonomous creation, anti-plagiary, a studied freedom from readable antecedents. Romantic improvisation begins with a blank sheet of paper; rhetorical improvisation begins

with a sheet of paper on which a poem or score is written but which contains to the knowing or the artful eye large and indeterminate areas of something left unsaid, unsung, or tacitly unfinished. It would in practice be hard to distinguish Romantic improvisation from a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings, or indeed origination of any kind. Romantically, to poetize is as much as to improvise; the rest is the business of reason, the agency of recognition and revision, reminder of the better or the proven way.

Improvisation is gameless play: gameless, because what improvisation requires is a type of disruption. Imagine an improvised chess game, and you get something the Marx Brothers would play. Chess is heavy with rules, but what matters is the concentration of decision that attaches to each sequence of moves. Chess is more plot than character (no move has meaning by itself). It is a game from which improvisation has been systematically removed, nor can improvisation return even as a last or desperate chance (it would be present only as a symptom of the game's distintegration). Thus openings and secondary deployments and strategies in unforeseen circumstances are capable not only of being repeated but of acquiring fame and bearing names, as though the true antagonists in chess were forms of action rather than agency. In chess improvisation is indistinguishable from the blunder or mere ignorance; it is a departure from that which has a determinable and conceivably fortunate end. What is not foreseeable or provident in chess is always a form of undoing, and what is undone is someone's participation in the game. Thus an improvisation would become parody or anarchy or buffoonery: it would require the disruption not only of moves but of rules and usages and even of the principles of mental order on which such a thing as chess (art, the state, culture) is based: and not mental order only, but the order of transactions by which players are brought into systematic and sometimes affectionate kinship. Moves in chess speak: they communicate intentions and compel answers. Improvisations are by contrast inscrutable and unanswerable and presuppose the operations of a solitary singer.

To say that writing is intransitive is to say that it is meant chiefly to be made, not read. A certain unreadability is built into every intransitive utterance, and in improvisations this unreadability is writ large by the natural invisibility of improvisational results. Certainly one function of improvisation is to outwit the reader; it is to disrupt readerly expectations and the consequent ability to recognize what is taking place. The unpredictability of improvisational discourse means exactly that the improvisator is hard or impossible to follow: we cannot get a line on him, because his lines do not proceed or follow one another in linear or generic fashion: we cannot see where he is going, cannot anticipate his turns, and are literally left standing there, unreading, as he disappears into the page. At such moments we do not know where we stand, yet we have not exactly lost our way because there is no way to lose: the improvisation is meant to send us off in false

directions, but only in the appeal that no directions are true because none exist. The improvisation is ungeneric precisely to the extent that it confounds those signals that we normally use to complete the text we have not finished reading; it dismantles the virtual or heuristic whole that we need to construct in order to guide ourselves and make orderly our progress through the parts of what we read. And even when we have finished we cannot say exactly what we have read: it impresses us mainly by being familiar, perhaps, but not quite the thing we had in mind.

From a formalist point of view it would follow that an improvisation is a kind of negative discourse: intransitive, yet not formal or aesthetic, so intransitive as to be in general disregard of beauty. A formalist would say that formal relations of the kind one looks for in poetic or artful speech do not always occupy the foreground of the improvisational utterance, neither are they absorbed into something uttered. What is unaccountable is the seeming care with which form is averted without being abolished. Relations appear to exist, but only to disappear the moment we try to apprehend them according to a model of formal intelligibility. No other form of discourse appears to possess this elusiveness of form: elusiveness, for what the improvisation achieves is not formlessness but transience and namelessness of form, its ghostly and insubstantial presence or behavior. Form is contingent. The formalist would say that the improvisation achieves an aversion rather than a subversion of form, which is why the improvisation that declines into babble is usually rejected as (simply) a failed utterance. And this is also why improvisations are always an incitement to interpretation, with mixed and unimpressive results, the more so as interpretation naturally deforms the improvisation into the sort of discourse it most nearly resembles.

Accordingly, the first improvisation of *Kora in Hell* traps us into an inadvertent reading: “fools have big wombs. . . .” The sentence seems indistinguishable from a quotation: we have heard (something like) it before. It is a saying, an adage or proverb, and it contains a moral appropriate to the form: fools indeed have big wombs, for they are fertile and prolific and their progeny have spread to every human culture, each of which maintains a vast literature on the subject. But Williams’s first improvisation is not consummated in this saying. In its entirety it reads as follows:

Fools have big wombs. For the rest?—here is pennyroyal if one knows to use it. But time is only another liar, so go along the wall a little further: if blackberries prove bitter there’ll be mushrooms, fairy-ring mushrooms, in the grass, sweetest of all fungi. (33)*

*I have used the first edition (Boston: The Four Seas Company, 1920), which seems to contain fewer omissions than subsequent editions. The first edition is a beautiful book; it would be good to have a facsimile of it.

One may as well know that pennyroyal is a medicinal herb (“small leaves and a prostrate habit”—*OED*), thought once to be effective against common hysteria, and somewhat bitter to the taste, which is perhaps why the voice of the improvisation, after warning us against the false promises of time, guides us further along the wall (where the pennyroyal doubtless grows), past the also-bitter blackberries, to the fairy-ring mushrooms (*Marasmius orcadus*), “sweetest of all the fungi.” Surely one could go further still, thus perhaps to assemble different categories of folk wisdom: (1) adages concerning fools (and those who count on time for something better); (2) treatment of nervous disorders; (3) the superiority of the fairy-ring mushroom. Interpretation is as resourceful as improvisation—but to what end? The end is precisely what has been removed from consideration. What we have above sounds like an excerpt from a longer speech: *sounds like*, which is roughly the sort of illusion improvisations are gifted to sustain, because they seem to fall between recognizable categories of speech. Connections are missing that presumably a context could supply, which is where interpretation comes in (needlessly, no doubt desperately) to imagine now this context, now that, in order to build among the parts of the improvisation a formal continuity that is plainly absent—a continuity unavoidably unwritten and which the text seems actively to resist.

A minor lesson to be drawn from this is that improvisations tend to occur at the level of the discourse, not at the level of the sentence. Improvisations at the level of the sentence are indistinguishable from what any competent speaker of a language may produce for any reason whatsoever and with no effort at all. “Colorless green ideas sleep furiously” is a sort of improvisation at the level of the sentence, chiefly because it has sustained a disruption of linguistic rule without dispersing into babble: it still sounds like a sentence, and can even be made to read like one when transposed to a provident context. A similar analysis may be brought to bear upon Williams’s justly admired “When beldams dig clams their fat hams. . . .” —which is, however, only part of an utterance that illustrates nicely the theory of gameless play:

When beldams dig clams their fat hams (it’s always beldams) balanced
near Tellus’s hide, this rhinoceros pelt, these lumped stones, buffoonery
of midges on a bull’s thigh—invoke,—what you will: birth’s glut,
awe at God’s craft, youth’s poverty, evolution of a child’s caper,
man’s poor inconsequence. Eclipse of all things; sun’s self turned hen’s
rump. (55)

(Tellus’s hide is the earth’s skin and is consonant with the improvisation’s anatomical bias.) The body of this improvisation is motored by three substantives: “this rhinoceros pelt, these lumped stones, buffoonery of midges,” which together “invoke,—what you will,” that is, almost anything at all, or whatever can be fitted into the sound of an epithet: “birth’s

glut, awe at God's craft," etc. No need to stop at "man's poor inconsequence": as a mode of utterance the list is one of the more powerful mechanisms by which improvisational discourse can amplify itself, because the list (unlike the game) is plotless, episodic, one damn thing after another: it contains no internal demands for a conclusion. A list is something that one can introduce into a sentence as a way of making it go on forever, which theoretically it can do because a list does not end, it stops, often owing to weariness, or because something has run dry. A list is a way of exceeding the limits of the sentence without actually abolishing them.

When old women dig clams they get down on their haunches, which hover therefore near the sand. Students of Williams will recognize in this information a characteristically treasured fact, an observation released from its reasons: simply one of those things Williams tends to notice. A more complicated attention to fact is contained in this improvisation:

There's the bathtub. Look at it, caustically rejecting its smug proposal. Ponder removedly the herculean task of a bath. There's much camaraderie in filth but it's no' that. And change is lightsome but it's not that either. Fresh linen with a dab here, there of the wet paw serves me better. Take a stripling stroking chin-fuzz, match his heart against that of grandpa watching his silver wane. When these two are compatible I'll plunge in. But where's the edge lifted between sunlight and moonlight. Where does lamplight cease to nick it? Here's hot water. (74)

There's the bathtub: when you look at it you will see not simply an object but a whole society of meanings—a world of reasons. Thus you will recognize a bathtub by its superior attitude: it belongs to (among) the better sort of people. As for camaraderie, the better sort of people do not engage in it. Camaraderie exists among soldiers, ballplayers, young boys, grandfathers and grandsons: camaraderie is not a bathtub word, and for much the same reason it is not a female word. One naturally prefers filth to cleanliness as one prefers company to solitude. Most often one bathes alone and acquires thereby self-satisfaction not possible to share: one feels better, perhaps one is better for having bathed (although Dr. Williams does not think so). Naturally a bathtub would propose a bath: propose is a bathtub word. Comrades, for example, do not propose; colleagues propose, as do superiors, associates, junior partners seeking ready advancement. One does not go unbathed into the world of proposals, no more than one enters the company of women so, nor certainly does one go filthy into a single woman's company, where a proposal is apt to occur, sooner or later: whence the comradely world is lost. What is gained is access to the world kept by the better sort, a world of solitude, where one is required to tolerate endlessly the smugness of junior partners who probably bathe twice a day. So you see one has to decide carefully whether to bathe, for every bath taken or rejected is a statement of allegiance and profession of value, unless one is dead

tired, in which case bathing becomes a herculean labor: the time and effort required simply to climb into a tub of water must be weighed against how good it would surely feel. Reasons. Go ahead. Here's hot water.

An improvisation is an unwashed utterance.

Is there a law peculiar to an improvisation by William Carlos Williams? An 18th-century *improvissatore* would seek to improvise an utterance that would show none of the effects of its production; it would be his desire to produce the illusion of orderly composition spontaneously achieved (a song in ottava rima, with not a syllable out of place). Notice that this is a variation on the ancient dream of an artfulness that can produce artless or natural perfection, whence it becomes the obligation of the artist to conceal his art, or at any rate to hide the effort that his artifice naturally requires. The *improvissatore* does not disregard the perfection of art: his performance is governed by the same ideal of the homogeneous work that governs all art: it is his desire to seem to accomplish at first try what other singers require planning and revision to produce. Pope, who originally lisped in numbers, desired no less, but understood more: namely, that planning and revision are the activities that make effortless art possible. Oddly, Romantic improvisation (Romantic creativity) is not inconsistent with this discussion: it rests upon a belief in the trustworthiness of imagination, which is said to be able to produce on its own (without the intervention of conscious will, or simply by following the native laws of its development) a whole work, a homogeneous text figurable as an organism, something whose parts are integrated into a superior unity and which can compete against (perhaps is even greater than) the great works of art produced by the ancient masters. But Williams's improvisations are dependably heterogeneous. The improvisation of the bathtub, for example, contains these lines: "But where's the edge lifted between sunlight and moonlight. Where does lamplight cease to nick it?" The question we are trained to ask is: How do these lines fit in? In order to answer this question we would have to imagine reasons why the voice of the improvisation would compose them—not an impossible job, but one that is difficult to bring off without seeming absurd, because Williams's purpose (the whole point of writing improvisations) is to avoid the reasons of art. It is to resist composition of a discourse whose parts are accessible to uniform accounting. Indeed, in an improvisation by Williams the privileged line is no longer the line that seems to condense and confirm the whole; equally welcome now is the incongruous line, such that a uniform reading of an improvisation may have to leave one or more lines out of account. Hence the interpretive invisibility of "But where's the edge," etc. Interpretation performs the duty that revision declines: namely, the silent removal of incongruities. For Williams, the imagination will not naturally produce an utterance that contains in itself the reasons why it is so and not otherwise; it does not aspire to the condition or illusion of art.

We are thus on the verge of affirming still one more time the doctrine of

anti- or counterpoetry, and no doubt we can plead sufficient reason for doing so; yet such a doctrine no more gives the law of Williams's improvisations than does, say, a doctrine of imagination. The imagination does not aspire to—but neither does it flee from art. A poem can be made out of anything, including a familiar amble of Tennysonian decorum: “there's many a good backroad among the clean raked fields” (77). An improvisation by Williams is likely to be heterogeneous, but it is not therefore anaesthetic. When assembling the parts of *Kora in Hell* Williams left out those improvisations which were merely failed utterances; he did not hesitate to include many unaccountable lapses into art. One of Williams's improvisations is a story of the Good Physician. It begins: “After thirty years staring at one true phrase he discovered that its opposite was true also” (68). The story—perhaps you would prefer to call it an anecdote—is an illustration of this opening statement as of a moral: the doctor is indeed an embodiment of the Good Physician (he answers calls in the middle of the night, etc.). But every act or event that confirms him in his nobility becomes transparent to him: he sees through every confirming moment to that which contradicts it—contradicts it without, however, falsifying it: “Summoned to his door by a tinkling bell he looked into a white face, the face of a man convulsed with dread, at the laughter back of its drawn alertness” (69). Or, again: “He plunges up the dark steps on his grotesque deed of mercy. In his warped brain an owl of irony fixes on the immediate object of his care as if it were the thing to be destroyed, guffaws at the impossibility of putting any kind of value on the object inside [an unborn child] or of even reversing or making less by any other means than induced sleep—which is no solution—the methodical gripe of the sufferer” (69). The “owl of irony” is a phrase worth having, although one suspects that a more deliberate and therefore less figurative Williams would not have written it. It is an allegorical phrase, and so well does it summarize the story that one could imagine it as the title—which is one way of saying that in this improvisation part and whole are combined in an entirely traditional relationship.

And this suggests in turn that the law peculiar to an improvisation by Williams is not the law of formal violation pure and simple but the law of unpredictability (as in Cicero, for whom *improvisum* is the figure by which an expression takes an unexpected but forgivable turn). One imagines that if anomalies had crept prominently into the improvisation of the Good Physician, Williams would have allowed them to stand and would have relished their prominence; but the art of writing improvisations does not stipulate (how could it?) that nothing but anomalies shall be composed. Perhaps it is this that makes *Kora in Hell* different from the Continental affronteries with which it is still sometimes associated: there is in Williams no active principle of derangement, no unsparing abuse of sense. There is, for example, very little that can be called anomalous in the following:

Something to grow used to; a stone too big for ox haul, too near for blasting. Take the road round it or—scrape away, scrape away: a mountain's buried in the dirt! Go yourself down along the lit pastures. Down, down. The whole family take shovels, babies and all! Down, down! Here's Tenochtitlan! here's a strange Darien where worms are princes. (57)

Country Life in America. Chapter One. The Rock. Once every farm in America had its rock story. (Great-grandpa Kirsch tried to raise it when he cleared this field. So did pa. Finally pa said: Holds the land together. Once when we brought home our first tractor I took the plow over it and got me such a whipping. No one can tell how deep it goes. China. South America. Stella says it's probably down as far as Uncle Ben.) The rock is quintessential, as Thoreau and Stevens knew: it is that which remains intractable; it is the instance of our circumventions and, accordingly, that to which our attention repeatedly returns as to the truth or origin of things. Every unmoved rock is piece and principle of the frontier, unsettled by illusions.

Scholia: Tenochtitlán was the ancient capital of the Aztecs, since replaced by Mexico City. It is where Cortes was instead of the peak on which Keats placed him. The real and perhaps unfamiliar Darién is in Panama; or perhaps it is whatever lies across a frontier, or beneath it, where worms are princes because if you dig deep enough you come to a place where things are upside down. No anomalies here.

Still, one's attention returns to the story of the Good Physician and its opening statement; there is something representative about it. The natural inclination of criticism is to read this principle of mutual contradiction as a testament not only of Williams the physician but also of Williams the writer—but in this special sense: contradiction is the privileged and indispensable category of skepticism (skepticism is perhaps impossible except by recourse to contradiction as an authorizing principle). Yet this is not quite so for Williams, who regards contradiction less as a sign of unreason or mental failure than as a frequent state of affairs: the simplest consequence, for example, of real events, which, lacking providence, contrive to interfere with one another, as do on occasion the several parts of an improvisation. Improvisation is history. Whereas contradiction is traditionally the occasion of despair or satires against credulity, for Williams it is (1) good fun, and (2) a condition of plentitude or the completeness of things—as one notices especially when one of the improvisations of *Kora in Hell* fails of itself to produce a whole waywardness:

This is a slight stiff dance to a waking baby whose arms have been lying curled back above his head upon the pillow, making a flower—the eyes closed. Dead to the world! Waking is a little hand brushing away dreams. Eyes open. Here's a new world.

*There is nothing the sky-serpent will not eat. Sometimes it stoops to gnaw
Fujiyama, sometimes to slip its long and softly clasping tongue about the body
of a sleeping child who smiles thinking its mother is lifting it. (76)*

The improvisation here is an episode of uncontaminated domestic warmth such as one would expect the Good Physician to affirm; the “interpretation” which Williams placed after it is a countervailing macabre fantasy composed by (who else?) the “owl of irony.” So far from being a sign of unreason or something not working, the contradiction is a construction, the work of an ordering and editorial hand: the “owl of irony” is self-consciously dialectical, but rhetorically rather than logically so. Rhetoric (like history) provides for the expression of opposite and inseparable truths, whereas logic requires that we choose between them or seek their assimilation into a superior and resolving order. For rhetoric (like history) is eventual in its proceedings and copious in its results: it declaims now one truth, now another, in the interest of leaving nothing unspoken, whereas logic aspires to the simultaneity and cleanliness of system, into which nothing incongruous may proceed without transformation or, failing that, without doing damage to the before and after of every thought. It may be for this reason that philosophers regularly give us an implausible estimate of the world; it is certainly why there is no one more hateful to the philosopher than the rhetorician, who has his eye fixed not on systems but on the plenum of his inventory, because he knows that you must be ready to take everything into account in a world where nothing is predictable and anything can happen. Hence the sophistry of history: that which is true is simply that which occurs, as everything does, sooner or later. Mind or philosophy, the content or method of your thinking, have nothing to do with it.

An improvisation by Williams is essentially a private utterance, but only in odd and complicated ways. By his time the improvisation had ceased to be a public form or type of public verbal performance (ex tempore lyricism to musical accompaniment). As written discourse an improvisation by Williams is by its very nature privately performed, but it is therefore publishable in a way that an 18th-century improvisation is not. As a mode of ex tempore utterance the improvisation by Metastasio is naturally fleeting: it is speech whose most compelling feature (how does he do it?) cannot be preserved by writing. The improvisation in this case belongs to the world of sound, voice, and spirit, which written records always betray. One does not write improvisations of this sort, one writes them down, as an *improvvisatore* sometimes did, to the disappointment of many. An improvisation by Metastasio is first spoken (or sung), then written, which means that it is never an instance of original but only of secondary or documentary writing—and confirmation of the principle that to write down one’s improvisations is to turn them into bad writing. Hence, by contrast, the originality of an improvisation by Williams, which is never anything but written: not written speech but writing pure and simple, which imitates the spoken

utterance chiefly by not getting revised. Improvised writing imitates the most unwanted feature of spoken discourse (waywardness), which writing was invented to get rid of. It is because it is unrevised that an improvisation by Williams is essentially private: it is writing in a form which the public almost never sees, the original form, which only the writer sees and which it is ordinarily his profession to remove from view. In this respect a chief property of improvisational discourse will be its difference from published (and therefore professional) forms of writing. The dynamics of publication provide especially for revision, and not revision only but repeated application of correctional arts designed to produce a fair and finished copy: an edition. But an improvisation by Williams is writing deliberately left in draft, as though not meant for publication: relentlessly original, private and un-readied writing incompletely composed in defiance of the decorum of print culture. An improvisation by Williams pleads the decorum of unbookish or unlettered writing, as in the work of a talented but undisciplined amateur, author of unrelinquished inspirations, the unschooled or untrammled poet whom no one (unless Shakespeare) has imitated so perfectly as our Good Physician.

The mild irony is that *Kora in Hell: Improvisations* is a book, and one that swells with many bookish devices: its making required that private writings be mediated by certain editorial or explanatory alternatives to revision: a prologue, ancillary commentaries, intervening "interpretations" and short statements of principle—varieties of self-exegesis that gather the improvisations into a state of legitimacy. Hugh Kenner once made the happy observation that bad writing is writing that gets published by mistake. One function of the editorial machinery in *Kora in Hell* is to make sure no one supposes a mistake has been made: we are meant to understand that whoever put this book together knew very well what he was doing (for example, risking himself against the assumption, widely held, that no one gets it right the first time). The improvisations are uncontrolled, but not out of control. They may fail (they may fail to please), but they are not failed versions of that in which others have succeeded: not inadvertent failures published by mistake: not bad writing. They are (let us speculate) experimental, like so many lyrical ballads, and so have a provision for failure built into their originating motive: he who experiments may fail, but in unprecedented ways apt to be more savored than scorned. Experiments resemble improvisations insofar as one cannot know how they will turn out: they may successfully disclose what we cannot hope to achieve. To disclose a saving motive the improvisator takes recourse to self-exegesis, which since ancient times has been a primary form of authorizing discourse, especially when the "unschooled" or vernacular writer desired to free his lines from the trammels of Latin. We know how Williams aspired to vernacular eloquence, and how he redoubled his effort when confronted by the literariness of Eliot, Pound, and Stevens. Of more direct interest is his offhand or comic desire

for a museum of vernacular art:

I wish Arensberg had my opportunity for prying into jaded households where the paintings of Mama's and Papa's flowertime still hang on the walls. I propose that Arensberg be commissioned by the Independent Artists to scour the country for the abortive paintings of those men and women who without master or method have evolved perhaps two or three unusual creations in their early years. . . . Carefully selected, these queer products might be housed to good effect in some unpretentious exhibition chamber across the city from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. (11-12)

One wonders what it would be like actually to visit the kind of exhibition Williams has in mind. Fortunately, one need not specify in detail what such an exhibition would contain, because “abortive paintings”—no doubt everywhere to be found—would be worth gathering into one place only on behalf of a mainly satiric principle, or principle of divergence and ridicule: a museum of “unusual creations” and “queer products” (“The pure products of America”?) would make sense *only* if it were placed in opposition to (“across the city from”) the Metropolitan Museum of Art. By “across the city” Williams means precisely on the wrong side of the tracks, for the hangings of such an exhibition would be intelligible or valuable chiefly in terms of what is missing among them: high art, canonized art, art worth preserving for its own sake. One would therefore visit such a gallery as one would profess a new allegiance, or renounce an old authority. Such testimony is related to the way vernacular utterances make their claim upon literary or trained attention: they are divergences from the better sort of speech, lapses from Latin or Literature into vulgarity—failed utterances, to be sure, but unmistakably so, in the mad conviction that failure of a vulgar or divergent kind is a mode of violence and therefore of refreshment: that is, originality. Originality is, among other things, a failure to preserve what everyone had thought valuable. To speak in Latin is to speak the language of preservation—the language of writing and museums, of poetry and tradition—but to speak a vernacular is to strike out on one’s own, “without master or method,” improvising decorum, not knowing where one will end up because no one has gone this way before.

What authorizes vulgarity? On the wrong side of the tracks anything goes: it is where poetry may be made out of anything. For example: “One day Duchamp decided that his composition for that day would be the first thing that struck his eye in the first hardware store he should enter. It turned out to be a pickax which he bought and set up in his studio. This was his composition” (12). (To improvise is to make do with whatever lies at hand.) A hardware store is not a museum, not by itself it isn’t, but it contains everything requisite to the making of one—a museum of modern art or, as Duchamp would want it, a museum of American art: a vernacular

museum which to the unschooled (academic) eye would be indistinguishable from a hardware store. How does one become schooled to see such a hardware store as a museum? One does so by consideration of such gestures as Duchamp's: the decision to compose a pickax (or whatever) by picking one up at the nearest hardware store was an authorizing decision, and an individual appropriation of the cultural procedures by which many brute and transient things get institutionalized as things worth preserving. Whence comes Duchamp's authority to render such a decision? For an answer we may turn to *Kora in Hell*, which requires us to consider how on earth we can regard these makeshift utterances as art, that is, as something worth preserving. By what right did Williams collect his improvisations into a book when these improvisations are (to the unschooled eye, of which early reviewers had many) indistinguishable from bad writing?

It could be said that what is modern is always unauthorized from the standpoint of what precedes it. It is at least true that modernism is always a vernacular phenomenon. Any reasonable definition of modernism—one which could be applied to Dante as well as to Williams—would provide for the corollary that in a modern state of affairs we have only the artist's word for what he is doing. Williams once remarked that the modern writer must be his own interpreter, because he alone is sufficiently schooled in his labors to be able to speak with authority concerning them. When two or more self-interpreters understand one another you have the beginnings of a school; if disciples appear you may have a movement; when critics replace the masters as voices of instruction you have a tradition, and the end of modernism, and a need to improvise.