Incapacity

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Chapter 8

The Idiot’s Anxiety at the Object’s Disappearance

Language enjoys certain options on the surface, but deeper down it is founded on the intrinsic nature of objects, which is not our creation but is set over against us in mysterious independence.

—David Pears, The False Prison: A Study of the Development of Wittgenstein’s Philosophy

The conception of philosophy that would attempt to address and undo a disposition to see a problem where there is none may be thought to liken a philosophical problem to a psychosomatic illness; the distress is real, but the source of the problem has been displaced by a fiction, a ghostly body-double.

—James Wetzel, “Wittgenstein’s Augustine: The Inauguration of the Later Philosophy” in Augustine and Philosophy

In the opening comedy routine of The Colgate Comedy Hour (September 17, 1950), which they headlined, Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis are hired to entertain at a psychiatrists’ conference while lying down on an analyst’s couch. Quickly realizing that Dean can’t sing and Jerry can’t joke in this position, the duo win over the psychiatrists by turning their statement of being “well-adjusted” into a musical number that culminates in the comedy team’s being pushed out in front of a quickly closing theatrical curtain, the previous act having been a curtain raiser. Jerry proceeds to perform his standard mock-juvenile maladjustment shtick, replete with grammatical errors, which his figuratively older brother Dean corrects at every turn. The non-performance of the comedian on the psychiatrist’s couch articulates the commonly held belief that analyzing comedy is counterproductive. It is better not to know how and why it works. What we begin with here, then, is a negative or counter-episteme, the not-knowingness of comic enactment as another form of incapacity-as-performance behavior.
In considering what he calls “The Proposition and Its Sense,” Wittgenstein writes, “The notion that we can only imperfectly exhibit our understanding: the expression of understanding has something missing that is essentially inexpressible. But in that case it makes no sense to speak of a more complete expression” (PG §6). In an Italian food sketch, Lewis conversationally transforms “ravioli” into “rivoli.” When Martin tells him the latter is a theater, Lewis responds, “No wonder I couldn’t digest it, what with the ushers and the balcony and the marquee was the toughest part of all.” The indigestible object of performance (the thing whose architecture hopes to remain invisible, like the mechanics of comedy and the psyche of the comedian) is made evident by the grammatical one-off “ravioli/rivoli.” The reappearance of the one-off signals illogical severance and neological recombination (e.g., architectural consumption), recalling George Pitcher’s observation that “[Wittgenstein] uses [nonsense] like a vaccine that cures us of itself.”

Martin and Lewis speak directly to this theme in another sketch in which Dean’s non-receiving receiver (his TV is on the blink) summons Jerry’s “friendly TV repairman” (who came to “defuzz” the television) whose intrusive behavior compels Dean to leave the premises, complaining loudly that he (Martin) “can’t even watch a house in my own home.” This expression of comic exasperation is another one-off, alerting us to the “fishiness” of a word or sentence we assume we understand but sense we may not—“fishy,” like the which-of-these-objects-does-not-belong test the psychiatrist administered to Jack in *Funny Bones* and the one-off responses Jack provided. Lewis, doubling as the TV pitchman advertising (television) repair who then sends himself through the doubled TV set on the constructed TV comedy set, represents intrusive thought advertising its own obsession through enactment (a possible definition of performance behavior as pathology).

The exposure of the inadequate spacing in the redoubling (tessellating) non/sense highlights the limit-world of performance as a behavioral mechanism. Lewis’s ability to move from one position within this *mise-en-abyme* to another is only possible inside performance as a language-game. Tessellating performance patterns (mirroring those on analog TV screens) speak to philosophy’s “comic repetitions” and to the infinite regress of space and time that is vested inside objects and our perception of them rather than inside states of consciousness. The clumsiness/noisiness of Lewis’s transport from TV to its conceptually extruded set(ting) advertises the labor of the task and the “live” medium’s inability to hide how the trick is done. It is an embarrassed performance, which is what performance becomes when it forsakes anonymity. Of course, none of this is possible without the viewer’s own TV set, rendered self-referential in 1954 (the year the self-referential *Rear Window* and *Dial “M” for Murder* were both released), that provokes and mediates everything that comes through it. Contra Kant, Wittgenstein believed that “objects, not human beings, supply the form which render state of affairs, content, possible” and that “the representations which Kant had
thought a function of consciousness are for Wittgenstein produced by the blending of objects to form states of affairs.” 3 Martin and Lewis’s TV characters tessellate their comic personae, occupying the same spaces they do. The Colgate Comedy Hour Starring Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis bespeaks identity while advertising the fact that it is bespoken, the branding of authenticity making it disappear as a visible criterion. Testing various positions to improve TV reception, Martin ends up standing in his (fake) fireplace with his head cut off from view. The scene, which began with Jerry as a TV talking head, transforms Dean, the original TV receiver (i.e., its audience), into a non-head talking while holding the means of its own reception, the Wittgensteinian virtual depth of the grammatical joke. The medium’s message is self-curated in the form of psychosomatic reception.

Logically, the comic representation of this televised mise en abyme (a TV set on a TV set in a TV set) cannot cure us of what we want to see pictured anymore than Wittgenstein can ultimately cure philosophy of what he regarded as being its obfuscating (fuzzing) of logic and common sense. And yet there is something to be discovered in the nesting of televisual realities that speaks to both the nature and the scale of perception as it troubled the mind of Wittgenstein, whose life led him to inhabit ever smaller and more spartan physical spaces. In Zettel (§214), he writes: “Experience of the real size. We see a picture showing a chair-shape; we are told it represents a construction the size of a house. Now we see it differently.” With this in mind, Martin’s complaint that “I can’t even watch a house in my own home,” represents not so much a nonsensical statement as a shift to the “seeing as” state that Wittgenstein so famously described in Philosophical Investigations in terms that purposely straddle the line between sense and nonsense, or at least between certainty and uncertainty: “ ‘Seeing as . . . ’ is not part of perception. And therefore it is like seeing, and again not like seeing” (PI §137). “Seeing as” is a form of “aspect seeing” that speaks to the idea of the particular. Joining the talking non-head Dean Martin, the medium for reception of language’s transmission inside the fake intimacy of his theatrical house/home, Wittgenstein observes:

> It is as if at first we looked at a picture so as to enter into it and the objects in it surrounded us like real ones; and then we stepped back and we were now outside it; we saw the frame, and the picture was a painted surface. In this way, when we intend, we are surrounded by our intention’s pictures, and we are inside them . . . When we intend, we exist in the space of intention, among the pictures (shadows) of intention as well as with real things. (Z §233)

That is, in this particular context, having sought to enter into the reality of the televisual world to the exclusion of the real one (actually affecting a reality shift from one meaning of “TV set” to another), Martin loses sight of what it means to have an actual house except in the mode of watching (“I can’t even
watch a house in my own home”), of mediated visuality, a set that is more particular to a stage than to a TV that has merely scaled the stage to fit the dimensions of its twice-mediated reality. It is the stage set whose picture is painted (we see the painted interior wall of the room in the house shake when the door in the wall is closed, asserting the set’s staginess), but it is the metonymic presence of the TV set on the stage that allows us via Martin to enter the picture and allows the picture via Lewis to enter our house(s). “When we intend, we exist in the space of intention, among the pictures (shadows) of intention as well as with real things.” When we watch Lewis’s pitchman’s shadow reflected on a fake wall inside the TV set Martin is watching, we see Martin’s (i.e., the viewer’s) solipsism (he is oblivious to his wife and child while watching TV) that sees no context outside of its own mental image.

The sketch culminates with Martin destroying his TV set with the fireplace poker (unintentionally recalling an oft-told anecdote concerning Wittgenstein, rival philosopher Karl Popper, and a poker attack). Lewis’s materializing as a junk man to cart away the TV set, summoned only by the on-set spoken word “junk,” advertises the dematerialization of the alleged mechanism of transmission. In the process, liveness in the form of Wittgenstein’s ordinary language appearing here as “junk” is extracted from the corpse of the disappeared object whose intrusiveness was rendered self-referential in the self-advertising interruptions supporting its programming. This liveness returns us to the stage, or rather to the larger set that recalls the mediated reality of the stage.

Sinkhole, or Disingenuity

Every attempt to dislodge ingenuousness from the universe is in vain. Because, in a word, there is nothing other than sublime ingenuousness, that is to say, reality.

—Jose Ortega y Gasset, “Preface for Germans” in Phenomenology and Art

JERRY: I can do a lot of things.
DEAN: For instance, what can you do?

[Jerry lurches through the space as if looking for something to do, in a manner that resembles looking for an exit, an exit from the burden of deciding what to do. In the process he manages to touch the back of one chair.]

DEAN: Is this what you can do?
JERRY: That’s about it, yeah.

—Martin and Lewis Colgate Comedy Hour
Amid general laughter, Ted Rogers (Jerry Lewis) in the eponymous role of the stooge or audience plant (*The Stooge*; dir. Norman Taurog, 1952), says to his partner Bill Miller (Dean Martin) with naïf-like but comic sincerity, “Hope you’re satisfied with the way you embarrassed me in front of everybody. Look, the whole audience is staring at me.” Bill tells Ted, “Stare back at them,” which Ted does, crossing his eyes in an out-of-perspective look prompting Bill to add in an unconscious appropriation of Ted’s (i.e., Lewis’s) show business Yiddish grammar, “No, better they [should] stare at you.” It is the idiot’s role in life to be painfully embarrassed by behavior he is compelled to perform in front of an audience he cannot help but see, because he is (in) it. And it is this which allows the idiot to play the theatrical “stooge” as a form of public confession. This idiocy-performed-as-stoogeness is its own form of solipsism, mirroring Bill’s who wants the spotlight to himself (he reads *Spotlight* celebrity magazine) and for the stooge’s identity to remain anonymous, Bill says, for the good of the act. When Bill and the (self-)infantilized “kid” hit the big time, the marquee reads: BILL MILLER AND HIS ACCORDION. Ted is not only the missing subject (the silent partner of accord), he is its hidden object concealed inside the instrumentalism of performance, the unknowing on which its success depends. (Ted only becomes a literal marquee name after upstaging his partner with the stage’s in/capacity to go in and out of light and darkness, enclosure and disclosure by taking control of its mechanism.) The prefigured spotlight’s ultimate extrusion of function (acknowledged performance) from name (in the print media) and figure (co-star) from ground (audience), for the purpose of achieving a disingenuous happy ending (resolution), cannot remove the hiddenness of the object, its continued disappearance into the anxiety of its not-knowing (irresolution).

The film shows us in numerous lower-case moments how painfully difficult it is for the idiot to navigate the incapacitating spotlight of his self-irreconcilability. The key scene in this regard transpires on board a train taking Bill and his still unknowing/unknown stooge out on the road. This is Ted’s first overnight train ride, so even the simplest tasks become impossible for him to perform. Ted is sitting on the lower sleeping berth of the team’s train compartment eating a whole carrot in his pajamas (to paraphrase Groucho Marx’s famously disingenuous not-knowing line, “I once ate a carrot in my pajamas, how it got in my pajamas, I’ll never know”). When Bill asks him if he eats a carrot every night before bedtime, Ted says that he eats “lots of carrots,” because “they’re good for the eyes” and then asks rhetorically, “Did you ever see a rabbit with glasses?” In the informal split screen shot that follows (the Wittgensteinian duck-rabbit that can only in this case be simultaneously seen), we see Bill at the pull-down bathroom sink preparing to brush his teeth. He lowers the sink from its recessed space in the wall and pushes the sink back up into its wall opening when he is done, leaving the actual brushing unseen because it is (disingenuously) not relevant to what happens next. Ted goes into the bathroom to brush his teeth, but he cannot
find the sink anywhere, that “anywhere” indicated by Ted’s turning around in circles (a version of Lewis’s anxiety dance) in a vain attempt to pick out the sink from the place where it is apparently hiding, because, even with his carrot-enhanced vision, he cannot see it.

“Did you ever see a duck-rabbit?” Wittgenstein asks, sounding like a stand-up comedian. “What I properly see must surely be what is produced in me by influence of the object,” Wittgenstein’s interlocutor tells him. To this, Wittgenstein responds (the italics in this case are mine), “In that case what is produced in me is something like a copy, something that one can oneself in turn look at, have before him. Almost something like a materialization” (RPPI §1075). Seeing, then, is an aspect of staging. We see what we often fail to acknowledge is a copy of the object and not the object itself, which hides in plain sight in our field of vision. Conscious staging, as in performance, acknowledges this fact, and from this acknowledgment is constituted the idea of an audience that consciously sees what seeing looks like when it is materialized. The idiot cannot separate figure from ground, a reverse prefiguring of his own separation as figure (stooge) from ground (audience). He disingenuously performs the embarrassment of being seen by an audience that he materialized via his acknowledgment of not seeing the thing that is right before his eyes. In this, he resembles a blind man who has been taken to view a performance. The idiot is, in fact, meaning-blind. He not only does not see, he does not feel “that the experience of the meaning [of ‘seeing’] took place while [he was] hearing the word [e.g., ‘sink’]” (RPPI §202).

It would be as if someone were looking for some object in a room; he opens a drawer and does not see it there; then he closes it again, waits, and opens it once more to see if perhaps it isn’t there now, and keeps on like that. He has not learned to look for things. (OC §315)

What follows is a dramatization of idiot logic, a sort of magical thinking to whose humiliation I can attest. This discussion takes up the thread begun in “Wittgenstein’s Anatomy” regarding what I call the “polysem(ous) y perverse” way of seeing that is given the idiot as relates to language, here including the language of (the hiddenness of) objects. Ted runs to Bill screaming, “There’re crooks on the train.” When Bill attempts a logical intervention (“No one ever taught me that my hands don’t disappear when I am not paying attention to them [—I just know that they don’t”] [OC §153]), Ted responds with his own peculiar logic: “Well, somebody stole the sink.” Bill’s response—“Take it easy. All you do is press the bottom, pull the handle, and it’s there”—sounds no less magical, no less unreachable to Ted than the non-hiddenness of the sinkhole which disappeared logic into itself.

Even when the idiot grasps the logical premise, he fails at follow-through, or in film terms, at continuity. This is demonstrated later in the same scene when Bill tells Ted that he need only pull a switch down to turn off a light
on the wall alongside his sleeping berth. Although Ted is able to do this, he is unable to turn off the light on the other side of his bed. When he finally “solves” the problem by placing one of his socks over the light (effectively changing the problem with his solution), he turns the sock around until the large hole in it is facing him. His mind’s speculative eye/I is still following the hidden sink in its doubly recessed hole-ness in response to some self-administered psycho-optometric test. The idiot’s re-solution (an approximate solution to a question that functions in his mind like a moving target) allows the one uncovered part of the light to shine directly in his eye, spotlighting it and irising in on Ted’s establishing action in the scene of eating lots of carrots to improve his eyesight. The arc of the scene reveals this self-monitoring optical design, the stooge whose performance is defined as being of the audience, in terms of his performance behavior, is the audience and, as such, the source of his own embarrassment as self-serving emploi. In what one supposes is a bit of unintentional irony, the first light that Ted, following Bill’s simple instructions, did manage to turn off is later seen to be on again, as if lit of its own accord, indicating a failure in the film’s continuity, but also perhaps the hiddenness of Ted’s performance behavior brought to light.

By following Bill’s instructions (pressing here and pulling there), Ted is able to lower the bathroom sink down from the wall, or, in idiot’s terms, to make the sink (re)appear and, in the process, expose its hiding place. However, when Ted momentarily lets go of the sink in order to roll up his sleeves, it naturally pops back up and into its wall space. Like the hidden doors in *The Way of the World*, the object-to-wall (figure-ground) relationship only appears when it is in use. When the logic of use is violated, the object recedes back into some indistinguishable amalgam of what it is and what it does. Ted is incapacitated not by an object per se but by an object analogy, by his unconscious efforts to view the mental object (his obsessive thought or thinking) as a physical object in a pictorial context. The overfamiliarity of the object, the sink, and the obsessiveness of the idiot’s thought process share a redundancy that renders meaning obtuse in the Barthesian sense of ridiculously counter-analytic, punning, joking, disarticulated, unseen—a signifier [‘sink’] without signified [a sink].” Barthes’s likening of the obtuse meaning to “a kind of gash” that counters narrative (“obtuse meaning can proceed only by appearing and disappearing”) recalls an actor with a permanent head wound. The word “idiot” derives from the Greek idios, which refers to “one’s own” or “private,” nudging the idea of the idiolect, my name for the Barthesian “obtuse meaning [that] is outside (articulated) language, but still within interlocution,” into the debate with Wittgenstein over whether or not such a thing as a private language can be seen (public show being its inherent dissolution).8

Lewis’s self-conscious enactment of Ted’s dilemma renders incapacity as performance behavior that envisions an audience no more visible than the hidden sink, but affirming what the sink withholds. The failed inspection of the physical object is superseded by the idiot’s unspoken capacity
for introspection, dis/ingenuously presented. Gary L. Hagberg writes: “To inspect, we think, we need an object; to introspect, we consequently think, we need an object of another kind. And that object, if we are puzzled about, or indeed mystified by, the nature of the self, will be separated from the physical or the material, and the sense of mystery will be heightened as the separation proceeds.” Lewis uses the disappearing sink to make a show of the subject’s self-mystification and of the self’s mystification as a hidden mental object. Like the Martin and Lewis sketch in which the TV set/screen is watched by and is watching the (split) subject resulting in a comedy of inter-injection/interjection, the disappearing sink and Lewis’s reaction to it cites the impossibility of “perceiving or observing our own consciousness” as anything other than a myth or fiction, a false show that we enter into like a picture that can be seen as being outside ourselves. In the process, Wittgenstein’s “mysterious ‘I’” is transformed into a so-called mysterious eye that sees and un-sees with equal strangeness/estrangement.

Ted’s illogical solution to the sinkhole problem is to insert his entire head into the space created when he pulls the sink back down from the wall. By doing this, Ted not only inadvertently turns on the faucets at their highest intensity level, but his head gets caught between the wall and the sink, transforming Ted himself into a wall component, the object’s object by definition, a cautionary tale of the possessor repossessed. Ted is unfamiliar with Heidegger’s explanation: “The peculiarity of what is proximally ready-to-hand means that, in terms of an entity being a piece of equipment, its ‘thingness’ must, as it were, withdraw in order for it to be ready-to-hand in an authentic way.” That is, “tools are not meant for looking at, since we usually just silently rely on them.” This is a serious proposition with comic consequences that can be readily foreseen, as it recurs in The Ladies Man (dir. Jerry Lewis, 1961), where Lewis washes his face with his glasses on and is drenched by a sight-antagonized sink. The persistently bespectacled idiot (forever monitored by and monitoring his own embarrassment) shares the philosopher’s incapacity as Wittgenstein described it: “The [insistently retentive] idea is like a pair of glasses on our nose through which we see whatever we look at. It never occurs to us to take them off” (PI § 103). Cora Diamond adds: “In Wittgenstein’s use of the image, the philosopher who takes himself to be wearing irremovable glasses does not take these to be distorting his view. The ‘glasses’ here are the underlying logical order of all thought, the philosopher, the author of the Tractatus.”

How do I know that this train of thought has led me to this action? (PI §490)

Representation inherently responds to the otherness of the object when it is here and the memory of its physical properties and components when it is not rather than allowing the viewer to become absorbed with (although not
by) the object’s self-absorption even when it is said and believed to be present. This being said, what makes the object’s disappearance comic in the case of Lewis and the sinkhole is twofold. First, the object performs its use-function for Martin, but not for Lewis. Second, Lewis’s reaction to the sink’s absence is to puzzle out a number of ever more complicated ways to address the fact of simple disappearance that spotlight a self-confessed incapacity (incapacity always being self-confessed in the doing and undoing), the evidence of his thought process being executed, as in illogically shooting itself in the head. I should acknowledge here what Nancy calls “the prestige of absence,” referring to “the representation of the thing in its absence.” “Usually,” Nancy writes, “we take it to mean ‘while the thing is absent, it is elsewhere.’ But what if we were to understand: the presentation of a thing within its absence, going to the heart of this absence, penetrating into, and abandoning itself unto the infinite hollow of presence whence presence comes.” Nancy has in mind image and by image, imagination. Unlike the comic performer, the philosopher must burrow into absence as a concept so as to deepen its meaning beyond that of image, representational sign, to comprehend the fullness of its abandonment of meanings that cleave to the external and exteriority of the subject’s view(ing) of it. In the process this deepens our sense of incapacity to mean something beyond what the physical evidence tells us we cannot see (visually or in the sense of understand) or do.

The proposition “The signature vexation of anxiety is that it is objectless” is openly disputed. Kierkegaard claimed that anxiety is obsessed with the object and cannot look away; fear produces a desire that anxiety, in a sense, advertises. Lacan asserted that “anxiety is not without an object,” “what was lacking, a void, has emerged, so that paradoxically, with anxiety, it is the void itself that is no longer missing or hidden. The void asserts itself as a Thing!” (a figuration of the sinkhole). Joan Copjec adds that “anxiety is precipitated by an encounter with an object of a level of certainty superior to that of any object of fact, to any actual object.” As we see ourselves proscenium-framing this inner darkness our mind begins to whistle “There’s no business like show business” not so much to keep us unafraid as to keep our head in the game.

Wittgenstein’s Complaint

How can the non-occurrence of an experience in hearing the word hinder our calculating with words, or influence it?

—Wittgenstein (RPPI §171)

No reason can be given for the phenomenon that language-games are played, for all distinctions are given within the language-game.

—Ingvar Horgby (paraphrase of Wittgenstein)
Meaning comprehension, like reading comprehension, is never instantaneous owing to a mental process in which individual word-and-sentence-meaning is overwritten by a surplus of possible thought-as-form-meanings. This is a conceptual problem akin to Wittgenstein’s exposure of the fallacy that “the sense of a sentence is composed of its individual words. (The group-picture.).” If this were true, he argues, “how is, e.g., the sense ‘I still haven’t seen him yet’ composed of the meanings of the words?” (RPPI §327). Here is an example of how this works. Not long ago I visited a psychiatrist who specializes in the treatment of anxiety disorders. Upon arrival, I immediately checked in with the receptionist and took a seat in the waiting room, where there were already other people sitting and pretending to leaf through magazines while waiting to be seen in a state of not-wanting-to-be-seen. One by one their names were called and they proceeded past the checkpoint at the front desk and into the inner sanctum of the doctor’s office. Finally, I was the only one left in the waiting room and after what I thought was a long time I approached the front desk and asked the receptionist how much longer I would need to wait before being seen by the doctor. “Oh, he has left for the day,” she said. “I still haven’t seen him yet,” I gasped. “Did you check in at the front desk?” she asked. “Well, of course I did. Don’t you remember me?” (Don’t you know that I am an OCD checker?) She just stared into space. Somehow, in the course of waiting and keeping my anxiety in check, the memory of the receptionist had been magically erased. My possible complicity in this disappearance has only now become apparent to me. The receptionist might have heard my statement “I still haven’t seen him yet” not to mean that I had been waiting too long to see (still hadn’t seen) the doctor but instead to mean that I could not yet see the doctor, in that I still needed to wait. Why (else) say “still” and “yet” when either “still” or “yet” would do? Does anxiety reveal itself and even revel in purposeful redundancy that conveys and transmits “meaning-blindness” (RPPI §202)?

I had come to see the doctor because I was anxious. He was, in a sense, there because I am anxious. The vanishing agent could see this, so what need would she have to see further? “Yes, ‘still’ and ‘yet,’ I can see that you are anxious. Please take a seat and wait,” I imagine her sentence-meaning to say. “But waiting makes me anxious,” my “still” and “yet” insist, repeating myself. “The doctor will see you shortly,” she near-repeats in kind. “But I still haven’t seen him yet.” “Yes, I’ve already heard you say this. You can see this, right?” “Yes,” I say, still somewhat confused by what she means by “see,” and take a seat. I am now waiting, it would appear, only for the vanishing agent to wipe clean all memory of my having been there waiting in the first place, that place having effectively shifted from where it was before in the negotiated process of mutual misreading. It appeared as if the doctor had disappeared in the course of a meaning shift that articulated a time-change. Having arrived, I thought, too early to see him, I had in fact arrived too late at an understanding of what it would take to be seen by him.16
Can one keep hold of the understanding of a meaning, as one can keep hold of a mental image? So if a meaning of the word suddenly strikes me—can it also stand still before my mind? (RPPI §251)

My astonishment at what transpired inside the psychiatrist’s waiting room proved that I did not know my way about it in Wittgenstein’s construction (RPPI §295). I could not hold a mental image of this room still inside my mind, or else of myself waiting inside it without risking a mise-en-abyme scenario, which I did not want but into which I am all too willing to enter—mise-en-abyme being an obsessive-compulsive figure, after all, and a solipsistic one besides.

For the solipsist, it is not merely the case that he believes that his thoughts, experiences, and emotions are, as a matter of contingent fact, the only thoughts, experiences, and emotions. Rather, the solipsist can attach no meaning to the supposition that there could be thoughts, experiences, and emotions other than his own.17

I was, of course, familiar with waiting, but not with this particular iteration of waiting. “Someone says, perhaps in a language lesson, ‘Let us talk about the word ‘still,’” and I ask, “Do you mean the noun, adjective, or the verb?” (RPPI §359). There is that “thirdness” again. In the case I have cited, it was not precisely word-meaning that went awry, though, but what Wittgenstein called “the range of similar psychological phenomena which in general have nothing to do with word-meaning” (RPPI §358), which to me describes without directly citing the field of anxiety-induced distraction.

Introspection can never lead to definition. It can only lead to a psychological statement about the introspector . . . the essence of understanding [lying] in [the correct use of the word “understand”] and not in what they may say about what they experience. (RPPI §212)

It is important to confess here that Wittgenstein’s therapeutic philosophy will not countenance the full measure of my complaint, as one might expect of an approach that pursues its own agency. Wittgenstein offers what appears to be a direct caution:

Don’t put the phenomenon in the wrong drawer. There it looks ghostly, intangible, uncanny. Looking at it rightly, we no more think of its intangibility than we do of time’s intangibility when we hear: “It’s time for dinner.” (Disquiet from an ill-fitting classification.) (RPPI §380)

Of course, Wittgenstein, who practiced usefulness and clarity in principle, was himself a notorious purveyor of “ill-fitting classification,” as well as of a
“concept of . . . perspicuous representation [that] is not itself perspicuous,” in that it is “introduced [in PI §122] with minimal clarification and without a single example.” Furthermore the “disquiet” in his writing birthed a philosophical doppelgänger in the form of an unnamed interlocutor “who is genuinely in torment,” caught as he is (and we are) in the “disquieting” form in which philosophy speaks its own representational language—a language to which Wittgenstein cannot help to contribute even while seeking to destroy it. For Wittgenstein, “the philosophical problem is not simply the source or object of such torment or anxiety, the problem is the anxiety.” Wittgenstein’s therapeutic philosophy nominally sought to treat this anxiety via a sort of “talking cure,” but Wittgenstein himself certainly sensed that the clarity to which such treatment could lead might in fact leave an emptiness where philosophy had been. Call this expressed desire to stop that which one refrains from stopping “Wittgenstein’s Complaint.” It is for me an obsessive-compulsive performance behavior that has previously gone undiagnosed in Wittgenstein’s therapeutic philosophy.

Signpost

Bloch dropped in the cards. The empty mailbox was so tiny that nothing could resound in there. Anyway, Bloch had walked away immediately.

—Handke, The Goalie’s Anxiety at the Penalty Kick

When Jerry Lewis as Dr. Julius Kelp in The Nutty Professor (1963) goes to post a letter in a mailbox on the street, there is (he finds but does not acknowledge) a trash can of the same size and with the same deposit slot standing alongside it. The OCD mind grows anxious as Lewis approaches the two receptacles:

Anxious because a mailbox of this sort demands certainty from the subject that what he deposits and cannot retrieve is what he thinks it to be. [“Altogether he found everything alike: all things reminded him of each other.”]

Anxious that the two receptacles and their functions will not be confused resulting in the consignment of the letter to the dead letter trashbin [“Next to it there was a music box: only when he gave it a second look did Bloch recognize it as a contribution box for some charity.”] In the case of either receptacle deposit, the letter will be effectively consumed and with it the correspondence between the two receptacles and their functions, although not the OCD mind’s self-consumption in a seemingly endless looping of thought that continues even after he walks away from the two receptacles (predictive and retrospective anxiety being two parts of the same mental object, which is to worry oneself to death, both figuratively and chronologically speaking).
Anxious that the presence of the similar-but-different objects standing alongside each other are both really there and not actually one object expressing its dual intentionality invisible to the untrained subject's mind's eye. This duality is the object-world's autonomously conceived echo (and maybe the director's conscious symbolic representation) of the subject's predicament of being two men in one—Doctor Julius Kelp on the one hand and lounge singer Buddy Love on the other—or one man inside another, expressing the simultaneous in/visibility of the subject who inhabits a world of objects that regularly perform the same act without a properly appreciative and understanding audience.

It seemed to Bloch that he should take inventory of the room, so that the objects he paused at or that he left out during his count could serve as evidence.\(^{23}\)

It is entirely possible from a certain (post-)phenomenological perspective that it is not the capacity of the protagonist's mind to play tricks on him regarding the objects' disappearance that is the issue, but the objects' autonomous relationship with one another (and not with the human being) that could cause problems. Graham Harman's remark “The vibrant flesh that exists between humans and objects also lies between objects and other objects” reinforces Alphonso Lingis's notion that objects turn their backs on us “because they have to coexist in a field with one another, and that field has to coexist with the fields of other possible things.”\(^{24}\) So, if it is not really or altogether about us as far as objects are concerned, then what is it to them if we drop our letter in the garbage or our garbage in the mailbox? As if we didn't already have enough to worry about, now objects are manifesting thought-behaviors. And there doesn’t appear to be anything we can do about it. What is worse: having consciousness be the problem or having consciousness not be the problem?

“WELCOME TO MILLTOWN: A VERY NERVOUS LITTLE COMMUNITY”
—A sign posted in The Ladies Man (dir. Jerry Lewis, 1961)

An old woman enters the first frame of The Ladies Man, which presents the viewer with a studio back-lot version of a small town street, and the first two objects she walks by are a U.S. mailbox and a trash can, alerting us to and alarming us with a fictionally remembered anxiety. Between the mailbox and the trash can, the old woman passes two identical entrances to two separate businesses whose window advertising reads “MILLTOWN INSURANCE,” as if this anxious community requires reassurance. These two signs reinforce the first WELCOME sign, which includes the information pop. 4234, in which the second number “4” repeats and reinforces (reassures, or reinsures) the
status of the first, although or because it is written in a wavering hand at the bottom of the frame, all signs being anxious in the language-game: “So I can say that the signpost does after all leave room for doubt. Or rather it sometimes leaves room for doubt, and sometimes not” (PI §85). Wittgenstein’s glasses-wearing philosopher who persists in believing that thinking, speaking, and signing as he conceives them are consistent with each other and together define the logical order, misrepresents and misunderstands the resistance of language to conform to his worldview: “we seem to see in the inmost nature of the thing what is etched on our spectacles. The expression of this illusion is the metaphysical expression of our words” (TLP §110). Milltown’s ordinariness, the run-of-the-millness it signs is entangled with and entangles the anxiety of self-imaging. What has this philosopher to do with the negation in the Milltown sign? Herbert Heebert, whose very name has the heebie-jeebies and who is the town’s model citizen, is traumatized into gynophobia by accidentally witnessing (and then obsessively replaying) his one-and-only girlfriend’s commencement betrayal of him with a so-tall-as-to-be-out-of-frame varsity letterman whose sweater bears a giant “M.” This non-corresponding letter recurs as another anxiously non-corresponding sign when a tough character tells Herbert his middle name is “‘C’ for Killer” and Herbert responds, “that’s what I was afraid of.”

Herbert’s gynophobia presumably makes him non-threatening to women and so in a scenario suggesting aversion therapy, he is hired to be caretaker to a house filled with as many nubile young women as there are rooms on what was then Hollywood’s largest interior set. The house is a veritable duck-rabbit warren of non-simultaneous female aspect-seeing, multiply redrafting the lexically challenged nymphet caretaker Humbert Humbert who chases Lolita’s first defiler Clare Quilty back to his rabbit-warren lair. Manchild Herbert’s accidental release and instantaneous recapture (via sped-up film reversal) of his employer’s late husband’s prize collection of reanimated dead butterflies likewise recalls Nabokov’s reputation as a lepidopterist. Humbert and Herbert favor the then academically correct bowtie, which, despite being an idiot, Herbert is able to tie himself, as evidenced by the multiple untied “bows” he unpacks from his suitcase as a series of potential entanglements. The house’s multiple doors promise numerous entanglements, although the three-walled house appears to be unembarrassed by its theatrical design. The sheer flash mob presence of all the women in the breakfast room provokes Herbert to literally (in terms of what we see) but figuratively (in terms of what we know) split into multiple Herberts who frantically race up and down and all around the exposed house set with mere multiplicity straining to become polysemy and in the process simultaneously demonstrating for us the sheer size and scale of the mental space that phobia has constructed. Ultimately, though, running in frame runs into itself. Herbert cannot outrun “Faith,” the name of his unfaithful trauma-source girlfriend, which returns as the name of a later
girlfriend-to-be, one of the house’s occupants who is studying to be, of all things, an actress.

In *The Ladies Man*, Lewis explores as a director the spatial paradox of the ratio of stage to film, moving through one of the set’s many shadow-box rooms, this one an entirely white space, onto a soundstage-as-soundstage. Here all pretense appears to fall away and Jerry Lewis-as-himself dances with a temptress channeling Cyd Charisse in *Silk Stockings* to the music of the real Harry James orchestra, which comes into frame. Truthfully, Herbert Hebert is “Jerry Lewis” (and not the other way around), as bachelor nebbish Herbert’s anomalous gold wedding band and Vegas pinkie ring attest. The motive of “always playing yourself” is a self-tessellating form of movie-star celebrity performance behavior. Its looping function draws our attention to the ring on Lewis’s finger that is its sign and which in turn recycles the ancient Greek myth that first gave man a metal ring to wear. Promethean-made man regenerates himself through painful performance. Lewis’s show business mannerism of holding his side with one hand to underscore the citation-ally self-satisfied, “painful” side-splittingness of the gag may also mark the spot where the eagle dispatched by Zeus to deprive the rebel god of his liver each and every night took its pound of flesh. “I’m dying up here,” says Prometheus’s body chained to a rock, and indeed, the character does die in the end, but in so doing “brings down the house” (as they say at the show) in the form of an avalanche. The ancient chorus banging their hands on the stage to simulate the power of the landslide may well have sounded like applause, a warm hand.26

**“NEVILLE NOISE AND SERENA SCREAM”**

—A sign advertising the appearance of two entertainers in the grand ballroom of the Fontainebleau Hotel in Miami, where Jerry Lewis’s 1960 film *The Bellboy* is set.

To Ted’s boss’s question in *The Stooge*, “What did that idiot do this time?” we ask in return “What do you mean by ‘this time’?” Lewis’s episodically structured film *The Bellboy* (1960) offers an assortment of “this times” that circulate the distractedness of meaning as it relates to person and name, letter and number, space and time, image and object. Bellboy Stanley (played by Lewis) is told to distribute hotel room keys among their corresponding mailboxes, the mailbox being an anxious sign that pressures him into random key dispersal into non-corresponding numbers, like ticking the wrong boxes on a timed test. Since anxiety requires embarrassed spectacle, the consequence of Stanley’s action is seen as hotel guests struggle unsuccessfully to open their room doors with the wrong keys. Stanley then unsuccessfully attempts to start a car using what we assume to be an itinerant room key, a number with the wrong name, a Hitchcockian fever key.
In a reversal of this action and outcome (a second “run”), the bell captain instructs Stanley to set up what appears to be an infinite number of chairs in the Grand Ballroom (in which “Neville Noise” and “Serena Scream” are scheduled to perform). The bell captain, who means this to be a joke at Stanley’s expense, tells another bellboy that the task he assigned Stanley will take him “2–3 days at least.” Thanks to editing, it takes Stanley only a few moments at most to set up all of these chairs, which have somehow changed object name and number:

Naming seems to be a strange connection of a word with an object.—And such a strange connection really obtains, particularly when a philosopher tries to fathom the relation between name and what is named by staring at an object in front of him and repeating a name, or even the word “this,” innumerable times. For philosophical problems arise when language goes on holiday. And then we may indeed imagine naming to be some remarkable mental act, as it were the baptism of an object. (*PI §38*)

The name “bellboy,” like the uniform the bellboy wears, is one-size-fits-all, producing an audiovisual polysemy that informs the chair scene as a setup for an entire film devoted to the performance of remarkable mental acts in a holiday setting where logic no longer obtains. Here is how Wittgenstein sets up the solution to the chair scene:

I say “There is a chair over there.” What if I go to fetch it, and it disappears from sight?—“So it wasn’t a chair but some kind of illusion.”—But a few seconds later, we see it again and are unable to touch it, and so on—“So the chair was there after all, and its disappearance was some kind of illusion.”—But suppose that after a time it disappears again—or seems to disappear. What are we to say now? Have you rules ready for such cases—rules saying whether such a thing is still to be called a “chair”? But do we miss them when we use the word “chair”? And are we to say that we really do not attach any meaning to this word, because we are not equipped with rules for every possible application for it? (*PI §80*)

Can we say that what we are seeing is actually the performance of Stanley’s incapacity, his inability to stop becoming overwhelmed by the task at hand, expressed in terms of exaggerated numbers, in appearance as frequency of recurrence under the severe constraint of time? Can Stanley attach the name “chair” to the there/not-there object of his performance behavior, the obsessive reenactment of his performance anxiety? It is true that a bellboy other than Stanley looks into the room and sees that all of the chairs have been set up, but in that “the bellboy” is a one-size-fits-all name, can we trust that all
of the chairs were set up by a distinct character named “Stanley” in a film that advertises (as we shall see) the nonalignment of appearances, and in a room that is set up for performance, set up in the name of dis/appearance? Could Stanley be setting up the same chair(s) over and over again which as an aggregate function performed in non-diegetic mental space produces the appearance of overwhelming number? The bell captain, formerly a bellboy, is anxiety/OCD’s self-taunting mechanism of predictive incapacity, aligning him more closely to this function’s performance than even he knows. Spectacular embarrassment (always as potential as it is concrete) is always self-witnessed.

Given the bellboys’ identical attire, Stanley cannot be said to be ill-suited to the name’s function, even though he ostensibly is. Likewise, seemingly impossible acts and functions are successfully performed not according to logic’s rules (bellboys, we are told in the film, “have no real direction”) but within the parameters of a particular language-game. A command, like a bell, summons the idiot (the bellboy infantilized by the order), who responds to what the command has anxiously put him in mind of—sound value and alternative meanings of words, the instantaneous mental reworking of sentence structure into self-punning mechanisms, the tone and manner of articulation. The idiot chases the mental object, the physical one having already disappeared. The looping action of his distracted mind and the voice telling him to redirect his thinking propel him into the anxiety dance of doing nothing as something, anything—randomly reshaping normative expectation’s form (a sculpted beauty into a gargoyle) and function (the live release of dead butterflies from a frame), even redefining time (the multiple chair setup whose mental processing is hidden from view).

Upon entering an elevator in the hotel where Stanley works, the “real” Jerry Lewis (who has come to entertain the hotel’s guests) remarks: “This is a nice room. Oh, it’s the elevator”—the implicit joke being, “This room is so small, I would have to go outside to change my mind.” The ballroom chair set-up scene has already set up the corresponding joke, “That room was so large, I had to go outside to change my mind into an even larger mental space.” Having done this, polysemous meanings of “Jerry Lewis” can be addressed. Wittgenstein maintains that as it relates to rules, language-games, and comparisons (e.g., between one person’s pain or identity and another’s, between the integrated and the multiple identity), “the explanation by means of sameness does not work” (PI §350). Furthermore, he writes, “There is no finer example of a useless sentence [than “A thing is identical with itself”], which is nevertheless connected with a certain play of the imagination. It is as if in our imagination we put a thing into its own shape and saw that it fitted” (PI §216). The real “Jerry Lewis” is identified by a “JL” monogram on his silk-collared velvet jacket, as opposed to unlucky number 13, which is stitched on Stanley’s bellboy’s uniform. The inexact correspondence between JL and Stanley, who together construct the film’s “Jerry Lewis,” is indicated as a lack of fit between “JL” and “13,” between the triskaidekaphobic hotel
elevator (missing the number 13) and the non-room(i)ness it presents to JL who thinks this thought out loud, like an anxiety patient of whom a psychiatrist’s waiting room lost count. The real Jerry Lewis disingenuously says in so many words that such smallness cannot capture his celebrity, which he has however condensed into a sign (JL) to articulate deference to anxiety’s greater celebrity that he has in mind to show. The film replays the non-/fitting celebrity of anxious show: JL’s impossibly large entourage exiting a small car’s back seat; Stanley’s inadvertent catalyzing a radically reduced obese woman into re-enlarging herself (by leaving her a box of candy), her re-widening appearing to shrink the film frame as befits the language-game’s frame of reference.

Stanley carries a message to comedian Milton Berle (MB), who is signing autographs (also) as himself, although we cannot be sure of this since we do not actually see the name he is signing (i.e., whether he is signing his own name or signing in name only—as a character playing “Milton Berle”). Perhaps he is using his other hand, his other-handedness, so as not to appear recognizably in his own name, as himself. Berle thinks that he recognizes bellboy Stanley as being JL, although he doesn’t name him, perhaps so as not to risk his own out-of-character self-exposure in the film for the benefit of a movie audience that nevertheless sees difference and also his own unvoiced performance behavior. “No, it’s not possible,” Berle signs by shaking his head in the negative, an unvoiced echo of one bellboy’s asking another when Stanley’s double JL arrives at the hotel, “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” and the other same-sized bellboy responding, “No, it’s not possible.” Still later, there is the following exchange between two one-size-fits-all bellboys:

“Have you seen Stanley?”
“Which Stanley?”
“The only Stanley in the world.”

(An actor impersonating comedian Stan Laurel enters the frame, in the process disproving the previous claim that there is only one Stanley in the world, a statement which was true only figuratively speaking.)

Celebrity inherently cites its own doubleness, leading those in its presence to ask rhetorically “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” before saying what they are thinking out loud: “No. It’s not possible.” I know of one celebrity who without provocation told someone who saw her getting out of a car, “Yes, it’s me.” Appearance’s bipolarity is advertised everywhere, but not everyone (and in Lewis’s film no one) recognizes it. When JL hails an unnamed bellboy who really is Milton Berle but not MB, the one-size-fits-all bellboy not only does not recognize JL as the real Jerry Lewis, he (Milton Berle as bellboy) does not recognize himself as himself (i.e., as MB) either. Stanley attempts to deliver a telegram to MB’s life-size flat, cardboard likeness advertising the
latter’s appearance as the hotel’s nightly entertainment, the role that was in fact being performed by Jerry Lewis during the time of the film’s shooting but, as Berle’s cardboard likeness suggests, in a different dimension, in non-diegetic space and time. Lewis’s daytime citing/sighting of who he would otherwise be at night indirectly references the day-for-night-shot film scene helpfully demonstrated by Stanley later, literally camera flashing night into day outside the hotel with one press of a button. Celebrity likewise falsifies reality, even to the extent of someone becoming famous for being famous (a famous brand giving fame another name). “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” the mind rhetorically asks itself. “No. It’s not possible.” It can’t be done. I can’t do it. What can an idiot do but not be other than who he is? “We go towards the thing we mean” (PI §455), wrote Wittgenstein, meaning, I think, that we go towards what we are. This is performance behavior, and, as such, the show must go on even given the catastrophic certainty of its and our own anxious disappearance.

An audio correspondence is discovered in The Ladies Man. After the old woman passes the frightening letterbox, she and the silent film are alarmed and confused by someone suddenly shouting her name, making its anxious celebrity known, then visible (as people in and out of vehicles loudly collide). In the film’s running sight-and-sound gag, Herbert carries increasingly larger quantities of food and water to an evidently very large because very loud, unseen house pet named “Baby.” Baby turns out to be as and as not advertised, her name matching her physical stature, a very small dog whose literal roar is much worse than Herbert’s anxiously anticipatory sound-bite image of her imagines. The lion we expected to claim the offstage roar, however, later enters the frame from the opposite side, seemingly out of another film, provoking Herbert to shout for his palindromic “MOM!” who is wearing his face (i.e., is played by Lewis) in another performance reveal. The “lady man” who becomes “the ladies man” is a momma’s boy, identity appearing to be just another language-game.

This film ending is inconsistent with logic’s rule but perfectly consistent with the language-game of anxious looping sound and unsound (incomparable) image into Wittgenstein’s “echo of a thought in sight” (PI, POP, xi, §235). In a proposition that is nearly always introduced with the word “puzzling” or “perplexing,” Wittgenstein noted, “If a lion could talk, we wouldn’t be able to understand it” (PI, POP, §327). Wittgenstein’s brief here was for the radical incommensurability of certain speakers based upon a non-concordance not only of their language but also of their “form of life” with ours. By “form of life” Wittgenstein has in mind the community and history that help determine the facial and gestural codes, the manner of speaking, rules, and patterns of behavior and language-games—“the intertwining of culture, world-view and language.” That Milltown’s form of life is that of not any run-of-the-mill-town but specifically, “a very nervous community,” speaks to a certain organic discordance that determines everything that comes
after, rearing its giant head filled with anxious noise and roaring at the end (cross-referentially, “NEVILLE NOISE AND SERENA SCREAM”). Whereas Wittgenstein uses the lion to exemplify an alien communicator whose form of life and so its language cannot be understood by another species, he says that a baby moving a chess piece only appears to us to be playing chess, because we recognize the moving of the chess-piece on the chessboard as signifying within our language-game a move in an actual chess game.30 Given the over-insistent, hyperbolic nature of Lewis’s brand of comedy, it is unsurprising that he combines the baby and the lion into “Baby” the lion to beef up the incommensurability of the moment in the context of the film and that he uses the lion to subvert the overall context in the end. Had the film been released by MGM, whose emblem is the roaring lion, the non-diegesis of the moment would have been (even more) complete and would have gestured back to earlier Martin and Lewis (as well as Bob Hope-Bing Crosby) meta-language-games with the medium and means of production (e.g., directly addressing the film audience regarding the movie they are watching and about their movie careers in general or at that point in time). As it stands, the lion’s roar typifies the self-referential inchoateness of mental noise in a perpetually anxious context, the mind as a very nervous community of self-enlarging, self-spectating thoughts.

At the end of The Bellboy, Stanley, who talks for the first time, is mistaken for the soundman, the voice of striking workers, in an aural equivalent to the silent convergence of Chaplin’s Little Tramp with the workers’ demonstration in Modern Times. “Why haven’t you talked before?” someone asks Stanley after he has slammed his hand down on a table to stop the din of argument and replaced it with Jerry Lewis shouting “SHUT UP!” “Because no one ever asked me,” says Stanley, who is as surprised as the others to hear himself speak in the voice of the real Jerry Lewis—the one who requires two surrogates to create the inexact echo effect of anxious thought thinking itself. “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” the mind asks, to which anxiety responds even without hearing the question, “Yes, it’s me.”

Walking and Ticcing

Keep walking until I get out of myself.

As soon as I think of an everyday use of the sentence instead of a philosophical one, its meaning becomes clear and ordinary.
—Wittgenstein (OC §44e)

In my personal experience, meaning only becomes clear when it is theoretical, philosophical, abstract. The ordinary confounds understanding (Is that a
The Idiot’s Anxiety at the Object’s Disappearance

hawk or a handsaw?). Wittgenstein’s philosophy of the ordinary, being based upon usefulness, reattaches truth to consequences as regards thinking. The idea is not unique to Wittgenstein, of course, but he is insistent upon it. To ask, for example, “what are the consequences of walking?” cannot be separated from thinking for a philosopher who would replace the notion of right or wrong pictures of thinking with the statement that “we don’t yet know our way about in the use of our picture, or of our pictures” (WPPI §549). Wittgenstein’s approach to thinking, as to language, is circumambulatory. He wants us to walk around the word, object, or thought process and to consider it from and in various aspects. When thinking walks around you instead, circumambulation is literalized in the form of repetition, empty rituals in service to the pedestrian mystery of self-doubt regarding the performance of ordinary actions. The problem manifested in ticcing while walking, like other problems of performance behavior, is exacerbated and to a large extent defined by the voluntary nature of manifesting the problem as a form of aspect-seeing in the first place.

The step creates the ground of the self-doubt manifested as performance behavior as if it were drawn by it, like an animated cell in which the walking figure cannot outstrip the ground on which he walks or the frame he walks within. The grounds for the truth of what we experience can be seen in how we act, not in what we see. The body tells the mind, I don’t (no longer) know how to walk. The mind tells the body, I don’t (no longer) know what “walking” means. The physical tic is a communication breakdown between mind and body over how meaning makes action and action makes meaning. Walking is encumbered by its modeling awareness of the dis-analogy of seeing-as-observing to seeing-as-knowing. Walking exposes the problem that contextlessness poses to thought. In this contextlessness, the tic poses a question to the mind that might otherwise be a description—Is what I am seeing or looking at a “5” or an “8”? It is impossible to tell because the thing being done appears to be so hand-drawn, a personal sign(ature). It has gotten so as I can no longer read my own handwriting.

I have taken to writing notes and affixing them to the soles of my shoes to put my body in mind of memory that, because it has been previously composed, might correct my “focus of where meaning is.” These notes, which are about ideas that transcend the ordinary, are designed to allow the ordinary to take its course without thinking about it, what it means and what it does. I know this looks bad from the outside, although not as bad as it looks from the inside, where I have become both actor and auditor, counting where there is as yet no accounting for my actions. (“No experience of identity today: only of running after myself,” wrote Handke.) There is really no accounting for who this person has become. There is no absence in my walking. Even the soles of my shoes take note(s), scraping boundaries on floors and pavements that I cross, retracing long walks once taken, alone but with anxious thoughts dogging my steps, like all those dogs I imagined would attack me like le Carré’s
Alfred Winser. I am vicariously attracted to the walking motif in Handke’s work and to the anxiety that attends every step in the writing from experience, not so much of the walking but of the thinking—the self-questioning, imagining, and second-guessing—that accompanies walking, the thought that walking sets in motion, the walking of thought that literalizes the process that transpires even when I am still. Even when I am still, I am still walking—restless legs at night seeking to walk off restless thoughts by day.

For how does a man learn to recognize his own state of knowing something? (OC §589)

There is less a severance in meaning between certainty and doubt than a lag in the processing of thought, which effectively shifts “the focus of where meaning is” from divergence to the habitually lazy convergence of meaning and function in written, verbal, and gestural language. As in one of Markson’s aphoristic novels in which the roll call of the dead conveys a passing of presentness and a presentness of passing, Handke’s *The Hour We Knew Nothing of Each Other* (1992) vexes temporality by presenting passing as both a continuous performance and a passing show. Handke’s passersby have their stage directions, their blocking affixed to the soles of their shoes. These notes are wearing off with each and every step, as they complete their rounds, the roll call of things done in the doing. Do we know this to be true in a play that announces at every step “This Is Not a Play”? Who are “We” and can this entity know nothing of the thing it is and of which it is a part?

Wittgenstein would take issue with the principle of knowing in most configurations in which knowing appears to bear witness against not-knowing, which is only knowing’s opposite. This is where Handke’s reading of Wittgenstein as a call to action is so theatrically affirming. Wittgenstein asserts that we misuse the word “know” in a philosophical sense, although not necessarily in particular circumstances (e.g., “I know that I am in England.” [OC §423]). Although Wittgenstein can imagine such circumstances, they do not sufficiently engage him to explain how knowing (or not-knowing) can bring meaning to language. We misuse “knowing” (and its opposite), argues Wittgenstein, by using it to state the obvious. To say, for example, “I know that this is my hand” is obviated by the trailing rejoinder, “Of course I know—how could I not know?” (OC §412). And further, “When I say ‘how do I know?’ I do not mean that I have the least doubt of it. What we have here is a foundation for all my action. But it seems to me that it is wrongly expressed by the words ‘I know’” (OC §414). So, we also misuse knowing/not-knowing by equating these words with certainty/doubt. How, then, does one escape the “bewitchment” of the word “know,” at the same time suppressing our anxiety at not-knowing that takes knowing’s place?

What then would Wittgenstein have made of Handke’s know-nothing play without words? “I want to say,” says Wittgenstein, “the physical game is just
as certain as the arithmetical. But this can be misunderstood. My remark is a logical and not a psychological one” (OC §447). Handke’s *Hour* is enacted on a plane and as a space that is ontological without ostensibly being in any way psychological—that is, unless you (properly) read the play without words as the counterpart to Handke’s anxiety journal, *The Weight of the World*, which is composed of words without play. The very fact that journal and play exist as two separate entities, though, allows the stage at least to appear to speak for itself, as itself, reciting in so many words its way of knowing as opposed to the content of what it knows. How can we not doubt what we see in these circumstances, when the proof of knowing/not-knowing is sized to what the world is that is (only) a stage? Wittgenstein asserts: “Every language-game is based on words ‘and objects’ being recognized again. We learn with the same inexorability that this is a chair as that $2 \times 2 = 4$” (OC §455). The stage, when it is allowed to make a non-psychological appearance, shows us what it is/not, shows us knowing/not-knowing that is commensurate with its durative time, the nominal “Hour” Handke’s play takes to perform. Even an “absurd” proposition such as a figure on a stage showing another figure his hand and proclaiming “This is not a hand” speaks to the stage’s ontological knowing/not-knowing that was elsewhere framed by Magritte according to the representational principle of “being recognized again.” In this way, the stage can never actually be “absurd,” although it can joke about itself as Wittgenstein urges philosophy to do.

Each thing is, as it were, a space of possible states of affairs. This space I can imagine empty, but I cannot imagine the thing without the space. (TLP §2.013)

In *The Hour We Knew Nothing of Each Other*, Handke transcribes the gist and gestus of Wittgensteinian “doing philosophy” into “doing theater.” But theater undoes the doing of philosophy, much as use and experience undid philosophy by transforming it into a way of doing for Wittgenstein, who wrote: “I do philosophy now like an old woman who is always mislaying something and having to look for it again: now her spectacles, now her keys” (OC §532). Is this another case of the idiot’s anxiety at the object’s disappearance, with the object here being philosophy? Is Wittgenstein’s expressed need to re-school himself in his basic way of knowing how he knows what the world is as a thought-space being reconfigured here as the book you are now reading?

Early in the afternoon, he remembered who he was: for that one moment he managed to feel identical with himself, and then, at last, he no longer thought as poorly of himself as he had for a long while.42

The figures who are crossing the square that is a stage in *Hour* are not actors so much as figures of thought, thought prompts. Their blocking is not
so much action in the traditional sense of mise en scène as it is the visible lag that occurs in the thought process between giving and receiving of image and information. Nominal stage space creates their movement. Appearance, not actuality, engenders their actions, so that what looks to be accurate, literally is not. The experience of this, as with other Handke plays, may be likened to what one feels when seeing a freestanding in-frame prop door being passed through an actual (stationary, architectural) doorframe. The mind’s eye feels like it has seen a theatrical ghost. There is something that is not quite identical with itself and that is distressing, disorienting, disconcerting, and dis-analogizing, all appearances to the contrary. And of course being unreal, a purgatorial (non-disappeared) Ghost, the aporetic figure of simile, the mind feels compelled, like Hamlet, to chase it, but that, as Wittgenstein has stated with a different object in sight, “does not lead us beyond itself” (TLP §102), beyond its being as not-being. “Wittgenstein,” writes Gordon Baker, “tried to liberate our thinking from enslavement to particular analogies by bringing to light other analogies, which are equally well-supported as the ones of which we unconsciously make use.” So perhaps simile and metaphor are not effaced but are instead more truly rendered and rendered more true. (“A true metaphor: like everyday reality, transformed into a dream that clarifies it.”) “Never look for metaphors!” Handke says, “(They must be experienced.)” But experienced by whom? By the one who is not identical with himself? The one who, for a metaphorical “hour,” knows nothing of the “other” in the syntactical thought loop created by “we” and “each other”? (It’s not one until it’s the other, conventional thinking holds.) The operative question is not so much “who am I when I am not me?” as “who am I when I am someone not identical to myself?” as this second question summons forth a difference that is not at first sight or first thought as apparent. There is again no severance but a running after, or perhaps a running on, as the positionality of the non-identical selves remains conceptually uncertain.

The thanatophobic Hour is multi-thought passage in the proverbial bright light moment of ultimate un/seeing, here configured as a square (a shape and a place that configures that shape) commensurate with a stage, unknowingly identical with itself and its phenomenological dis-ease. A man “suddenly looks up into the other’s [a woman’s] face, which she, alas, has turned away a moment before,” paying homage to Chekhov’s plays of non-correspondence. The ends that cannot be made to meet articulate the poverty of relations, of which the body knows even without the mind’s intervention—but with the mind’s intervention, the body’s performance becomes performance behavior and we are made to see ourselves suffer, see ourselves in the act of suffering. We become like Hamlet, and, for that matter, like Jerry Lewis (or like the telethon that Jerry Lewis might host to discover a cure for Hamletism). Painfully, Handke tries to let the body play dumb; but he also tries not to, and therein lies one of the paradoxes of anxiety as a mode of performance.
In Hour’s anatomy, missing body parts speak to an ostensible lack of sure-footedness (e.g., the stage actions of staggering, falling, rolling, and especially running, which elicit doubt on and of the stage) that is nevertheless in line with a surefooted inevitability (where the path is leading) that fills the author with an overwhelming sense of anxiety or un-surefootedness that is only indirectly expressed. There is, for example, the woman in an advanced stage of pregnancy, who crosses the stage, “all alone, a letter in her hand on which she glues a stamp while walking,” summoning forth Lewis’s “nutty professor” whom we fear might deposit that letter irretrievably in the trash bin rather than in the letterbox, thus signing a dead letter. Each option signals its own mode of inevitability and its own measure of anxiety, the correspondence between the two receptacles dissembling as non-correspondence in the outside world that fits our mental dis-ease like a latex glove worn over a comedian’s head and inflated with his own dying breath.

The “advanced stage of pregnancy” shows necessity and contingency (on Hour’s stage) in an uneasy cohabitation of correspondence and non-correspondence. Nothing need be said, except in “passing”—that is, “quick passage”—and the mortality, which this signs (like a letter), silently, minus speech. The passage that follows the pregnant woman’s action is so relentlessly, compulsively reinforcing as to be almost unbearable:

This and that person, old people, young people, men and women coming after her in all directions now follow in her trail, all with their assorted pieces of mail which they check from all sides, still addressing, licking, closing envelopes, rereading postcards, looking at the pictures, all headed toward an invisible center beyond the square; one returns empty-handed, goes elsewhere; another woman has continued down the street [up your street], another man, back again for a moment, climbs down below the ground further in the back.

The mouth that licks the stamp and the hand that glues it to the envelope concealing the letter create the perfect seal between the stamp and the small square that is a stage, now empty. The mind’s pictures and the body’s empty-handedness are frankly acknowledged so as to be non- and even anti-illusory, so frankly theatrical as almost not to be theater at all—the playwright’s anxiety at the stage’s disappearance. Handke’s perfect stage image (from Weight) of “a stamp lying on a pocket mirror” infers breath and its stoppage as a recognizable and representable sign of life and death. Handke recasts Our Town with metonymic signs taken for wonders (e.g., “[An] enormous globe that . . . illuminates [a] bag from inside”) and the town drunk as “the square idiot,” less a local character than our localized (innocent, limited, prejudicial) idea of the stage’s knowing. The umbrellas mournfully raised at Emily’s funeral in Wilder’s play reduce to a single closed umbrella in Handke’s, anxiously performing death’s unknowing and the mind’s sense of loss. A dead
man lies in the brightly lit square, empty-footed and mocked by an idiot, before death takes the first man away, and solitude mocks the second who has been abandoned.

Can this be the end of the line, or is the SPECT SCAN machine passing too close to my face with its bright square of light? My eyes are closed against the brightness, my mouth shut, my mind the square idiot performing a cross-walking thought-pantomime, mistaking “Someone passes carrying a tree” to mean that my arms and legs should press harder against the trunk of my body to make my body into a straight line.\textsuperscript{51} Indexing thought, the square idiot is all of the so-called “someones” and “anyones” who, with their props, cross the stage, modeling thought as a performance behavior. The square idiot crosses the square “accompanied at some distance by a man carrying a reduced wood or cardboard model of the square in all its light” in the stage’s same-but-not-identical \textit{mise-en-abyme} show of ontological difference and tessellating thought-looping.\textsuperscript{52} “The whistle of a marmot, the scream of an eagle” and the self-provoking, self-obstructing slow-show-dance of a man and woman alternately pursuing each other and blocking each other’s pursuit replays the mind’s synthetic, aporetic Chekhovian memory. Age futilely tries beating back generational loss with a cane, feeling its way along the edge, “dragging one foot behind the other,” in the gait of the limping square idiot.\textsuperscript{53} An idiotic question: Chekhov (already) knew he was dying while writing his last play, \textit{The Cherry Orchard}, but did he think he had to die in order to write it?

Abraham pushes Isaac ahead of him onto the stage, “one hand on his shoulder, the other behind his back holding the sacrificial knife,” like the one my father brandished to stop me from touching physical (and mental) objects when my as yet undiagnosed OCD presented. The mind configures the hand and the other hand into an isomorphic attitude of self-contestation and irresolution—“Isaac returns, intact with Abraham, empty-handed, dead tired in [no longer on] his trail.” Where is the knife? Where is the consequence of an action? The knife is lost, the object has disappeared owing to the anxiety of real loss, in anticipation of real loss, of death, severance, abandonment—all of this signified in Abraham’s empty-handedness. He and his son, he and his action unresolved in the face of anxiety, except as anxiety, “settle down at some distance from the others” \textit{[my emphasis]}. The mind is exhausted by how it pictures itself, at the energy that is expended to repeatedly compose and revise this picture, at the energy it takes to shuffle and superimpose the square/the stage in different performance modes (“the square’s fool alias square’s master alias patron of the square”) and to keep it brightly lit. The machine that the self-blinded face sees only in the mind with eyes wide shut continues taking pictures of the brain, as unphotographed thoughts crisscross my mind like so many ticcing “someones,” “fanning the light into [t]his opened book.”\textsuperscript{54}