Incapacity
Golub, Spencer

Published by Northwestern University Press

Golub, Spencer.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/33156.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/33156

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=1267197
Chapter 5

Rules of the Game

Here the fundamental fact is that we lay down rules, a technique, for playing a game, and that then, when we follow the rules, things do not turn out as we had assumed. So that we are, as it were, entangled in our own rules.

—Wittgenstein (PI §125)

Whereas any fact can be described falsely, the rules that make it possible to describe the facts cannot be described in any way at all.

—Donna M. Summerfield, “Fitting Versus Tracking: Wittgenstein on Representation”

Wittgenstein’s discussion of rule-giving and rule-making has less to do with legality or ethics than with the context of particular language-games, (pre) determined by individual prejudice as preference. But in doing so, isn’t the artist, together with those engaging with the rule-giving functions of some mental incapacity (including many artists and criminals), following rules in a fuller sense than those who are not compelled (except by external mandate) to do so? Certainly, rule-following is a compulsion, the obsessive-compulsive says. And if this obsessive-compulsive is an artist, so too is interpretation of the rules. And yet, the rule-following that constitutes mastery in the artist does not necessarily present as mastery in the mentally impaired, whose intention (where his incapacity does not negate the possibility of intention) is to achieve a self-mastery that will continue to elude him.

Like Wittgenstein, whom he cites as an influence on his work, filmmaker Michael Haneke is an anatomist and grammarian as regards the languages of human thought and behavior. In particular and again like Wittgenstein, he is interested in testing the limits and models of mis/communication in relation to the irritant of pain. More than this, though, Haneke insistently pushes his finger into the wound of fact, consistently locating the pressure point where
fact is most vulnerable to transparent performance, an irony that gives his works their disturbing tone. *Funny Games* (1997) begins innocently enough, with a doughy blond young man named Peter asking to borrow some eggs from Anna, who along with her husband Georg and young son Georgie are vacationing in their summer home in a bucolic lakeside setting. The eggs, Peter says, are for a neighbor and family friend, and because the young man is neatly groomed and polite, Anna invites him into her house. Peter (purposely) drops and breaks the eggs Anna lent him, an interruptive, story-frame-breaking event precipitating a variant form of showing and telling that recalls Wittgenstein’s proposition: “In the moment of event-sighting/citing rupture, the event which takes the place of an expectation, answers it: i.e., the replacement constitutes the answer, so that no question can arise whether it really is the answer. Such a question would mean putting the *sense* of a proposition in question” (*PR* §29).

In the process, the loss of representational integrity both as to space (“the expectation must be in the same space as what is expected” [*PR* §28]) and to time (“Causality rests on an observed uniformity” [*PR* §26]), like the loss of life that will follow, is regarded as being acceptable in the name of a transparency that “bears a certain resemblance to” fact. Peter and his dominant partner Paul are merely transparent names, blank, dispassionate rule-breaking/-remaking agents of narrative minus fingerprints, as the white gloves they wear over their presumably soft hands that fictionally cannot hold eggs suggest.

Peter mock-apologizes for the egg drop, reciting for Anna’s sense of protocol the cliché that he has two left hands. A second drop, this one of Anna’s mobile phone into a sink full of water, makes a mockery of the first drop and his attendant apology/explanation, his two left hands having functioned according to a rational design advertising a false incapacity. “This is simply what I do,” (*PI* §217) Peter’s “incapacity” performance behavior tells Anna, which is true and untrue in relation to what Wittgenstein identified as the complexity of logical propositions (i.e., Peter is not incapacitated but he “does” incapacity). Peter’s performed incapacity enacts a nihilism that is beyond doubt but also resistant to “fact” for those who cannot bring themselves to believe what they see, or who cannot in their minds see transparency. The intruder’s nihilism paraphrases Silvia Lanzetta’s nihilist characterization of Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty*: “Doubt about good and evil can show within a world-picture framework which is not a conventional point of departure, as the element in which arguments occur.”³ Haneke’s perverse intuition regarding Wittgenstein leads him to recast rule-making into nihilistic performance behavior and rule-following into the disintegration of the self, incrementally eroding the capacity to define “fact.” Wittgenstein was aware that misunderstanding and misapplying his concept of rules and games could have consequences but had no idea how dire they might be.

The system of rules determining a calculus thereby determines the “meaning” of its signs too. (*PR* §152)
In his parsing of Descartes, Nancy wrote, “the experience of doubt exceeds the soul and in the process inverts the logic of inside and outside.” Anna cannot bring herself to act upon her suspicion that Peter may well be an intruder exhibiting the performed manner(s) (behaviors) of a guest. She fears that suspecting the new arrival would confirm her bourgeois ordinarness and prejudice and so she performs compliance she herself distrusts. Her own bourgeois drama disenables her from reading performance behavior that has no apparent motive and that conforms to no one tonal register. She doesn’t know what to expect. “Expectation, so to speak,” wrote Wittgenstein, “prepares a yardstick for measuring the event when it comes and what’s more, in such a way that it will be possible to measure the one with the other, whether the event coincides with the expected gradation mark or not.” Expectation is a mechanism for factual comparison, and there is an expectation of what that mechanism should be. “It is, say, as if I guess a man’s height by looking at him, saying ‘I believe he’s 5 ft 8 in’ and then set about measuring him with a tape measure. Even if I don’t know how tall he is, I still know that his height is measured with a tape measure and not a weighing machine” (PR §33). But what if the man who needs measuring has hidden your tape measure and replaced it with a weighing machine? “It only makes sense to give the length of an object if I have a method for finding the object—since otherwise I cannot apply a yardstick to it” (PR §36).

Mac Wellman says, “all true actors only approach the front door by the back.” He appears to be speaking of the actuality of performance but also its truth claims, its reality effects, the show that the suspecting (expectant)/unsuspecting (unknowing) audience takes at face value. The well-spoken young men in their non-threatening boyishly white short pants feign walking on eggs, “trying to be careful,” outwardly to be polite but inwardly to be discreet, the former being a performance behavior concealing the latter until their behavior becomes as purposely indiscreet. They are “careful” not to stain the family carpet so as not to leave trace evidence that is questionable as to meaning, especially insofar as the unspoken stage direction of their not-doing reads: “You cannot use language to go beyond the possibility of evidence” (PR §33). That is, language and evidence inhabit the same logical space (in Cora Diamond’s paraphrase of a Tractarian argument): “we become clear what our sentences mean by becoming clear what place within logical space they determine.” Peter’s faux-accidental second egg drop logically relates to the first and to the sentence “I have two left hands,” while confirming that logic cannot know what to expect going forward. Even in performance, there is no illusion of the second time. The unexpectedness of repetition outside acknowledgment of “fact” that a game is already being played according to its own rules continues to shield the family’s expectations of further repetition as a form of dis/continuity. This failure to transfer expectancy to the game allows the family to be shocked by each new un-expectancy that is, in fact, a reiteration of the same event.
Egg splatter is shockingly (unexpectedly) replaced by blood splatter on the movie screen’s metonymic television set. The “real-time” slowing down of time inside the film following Georgie’s death (it’s his arterial blood-splatter that we see) gives the screen time to read our spectatorial incapacity as we just sit there keeping (real) time—counting, obsessing over counting, and trying to parse visual grammar now that the rule-givers have temporarily left the scene of the crime (although the scene persists as spectatorial aberration inside the surprised narrative frame). The intruders disengage rules from expectancy, seeing from reacting where convention has been irretrievably broken. Peter and Paul’s nominal first impression of goodness (as Christ’s apostles of good neighborliness) has been peeled back to reveal the archetypal nihilism of the animated Tom and Jerry and Beavis and Butthead, which are their later articulated identities. We have only a formal metric for archetypal character, as we do for convention, a structural and not a moral expectation.

Wittgenstein’s proposition, “the concept of distance is given immediately in the structure of visual space” (PR §208), may be applied to the cine-logic of bystanding that our surrogates Anna and George enact. Anna’s failure to warn her neighbors of the deadly intruders who will be visiting them next acknowledges that their gaming is fair within the structure of rule-following, even in an aberrant form. Anna must be true to the game, because the game is true to itself. The sadistic games the captive family plays are “funny” in that they compel us to acknowledge how well we tolerate our own incapacity. Writing after heart transplant surgery, Jean-Luc Nancy identified the intruder as an alien body that is first of all “foreign to thought”; and yet writing within his incapacity adopts intrusion as a function, making its foreignness less a fact than a complaint, a performance behavior, an affect of pain. The heart-death of the patient and that of Haneke’s morally evacuated spectator is a near enough match not to have this transplant rejected. As anxiously incapacitated L. B. Jefferies has already illustrated, by watching we make ourselves sick, in that our sickness is a function of our making in the form of watching (and of writing). Intrusion as an external complaint is a performance behavior designed to call attention to the incapacity of an internal (i.e., mental) strangeness that we will not let leave. Paul suddenly turns toward the camera and winks, indicating that he knows this about us. He challenges us to bet on how much longer the family will live. We cannot acknowledge taking the bet but we are already running the numbers in our minds. Chair-wheeling himself further into the darkness, Jefferies is even more fascinated by a narrative that conventional wisdom says has gone so horribly wrong but his hiddenness tells him is so horribly right.

“The complexity of philosophy,” wrote Wittgenstein, “is not in its matter, but in our tangled understanding” (PR §2). A proposition in which “philosophy” is inclusive of language and “our tangled understanding” encodes both the reader’s and language’s own incapacity. “He has done so and so” and “He
can do so and so” say only what time makes possible (BB 49), a thought that Wittgenstein immediately subverts by considering the Nietzschean proposition, “what can happen must have happened before” (BB 49). “The future,” says Wittgenstein, “[appears] less existent than the past,” by which he means, “though the past events do not really exist in the full light of day, they exist in an underworld into which they have passed out of the real life; whereas the future events do not even have this shadowy existence” (BB 56). Every time you open a door, some measure of time passes through. But where does it go? “‘Where does the flame of a candle go to when it’s blown out?’ ‘Where does the light go to?’ ‘Where does the past go to?’” (BB 56). How can we expect to gain our footing and recognize our (in)capacity in the present when we can only know time as an unexpected passage? The intruders shift a shotgun back and forth in a nursery rhyming game of the one not after “next” will, at least for the moment, not be killed. Paul says, “We want to offer the audience something . . . and show what we can do, right?” “What we can do” recalls Wittgenstein’s “This is simply what I do” and together with his “what can happen must have happened before,” speaks to performance’s tangled temporality, its ontological dis-ease. When the hosts balk at playing this game, Paul’s “We’re not up to feature film length yet” and his live-audience-directed “Is that enough?” point to the sickening horror of what the present demands. Suddenly, Anna grabs the momentarily unattended shotgun and shoots Peter, killing him. Paul quickly grabs the remote control for the TV and presses the reverse button, which causes the film we are watching to run backwards to just before Anna grabbed the gun, which this time Paul grabs first and kills George. Reenactment tell us that “what can happen must have happened before” and also “the future appears less existent than the past,” as the event spools not in real time but around a spool.

As Paul later prepares to throw a bound and gagged Anna off her sail- ing boat into the even colder medium of the Deep, he speaks suggestively of thermodynamics’ three laws, parsed here from C. P. Snow’s reading of Lord Kelvin’s theory:

1) You cannot win (that is, you cannot get something for nothing, because matter and energy are conserved). Wittgenstein wrote, “I would almost like to say: It is true that in the game there isn’t any ‘true’ or ‘false’ but then in arithmetic there isn’t any ‘winning’ or ‘losing’” (PG, “Foundations of Mathematics,” §293).

2) You cannot break even (you cannot return to the same energy state, because there is always an increase in disorder; entropy always increases). It is not just that the intruders increase disorder, they do so within a closed system, a language-game.

3) You cannot get out of the game (because absolute zero is unattainable). Following their son’s murder and the intruders’ exit, Anna does run for help, but after hiding from one passing truck, fearing that it is
her tormentors, she stops a second vehicle, which is transporting Peter and Paul, who then return to her house to finish the job, the work, the game they had started. (Re)cycling is the logical economy of obsessive-compulsive narrative disorder.9

Meanwhile, figurative “Lord Kelvin” (its namesake having also invented maritime instruments for measuring depth, distance, and direction at sea) is dragging underwater Anna’s soon-to-be dead body, which is approaching maximum temperature and informational/communication loss culminating in entropy, the shutdown of a closed system, end of play. Outliving her family, Anna feels her bound body’s constraint, the shame of her body’s persistence, its weight—speaking only of itself, solipsised by intrusion’s psychosis. In the “body-to-body struggle with language,” Anna “never stops selving. Her body “exscribes itself as body: being spaced, it’s a dead body; being expelled, it’s a filthy body.”10

Wittgenstein maintained that “continuity in our visual field consists in not seeing discontinuity” (PR §137), the unseeing of an image’s inherent unreliability. Alain Badiou maintains the image is the self-confessed truth of cinema, its thought being a “deception of vision.” The only two options then are to look at or to look away, but the latter ruins any “chance of attaining Ideas.” Film spectatorship asks us to make sense of image, even though this “sense” entertains its own logic at the expense of what philosophy teaches us logic is. What the intruders do makes no sense outside their language system, language-game. Saboteurs of expectancy, there is nothing left to expect, so their conversation concerning whether film proves that fiction is real goes nowhere—it just breaks off, elliptically (“Why . . . ?”), bereft of language-gaming and beyond measure. The intruders are exposed as agents of no known dispatch, Pinteresque dumb waiters, unable to say where continuity ends and discontinuity begins—Wittgenstein’s “Which is the last dot in the first sequence and which the first dot in the second?” (BB 67)—not knowing enough to be even self-deceived. But Paul’s final frozen-intersubjective look into the camera lets us elliptically know, it is our self-acknowledgment that is incomplete, incapacitated as we are by performance behavior which we refuse to stop and from which we cannot look away.

Infraread

I am
what lies outside language and therefore can-
not be understood. Cannot be understood,
do you understand? You are all housed in
your unhousedness.

—Wellman, Antigone
Mac Wellman wrote a play about an “elegant, very capable looking [my emphasis] and quite green” cabbage on a table. *Bitter Bierce; or the Friction We Call Grief* (2003) takes its form from Ambrose Bierce’s *The Devil’s Dictionary* (1911), an indexed satirical commentary on his day. A table too is both a measurable text and a means of indexical measurement. And the cabbage on the table can be unpeeled so as to wear away its capability, its capacity, along with its elegance contingent upon integrity and its (“quite green”) color. This amounts to undoing verification itself, of the object and the description of the object that is entered into language as evidence. (“What would incline me to call anything a table?” [PI §570].) Wellman defines his cabbage as “a familiar kitchen vegetable about as large/and as wise as a human head,” much as a forensic pathologist might atomize a man’s brain upon his operating table.\(^\text{11}\) Except in Wellman’s case, a table-stage and the cabbage-head contest what language means to a theater of “Apparence,” Wellman’s term for appearance’s “is not” (“apparence” being the untranslated French word for “appearance”). “‘Apparence’ is,” Karinne Keithley Syers states, “Wellman’s translation of Kantian ‘apperception’ in which something new comes to be known, or perceived.” Wittgenstein, of course, called this “aspect seeing,” or “seeing-as.”\(^\text{12}\)

Wellman’s table gambit recalls Wittgenstein’s table-reading of secondary and primary sense, the former depending upon the latter in the same way that “seems” (“appearance”) depends upon “is” (“apparence”). “One could,” for example, “consider a red coloured label a primary sign of the colour red, the word ‘red’ a secondary sign” (*PG* §§46–47).\(^\text{13}\) A synaesthete’s mind, though, can transform “red” into the letter “A,” revealing a difference in seeing and understanding that language does not inherently (i.e., without context) express but also does not admit to not expressing. Setting aside the synaesthesic manifest, Wittgenstein asks “can [and “why shouldn’t”] a green label be a sample of red?” effectively using the example of a table (chart) in which a green label is placed beside a red one being read “differently” by one man than another, red to red or from red to green, horizontally or diagonally across. The same man who “mistakenly” connects red to green will not necessarily bring a green book when he is ordered to bring a red one. “It is clear that a sample is not used like a word (name). And an ostensive definition, a table, which leads us from words to samples, is used differently from a table which replaces one name with another” (*PG* §49). How do we, then, define degrees or circumstances of arbitrariness, and does the arbitrary alter meaning or cease to be meaningful? “Is the word ‘red’ enough to enable one to look for something red? Does one need a memory image to do so?” (*PG* §53). Language-reading is, after all, model behavior, in which analogy can give way to disanalogy, and we measure and recognize interpretation by means of comparison to a body of rules.\(^\text{14}\) Even in the frequent cases where the origin and exact nature of the rules are unknown to us, we engage in “rule-governed activity.” Paradoxically, such activity, despite being
rule-based, cannot function absolutely, like a rule, and can be questioned as to its application in any particular case. Wittgenstein writes, in reference to the table: “It’s there, like a field, with paths leading through it: but I can also cut across—Each time I apply the chart I make a fresh transition. The transitions aren’t made, as it were, once for all the chart” (PG §52). Therein lies the opportunity of The Difficulty of Crossing a Field.

presiding magistrate: A fixed rule.
andrew: A fixed rule.
presiding magistrate: What do you suppose he meant by that?15

Wellman’s The Difficulty of Crossing a Field (1997), based on a story by Ambrose Bierce, tells about the disappearance from a field of a planter named Mr. Williamson, late (or perhaps not late, as in not dead) of Selma, Alabama, of which little can be recalled or retold. The strangeness of this state of affairs functions as estrangement in the context of a play whose formal structure is configured as a series of “tellings” that are allied to making scenes (showings). The play inscribes Wittgensteinian wonder as an index of certainty and doubt (“wonder wonder wonder thing / Wonder what and wonder sing . . . Wonder what I am . . . Alone with the wonder of not knowing.” Also, “I am very certain I cannot recall”).16 This sense of wonder is predicated upon the proposition that a man who was last seen crossing an empty field could have either disappeared from view or else not have been there in the first place. “Continuity in our visual field,” we recall Wittgenstein saying, “consists in not seeing discontinuity” (PR §137). So too, if a field is simultaneously a table, a chart, and if “each time I apply the chart I make a fresh transition,” a man seen crossing a field might either disappear or else not be there in the first place. What, after all, is the first place?

The ambiguity of mis/interpretation plays off against the apparent factual-ity of the inquest being conducted (from behind a table) to determine whether Mr. Williamson, the man who vanished, is alive or dead. Or, like Schrödinger’s cat, perhaps both? (“It is not the purpose of this narrative/to answer that question,” the Presiding Magistrate at the inquest would say, as the inquest is by nature narrowly focused on answering but one question.)17 The play’s cast includes “a chorus of slaves, field hands, and other black folk on the Williamson estate,” and one soon wonders (in a second verb[al] sense of the word “wonder”) whether Williamson is here meant to be a stand-in for the similarly initialized and syllabic Wittgenstein, doubling down on the play’s stated intuition, “Everything that goes away, and everything / that appears to disappear doesn’t really.”18 There is, in fact, says Wittgenstein, no past fact, only memory and evidence that serve as questionable proofs of (past) life. “It seems,” writes Cora Diamond regarding Wittgenstein’s proposition, “that we merely say things in the past tense when certain present conditions are fulfilled, but we never have, cannot have, the fact that would genuinely stand
behind the saying and make what we say true. For there are no past facts; ‘the past is not and cannot be.’” As with time, Wellman’s splitting and recombining of nouns and verbs in the name of “wonder” splits the only apparently seamless wholeness of rule-governed representational form to expose it not only as illusion but as an allusion to something else that we only think we know because we recognize it as being real.

The difficulty of crossing a field speaks to the ways in which history can be read and misread as language, subject to erasure, interpretation, and “misregard”—an invented noun/verb introduced in a more immediate context of no(t)-naming (“I think something that I don’t have no name”). “The mystery of Selma, Alabama, is: what was, isn’t.” This apparently simple statement of change and negative comparison contains a tense change that recalls several points made by Wittgenstein that help us shift focus from history to logic, from story to proposition: (1) “Language can only say those things that we can only imagine otherwise” (PR §54). The purposeful awkwardness, the constructedness of Wellman’s syntax in his sentence (“is: what was, isn’t”) speaks to its meaning lying not in other days so much as in other ways, otherwise, that is, alternative thinking, seeing, and speaking. (2) “I do not see the past, only a picture of the past. But how do I know it’s a picture of the past?” (PR §50). This statement casts a new light upon the phrase “what was, isn’t,” allowing us to question the presupposition of a past upon which belief in the possibility of change is based. This is one of Wittgenstein’s many “how do I know” propositions that hypothesize belief. We cannot legitimately cross a field once the possible groundlessness of belief has been glimpsed. Viewing is likewise undermined as “the mystery of Selma, Alabama,” which may only be a picture and “the mystery” is not of a place but of the picture itself. “How do I know it’s a picture of the past?” And if it’s not, then there is either no or new meaning to the phrase “is: what was, isn’t.” (3) “A phenomenon (specious present) contains time, but isn’t in time. Whereas language unwinds in time” (PR §69). This proposition sights Wellman’s representational field (projected as/on a stage), which is not only what his play describes by way of impersonation, but what his play is. The speciousness of representation is at odds with the perspicuous language that Wellman (after Wittgenstein) employs to capture it. But capture being impossible in a state of language-fascination, the proposition of the play and its sentences default to language itself, which both unwinds temporally via tenses (“is,” “was”) and infrastructurally to express grammatical relationship as temporal affect (“is: what was, isn’t”). Language is here not measuring time; it is measuring itself. (4) “The specification of the ‘here’ must not pre-judge what is here” (PR §98). An inquest into Williamson’s disappearance by its own formal definition (of the word “inquest”) must find for death, only without a body, so that “is: what was, isn’t” speaks to the wider “mystery of Selma, Alabama” as a place that appears not to be what it is. What authority can be claimed for rule in the erasure of wholeness? And what
authority can wholeness have claimed in the first place, except as a mode of representation?

CHORUS:
We are building a nation.
We are building a nation.
We are building a nation.
We are building an erasure.22

What is here being told and who is it that does the telling—a chorus of the disenfranchised, excluded from the whole and so excluding wholeness—exposes the impossibility of (the) rule being meaningful, no matter how many times it is repeated (let this passive sentence construction serve as a purposeful weakening of the claim to possibility). Such repetition will only and (in fact) inevitably enable the noun to expose its relationship to the verb that acts upon it as being built upon a groundless foundation (and, as the case of Mr. Williamson attests, a figureless ground). You cannot, as Wittgenstein argued, lay a proposition “against reality like a ruler” (PG §85). Nor can you lay a system of what appears to be a series of logically related propositions against a single measuring rod, as Wittgenstein later maintained.23

To begin with, a table is not always a table, at least not (just) in the way that you mean it or that you think it is meant. Of course, Wittgenstein understood this in terms of language, but he did not have to show what this knowledge enabled and dis-enabled beyond telling about it. He could cite a table as a measurable object, but not an object placed upon a stage, where all distance is troubled (by compression and abstraction) and with it, all measurement. The difference between Wittgenstein and Wellman or Foreman, for that matter, is that the playwright-directors philosophize in languages that are stage-worthy. Foreman specially designed his own prop tables, measuring the unfathomable distance between them and other objects with the visible aid of tautly strung strings to allow the spectator to read space and spatial objects across a field that the strings make visible, albeit in pictorial terms (i.e., as/in a picture). These physical lines analogize to sentences that likewise present themselves as/not-as such: “I do not believe that logic can talk about sentences [propositions] in any other than the normal sense in which we say, ‘There’s a sentence written here’ ” (PR §18). Wittgenstein here concedes that telling must, in some sense, accede to being shown, with the sentence becoming a line about a sentence: “There’s a sentence written here.” So, although Wittgenstein gave up on the idea of model-making, the logic of Foreman stringing space along as if it were language would be visible and readable to him. The stage provides the opportunity to test philosophical language and the agreement of its constituent elements (e.g., nouns and verbs) as parts of speech/speaking parts in ways that Wittgenstein could only imagine.
Mrs. Williamson: . . . I have never seen nor heard of Mr. Williamson. Nor of Mrs. Williamson since.

Something more than a mere disappearance.

More than a mere disappearance.

Than a mere disappearance.

A mere disappearance.

The Williamson girl (half hidden, whispering):

Someone or something knows

something someone or something

will not tell.

No one knows what telling

is the one someone or (something)

will not tell.24

Williamson’s Mrs. loses her identity the moment her husband disappears, making his vanishing “more than a mere disappearance,” making it into something that takes names (in an alternative sense than the rule of Law) and the other linguistic and categorical markers with it. Disappearance is itself a form of non-differentiation that spreads into everything and not just something or someone else. Disappearance declassifies, but not in the sense of making less secret, only less discretely striated, like the pitch of a stage-raked field. Disappearance creates a strange class f(r)iction in the womb of the slave narrative. Slavery is the play’s immediate socio-historical context, which here functions chorally as a kind of metatext of the non-differentiated, un-demarcated “something someone or something.” There is much more of this to tell, but “it is not the purpose of this narrative/to answer that question.”

It is, I think, telling that at the beginning of the Sixth Telling, just after the Presiding Judge declared him to be dead and “the Stage world cracks open to reveal the vast openness of Mr. Williamson’s field, the late-not-now-or-not-yet-late Selma planter crosses the stage, “heading diagonally to upstage right” (my emphasis).25 This sighting/citing returns us to Wittgenstein’s differently read “table” and to the new meanings that are produced therein. Much in the same way that Mrs. Williamson’s saying as regards her husband, “He is gone!” relates to both death and disappearance, with the former affirming the latter but the latter not necessarily confirming the former and in fact making confirmation impossible minus some kind of evidence or remainder, the stuttering “is” in the question “Is you is, or is you ain’t?” hints at an ungrammatical logic that allows questioning to syntactically persist.26 “You cannot use language to go beyond the possibility of evidence” (PR §33), Wittgenstein said, but you have to know how to read and what to read as evidence, and here the philosopher allows you some latitude to make up your own mind. Thus, his proposition, “A good reason is one that looks like this” (PI §483), gives potentially conflicting evidence based upon citation. Language
may say exactly and inexacty what needs to be said, and so must police and even cite itself for occasionally giving ground to the spectral claims of simile as self-representation. Language as language double defines “language as being language” and “language in the capacity of language.” With this in mind, propositions like “Logic must take care of itself” (TLP §5.473) and “Language has to speak for itself” (PG §2 and §27) begin to sound therapeutic.

Ghost, noun.
The outward and visible sign of an inward fear.

In the Tractatus (§5.641) Wittgenstein writes: “The philosophical I is not the man, not the human body or the human soul of which psychology treats, but the metaphysical subject, the limit—not a part of the world.” The Ghost (perhaps oxymoronically) materializes this subject-limit while also touching and awakening the philosophical “I” of man that is too often obscured by the more directly analyzable psychological “I” with its demonstrative manner and hidden motive. In its immaterial figuration, the noun “Ghost” gives up the ghost of the noun as conveyor of language’s naming function and means of knowing the way of the “real” world. The Ghost dis-analogizes the figure to the world by folding incorporeality into nominal form. The etymological presence of the human figure is rendered suspect, not knowing or being able to say whether the figure is here or there, is “present” as called, as acknowledged.

Ambrose Bierce was such a ghost, disappearing into Mexico, like so many outlaws in the United States before him who fled beyond its legal jurisdiction and often into anonymity; the closest thing there is to disappearance without visiting Colonus blind and in rags. Wellman’s Bierce in turn says that former President Rutherford B. Hayes was so anonymous, so invisible, that he could (like the historical Bierce) be anywhere, everywhere. The irony here is that Hayes by virtue of his political office and Bierce by virtue of his profession as a newspaperman and cultural gadfly were socially the most visible of men. Of his own celebrity, Wellman’s Bierce notes: “I am almost disposed to consider myself the most famous of authors. I have pretty nearly ceased to be ‘discovered,’ but my notoriety as an obscurian may be said to be worldwide and apparently everlasting.” Here the irony is compounded by “Bierce’s” linked references to being “pretty nearly ceased to be ‘discovered’” and to his “obscurian” tendencies—alluding, no doubt, to his language-use, opinion-making, and perception—which translates his incomprehensibility into non-discovery. You cannot find something if you don’t know what you’re looking for; you cannot know what you don’t understand.

Like “Ghost,” “Anonymity” is a spectral form of Wellman’s “Appearance,” which is only somewhat at odds with its designation as a “noun,” that is, as a part of speech, or the speaking of that which cannot be known or shown,
to borrow from Wittgenstein’s famous Tractarian resolution of a text that cannot be finally resolved. Be it resolved that we, the community of _____, will henceforth call this word a “noun,” to make it stand in for, as in take the place of, that thing of which we cannot speak (e.g., fear). There is, necessarily, in this decision, a measure of agreed upon self-delusion, as Wellman illustrates:

Gravitation, noun.
The tendency of all bodies to approach one another with a strength proportioned to the quantity of matter they contain—the quantity of matter they contain being ascertained by the strength of their tendency to approach one another. This is a lovely and edifying illustration of how science, having made A the proof of B, makes B the proof of A.31

Actually, this is an example of the illusory proofs that result from circular reasoning, one of the free habits of false reasoning named “the Münchausen Trilemma” after the fabulist baron. If a definition proves nothing and further reveals the pretzel logic that is necessary to communicate meaning, then the word it is seeking to define (in this case, fittingly, “Gravitation”) spins out of any logical orbit, becoming instead an obsessive thought loop that defamiliarizes or “makes strange” the word-object that the definition sought to make familiar, or else to confirm in its familiarity. The failure of this task allows word and part of speech to split off from itself, its meaning from its function. The mind can no longer rely on a certain rehearsed gravitational pull, a habit of thought, and starts cycling in search of new meanings and of new ways in which to mean. On its way back around, the mind crosses paths with Haneke’s two intruders parsing the scientific theories of Lord Kelvin.

DICTIONARY, n. A malevolent literary device for cramping the growth of a language and making it hard and inelastic. This dictionary, however, is a most useful work.32

The hardness and inelasticity of language of which Bierce wrote is precisely what thought, in Wittgenstein’s writing, bumps up against in the form of a limit. But this limit, Wittgenstein argues, is often invisible to us as such. If Wittgenstein were given to definition, which he surely was not, the word “limit” for him would involve not seeing, minus the heightened consciousness of not knowing (“what another world it / all is. How even the most commonplace and / familiar objects take on another character”).33 Quite possibly (“Actually, adverb. / Perhaps; possibly”), Bierce, who received a bullet wound to the head while fighting in the Civil War, and who suffered from periodic
blackouts thereafter, took the role of the wounded actor, went off-script and, like the hanged protagonist of his celebrated short story “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” (1891) (with whom he is elided at the end of Wellman’s play), went missing in a dream without knowing that it was a dream and not knowing either that what was real was the dying that the dream replaced. (“Really, adverb. / Apparently”).

Both Williamson and Bierce reappear in the plays whose theatrical eventfulness study disappearance but neither one of them shares Kaspar’s desire “to be a person like somebody else [i.e., he] was once”—perhaps given a more heightened awareness of the tenuous grip their theatrical appearance has on once having been, or having been only once. Unlike Kaspar, Williamson and Bierce are not so much bound by the limits of language as they are cognizant of language being bound to describe what it cannot, namely how the theatrical event manages to invoke appearance, disappearance, and reappearance at the same time, within the same time frame. And this frame effectively destroys time.

The fact of performance is irrefutable, so this is not at issue here. But the fact, which I have already likened to a wound (the “likened” being a sign of comparison or resemblance to), is suspect, especially as regards performance. Wellman makes this clear in his splintered-fluid take on Sophocles’s Antigone, in which the three fates double as the three facts, girls wearing hats instead of masks, “each wrapped up in her own / fabric. (Fact, here again becoming [physical] iteration of the [en]rapt / wrapped language-as-language trope.) Each carries her own dumb, expensive wand. Day. Night. Death and crumpled / paper.” Facts, quite simply, fail to perform. “Each fact denies another. All / change hats. Nothing works. Nothing works.” There are no absolute origins or endings in Wellman’s play (“End of play. / Almost”), no measure of certitude in the forms he inherits (e.g., Greek tragedy) or even in the forms he invents, the worlds for which he sets the rules of the game (“The three / girls played all the parts, with hats instead / of masks [well, maybe one mask is allowed].” What is at work is an atomization of what is truly performable as a thing of value, separating out the heart and mind of “theater” from the calcified corpus of spiritless “theatre” (in Wellman’s spelling-as-symbolic-parsing). Or, as Wellman’s own quasi-begrudgingly physical example cites, the down-market materialization of what that spirit looks like as opposed to what, if anything, it means. So, when Wellman introduces us to his Bierce standing behind his cabbage/head-setting table, he parenthetically comments upon that author’s good looks that have “something a little apparitional” about them: “(and why does not the apparition of a suit of clothes sometimes walk abroad without a ghost in it?)” As these remarks are offered in the form of opening stage directions, they are printed in the apparitional font of the italic.

Wellman develops the figuration of the ghost as a sop to theatrical representation a bit further on:
A ghost never comes naked: he appears either in a winding sheet or “in his habit as he died.” To believe in him, then, is to believe that not only have the dead the power to make themselves visible after there is nothing left of them, but that the same power inheres in textile fabrics.38

The ghost is, then, the intruder that does not so much impose its will as it displays the artifice our fear constructs, the mind’s capacity to cope representationally with what it cannot otherwise conceive of as being truly unknown—or worse still, known personally to us. (“Picture, noun. / A representation in two dimensions of / something wearisome in three.” Likewise: “Hades, noun. / The place where the dead live.”)39 The ghost haunts the mind where it lives, within the confines of its supposed not-knowingness. So too, too often does the theater, which wraps our cabbage-heads in spectral curtains of false mysticisms of the real that it sets upon its table-stage. The peeling of the cabbage reveals nothing except for the mise-en-abyme, the unbreakable if not irreducible limit-wholeness of our theatrical incapacitation that we take on willingly as our own without owning up to what it means.

Bierce’s “Devil’s Dictionary” grew out of his journalistic assignment to comment upon the letter of the news, much as Wellman gave himself the assignment as a playwright to deconstruct the theater upon which drama reports. The motives of the journalist and the dramatist elide in the Wellman-scripted Bierce passage, “The facts about how and when I met Molly Day are lost. There are no letters, no love poems, no story of the meeting or the courting.”40 At the heart of this passage is the observation that facts/history/the so-called “real” lose clarity—the “when,” for example, bearing weak testimony to the temporal actuality of a meeting with a woman whose surname “Day” would seem to demand a greater specificity (the day) than the author can or will provide. This, though, is a false lead, as they say in the newspaper trade. The absence of clarity (perspicuity), like the missing first “e” in Wellman’s alt-realism construct, “Apparence,” being a positive advertisement for absence, the imaginative gap that forms but which is too quickly filled by the truth claims made by unexamined language. Wittgenstein’s therapeutically atomized philosophical propositions speak truth to the lie of such truth claims. In a similar way, both Wellman and Foreman have separated language from stage(d) bodies in order to return embodiedness to words—or as Nancy has written: “A word, so long as it is not absorbed without remainder into a sense, remains essentially extended between other words, stretching to touch them, though not merging with them: and that’s language as body.”41

“This body retreats to its own depth—to the depth of Sense—just as sense withdraws all the way to its mortal depth . . . [into] a black hole.”42 Wellman’s plays, such as Infrared (2000) and The Invention of Tragedy (2005), take the
visual reader down just such a black hole, as deep and dimension-shifting as any Lewis Carroll could fathom. Wellman confesses to being fascinated with holes, and they are ubiquitous in his plays. He cites one book in particular as having been quite useful to him in this regard: Roberto Casati and Archille C. Varzi’s *Holes and Other Superficialities*. The book, which contains numerous visual and written configurations of the hole, recalls in its concept-modeling the “projective geometry” that Wittgenstein employed in “Some Remarks on Logical Form” to illustrate the pictorial problematic of analyzing the languages of logical forms. “The point of the analogy,” says David G. Stern, “is that a fully analysed language would allow us to reproduce the full variety of logical forms to be found in the world so that they can be taken in at a glance.” What Stern is suggesting that Wittgenstein had in mind was, so to speak, a morphological table. The problem is that “ordinary language hides its rules behind a misleadingly simple surface structure and a correspondingly complex set of tacit conventions concerning how its words are to be applied.” This reads like Wellman’s *Bitter Bierce* table, which is unadorned except for its family resemblance to “notable,” “stable,” and “acceptable,” all words containing the word “table,” that I have used in this chapter in discussing the want of simple fact in representation and “the complex set of tacit conventions concerning how [ordinary language’s conventions] are to be applied” when they are glimpsed through the curtain of other linguistic mystifications.43

*Infrared* begins in Wittgensteinian amazement—“My origin was amazement,” says the Kaspar-like protagonist, described in a sentence that digs a hole for/with itself as “an ungainly self in search of itself,” not knowing whether his is the actual tale and not “the tail wagging the dog / of some other existence.”44 Ironically, the protagonist is called narrator. One here recalls Wittgenstein’s answering a question with a question that he poses to himself (*OC* §486): “Do you know or do you only believe that your name is L.W.? Is that a meaningful question?” (“The meaning of a question is the method of answering it. Tell me how you are searching, and I will tell you what you are searching for” [*PR* §118].) One question darkly shadows the other, made darker still (but not into another color) by the interrogation being self-imposed at the point of the self’s possible disappearance as a proper name (it having already shrunk to the space and size of an initialed sign). narrator’s shadow breaks free from his impersonal third-personhood and breaks into a number of smaller shadows that in turn transform into holes defining a flatland of “nameless bodies of figures and grounds,” an Alice-in-Wonderland playing-card stage that resembles, as in *Bitter Bierce*, a table. narrator, for his part, is left shadowless, bereft of a tail/tale, but feeling no less monstrous than before—empty absent, all odd(s) with no end(s).45

The black hole that has engulfed narrator in “SCENE [DEPRESSION]” (so named by Wellman), which he calls “this nightmarish cabinet of illusion,” is the theatrical corpus “conceived in the anxiety of its [self-]confinement,” “the pure darkness of autofiliation.”46 The Oldest Shadow speaks for the
vexed realism that is born of such faux-inward-gazing. When asked what it is doing, the Oldest Shadow replies: “I am keeping all things hinged to the doors and / windows of customary appearance.” 47 The shadow says what the shadow does not even know. Descending into the underworld of Infrared as a self-named Orpheus in search of his Eurydice, Narrator’s amazement turns tail on “an ordinary dog” named WOW, a double sign (amazement + the ordinary) that, like Kilroy who lives in and on Tennessee Williams’s linguistically double-edged Camino Real (and Jack’s dog “Toast” in Funny Bones) says that Wittgenstein was here. Wittgenstein is the writer of fragments, collections of thoughts and functions and Wellman the writer of holes. Between them is configured a body that carries the weight of its head and the head that carries the weight of its body upon it. Nancy says, “We don’t think the body if we don’t think of it as weighing.” The body, like Wittgenstein’s atomized philosophical corpus, is made up of atoms but also, more externally (non-subatomically) of an ensemble of moving parts that are attached to the head, which is (intensifying a theme articulated in other zones of the body) made up almost entirely of holes—“Pupils, nostrils, mouth, ears are all holes, carved flights out of the body.” 48 Wellman might have substituted (like Foreman) a potato for the cabbage in Bitter Bierce, except then, of course, there would have been too many eyes and with them the homonymic temptation to ascribe as many “I”s to them.

From the tails of dogs in Infrared to the “chails” of cats invoked by the glossolalic Greek chorus in The Invention of Tragedy, Wellman returns to theatrical origins to stare down more than a century’s-old fear of convention so as to compel so-called realism to give up the ghost.49 “A black hat scuttles across the face of the whole [hole] world—a very suspicious black hat,” where a tragic mask stricken by what has become of theater and what theater has become might otherwise be. This leaves Hare, an Oedipus surrogate, to wonder, “Is my understanding only blindness to my own lack of understanding?” This is a rhetorical question at this late date, self-evidence of a body that is still as always not-knowing what befalls it yet is sinking under the weight of the fall.50 Therein lies a tragedy befitting a comic film by Haneke. And Wittgenstein was here too:

If a blind man were to ask me “Have you got two hands?” I should not make sure by looking. If I were to have any doubt of it, then I don’t know why I should trust my eyes. For why shouldn’t I test my eyes by looking to find out whether I see my two hands? What is to be tested by what? (Who decides what stands fast?)

And what does it mean to say that such and such stands fast?

(OC §125)

Hare, no stranger to the underground passage commensurate with a hole, is at this very moment bracketed by Wittgenstein, involved in “an inaudible
squabble between the answe[r]er’s two hands.” Like narrator in Infra-
red, HARE is in search of a lost tale/tail, of a time “when I had been attached
to something else,” like the shadow gone missing in the darkness that can
only be seen under infrared light, like stage directions that can be seen but
not heard, stage directions like “Silence. The sound of not much” and “A
hush happens . . . .” HARE, who admits to also being “a Hair of truth” fully
capable of severing the tail/tale at any point because it’s not real, speaks
knowingly of the hole in a speculative logic that enthralled the hole into becom-
ing or at least into perceiving the whole, the communal real in the form of
a chorus:

So the sleep of tongue that forces an each to become an all [a chorus]
is also the itch of an each to teach the thing to be replaced by an
appropriate symbol so that what is symbolized by our speech is the
call of the all of our certainty.52

One again hears in this an echo of Wittgenstein, who could have had
Oedipus in mind when he posed the following questions of a man of whom
he makes an example:

Could we imagine a man who keeps on making mistakes where we
regard a mistake as ruled out, and in fact never encounter one?
E.g., he says he lives in such and such a place, is so and so old,
comes from such and such a city, and he speaks with the same cer-
tainty (giving all the tokens of it) as I do, but he is wrong.
But what is his relation to this error? What am I to suppose?
(OC §67)

What we are to suppose, Wellman suggests, is that there is no certainty (not
even for an “answearer,” a person of faith), and, as HARE starts to tell us,
“Apparently is the parent of reality. And . . . [Freezes]” And with this “And
. . . .,” “Apparence” haunts reality like an intrusive thought, as doubt, inexactness, paraphrase. The chorus, unsupported by any sense or context the
modern stage can compose, literally undone by the stage’s loss of composure
in its presence as some anomalously conventional “apparence,” remove their
cat masks and affix various tale-bearing suffix-tails to the word “Cat”—
“Catastrophe, Catastasis, Cataclysm.” This series of eventful words falsifies
sequence in history, Catastasis or climax in ancient Greek tragedy having
regularly preceded catastrophe. This is of little matter and less consequence,
though, as the Blackout to which this listing leads here signifies only “End of
Play. Almost”—a near replay of HARE’s freezing in the appearance of reality,
made mask-like and faceless in the face of the ontological truth and untruth
of stage convention.54 And therein, says HARE, lies what we, not he, would
call a paradox:
The tragedy in all this is when we fall out of the all, all we are is an each, even if a peach of an each, an each suspended like a kitten by a single slender hair. A hair so slender it can hardly be seen in the air. A hair so slender it is not the same for all. Each of us suspended by a long slender singular hair. So that we are not the same. We were all the same in the chorus. We are all the same out there, out here in the open air.55

Having reemerged from the chorus like the first actor come again, HARE paraphrases Vladimir speaking to Estragon in Waiting for Godot, a shaggy dog story and twice-told tale that loses its memory like a tale/tail that has been severed, cut off—“Don’t you remember? When you slept by the tree and were like to go dreadful?”56 “Catastrophe” is the watchword of Godot’s waiting, but in that Wellman has not cited but rather paraphrased Beckett’s play, it is best to recall what Wellman said in this play about paraphrase:

Paraphrase misses the point.

Paraphrase imagines the purpose of a repeated action is to get the thing right.

Paraphrase attempts to enforce a certainty where there is none.57

Having read his Wittgenstein, Wellman knows that although certainty appears to come after doubt, it is really doubt that comes after certainty, as surely as Catastasis now follows Catastrophe, the only climax left to us being “anti-.”

Rule-based behavior is expectant. Rule-following may precipitate loss of a felt need to look and listen. What kind of rule change would cause a pair of severed feet to fall out of Gogo’s overturned boots in Godot, or Orgon to disappear from under the table where he was thought (and seen to be placed) eavesdropping on Tartuffe? Perhaps a philosophical one on the order of the question, “What reason have I, now, when I cannot see my toes, to assume that I have five toes on each foot?” (OC §429). When expectancy stops being synonymous with proof, the unexpected presents itself as a new logical condition. Certainty is expectancy’s disguise, expectancy being a seductive act that affirms spectatorial knowledge we only think we have. We are continually warned in Molière’s plays not to succumb to theatrical fakery, and yet, we are made to play the fool who ignores this not good but sound advice. And we do so, because misplaced loyalty, hypochondria, jealousy, miserliness, misanthropy, romantic delusion, and other manners and subsets of comedy’s inherent obsessive-compulsive act are easier for us to take than is tragedy, because comedy, whatever else it is, is death-defying and death is what we ultimately expect.

What if Orgon disappears into the performance of listening, which he has been put under the table to do, and once subsumed by the Voice can no longer be seen? In his short isomorphic play “Vox Clamans in Deserto,” Nancy
imagines various language philosophers poly-vocalizing their acoustic images of the voice—taking place, as voice must take place—on a bare stage that is “brightly lit and resonant,” reminiscent of a Handke-scripted performance venue for Kaspar or some other speech apparatus. Nancy articulates the character “Saussure’s” position that voice and speech are separate entities: “Voice isn’t a performance; it’s something else, something that comes about prior to the distinction between an available language and the spoken performance of a word. . . . It’s like an intimate prelude to language, yet foreign to language itself.” “It is,” the character “Roland Barthes” adds, “a privileged (eidetic) site of difference,” the thing that cannot find a voice with which to speak about itself. The voice, adds “Hegel,” sounding a lot like Foreman, “begins as sound, and sound is a state of trembling, an act of oscillation between the consistency of a body and the negation of its cohesion.” Voice, which vexes context in the act of (dis)embodying, “a vibrating singular difference” which hears itself only by keeping silent in an acousmatic (seen but un-cited/un-sited) echo of the Tractatus, is the subject of and subject to representationally dyadic thinking about the incomparably same-but-different space of thinking itself. The way out of dyadic thinking is to dig deeper and in doing so to discover the space of the within space, which is what Nancy does relative to the voice and Foreman does by extruding VOICE as a character from voice, VOICE as the nominal character of voice. Nancy writes: “Voice doesn’t just emerge from an opening but is open in itself, open onto itself. Voice leads onto the voice within it. A voice immediately reveals itself to be a polyphony.”

Foreman’s frequent use of a transparent plexiglass wall, situated where the mythical fourth wall of orthodox (mental) stage representation is, asks what it means to be present and distant, like a voice, like the Voice, and its physical referent the absent but present Orgon—to be imbued with a presence that is distance; to be on the one side or the other of this spectral life, on neither one side nor the other but in the end as well as in the beginning, as distance recedes back into presence itself in the face of all the temptations to be otherwise. Except for the purpose of representation, it is irrelevant whether or not Orgon is under the table. The table is not a placeholder, a place to hold Orgon. The table is, as in Wellman’s plays, an index of something else that redefines or absents the rules of play. Wittgenstein expressed the purpose of the Tractatus as being:

[to] draw a limit to thinking, or rather—not to thinking but to the expression of thoughts: for, in order to draw a limit to thinking, we should have to think both sides of this limit (we should have to be able to think what cannot be thought). (TLP §27)

The missing Orgon is on the other side of the limit of what cannot or can only be thought. Orgon’s under-the-table absence, like Bierce’s and Mr. Williamson’s unaccountable disappearances, restores to us the possibility of not
knowing what disappearance is and so (re)moves the limit. Diamond reminds us that in Wittgenstein’s formulation “‘p and not-p’ is the same sentence as ‘(p and not-p) and q,’ for any sentence, any contradiction is a conjunction ‘containing’ that sentence.” Expectancy is just such a self-contained sentence, in that it sentences the mind to its conventional limit. The sentence “Orgon is here (or not here)” offers proof of nothing but the speaker/auditor’s expectancy of what proof is. As Ionesco after Wittgenstein reminded us, all language is foreign and we lack fluency in our own. If a real human foot fell out of Gogo’s boot, this apparently illogical severance would activate the boot’s tongue in the spectator/auditor’s mind to give voice to the vacancy that is the overturned boot’s condition. Sometimes you have to see what is not there to understand what not being there means. And sometimes you have to see what spoken language purports to be missing to fully understand the vacancy of representation’s conventional claim to capture what seeing is and what is being seen. In this, Wittgenstein, Foreman, and Wellman are Therapeutes.

In Foreman’s Voice-activated plays, theater’s deathless recycling of binaries (representational markers) is extruded and reformed into a plexiglass wall we can visually but not always mentally see through to: the secret codes that are only demonstratively expressed in what is for most viewers a non-representational form of (Hebrew) lettering; atomized and telegraphic language and secret ceremonial acts replete with alien dance and movement that may either be primordial or else entirely invented. Far more difficult than seeing what has been hidden is seeing hiddenness itself—and this is what Foreman citing stage ontology demands. Everything else the stage shows us is just performance behavior, the pathological acting out of what it cannot get its audience or itself to want to understand. Foreman’s stage work recalls Wittgenstein’s philosophical telegraphy, his struggle to make whole that which on some level he preferred and intuitively knew to leave broken like a vessel with only its secret(s) intact. Wittgenstein may have abandoned logical atomism, “the thesis that all meaningful discourse can be analyzed into logically independent elementary propositions, for a view on which analysis leads to systems of logical relations propositions,” but he never really vanquished from his mind the thought fragment or the thought that the oppositional relationship between whole and fragment spoke to the vibrancy of an unsettled state of thinking. Foreman’s own unbalancing act is “a totally polyphonic theater in which all elements work to fragment each other so that the spectator is relatively free from empathy and identification and instead may savor the full ‘playfulness’ of theatrical elements, even though the subject matter of these plays is anguished and aggressive in the extreme.” Foreman’s goal in this “has always been to transcend very ‘painful’ material with the dance of manic theatricality.” Painful theatricality again cites the isomorphic relationship between pain behavior and performance behavior, the pathology of performance.
Like sleepwalkers following their creator’s creatively unconscious lead, Foreman’s characters do not so much experience as ontologize action and speech, carrying hieroglyphic stage miniatures suggestive of tefillin, small black leather boxes containing tefillah, Hebrew Torah prayers written on parchment. One leather box is wound around an upper arm with its leather strap extended down to and around two fingers of the corresponding hand. The other leather strap is wound around the head, as if bandaging a wound, its leather box worn on the forehead like a miner’s lamp illuminating the mind or else focusing the mind’s light. “I’ve reached the point, [Foreman’s “Mind King”] offered—(Lights flash and fade)—where I’m doing too much THINKING about the conclusions of things I’m starting to think about.66 The problem that Foreman and Wellman cite/sight after Wittgenstein is twofold: (1) to stay inside thought-space, resisting performance’s hyper-materialized impulse toward distraction and breaking apart thought into too many things that come to resemble thought less and less; and (2) not to turn thinking into an obsessive-compulsive loop that excludes new thinking as being intrusive, so that the lights that flash (like a new blank page) immediately fade. Fighting “the fascination which forms of expression exert upon us” (BB 27) extends not just language to language as an expression of thought but to the illusion that thought is its own expression, thought thinking itself like a “reswallowed alphabet.”67

The question what kind of activity thinking is is analogous to this: “Where does thinking take place?” We can answer: on paper, in our head, in the mind. None of these statements of locality gives the locality of thinking. The use of all these specifications is correct, but we must not be misled by the similarity of their linguistic form into a false conception of their grammar. (BB 16, 50, 52)

Wittgenstein mainly discusses the unlocatability of pain, a topic that is very much on theater’s mind. We find ourselves alternately looking away from and pointing at the spectacle of a blindness in Oedipus earned as punishment for hubristic thought bearing what Wittgenstein might call a strong “family resemblance” to thought thinking itself, incestuous if only figuratively so. We find ourselves as spectators having “pains in another person’s body,” but, says Wittgenstein, our language for describing such pains is inexact. “We are handicapped in ordinary language by having to describe, say, a tactile sensation by means of terms for physical objects such as the word ‘eye,’ ‘finger,’ etc., when what we want to say does not entail the existence of an eye or finger, etc.” Wittgenstein apparently grew discomfited at the sight of his mentor Russell’s hands as the latter “sat listlessly” in a chair near a lamp, (one imagines) much like the old man in Maeterlinck’s symbolist monodrama The Intruder (1891): “Funny how his hands looked to him [Wittgenstein] under the light, like gloves, so useless and old.”68 In this image
one hears Wittgenstein’s disembodied voice capturing the intonation of intellectual finiteness as handmaiden to physical mortality in Russell (whose philosophical thought he vigorously opposed) and indirectly in himself, the critical disciple as patricide. When his uneasiness over what he perceived to be Russell’s illogicality peaked, Wittgenstein, who had profound issues with his industrialist father Karl, temporarily lost control of both his voice and his hands. In both cases, the philosopher’s body broached his mind with the displaced (already rejected) possibility that thought thinking itself could be(come) psychosomatic.

**Mastro:** Next comes the hard part—(*Tearing up the paper.*)—translate that into general rules of behavior.69

Wittgenstein wrote: “The idea of thinking as a process in the head, in a completely closed space, gives him [the philosopher] something occult” (Z §71). Wittgenstein came to believe that “language is not a representational structure, but a presentational act.”70 Language presents itself to us to be used, to be given life and meaning, so that it can perform its purpose and hear itself speak, not just being spoken. “Language,” Genova says on Wittgenstein’s behalf, “must be seen as a play, a script to be performed.”71 And yet, Wittgenstein continued to make room for an extra-mental reality that avoided capture by the trap of imaginability (discussed in *Philosophical Investigations*) and ultimately withholds itself from performance practice and performance behaviors (and his attendant dislike/distrust of psychology). The more insistent Wittgenstein became that language should speak for itself and not merely represent something else, the more he might embrace Saul Bellow’s observation: “It seems true. Like taking swimming lessons on the kitchen table.”72 The surreal image this statement recalls is less important than the practice it, so to speak, puts on the table for urban-dwellers without consistent access to an actual beach or a pool.73 And so, the activity must be separated from the image that depicts it but not from the language that describes it. Language *is* an activity; ergo, the language-game. Bellow’s analogy reminds us how to read a sentence. Language is the ordinary *made* extraordinary by the philosophical and poetic voice. But, Wittgenstein reminds us, in the process language is asked to act against itself (its representational DNA, as Genova puts it), to occult itself not for its own sake.74 Later Wittgenstein found not only language *as* representation but also language *in* representation to be a difficult proposition to accept. Language is manifold in potential but everywhere finds its limit, even in art—especially in art, even though it is art that potentially is best able to visualize a field of play, a space and a body of rules for the language-game by which language can transcend what Wittgenstein earlier conceived to be its limits. (“A *picture* held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably” [*PI §115*.])75 What sounds like
a chronological evolution of Wittgenstein’s thought was in fact an ebb and flow of his anxious regard for language and language’s anxious regard of us.

MAESTRO: The world itself is the main character, ladies and gentlemen.
And it effectively hypnotizes all of us to achieve its own ends.76

Foreman’s allusive relationship to Wittgenstein has less to do with the head than with the headache, with the pain of the mind wrestling with its unwillingness or incapacity to let the body have its say/way and do its work. Think of all the times in which characters in Foreman’s plays hit or are hit on the head, how often the head or the brain is referenced in his later play titles (ushering in an extended period of critical self-examination), even how often his characters don strange head attire and apparati or brandish decapitated heads resembling and pretending to be their own. A brain rocked so often in its cranial cradle (like the wounded actor’s colliding with the stage-beam) produces a language that is consistently more idiotic (a positive value) than idiomatic (in the sense of sounding contextually real), more repetitive than discursive, more at loose ends but tied into more complicated knots.77 Foreman’s theater stages Wittgenstein’s proposition, “The results of philosophy are the uncovering of one or another piece of plain nonsense and of bumps that the understanding has got by running its head up against the limits of language. They—these bumps—make us see the value of that discovery” (PI §119).

Wittgenstein wrote self-critically that “often my writing is nothing but ‘stuttering’” (CV §18), and his writing presents as “wild and punctuational signs—dashes, quotation marks, exclamation points, diagrams, font variations, demonstrative pronouns (invariably italicized), sentence spacings, spatial and temporal indexes.”78 Foreman’s isomorphic stage-stammering appears as repetitive music loops; Foreman’s own taped omniscient voice; live and dissonant sounds—crashes, thuds, bells; punctuations; sudden flashes of light and light changes; unprovoked spastic dances and quasi-vaudeville physical routines; shifting roles and names that gesture beyond specific dramatic contexts and often replicate the real actors’ names (interrogating the use and meaning of names and naming as in Handke)—using the real names of the actors who first played them or titles instead of names (Madame, Maestro, Voice, Doctor, The Professor, The Child, The Dangerous Man, The Dangerous Woman, The Ballerina, The Disheveled Ballerina, The Angel, or other preexisting characters’ names like Colombine, Pierrot, or even Nietzsche), effectively telling us we are never meant to know who they are, who is speaking, only what they wear and what they do. (Similarly, “the boundary between self and other breaks down in Wittgenstein’s thinking, and the slippage is reflected in the lack of delineation between speakers in the text and positions”);79 unusual/a-contextual props, costumes, and other scenic elements of exaggerated scale—small curtains, small stages, and
small proscenia, along with boxes and magic boxes and their indeterminable contents—Schrödinger’s cat and *mise-en-abyme*, dwarfs, models and miniatures, including phalli; actor-character physical collisions with scenic walls; transparent proscenium (fourth) walls; overlapping dialogue; game-playing; perspectival lines of string stretched across the performance space to connect object to object, person to object, person to person; actors playing actors; actors playing (e.g., commedia dell’arte) masks; actors performing acts of self-inflicted violence; actor-character transvestism and hermaphroditism (sex/gender/subject/object confusion); mirror-imaging (of people, language, scenic elements, and objects) and the illusion of seeing double; people as objects and ideas; actors playing characters playing philosophers; direct audience address; possibly overheard interior monologues and words that appear to be addressed to no one in particular that return the auditor to the grammar of definition. (“‘Thinking’ and ‘talking in the imagination’—I do not say ‘talking to oneself’—are different concepts” [*PI* §246]. “Wittgenstein,” Genova notes, “talks to no one in particular, not even to himself”).

The net effect of all this is to stammer meaning in(to) space through a cacophony of signs—the theatrical synesthesia of the unruly mind at work, as often as not, against itself. Or, as maestro says in *Pearls for Pigs*—“Yes. To the theater of hesitations”—a thought amplified in Foreman’s 2002 play *Maria del Bosco (A Sound Opera: Sex and Racing Cars)*.

Here, another disembodied incarnation of The Voice intones, “Ah, one problem. / There is a solid wall directly in the path / Of the racing car,” again raising the “bumps” inside Wittgenstein’s head. One thinks here of Wittgenstein’s rejection of the false picture of the “outer” (behaviorism, which rejects the “inner” and maintains that “only behavior is knowable”) and the “inner” (the private language argument that someone else’s pain—among other sensations—is always hidden from you) in *Philosophical Investigations*. Or, in Charles Bernstein’s Wittgensteinian paraphrase: “I feel my pain from the inside out, you see it from the outside in.” Bernstein cites a passage from the Robert Creeley poem “Somewhere” to illustrate the action of language to enable seeing, even in the dark. The line reads: “From outside, it must have seemed / a wonder that it was / the inside he as me saw / in the dark there.”

Foreman’s *Benita Canova* (1998), subtitled *Gnostic Eroticism*, is set inside a self-referential bourgeois room in Paris in the 1940s and set off from the audience by a plexiglass wall, as is appropriate given its conflation of Wittgenstein’s and Creeley’s statements of inside-outness. Madame’s charges are three nubile schoolgirls who appear to have stepped out of a Balthus painting—all of them compliant, only Benita less so. The actresses playing the girls are older than their characters, although maybe neither as young nor as old as the girls imagine themselves to be. Madame is herself a “quite well disguised” man in drag, the quotation marks reiterating drag’s own citation-ality and its camp vexing of desire in the play. A yellow Jewish star has been sewn on Benita’s dress either by herself as required in Nazi-occupied Paris
or by one of the other girls, all of whom are forever sewing things to their own and one another’s clothing, especially their underclothing. Benita’s alien (non-)status, whether as an actual or apparent Jewess, complicates her inside/ outside relationship to the plexiglass wall through which a few Hebrew letters “peek out from behind other decorative features.”

“So, she [Benita] says, inside every illusion, she’s imagining vast activity.” Every fourth wall in theater is after all invisible and seen through, but also, as per Wittgenstein, seen as. “If the medium in one makes a hole is in fact a medium that is constituted by nothing real—,” says Madame in a broken-off sentence fragment whose lack of punctuation severs w(hole)ness and reveals theatrical design. “She’s a hole in something,” Benita says of the obstructive Christina, although Madame is quick to point out that there are solid holes and void holes and all are seen (as) according to the contexts in which they appear. Thus, a “void hole” is only void in a solid context. In a void, a void hole is objectlessness without a referent. Being a surveyor of gaps rather than holes, Foreman does not give his characters words with which to fill or deepen these holes. For this, they will have to wait for Wellman, but there is no real expectancy in them. Benita’s schoolgirl tormenters are little fascists, the hands they hold up to prevent Benita from leaving the stage displaying little swastikas and posing the leading, Jew-/spectator-baiting question, “How many of you have never raised your hands?” Betty’s plaint, “Once upon a time, knowing what to do with my hands was no problem,” articulates a nostalgia for performance outside the rule of exception.

Benita’s mental confusion is nominally Madame’s “wonderful catastrophe” (“She’s a hole in something”). Benita’s rejoinder that catastrophe is “an easy word for a much more ambiguous situation” provokes her chief rival “Christina” (the Christian name of the actress who originally played her) to cruelly taunt Benita (Madame’s “little Israelite”) with a thinly disguised reference that is in fact as plain as the nose on Benita’s presumably Semitic face: “(As all the girls surround benita) Oh—look at this, little Benita Canova’s brain’s doing bad things to her facial expression.” “She [it is said of Benita] doesn’t think her facial expression comes in different sizes, because her brain is telling her the size and shape of her facial expression is always indeterminate—and she goes back and forth inside her facial expressions like a hungry animal in deep trouble.” Benita will later violently stab to death a performer in a gorilla suit so as to distinguish herself from it in her tormentors’ anti-Semitic (and perhaps her own self-hating) eyes. Betty explains that the gorilla, “like all magic animals [is] a little confused, maybe because not everybody in this room has the same kind of great-, great-, great-, great-grandmother,” a rationale that recalls Cabaret’s proto-Nazi emcee telling his audience, “if you could see her [a performer impersonating a gorilla wearing a dress] through my eyes / She wouldn’t look Jewish at all.”

“What does a face mean?” one Wellman character asks another, who responds, “A face mean? I don’t understand.” Wittgenstein wrote that
“meaning is a physiognomy” (PI §568), Bernard J. Rhie’s response being that for Wittgenstein, “meaning and mentality are not occult phenomena which accompany the physiognomy of a game, a word, or a face, but are rather directly visible to anyone who cares to look . . . such direct seeing is always a possibility (an everyday occurrence even), not that we can have epistemological certainty with regard to the mental states exhibited by the expressions of others—that, of course, would be patently implausible.” But is the fact that the ordinary shapeliness of the Wittgensteinian proposition makes meaning clear, grammatically speaking, sufficient to justify making rules for what meaning is?

Benita Canova may be a coded reworking of the figure of the Marrano (Spanish for “swine”—Foreman produced this play just months after his play *Pearls for Pigs*), the baptized Jew who despite advertising his conversion to Christianity in the time of the Spanish Inquisition, continued to practice his original faith in private. (Benita herself questions the authenticity of her name.) Here the Marrano has been called a “Crypto-Jew,” in keeping with Foreman’s transplantaing letters from the Hebrew alphabet to his stage settings where they become a-contextually mystical. This publicity of hiddeness is perhaps a riposte to the anti-Semite’s longstanding public assertion that Jews cannot be trusted because theirs is a hidden language. “My thoughts are one hundred percent Hebraic,” Wittgenstein proclaimed later in a life that kept his Jewishness well-hidden and distressed.

Foreman follows Benita’s third-person statement, “Protected by her own private and personal God, she speaks,” with a sudden rapping at the door—actually, three loud knocks, like those that began plays on the Baroque stage and that reintroduce Wittgenstein’s subversion of the idea of expectancy: “What if someone said to me ‘I expect three knocks on the door’ and I replied, ‘How do you know three knocks exist?’” (PR §36). Expectancy as a hidden capacity of language, part of its grammar, one of its rules, is illegible and threatening to the Christian girls whose faith renders belief in the Second Coming transparent. Perhaps, the quintessential Christian girl (Christina) fears the arrival of the Jewish girl’s God as an avenging mystical Unknown, as opposed to Anne Frank’s secular fear of the actual knock on the door that will take her away. Presumptively Christian Betty tells Benita, “I don’t think a God without even a face offers anybody much protection.” Indeed, the ancient Hebrew God does not have a face or even bear a name that can be fully spelled out or spoken. Blanks are left to indicate the letters that must remain unvoiced and invisible. This, as Christina, protests, “is not part of my fucking reality,” to which Benita responds, “so for that reason, start filling in the blanks!” The language-game being played here resembles the child’s game of H-A-N-G-M-A-N, in which each failure to fill in a blank with a letter literally draws you closer to a picture of some figure of death. In some cases, meaning may well be a physiognomy we prefer not to see.
MADAME: Dear Benita Canova, do you really think your ancient and venerable God is speaking to you from the inside of a world from which he himself has totally withdrawn? Oh—leaving hints of things, of course. But his withdrawal being, you understand, just another make-believe adventure—like your own make-believe adventure.97

The Jewish Kabbalist Isaac Luria (1534–1572) believed God withdrew from the world into Himself (tsimtsum) to “make possible the existence of something other than God and His pure essence.”98 The tsimtsum being both a self-banishing and a self-limitation (as well as a with-drawing, THE H-A-N-G-M-A-N notes) on our behalf, we are left to draw ourselves in our own light or to withdraw into the dark (t)here—in either case to self-represent. Another part of Luria’s new Kabbalist symbology was “the breaking of the vessels” (the shevirah), which, like the breaking of character and of the Hebrew alphabet, means that “everything is in some way broken, everything has a flaw, everything is unfinished.”99 Gershom Scholem refers to this constellation of negative pieces of brokenness as a “gnostic paradox,” particularly in that it defines “exile as an element in God himself.”100 Benita Canova, subtitled inside parentheses that clarify the motive of hiddenness “(Gnostic Eroticism),” offers up the passion of the primordial broken vessel of the God who cannot be embodied and whose name must not be fully spelled or spoken. It is a sentiment that self-encrypted/-encrypting Wittgenstein transformed into the secular grammatical proposition, “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent” (PI §7). In the end, though, Wittgenstein and Foreman may be trying to express the hiddenness of the “something than which nothing greater can be conceived,” larger still than Handke’s “section of a room that is even larger than the large stage.”101 In this light, which world is everything that is the case?

Benita Canova is someone who has been found out, but not found out entirely, not only because she has not been entirely hidden but because it is not her hiddenness that is finally at issue. Madame refers to Benita’s “so-called theoretical invisibility,” which alerts us to the intellectual benightedness of our conceptual design. Benita will not talk about herself except in the third person, as others see her, as a cipher (“Cipher, cipher, who’s got the cipher?”), a nonentity.102 Benita is thought guilty and guilty of thought only insofar as she projects “the image of a mind so ravished.” To Benita’s statement of third-person self-laceration, Madame responds rhetorically with, “You see how advantageous it would have been if the little Israelite had simply remained silent?”103 Silent or unknown? To Madame’s goading Benita to “explain with a suitably Hebraic complexification,” she responds, as might Foreman, “It was a trick,” and asked to dig deeper for an explanation, turns this “trick” into “a momentarily effective [self-critical] illusion.”104

Foreman’s voice speaks of “an elsewhere that is always now,” which is only nominally an echo or pre-echo of the world we already know, and this
accounts for its lack of presentness. (“There is no illusion of presentness to
the audience, only the diachronic and diatropic envisioning of a duration
estranged from us so that we can see it.”) Presentness is dissolved in a dif-
terence that neither mirrors nor analogizes to but instead estranges us from
the nominally eventful moment while thrusting us into some other durative
moment of uncertain and unknown provenance (e.g., anxiety, catastrophe).
Consider here the dangerous gift (in Madame’s estimation) that Benita Canova
cannot resist opening at play’s end. The meaning of this parting gift migrates
back to the birthday gift that Anne Frank cannot resist opening at the begin-
ning of her diary. The gift is in fact the very diary that we are in this moment
just beginning to read in its entirety, that is, in its future form of completion.
If we substitute for “gift” the word “present,” we introduce another level of
meaning expressed by Foreman in another of his plays: “Resist the present.
/ Resist the present.” Are we being cautioned against expectancy, the cata-
strophic rehearsal of the end in the present’s unlocatability?

Wittgenstein writes, “Where does the present go when it becomes past,
and where is the past?” (BB 107), and Diamond explains:

Wittgenstein seems to be committed to the idea that our forms of
expression are not answerable to any facts because there are none of
them to be answerable to. . . . The unchangeable character of the past
cannot explain why we cannot have the very same noise twice, since
there is no fact of irrevocability capable of playing such an explana-
tory role. But the absence of certain kinds of facts itself does play an
explanatory role in this account.  

Expectancy is here tied not to the coming of the event or even of its com-
ing again (to paraphrase the Judeo-Christian dialectic glimpsed in Benita
Canova). It is rather what we can expect to say in certain sentences that
holds true according to the logical laws of expression. A fact does not, says
Wittgenstein, make a form of expression right or wrong, any more than a
logical form of expression can make something into a fact, although it can
make something appear to be true based upon the structure of the thought it
conveys. Wittgenstein, says Diamond, asks, “What would go wrong if our
form of expression were different?” “What would be wrong if we recognized
different logical laws?”

**BETTY** (TO **BENITA**): You don’t have enough character flaws to keep
anybody interested for ten minutes even.

Benita Canova is, in effect, the hole or broken vessel from which all the
voices inside of Foreman’s voicebox project the variableness of meaning in the
mystical ordinariness of the world, as per Wittgenstein. After receiving a gold
medallion “with all the forbidden letters of the alphabet embossed on one
side” from the human-sized, gloved gorilla, Madame is moved to ask, “Is my own name discoverable amongst these grotesque letters?” “Benita Canova,” says Madame, and Benita, looking at the gorilla, responds, “Her real name? I don’t think so.” Since Madame, who has been speaking to their (Madame’s and Benita’s) resemblance, puts Benita’s name in quotation marks and Benita continues to speak of herself in the third person, a certain self-similarity is being broached, a resemblance that Benita anxiously tells Madame, “should not be made in public” (in performance or as performance behavior?).110

Turning the medallion over and holding it up to a mirror (upon which liveness breathes and artistic representation reflects), Madame sees that it (the medallion) is empty, unwritten upon on the other side, whereupon she is “tumbled by a wave of intellectual emotion . . . —as I realized that nothingness reversed—induced in me a range of possibilities—I had not the means to articulate myself.”111 Madame’s syncope is another isomorph of Foreman’s theatrical aporia, “the [public] expression of a simulated or real doubt, as about where to begin or what to do or say.”112 Madame regards Benita as a solid hole (a real simulation?), which Madame acknowledges on Foreman’s behalf is a mind-boggling thought and (a) theatrical conceit.

Theater is in fact nothing real, falsely doubled, but only if it is seen as continuum and not as overlay as in Orgon’s disappearing act. Madame simulates chasing Benita Canova around what is essentially Orgon’s table, which has by now taken on its Wellman-articulated other meaning as a field. The female-actor-as-female-character Madame loses her wig (and the audience its presuppositions) during the chase, so fervently desiring is s/he to fill the self-acknowledged hole in her own/Benita’s meta/physical understanding. We see now Madame’s bald head, a phallic foreshadowing of the life-sized reduction (the actor’s member) that will soon appear to jump the gap between ontological and phenomenological purpose.

Benita is now (but not quite in the present) running in the place of running in place as Elmire but also as herself and as Madame. Like short-term amnesiac Leonard Shelby pursuing/pursued by an unreal, unlocatable past, she cries for help where there is nothing—no real past, except as rehearsal of its own performance, no liveness when and where the past cannot be. There is no outside to Madame that does not also contain Benita and no inside that is not performed as thought thinking itself. Foreman’s metaphysical vaudeville slips its wig in order to reveal a split, racing, and self-doubting mind acting out its own thought-behavior as generative condition and as cure.