Incapacity

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Chapter 2

Wittgenstein’s Anatomy

Is a bit of white paper with black lines on it similar to a human body? (PI §364)

Her hand tipped toward the paper, black stroke the pen made there, but only that stroke, line of uncertainty. She called her memory, screamed for it, trying to scream through it and beyond it, dammed accumulation that bound her in time: my memory, my bed, my stomach, my terror, my hope, my poem, my God: the meanness of my.

—William Gaddis, The Recognitions

The written word potentially terrorizes its subject with the unlikeness of thought. The hand delivers the message, but the mind doubts the messenger. Is this even my hand? Is it worth issuing an illogical denial rather than acknowledge that there is truth in the hand-delivered message? Alternatively, is the mind that moves beyond acceptance to demanding what is mine just being mean in the sense of small-minded? Wittgenstein, who continually returned to the hand to measure un/certainty wrote, “If e.g. someone says ‘I don’t know if there’s a hand here’ he might be told ‘Look closer’” (OC §2). This is what I propose to do in this chapter.

Heidegger’s observations that “man himself acts [handelt] through the hand [Hand]; for the hand is, together with the word, the essential distinction of man” and also that “thinking is . . . a ‘handicraft’” resonate with Kaspar’s coming to legible consciousness (entering hand-first through a stage curtain) via carefully wrought and repeated words in Hand-ke’s play.¹ For Kaspar, consciousness is an imposition, trapped as he is within world-less words that recur only as rehearsal and performance.² Upending Wittgenstein’s givenness of the world unleashes what seems like a torrent of words that overwhelm and destabilize consciousness and communication. The mind must decide whether to declare bankruptcy or to accept meaningful doubt and illogical questions as blank checks that writing reveals. You can acknowledge the
imposition without succumbing to it, but acceptance resides only in the writing and not in words that are otherwise exchanged.

Stephen Mulhall writes: “Is it perhaps essential to Wittgenstein’s conception of philosophical prose as unassertive that it avoid declaring this fact about itself—that it not insist on its own uninsistence?” There are indeed many times when Wittgenstein’s hand seems to be writing checks in the form of categorical propositions that his mind does not cash but instead continues to recheck. Wittgenstein famously writes, “The philosopher treats a question; like an illness” (PI §255), and the reader wonders about the semicolon—original to the German—that Wittgenstein places between the words “question” and “like” almost as if the “question” in seeming to beg off simple comparison invites a connection at some other level. As always, Wittgenstein is manifesting his desire to slow down thought, but what he in fact does is to slowly twist it. This realization, call it recognition, comes naturally if not easily to the OCD reader.

If the problem that I am describing has to do with loss, it is with the feeling of loss that accompanies what you remember about how you used to take in and express the language of thought. “The words with which I express my memory are my memory reaction” (PI §343), says Wittgenstein, not so much ignoring the meanness of “my” as repossessing qualification (“my”) and “meanness” as new values. It is not about no longer remembering, the double negative (qualification) says, but about what remembering means. (“Am I remembering a process or a state?” [PI §661]) Meaning, Wittgenstein argues, is often a matter of comparison, with difference in meaning often resulting from “some direction of attention” (PI §666).

As part of a simple neuropsychological test, I was asked to draw the numbers inside a circle that would make it into a clock. After some hesitation concerning where I should put the “9” and the “3,” which I got right, I was asked to draw in the hands that would make the clock read 11:10—just one minute short, I would add, of the magic time for the OCD mind, which is 11:11. (Perfect symmetry, parallelism, a palindrome—as it applies to language forming the perfect seal. Catastrophe also being the perfect seal as far as expectation is concerned—e.g., the calligram of the twin towers of 11:11 recurring as the image that is made of time as an obsessive mode of recurrence. Michel de Certeau alternatively called the twin towers “the tallest letters in the world,” which, as a grapheme, constitutes in and as itself a non-recurrent sign.) I drew the hands in the position of 10:50 instead of 11:10. Now, the difference seems clear when you write the two times down on the page, but when you consider that the number on which the large hand must land is not a “10” but a “2,” then 11:10 appears, at least momentarily, to be an illogical figural construction and a breaking of the unspoken law of conceptual agreement between word and number, not to mention a breaking apart of time’s arrow. Wittgenstein allows me some leeway here:
I can look at a clock to see what time it is. But I can also look at the
dial of a clock in order to guess what time it is; or for the same pur-
pose move the hands of a clock till their position strikes me as right.
So the look of a clock may serve to determine the time in more than
one way. (Looking at a clock in one’s imagination.) (PI §266)

But the doctor and the person who designed the test were not testing for
imagination. Nor could my rationalization that my wristwatch and the
clocks in my house do not have numbers, and in some cases offer only digital
readouts without even a clock face, be considered anything but a rationaliza-
tion. They don’t normally test for that either. And this, I think, may be a bone
of comic contention.

Arrowhead

If Wittgenstein were not a self-denying Jewish philosopher, he might in a
later day have become a conflicted stand-up Jewish comedian with an eye
and ear for the mundane detail or illogical figure of speech or thought that
is today called “observational humor.” Wittgenstein’s philosophy is marbled
with the comedian’s melancholic anxiety, with a self-absorbed aversion to
external narcissism and illogic, and a fascination for the ways in which lan-
guage breaks itself up. Norman Malcolm reminds us, “Wittgenstein once said
that a serious and good philosophical work could be written that would
consist entirely of jokes (without being facetious”). Wittgenstein mentions
Freud’s Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious (1905) several times
in his work, although he doesn’t treat it in any depth, given his dismissal of
the premise—Freud’s theory of the subconscious, which the philosopher calls
“hypothetical” and grounded in the similarly speculative motive of conceal-
ment or repression. Wittgenstein’s attention to depth of surface makes him
better qualified to influence the practice of humor rather than to theorize
about it, as did Freud.

Steve Martin sometimes opened his stand-up show with the joke, “It’s
great to be here!” then moved to one after another spot on the stage, each
time exclaiming with a false sense of discovery, “No, it’s great to be here!”
The comic body carries its mortal space with it wherever it goes, and so
the line, “It’s great to be here!” is everywhere ghosted by the sickness-unto-
death shadow-line, “At this (st)age in my life, it’s great to be anywhere!”
This theme of dispossession invokes the Heraclitean idea of constant change
and therefore instability disenabling us from ever claiming anything as being
one’s own (not my death or my terror). We cannot possess space anymore
than we can time, and any attempt to stake a claim is no more than a painful
performance behavior whose purpose is to draw attention (where inattention
might otherwise be seen), to make a spectacle of oneself.
Is the joke, then, *where* the body is on a stage relative to *what* the line says and then says again, or is it the idea of the body’s obsessive (t)hereness, its now-and-“thenness”—blending of distance from and proximity to being comedy’s métier?

Just as the words “I am here” have a meaning only in certain contexts, and not when I say them to someone who is sitting in front of me and sees me clearly—and not because they are superfluous, but because their meaning is not determined by the situation, yet stands in need of such determination. (OC §348)

The comic truth of this statement is manifest in the fact that the comedian is doing stand-up in the manner that Wittgenstein is doing philosophy, by stretching our perplexity and with this our understanding when faced with the ordinary, when the ordinary stands up and speaks for itself devoid of a particular context that might occlude its meanings, even making them disappear. The audience knows that “I am here” or, in Martin’s case, that “It’s great to be here!” is a line, but does not know and in fact becomes less and less certain each time it is repeated what the line is “supposed to be doing” (OC §352) and what they (the audience) are supposed to be doing in turn.

Martin’s self-satisfied voice appears to say after Wittgenstein, “I just wanted to remind myself that I know things like that” (OC §352). In this way, the comedian transfers doubt to the audience so that he can at least perform the behavior of certainty. In other words, “the joke’s on you”—at least that is what the performance says, or as Wittgenstein would have it, “One might say: ‘I know’ expresses comfortable certainty, not the certainty that is still struggling” (OC §357). Performance, comic and otherwise, is the expression of a “comfortable certainty” that is, however, in anxious dialogue with “the certainty that is still struggling” in the performer as the stand-in for those who sit still for performance, who do not stand-up. Self-satisfaction being a cornerstone of Martin’s comic persona, the shadow of solipsism falls across the stage, where one might least expect to find it given the presence of an audience. This condition, which so worried Wittgenstein on both a personal and a philosophical level, makes all existence the extension of the individual self and its mental states. Given that, as psychologist Louis A. Sass has stated, “the solipsist is driven to what he can never have, validation in the consensual world, . . . undercut[ting] his seeming self-sufficiency,” the possibility of this condition returns to the actor and more so the stand-up comedian, whose need for audience validation is most intensely direct. Sass considers Wittgenstein’s statement “‘I’ doesn’t name a person, nor ‘here’ a place, and ‘this’ is not a name” (PI §410) in relation to what linguistics calls “indexicals” or “shifters” that move with the speaker rather than being grounded in and naming a particular place. Thus, each time Martin moves to a new point onstage and proclaims, “It’s great to be here!” “here” stands as
only an empirical claim to his and not the audience’s presence, since there is no room for them in this “here.” “Here” has no meaning except in conjunction with the speaker’s “I.” So, Martin’s ironic performance of inclusiveness shows what otherwise could not and generally would not be spoken by an actor to an audience, outside the realm of stand-up comedy—namely, “you are not (do not belong) here,” and, by extension, “my desire for you is only apparent.”

Martin’s “It’s great to be here!” routine speaks not solely to the body in space but to the body as spacing. His affect recalls Descartes’s corpus ego, which Nancy says (contra Sass) “has no propriety, no ‘ego-ness’ (still less any ‘egotism’).” The body, the corpus, is the “out there” of the “right here” and “is never properly me.” This “exscription of being” is the condition of performance. Martin’s “It’s great to be here!”—“No, it’s great to be here!”—conveys the appearance of Wittgensteinian wonder at performance’s claim to continuous rediscovery of the new. Martin often worked with theatrical props, most notably a bifurcated arrow on a band that circled but seemed to pass through his head. The arrow invokes Zeno’s paradox of the non-arrival of space in any time other than the “now” of “hereness,” the forever not-getting-there in time (the actor’s nightmare). In that all “heres” are equal, they are, in arrow-headed Martin’s performance, repeatable and substitutable, one for the other. That his performance transpires and expires within the limit-realm of the stage makes the sense of going without going farther, time as spacing, isomorphically if not precisely manifest. The prop arrow apparatus articulates this Wittgensteinian sense of the same but not identical, which is likewise the premise of the joke and of jokes in general.

The arrow is an indicator of pointing. Martin’s arrow points at meaning, specifically at the brokenness of meaning in performance, the only context in which this broken arrow can be useful as a non-sequitur. The arrow-through-the-head plays with the language of pointing as an entanglement of meaning. The comedian’s mock-excited “It’s great to be here!” repeated over and over again as he takes discrete steps in theatrical space reinforces non-causality as a performative mode of new meaning-making. This performance recalls that of the obsessive-compulsive wanderer Witold in Witold Gombrowicz’s novella Cosmos (2005), who follows an arrow that he may have imaginatively constructed from a crack in a ceiling into an entanglement of words, weeds, and possible paranoid connective meanings, compelling him to ask, “How many sentences can one create out of the twenty-four letters of the alphabet?” (and how many meanings for “arrow”). At his wit’s end but without any logical end in sight, Witold wonders whether “something was trying to break through and press toward meaning, as in charades, when letters begin to make their way toward forming a word. What word? Indeed, it seemed that everything wanted to act in the name of an idea . . . What idea?” Witold hangs a cat as the final word-object-action in a sequence that passes through a hanged sparrow—a hanged chicken—an arrow (imagined)
in a dining room ceiling—an arrow (imagined) in his bedroom wall—a stick hanging from a thread. Of the arrows that were similar in kind, he asks “what kind of an arrow was that, how could we have perceived it as an arrow?”

Is this arrow an assertion of “the almost” (as another character in the story calls it), a configuration of word and object whose inexact alignment invokes and represents the nature of personal anxiety, of things not being what they say they are or what I say they are?

Wordplay is the acknowledgment that everything is possible “in the face of overwhelming, confounding, entangling reality.” That is, says Wittgenstein, so long as these words or word-objects, these symbols belong to the same “system.” “System” for Wittgenstein spoke not to principle but to application, to “having the same use” on multiple occasions. “Sparrow” can certainly become “arrow,” just as “firsbern” in Steve Martin’s parodically reflexive line, “I think communication is so firsbern,” can become “Do you bemberg?”—one of Gombrowicz’s many contestations of meaning using variants of the meaningless “berg” as a language builder (Bilder). Multiple use in turn configures a paranoid system that must be adopted so that communication can take place. Similarly, “everything is always possible” (a sparrow can also be a non-arrow and an arrow a non-sparrow) speaks equally to capacity and to incapacitation, to “the favor and disfavor of associations” caused by distraction. The mind, like the body that cannot stay in one place while constantly returning to that place (“It’s great to be here! . . . No, it’s great to be here!”), is like a criminal returning to the scene of the crime. Universal configuration as a product of distraction further defines the criminal recidivism (the repetition of undesirable behavior) of the obsessive-compulsive, for whom distraction is not only intrinsic but flows in “from the diversity and overabundance, from the entanglement.” Martin’s arrow, in executing a double fake—as a prop that falsifies reality and as a broken straight line that interrupts causality—misidentifies the stage as being “here.” But in the process, the arrow locates the entanglement to which the compulsion to be led by language as the nominal object of meaning leads, enacting a theatrical recidivism, a return to the stage that is obsessive-compulsive in thought and action.

**Coming into Place**

Having dealt with the “here” in the statement, “It’s great to be here!” let us now move to a fuller consideration of the “I” that is implied but missing in the same statement. “I” is a problematical pronoun that is largely disputed by Wittgenstein and absented by Wellman in his play Cellophane, for example. “I,” Nancy tells us, is even more problematical as a locus of being (“I am here”), in that “I” has no place. How, Nancy asks, “can I, which has no place, come into place?” Nancy’s “solution” to this paradox is to adopt Heidegger’s
notion that says it’s not a matter of being there but rather of “being the there,” not as a point in space but as an “opening and exposition.”

The sentence “It’s great to be here!” notably absents the “I,” the identity of the speaker, because that identity is assumed to be made manifest by the speaker’s body. Absenting the “I” likewise draws our attention back to Wittgenstein’s notion that there is nothing outside the facts (including the fact of the sentence, the proposition), not even the subject, especially not the subject as an “I.” The body is, in fact (says Nancy), made less certain by the spoken claim to thereness; as such speaking is disingenuous given that the created body’s thereness is always “between here and there, abandoned, always improperly abandoned, created: with no reason for being there, since there doesn’t offer any reason, and with no reason for being this body or this mass of this body (because this doesn’t justify anything, or ‘justifies’ the nothing in the thing created).” “The body” (Nancy continues) “is always outside, on the outside. It is from the outside. The body is always outside the intimacy of the body itself.” So when, for example, we say that “It’s great to be here!” we are, as it were, speaking from outside the body and so must consciously and per force comically make our body catch up with itself. The audience laughs, but in having its ontology, its very being so publicly and deliberately exposed, the body is in comic agony.

Nancy asserts that “the body is self in departure, insofar as it parts—displaces itself right here from the here.” By reiterating this point, Martin allows the audience to catch up with him, with what thinking through the body’s spacing is doing. The audience may not know on every level what the performer is doing but their role is to acknowledge its being done. This acknowledgment effectively brings the audience into being, since without such acknowledgment it need not exist. “It’s great to be here!” acknowledges thinking as being a sort of out-of-body experience, of a coming into being that is, at the same time, a passing through that can only be pointed at by doing performance and philosophy. The stand-up comic’s fetishizing of being here or there is disingenuous given the unchanging location of the stage, even as his articulation of locality (not only where you are but where you are from—New York? Detroit? Brooklyn!) underscores and renders redundant locality as a determinant of humor. That jokes have their own sense of thereness relating to social worlds held in common allows us in on the joke’s telling to better see the stage that is prefaced on the same social analogy.

Presence is itself a vexed idea of which we are not only enamored in theater but in a real sense invested in for our survival. We use presence as a way of describing what is essentially indescribable, namely that self-possessed quality a performer has that possesses an audience in turn. The performer’s presence is invariably signed temporally in the present tense, so that presence and present are everywhere conflated or at least commingled. In Nancy’s argument, though, both presence and the present are not only separate from one another but each is dependent upon some interior distance for self-definition.
and must free themselves from the contingency of passing into another thing or another moment in time. Presence is very much the pre-text of “origins, relations, processes, finalities, becomings.”

Nancy’s spatial figure is that of the curving back of the reality of presence/the present to within itself. Ironically, given our common definition, presence is not something that you are ever really in or that is in you. Instead, it is something that you are always and only coming into and also, as with consciousness, coming to as acknowledging. For Nancy, what best marks presence as a “coming into” is the burst of laughter—“a presence that no present captures, and that no being-present can identify,” “presentation that disappears in presence.” Laughter makes even less of the already spectral voice, presenting us not with its body but rather its body parts—timbre, modulation, color, articulation—which may in fact be only parts of performance’s delivery system—that is, messenger speech. And yet laughter cannot really ever be given or received. It is and remains a solo performance that renders the body as being (a) comic.

Our own bodies perform surrogacy, cannot be wholly experienced “bodily,” and so the body on display provokes in us an age-old anxiety of unreasonable, nonsensical feeling and thought that cannot quite coalesce. “‘The body’ is our agony stripped bare. . . . We lose our footing at ‘the body.’” We lose our surefootedness in the staged comic agony of “no/here!,” making limping Oedipus at Colonus the first stand-up act (Martin says that he, in an Oedipal posture, was “born standing up”). In Martin’s arrow-headed routine the head becomes the “x” that marks the spot of otherness, of alien other-thereness, the hole in the head signifying the idiot’s extrusion of thought—“the arrow shot into the void” of the body’s absence in the vacating of meaning. The head that is virtually pierced by an arrow is a Wittgensteinian figure of embodied thought, specifically of aspect seeing, the manifestation of where one stands, a stance, which “can have . . . a life, in this case a life with what is depicted.” Is arrow-headed Steve Martin, like limping Oedipus, the first stand-up who “died” (in comic lingo that is properly virtual) at Colonus, a boiling pot? Is the performance of the broken arrow equivalent to steam arising from something that is only pictured? Wittgenstein’s example reads on the surface like a non-sequitur, even a joke, which the comedian nominally uses to make a thought clearer, self-evident, only to render it nonsensical. The grammar of depiction/performance is in conflict with what experience teaches us (i.e., a pictured pot does not boil; Martin’s spoken and physical location are comically at odds and the arrow does not actually pass through his head). Mulhall’s statement regarding how to read the idea-picture of the steaming pot may speak to Martin’s example as well:

To insist on the obviousness of anything is self-subverting, since the need for insistence contradicts the claim to self-evidence and positively invites an opposing insistence; and however empty that
opposition may ultimately prove to be (whether when it insists that 
pictures do not boil, or when it insists that expressions of pain are not 
the pain itself), the insistence to which it responds must bear some 
of the responsibility for that emptiness. More specifically . . . if gram-
matical remarks stand in contrast with empirical claims, then they 
cannot convey information in the way that empirical remarks do; so 
to insist upon them, quite as if things might have been otherwise, is 
to betray a misconception about how and why such remarks might 
be worth making.38

With this in mind, the performer-audience relationship affects the entangle-
ment of language as a means of real communication, with the performer telling 
the audience what they already know but the audience not acknowledging 
that they already know it. So, when the performer asks the audience not to 
raise their hands but how many of them have never raised their hands before, 
as Steve Martin does, they comply by raising their hands as if they never have 
before, fulfilling the illusion of the first time that enables performance.

Another of Martin’s bits of comic business betrays Wittgenstein’s influ-
ence. Martin: “There was a movie screen onstage, and I would go behind it 
and attach a fake rubber hand to it as though the hand were mine. Then, I 
would slowly move backward, making it appear as if my arm were stretch-
ing.”39 Now Wittgenstein, who in discussing the possibility of someone 
having pain in another person’s body (an unacknowledged performance 
trope), says: “When I see my hands I am not always aware of their connection 
with the rest of my body . . . the hand may, for all I know, be connected to the 
body of a man standing beside me (or, of course, not a human body at all)” 
(\textit{BB} §49). The dislocated and mentally disenfranchised hands that appear 
throughout Wittgenstein’s work compel the reader to acknowledge the ways 
in which pain (the philosopher’s and the comic’s) is referred and, perhaps, 
like the mind is unlocatable for all of us who do stand-up (i.e., are alive). 
Martin’s fake rubber prosthesis that gives the appearance “the hand were 
mine” responds to Wittgenstein’s anxiety regarding physical non-ownership. 
Heidegger’s “mineness of pain” here translates into the non-assertiveness of 
the embodied “I” and the performer’s hypochondriacal response of showing 
where the pain is, what it looks like.

The thought then arises: is the interlocutor’s compulsive insistence on 
the uniqueness of his pains simply a misplaced attempt to defend his 
own uniqueness, as if to acknowledge that another might feel exactly 
what he is feeling (“THIS!”) would amount to denying the separate-
ness—the individuality of his own existence?40

The stand-up comedian’s act succeeds to the extent that it makes the 
audience believe that what it presents is self-evident and empirical, even
as the act manifests the actor’s incapacity, the hyperbolic, hypochondriacal performance of his life’s painful difference. The stand-up’s observational performance (pointing at and pointing out) is not dissimilar from the philosopher’s role, which is, in part, to “put in question what other disciplines take for granted in their work.”41 In this sense, the performances of both comedy and philosophy are therapeutic, “treat[ing] a question; like an illness” (PI §255). In both arenas, language performs the pain of uncertainty, unknowing even that which it acknowledges as being possible.42

Warm Hand, Cold Feet

What’s the disjunction of senses? And why five fingers?
On the other hand, you have different fingers.
—Nancy, Corpus

If there were people who felt a stabbing pain in their left side in those cases where we experience misgivings with feelings of anxiety—would this stabbing sensation take the place with them of our feeling of fear?—So if we observed these people and noticed them wincing and holding their left side every time they expressed a misgiving, i.e., said something which for us at any rate would be a misgiving—would we say: These people sense their fear as a stabbing pain? Clearly not.
—Wittgenstein (RPPII §157)

Steve Martin’s brand of anti-comedy offers an analytical presentation of the limits of logic, or what Nancy calls “sense making sense where sense meets its limit.”43 Similarly, in Wittgenstein’s thinking, a philosophical proposition often appears to convey its own contradiction, so that the proposition both is and is “anti-.”44 Sometimes Wittgenstein develops this dynamic over the course of several sequential propositions, with sequence serving as a cover for subversion. This helps explain (at least to me) why so many of Wittgenstein’s propositions can sound like nonsense when you hear yourself reading them inside your own head. Ironically, so many of Martin’s philosophically minded jokes make sense precisely because the head you are given to ponder (with) has an arrow through it, providing the comfort of a self-acknowledged and self-proclaimed idiocy. Wittgenstein puts great stock in the grammatical (which, Mulhall says, “does not depict any particular way that things are, either necessarily or as a matter of essence”), even over the empirical or experiential, and yet he acknowledges that not only is there frequent confusion between the two categories of language but in the speaker as a result of this confusion as to whether he means what he says.45 This is somewhat similar to the comedian’s stance, the mindset of his “act.” Mulhall suggests that the
aforementioned language confusion produces in the speaker “a significant anxiety” over whether his words will elicit a response of “Of course!” or “Nonsense!” Wittgenstein meant to say (according to Mulhall) that “either response would, on the face of it, be equally appropriate as ‘a defence against something whose form makes it look like an empirical proposition, but which is really a grammatical one.’” But what I hear in the response of “Of course!” or “Nonsense!” is the sound of hands clapping or not clapping.

We are backstage at a showroom in a large Las Vegas hotel, where the young stand-up comedian Tommy Fawkes (in Peter Chelsom’s film *Funny Bones*, 1995) is getting ready to go on. We know at a sound and a glance that Tommy is angrily and painfully unfunny. It is his big opening night, and, as he is intensely aware, it will either make or break him. He suspects the latter, “I’m gonna die” being his first line in character. (Tommy’s joke: “I was playing Carthage, Tennessee. You know Carthage, Tennessee, where they brought back the death penalty for comedians only?”) The good-luck-on-opening-night card that is visible on Tommy’s dressing room table reads: “A WARM HAND ON YOUR OPENING” (The joke, as his father, the legendary comedian George later tells it, goes: “As the cow said to the farmer on the cold, wintry morning, ‘Thank you for that warm hand.’”) Of course, “a warm hand” in theatrical parlance translates into “a warm round of applause” but also is set in opposition to cold feet, to the doubt that shadows the performer’s life as specular death on a stage.

As a stand-up, Jerry Lewis (who plays George Fawkes) was wont to exclaim, “Pain, oh pain!” while holding one hand to his side where presumably time’s mortal arrow pierced his human body armor. This performance behavior acknowledges the comic dyspepsia (from the ancient Greek word for “digestion”) that enables an audience’s response to or consumption of his apparently uncomfortable act. The anxiety undergirding this discomfort is real but the act of holding one’s side is the comedian’s way of “giving notice” (*RPPII §163*) to the audience (often augmented by a drummer’s rimshot) that the proper and desired response to this behavior is to laugh rather than to feel his pain, which, Wittgenstein argues, they cannot do in any case. Even a non-philosophical stand-up would agree with this premise. The mock-piercing where the liver is located suggests a Promethean agony that relocates itself in the stand-up’s act (i.e., liveness) to Achilles’s fatal heel and Oedipus’s fateful ankle, two variations on the theme of cold feet. “Do your feet hurt?”—“Only when I (am doing) stand up.” In Bruce Duffy’s reimagining of Wittgenstein’s life, the philosopher is seen returning to Cambridge following World War I, limping with the aid of a cane, like the third and last stage of Oedipus’s Sphinxian riddle. Drawing upon his physical condition for the purpose of analogy, Duffy relates how: “Mysteriously Wittgenstein one day remarked to [his young protégé Frank] Ramsey that he had undergone a painful but necessary operation on his character. It had been a kind of surgery, Wittgenstein said, a surgery of the most radical nature—certain limbs
had to be lopped off.” So was Wittgenstein, like Oedipus, actually walking with a limp, or thinking he was as an instance of performance behavior, a no less real comic agony?

In its capacity as a mechanism for gathering, grasping, and gifting (and also “grifting,” as in cheating), especially as regards the fire that Prometheus gave to humankind, the hand has been likened to language. The subterfuge of the commonplace, linguistic (Heideggerian) ready-at-handness (the ordinary) continually replays Prometheus’s deception of Zeus with the temptation of exteriority (surface fat falsely promising depth of surface in place of real meat or value). The idea of ready-at-hand (ordinary) language further touches upon the idea of coming into presence as the spectral body double, the stand-in for the stand-up. An offstage voice implores the audience to give the entering performer a “warm hand,” but the applause bodies forth only the impossibility of there (their) being (in) touch with him or even enough of a unitary presence themselves for their many hands to become one.

For Derrida (and here he is perhaps quite distant from Merleau-Ponty), the touching-touched relation is a variant of the seeing-seen relation because in vision there is always spacing. When one hand touches the other, even in prayer, the coincidence of the touching-touched is only ever imminent, fusion only ever about to happen or arrive. It is as if in the gathering of the fingers, there is a gouged out eye that forbids the gathering of being into any “as such” [the essence of things].

The blinded eye of Oedipus (which the foregoing passage indirectly cites) invariably leads us back to his overlooked wounded feet that unknowingly toe a stage, where his fate is in his audience’s hands. “I’m not going to play safe anymore,” says Tommy at curtain time. “I’m gonna take it to the edge,” to which a character in Foreman’s The Mind King responds, “I’ve reached the point, he offered—(Lights flash and fade)—where I’m doing too much thinking about the conclusions of things I’m starting to think about.” The lights are caught blinking, as they are meant to, making a show of certainty as false bravura.

Tommy’s scheduled act opener, “The Dog Story,” recalls Tom Stoppard’s Wittgensteinian language play Dogg’s Hamlet, in which characters respond to seemingly arbitrary verbal commands, meanings that have migrated from original contexts to abstract signs and in the process “teach the audience the language the play was written in.” Stoppard’s play borrows words (like “Slab”) and its premise from Wittgenstein’s discussion in PI §§17–21 of the problems arising when a word (“Slab!”) stands in for a sentence (e.g., “Bring me the slab!”), the part for the unspoken whole (as in the foot or hand for the body and the body for the corpus or social text). In taxonomy (as in anatomy), the problem is one of usage ghosted by its severed context.
A word or part (the word apart) “at sea” or “on holiday” is like a performer, who is lost either on or without a stage, and unable to “find its feet.”

At sea in a literal ocean of despair (he has gone overboard during a drug deal gone bad), young Jack Parker (George’s unacknowledged son and Tommy’s half-brother) encounters a pair of severed feet and starts yelling, “I’m going to die!” It is the comedian’s plaint (“Comedy Death. Which is worse than regular death”), and Jack is an antic, natural born comedian who has “funny bones.” What does “I’m going to die!” mean when it is shouted aloud in the middle of uncomprehending nature, minus a real audience? (“If a tree falls . . .” is the basis for countless jokes.) Might we say in relation to Jack’s representative predicament at sea with his pain and a pair of someone else’s severed feet that we are as much at odds with one as we are with the other (two)? Can we, do we laugh at another’s pain, because we cannot experience or comprehend it as our own—or because we can, at the same time knowing that it does not belong to us and that pain in general absents belonging?

When the policemen who are trying to talk Jack down from a tower in the British holiday sea resort town of Blackpool ask him what he wants, his request is issued in the form of a command: “Toast!” Wittgenstein notes, “We say that we use the command in contrast with other sentences because our language contains the possibility of those other sentences” (PI §20); and further, “We could imagine a language in which all assertions had the form and tone of rhetorical questions; or every command had the form of the question, ‘Would you like to . . . ?’” (PI §21). What then is being said, as in meant, when one is saying “Slab!” or “Toast!”? What does our language contain? How, where, and why does it break down, take strange turns, speak volumes as in The Complete Works of Shakespeare, or in abbreviated code, grams of thought, as in the fifteen-minute Dogg’s Hamlet or in Wittgenstein’s aphoristic propositions? Language knows comedy, even when we don’t get the joke. When Jack yells “Toast!” he is commanding that he be brought not a comestible but his dog, whose name is “Toast.” It is the sort of name given to a pet by a child who is only beginning to “imagine naming to be some remarkable mental act, as it were the baptism of an object” (PI §3), however detached from the word’s ordinary meaning the name is. For childlike Jack (his emotional growth stunted when he killed a man while playing a child in a music-hall act), who is unable to function within the social order, naming a dog “Toast” may be a sign of self-ascriptive difference that only language allows us to perform. When Jack is talked down off the tower, though, he descends the ladder that Wittgenstein instructed his reader to discard as an acknowledgment of a senselessness wrought by language in his own Tractatus. “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent” (TLP §7) is his (provisional) final word(s) on the performance-enabling unknowing (the willing suspension of disbelief) that is at most only preparatory to what the audience must ultimately know. (“My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he
has climbed out through them, on them, over them. [He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it]” [TLP §654]). Jack’s Uncle Thomas, who is one-half of a silent comedy act (with Jack’s adoptive father) and who already knows more than he can say (that true comedy, like Jack, is illegitimate) has been silent in his offstage life for twelve years.

Jack has what Tommy lacks, bones that are not just funny but comic in a Wittgensteinian sense. Consider this dialogue with a psychiatrist following Jack’s tower descent:

**PSYCHIATRIST:** Where were you born?

**JACK:** Blackpool.

**PSYCHIATRIST:** Why Blackpool?

**JACK:** Because I wanted to be near my mother.

**PSYCHIATRIST** (uncomprehending): Have you lived here all your life?

**JACK:** Not yet.

**PSYCHIATRIST** (still uncomprehending): Now tell me, of this list, which do you think is the odd one out (Here Jack, “the odd one out,” makes meaningful eye contact with the therapist): house, school, dog, cinema, church?

**JACK:** Dog.

**PSYCHIATRIST** (relieved, either that Jack understands or that he does):

Good.

**JACK:** Cause a dog wouldn’t go to the cinema, would he?

**PSYCHIATRIST:** Which of these is the odd one out: Malice, jealousy, greed, envy, and kindness? (Like a bad actor, contorts his face in roughly the same way as if to manifest each word.)

**JACK:** (After giving it some thought) And.

Whereupon, as if after a series of ellipses on a printed page, Jack ventriloquizes the sound of an imaginary fly loudly buzzing around the room, which he then catches in his mouth. The fly continues to buzz inside Jack as if asking the listener whether a picture of a fly could be said to buzz and if so, whether we could hear it. We find ourselves trapped inside the invisible fly-bottle of prejudicial, thwarted knowing familiar to readers of Wittgenstein’s discourse (PI §309)—the very fly-bottle that Wittgenstein urged non-clarifying philosophy to exit from but which Jack turns into a clarifying joke at the expense of psychiatry and the presuppositions with which it holds the real world captive. Wittgenstein would be pleased.

Klagge has observed that “the bottle [in Wittgenstein] is presumably inverted, so that the fly is obsessively flying up to the glass, never able to escape.” Obsession being in the details, the italicized up draws our attention away from the goal and back toward the ordeal, the difficulty inherent in processing information rather than its use, the cycling and recycling of the mind for which direction, such as up, any directionality, including rule-giving,
Wittgenstein’s Anatomy

is itself a thwarted fiction. This idea is reinforced by Klagge’s linking prospective inescapability to both the image of the fly-bottle and to “Wittgenstein’s image of being stuck in a room with an unnoticed door behind one.”52 Obsession is not only in the details but in the inattention to details that escape notice while the subject is focused on extricating himself from the compulsion his mind sustains. Thus, Wittgenstein wrote in response to a paper by his friend Yorick Smythies on “Understanding,” “The point is, you can’t get out [of the figurative fly-bottle] as long as you are fascinated.”53 To say that obsession and compulsion enable one another is an odd way of performing goal-setting as a behavior. For the obsessive-compulsive mind, to borrow imagery from Handke, the goal is illusory; only the anxiety at the penalty kick, the mental choke point, is real.

Jack’s interview is another s(h)o(w)-to-speak paraphrase of Wittgenstein’s duck-rabbit figure of non-simultaneous aspect-seeing, in this case foregrounding how the psychiatrist and the philosopher (Jack) see differently. Norman Batkin writes: “Psychologists, given the company of the examples they keep, may miss the subtlety of the responses that pictures call upon, even in the simplest cases.”54 Following Wittgenstein’s premise that prejudice gets in the way of clear seeing, Batkin asserts that the psychologist misses the (for Wittgenstein) all-important ordinary circumstances of what the patient says, “because the psychologist stages our encounter with the figure he presents as if we are responding only to him, or to no one in particular,” as a response to the extraordinary circumstances of the test and of testing in general. Jack’s answers to the psychiatrist’s questions are, in fact, all quite ordinary in their own right but made to seem otherwise by the examiner’s facial responses to them that reveal the latter’s inability to take these answers at face value. This is, as they say, an occupational hazard.

Polysem(ous)ly Perverse

Whence does this observation derive its importance: the one that points out to us that a table can be used in more than one way, that one can think up a table that instructs one as to the use of a table? The observation that one can also conceive of an arrow as pointing from the tip to the tail, that I can use a model as a model in different ways? (PO 167)

Jack reproduces language as a ventriloquist or a lip reader might (he also lip-syncs to records, which was the real Jerry Lewis’s original solo comedy act). Comic mirroring magnifies a grammatical polysemy (the multiple meanings of a word or sign) and a seriality of meaningful comic exchange that normative logic denies. Listening to Jack we see what Wittgenstein might mean when he asks us to imagine people who can only think out loud (PI §331).
Likewise, Leonard Shelby, who mirror-reads messages he wrote backwards on his body so as to be able to pay lip service to the word that has become both polysemous and invisible to him. The word is “remember,” and the reflections of it he depicts, as Wittgenstein suggests, “stands in the way of our seeing the use of the word as it is” (PI §305). Kate, the possibly mad painter protagonist of David Markson’s 1988 novel Wittgenstein’s Mistress, says she signed a mirror once with lipstick (in a picture gallery), in effect signing an image of herself. “Should anybody else have looked, where my signature would have been was under the other person’s image, however. Doubtless I would not have signed it, had there been anybody else to look.” Anybody else looking into/out of the mirror? What here does “looking” mean? Does language create its own audience, in the way that Kate writes, “When I said heard, I am saying so only in a manner of speaking, of course.”

Such self-mirroring invites a question posed by Blanchot: “Who would not liberate himself from the depth of reflection?” Wittgenstein’s philosophy is not nostalgic, retains no interest in and posits no special function or value of memory as either a veil of mystery or vale of tears. “Is memory [even] an experience?” Wittgenstein asks. “What do I experience?” (RPPI §119). Leonard’s inability to make new memories may speak to the incapacity of memory itself to be experienced. Leonard’s repeated invoking of presence recalls Steve Martin’s iterations of “It’s great to be here!” where “here” in the Heraclitean sense of instability and flow names the shifting point as not so much genuine as theatrical. The issue is not that there is illusion born of forgetting or of thinking otherwise, but that there is substitution, and not of the fake for the real, or, in the case of Jack’s interview with the psychiatrist, the wrong answer for the right, but of one more complex reality for another. So, Wittgenstein poses the question: “If from one day to the next someone promises: ‘Tomorrow I’ll come to see you’—is he saying the same thing every day, or every day something different?” (PI §226). Wittgenstein is here and elsewhere pointing out the often unacknowledged difference in language and especially in philosophical language between “identical” and “the same” (PI §254). No two thoughts or sentences, feelings or sensations are identical even if they appear to be the same. Likewise, Heidegger asserts:

Poetry and thinking meet each other in one and the same only when, and only as long as, they remain distinctly in the distinctness of their nature. The same never coincides with the equal, not even in the empty indifferent oneness of what is merely identical. The equal of identical always moves toward the absence of difference, so that everything may be reduced to a common denominator. The same, by contrast, is the belonging together of what differs, through a gathering by way of the difference. We can only say “the same” if we think difference. It is in the carrying out and settling of differences that the gathering nature of sameness comes to light.
Jack is not merely a creative thinker. He is Wittgenstein’s exemplary poetical philosopher, whom the world takes for an idiot in what is only an accident of naming. If Jack is the wounded actor, the psychiatrist manifests the performance behaviors of the mad director and the gloved critic. Armed with the DSM-IV TR, the psychiatrist conspires to collaborate with the patient on the creation of a taxonomy of shared obsession between the compulsive self and the observing self, the roles played by the analysand and his analyst (“Obsession sits on both sides of the consulting table”).59 This externalized double role-playing, which re-creates the spectated performance dynamic inside the OCD mind, is offered without irony as being therapeutic (OCD has no cure). In this, the psychiatrist differs from Wittgenstein, who sought to pierce the self-perpetuating taxonomic language of his discipline, by separating naming from the meaning of the object (and in so doing, creating tangles that neither he nor his auditors could always get through, comprehend).59

Of course, Wittgenstein sought to lead philosophy to recognition, self-mirroring recognition being the sign of/signed by OCD, an ego-dystonic activity, that is, “alien and unwanted to the self.” The goal of the psychiatrist (formerly, “the alienist”) is to make the patient feel less alienated from his self-recognition.60 Wittgenstein asserted that “a psycho-analysis is successful only if the patient agrees to the explanation offered by the analyst,” a formula that Jack rejects in relation to the joke. Wittgenstein, Moore observes, discovered two fundamental mistakes in Freud’s theory of jokes: “supposing there is something common to all jokes” and “supposing that this supposed common character is the meaning of ‘joke.’”61 The problem is again not of taxonomy per se, but of the analyst’s need to create a joke-free taxonomy of literal family resemblance. Jack’s sui generis performance helps enable the psychiatrist to overlook the goal of language-games to “set up as objects of comparison which are meant to throw light on the acts of our language by way not [only] of similarities, but also of dissimilarities” (PI §130).62

In effect, the language-game performed by Jack and his psychiatrist is the anxiety of laughing away the assumption of (a single) shared meaning, which enables and is enabled by rule-behavior. To the psychiatrist’s question, “Which of these [affective words] is the odd one out?” Jack answers “And,” which allows Saul Kripke’s assessment of the word “plus” to enter the psychiatrist’s uncomprehending mind. Kripke considers the use of the word “plus” in assessing Wittgenstein’s proposition: “this was our paradox: no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be made out to accord with the rule” (PI §201).63 Kripke states that, “I, like almost all English speakers, use the word ‘plus’ and the symbol ‘+’ to denote a well-known mathematical function—addition.” “This,” Kripke continues, “is the whole point of the notion that in learning to add I grasp a rule: my past intentions regarding addition determine a unique answer for indefinitely many new cases in the future.” But what if, Kripke suggests, “I encounter a bizarre sceptic [e.g., Jack] . . . who suggests, as I used the term ‘plus’ in the
past, the answer I intended for ‘68 + 57’ should have been ‘5’!” My cer-
tainty is based solely on my following a rule that is based upon my belief that
the “metalinguistic” sign “+” was meant to perform a particular function. But
“perhaps in the past I used ‘plus’ and ‘+’ to denote a function which I will call
[via the neologism] ‘quus’ and symbolize by [insert a handwritten crosshairs
sign here]. It is defined by: x [crosshairs sign in place of “+”] y = x + y, y<57 + 5 otherwise. Who is to say that this is not the function I previously meant
by ‘+?’” And this [now] being the case, this act of “quaddition” allows for
the possibility of parsing meaning differently by way of usage, that is, the
function I applied to achieve meaning, an answer, a result, a mathematical
sum. Here Kripke notes, significantly, “I am not familiar with an accepted
felicitous convention to indicate the object of the verb ‘to mean.’”

By changing the psychiatrist’s meaning-aggregate “plus” sign into a “quus”
(neologism being a function that is appropriate to nonsense, which is the comic
mind’s point of entry into philosophical thought), Jack unmakes the logical
function of the affect words that are offered in a structural series, but also
relocates the valence of value in the series in a way that draws our attention
back to the meaning of the particular series (and of “series”) itself. In doing
this, Jack further undoes the rule of the language-game being proffered him.

Kripke writes meaningfully (vis-à-vis my thesis) in the context of his
explanation regarding rule-following: “Whereas [British philosopher W. V.
] Quine presents the problem of meaning in terms of a linguist, trying to guess
what someone else means by his words on the basis of his behavior, Witt-
genstein’s challenge can be presented to me as a question about myself: was
there some past fact about me—what I ‘meant’ by plus—that mandates what
I should do now?” Kripke’s approach to Wittgenstein informs my own but
only insofar as Wittgenstein’s consideration of “the problem of other minds”
(the so-called “private language argument”) redounded back upon his own,
resulting in what was for Kripke a self-described revelatory reading of the
work (especially the Philosophical Investigations). His reading seemed to
achieve its author’s (i.e., Wittgenstein’s) goal for his reader, clarity emerging
from apparently insoluble paradoxes and disjunctive, self-worrying argu-
ments. Although Kripke is quick to state that his reading is intended as “the
presentation of a problem and an argument, not its critical evaluation,” there
is at least for me a clear sense that Kripke is, like myself, attracted to Wittgen-
stein’s mode of discourse because it does the worrying (about itself) for the
reader, who can fact-check against the interlocutor as the reader in the text.

It is significant that Jack selects the word “And” not only because of what
Kripke has to say about rules, but also because Jack treats a conjunction as a
sign of disjunction. This “disjunction” would normally be expressed not by
“And” but by “Or.” Now look again at the question that the psychiatrist posed
to Jack: “Which of these is the odd one out? Malice, jealousy, greed, envy, and
kindness?” When you reread this affective series is it not logical to substitute
“or” for “and”? Hasn’t the psychiatrist, in his certainty regarding the rules that
govern his use of language, made a grammatical mistake? And by doing so, hasn’t he, despite his intentions, indeed made “and” into “the odd one out”? As such, Jack’s answer is the only logical one given the context with which he is presented. Because he is a performer, Jack is able to respond to this interrogation as a linguistic occasion or event, which the rule-bound psychiatrist cannot.

By presenting the plus sign of “And” as an apparently illogical response to what is meant to be, despite the appearance of choice, a rhetorical question, the idea of the minus as in a severance of or from normative meaning is likewise introduced. This severance or minus represents a cutting through, an interruption, an intrusion that recalls Kaspar’s cutting through the theatrical backdrop at the start of Handke’s play, the nominal protagonist leading, as it were, with his hand, which is an instrumental part of the language-game. This element of cutting through or disruption of the norm (a fitting analogue to or metaphor for theatrical performance and so too, performance behavior) can again be seen in Heidegger’s distinction between the “ready-to-hand” (roughly, practical agency implicit in form of being) and the “present-at-hand” (roughly, theorized existence, perspectival being, “thereness”). Heidegger’s two-handledness represents a figural grasping that rehearses Wittgenstein’s concern with the non-/usefulness of ordinary language in relation to knowing and understanding meaning. And Lambert V. Stepanich spins Heidegger’s two-handed grasping into something more overtly performative: “only on account of readiness-to-hand is there presence-at-hand. Realism, as based on an ontology of the present-at-hand, is thus fundamentally incompatible with Heidegger’s ontological understanding.”

And here, in the context of the battle of the plus-or-minus ones, the and/or (the one size meaning/logic that does not fit all), we return to the question of the severed feet, the anomaly, the fish out of water, “the odd one out,” so to speak. When the Director of Tourism for Blackpool in Funny Bones is confronted with the first severed foot washing up on shore from the sea, he calls it “a one-off.” He is, absurdly, right insofar as an abnormal occurrence or event is “a one-off” unless and until it becomes, at the very least, a pair. After the second severed foot turns up in a fisherman’s net out at sea, the Director has to account to reporters for his earlier statement. The dialogue that ensues would be right at home in Dogg’s Hamlet, with the expression “one-off” standing in (standing on one foot, an unsurefootedness) for meaning itself and how it is both served and subverted by the oddness that we constitute and construe as language:

FIRST REPORTER: I thought you said this was a “one-off.”
DIRECTOR: Well it is a “one-off.” The feet match one person.
SECOND REPORTER: Two feet, though.
DIRECTOR: Well, obviously. Everyone’s got two feet. Does anybody know anyone who hasn’t got two feet?
ALL REPORTERS (raising their hands and laughing in unison): Yes!
At which point, one hears Steve Martin’s voice asking his audience, “How many people have never raised their hands before?” (And, “Where are you all from?”)

Wittgenstein, for his part, sees the language of the joke overwriting what the interrogator mistook to be a serious, that is, non-rhetorical question. Not to mention the fact that the nominal disability of having but one foot performs or stands in for some measure of incapacity. And here clinical neurologist Oliver Sacks’s reference to a “mortified leg,” “mortified” in the sense of a limb that was “functionally and existentially dead,” puts me in mind of the alternative meaning of “mortified”—shame, or, at the very least, embarrassment, alongside the de-realization or severance of the mind-body’s claim to wholeness, integrity, actuality. “There is no permanent, reserved area . . . for any part of the body,” and we are embarrassed by having ever believed that there was. Sacks further states, “There is no fixed ‘hand’ area, for example.” Our image of where the hand belongs, where it was, that it was, can disappear from memory without an embodied trace.69

This is a proposition that Wittgenstein understood intuitively as evidenced by his constant severing of the hand from the body, a kind of Cartesian operation in which the hand performs the role of the mind’s body whose the-same-but-different-or-individual status as the physical body’s isomorph attends like the mind’s other body, the ear, to the possibility of its (the body’s, the body image’s) and its own (the body part’s) uncertainty. This severing of the thought-space that contains mind and body, mind-as-body, and body as sensory idea is at home at sea near Blackpool, which offers fluidity of meaning via the dispersal of context. And it is this sea, this seeing of what cannot otherwise be seen (this black pool), as being a (w)hole, which in turn summons forth the severed foot, the sign of the meaningful disjunction that the mind and the idea and function of language now perform.

Sacks’s mention of Rilke’s “things made of fear” recalls the monadic, non-nomadic performance of the leg as cast. Here we first sight the figure of Hitchcock’s chair-bound photographer L. B. Jefferies in *Rear Window* (1954) as an isomorphic agoraphobe for whom the blankness of his white leg cast provides the perfect background upon which to write the story of complicit criminal transgression—an uroborically obsessive neighbor-on-neighbor crime—that Jeff dreams, imagines, or sees only as a blankness (and a blackness), as an intuited offstage/off-screen performance of Wittgenstein’s non-visible death-as-life-event.70 Sacks likens scotoma, the natural blind spot (another black pool) and the unnatural loss or alteration of visual acuity (from which he himself now suffers) to “a hole in reality itself, a hole in time no less than in space.”71 It (the condition) is amnesiac (as is a lost foot, hand, or leg), so “it carries a sense of timelessness, endlessness,” the “see” if you will becoming the “sea,” la mer. “Scotoma,” says Sacks, “in Kantian terms, was an ultimate neuro-ontological extinction (or ‘Akantia’). Physically, physiologically, there was an absence of nerve-impulse, image and field; but
metaphysically, or ontologically, an absence of reason, and of its constructs, space and time.” Jefferies’s unreasonably single-minded vision is not so much enhanced by apparatic magnification (binoculars) as it is rendered scotomatic (as an obsessive-compulsive ticcing). Magnification born of solipsistic self-regard sees Jefferies as a one-off (guilty) witness to a murder in the play of incapacity. His performance in the original (i.e., first) cast (he is fitted for a second leg cast after nearly being murdered by his criminal neighbor at film’s end) demonstrates how and what incapacity makes possible, the creative de-creation of the wholeness and integrity of what (we think) we see.72

The wistful melody of the song that recurs throughout *Funny Bones*, “La mer,” holds out the remembered hope for a romantic integrity that the severed foot and the severing of meaning skeptically subvert.73 Assuming the role of Director of Neurographic Tourism, with his eye implicitly cast upon the mind’s disembodied and re-embodied funny bones, Oliver Sacks concludes (Is Leonard Shelby listening?): “One cannot remember what it is like to be ‘whole.’ And the alienated part of one’s body makes no sense at all.”74 And this brings us back to the no sense or nonsense that is comedy. Before going on to perform his record act, Jack is asked by his mother, “Do you remember clapping for yourself, just like your father?” Holding her hands at a distance from her face, she proceeds to clap her hands together so that the so-called immortality powder (a comical in the sense of [self-] delusional idea that first set Jack adrift and for which a man traded his life and his severed feet at sea) spreads evenly over her face. Her question speaks not merely to practice but to Jack’s orientation, his ability to amuse himself with or without an audience. The fact that Jack has replaced (i.e., faked) the usual talcum powder that sets makeup with another powder that fakes immortality exposes the clay feet of community and continuity. We hear in our minds something like the rhetorical sound of one hand clapping in the darkness of the stand-up performance of mortality, in the separation of the self from the face in the mirror and the face from the faceless crowd. The comic legacy, Jack’s Uncle Thomas says after the aforementioned twelve years of self-imposed silence, is a special brand of suffering: “The pain we feel is worse than anyone else.” And Bruno, Thomas’s brother and comic partner, agrees: “I never saw anything funny that wasn’t terrible, didn’t cause pain.” Which is to say, how much comic “pain-behavior” really hurts.

### The Peril of Awareness

In her memoir *A Brief History of Anxiety*, Patricia Pearson writes: “[As a child] I would jump off the garage roof in the ludicrous hope that I could break my leg and wear a cast for everyone at school to sign.”75 Pearson relates this particular turn of mind to what Freud called “anxious readiness” and Kierkegaard described as “the alarming possibility of being able.”76 Pearson
Chapter 2

likens all of this to fearlessness, but I experience(d) precisely the same mostly unfulfilled fantasy, to wear incapacity, physically, on my sleeve (my own childhood/childish desire was for an arm cast) not as a measure of fearlessness but out of fear of not being thought to be disabled enough to warrant my intrusive thoughts and performance behavior. Of course, there are those who consider such performance behavior to be fearless, even though it covers over a dark and deep well of anxiety and depression. Wittgenstein says that “lying is a language-game that needs to be learned like any other one” (PI §249). It is ironic that just when you’ve reached the point of questioning where you stand in relation to the language-game as a shared practice that your mind wants to generate new ways to up the ante while bending the rules.

And to think one is following a rule is not to follow a rule. And that’s why it’s not possible to follow a rule “privately”; otherwise, thinking one was following a rule would be the same thing as following it. (PI §202)

But do Wittgenstein’s two statements—the one regarding lying and the other the impossibility of following a rule privately—necessarily dismiss the possibility that my lying to myself is outside the structure of the language-game?

Before I quit her, my cognitive behavioral therapist explained to me the difference between two categories of patients she treats. The first type, who are diagnosed as being ego-dystonic, are distressed by their symptoms, do not like them, want to get rid of them, do not want them to be a part of their identity. The second type, who are labeled ego-syntonic, conversely embrace their symptoms, fold them into their identity, not without distress, but without sufficient distress to outweigh their desired effects. I fall under the second category, a sort of aberrant form of Munchausen by proxy (which is itself, of course, an extremely aberrant form to begin with), which is named after the eighteenth-century liar/personal literary fantasist, the Baron von Münchhausen. Normally (and I use this term advisedly), a patient suffering from the condition known as Munchausen by proxy injures other people (generally their own or other people’s children) in order to draw attention to themselves. But what if a person lives his own life in a way that is purposely injurious to himself so that he can write about it? What if he undergoes therapy not so as to achieve a cure but rather to deepen his identity’s definition in relation to diagnosed sickness? What if I am both the fantasist Münchhausen, who gave the condition its name, and my own proxy?

In his film The Disorderly Orderly (1964), Jerry Lewis’s character Jerome Littlefield suffers from so-called “neurotic identification empathy,” meaning that, as he says, “I’m oversensitive to someone who has pain. . . . I feel what they feel and I’m sicker than they are.” Discussing the American public’s response to Lewis’s antics in the 1950s, Mikita Brottman writes, “And yet, feeling a need for madness as entertainment is one thing; wishing to
Become mad oneself is quite another.” But Wittgenstein wrote from another perspective:

The philosopher is the man who has to cure himself of many sicknesses of the understanding before he can arrive at the notions of the healthy human understanding.

If in life we are surrounded by death, so in healthy understanding we are surrounded by madness. (RFM part 4, §53)

What kind of dissociative disorder, what extreme attraction to the theme of incapacity, would cause a mind to mimic madness in the pursuit of some greater understanding, and at the point where mimicry is no longer discernible as such does the self succumb and understanding in any objective sense cease? What does it mean when self-understanding becomes a fiction, and the performance of pain behavior is the only thing left that is real? Hamlet does not so much search for truth as he models it after his dead father’s authoritative immateriality. He is mad only insofar as acting to a mental image incapacitates all but the performance of the real.

Gordon Baker writes: “Taken as an example of ‘mythology in the forms of our language’ is the occurrence of the words ‘ghost,’ ‘shade,’ ‘soul’ and ‘spirit’ in the vocabulary of our language.” Further, “according to Wittgenstein’s conception, essence is created by us; by stipulating how we wish to use our own words.” One might say in connection with these two statements that we exercise our capacity to create essence via language in no purer form than the ghost. At the same time, Wittgenstein would say that the transformation of this essence into a picture or image (however much it speaks of its own insubstantiality) distorts our understanding of how the mind might otherwise understand what language does and means to say. Ghosts are for Wittgenstein “grammatical illusions” on the order of his proposition: “Language (or thinking) is something unique”—this proves to be a superstition (not a mistake!), itself produced by grammatical illusions” (PI §110). From a Wittgensteinian perspective, the Ghost is a symbol of obscurantist metaphysical expression (the source of superstitions and prejudices vested in the individual mind that Wittgenstein sought to combat). And Hamlet becomes a play about the mythmaking capacity of language—Hamlet’s motivation to act deriving from an image of a ghost that by speaking to him directly (by infusing him with its metaphysical and symbolic expression) drops Hamlet into a self-contained, self-perpetuating language-game of misrepresentation that plays with the Prince even more than it appears to play with it. This language-game troubles and possesses Hamlet unto death. Will he too become a ghost, or need he have done something more or have had something done to him to earn such emeritus status? He is not yet a soul-catcher but he did design a mousetrap, a fly-bottle in which he not only caught a
king’s spectral conscience but his own benighted attempt to make someone else feel his pain.\textsuperscript{80}

\textbf{Brain Scan}

\textsc{JACK PAAR:} Did it ever occur to you, dear old friend, that a lot of your trouble or illness may just be in your mind?

\textsc{OSCAR LEVANT:} What a place for it to be.

—Oscar Levant, \textit{Memoirs of an Amnesiac}

The tombstone of anxiety-ridden, drug-addled pianist/comic raconteur Oscar Levant reads: \textit{“I told them I was ill,”} hypochondria constituting its own spectral form of self-fulfilling prophecy, the ghosting of the body before the fact. I have gone through a full battery of neuropsychological testing, including the requisite brain scans—MRI, EEG, and SPECT SCAN. The first part of this last acronym stands for Single Photon Emission Computed Tomography (SPECT) and is defined as “a type of nuclear imaging test that shows how blood flows to tissues and organs.”\textsuperscript{81} I find this last bit to be particularly disappointing, as I had hoped that SPECT would refer to SPECTRE, as in ghost, a shadowy haunting of the brain with its own extra-linguistic claim on meaning. However, tomography refers to imaging, which Wittgenstein among others has taught us is suspect, spectral in its own right. Although I was not taking a test for which I could study, I did bring a book, which the technician asked to see—\textit{Philosophical Investigations}. I am told to set the book aside and to remove my glasses for the duration of the examination. I sit the one upon the other, so my own spectral textual scanning can proceed along with my being scanned. I am then instructed to remain absolutely still and to empty my brain, to stop thinking. “But I have learned this much from Benjamin [writes Handke]: that it is not possible to act as if one ‘did not think.’”\textsuperscript{82} As an OCD patient, I not only subscribe to this idea, but start intensely thinking about what it means to stop thinking as the scan begins.