Incapacity

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Chapter 9

Homeless

Tell me how you are searching, and I will tell you what you are searching for.

—Wittgenstein (PR §118)

Now at last the movies, I feel competent again.

—Handke, The Weight of the World

A solitary figure, a homeless man, walks from a distance slowly into frame. Before him, a doorframe fronts a house constructed to the specifications of film, with its back wall rather than its theatrical front missing. The frame house sits in Monument Valley on the Utah–Arizona border, in the vicinity of “The Mittens,” a large rock formation that is shaped like a gloved hand. John Wayne’s Ethan Edwards has to duck to pass through the doorframe of his brother Aaron’s home (in John Ford’s 1956 western The Searchers), an index of darkness’s dematerialized interiority that transfers to the low-framed enclosure alongside the home in which Aaron’s wife will lose her life and the dark cave mouth where Aaron’s daughter, Ethan’s niece Debbie, will have her former life reclaimed.1 This dematerialization is synonymous in time, place, and meaning with the burning out of the proper home’s contents—“the familial and spatial interior”—by the Indians, who have staged the home invasion and provoked an indeterminacy, a site of uncertain materiality that can only be spoken of but not fully understood in terms of “home” and “homecoming,” house and home.2 At least this is what Wittgenstein tells Dean Martin as they sit together watching the film together in the dark. The doorway is both a false limit and a severance signifying Ethan’s performance behavior of apartness, his bowing a false self-humbling. At film’s end, the homeless man stops himself at the threshold of the now dead Aaron’s front door and passes beyond narrative whose mise en abyme the open door ironically frames. His apartness represents a self-de-installation of the subject part (role) from the theatrical trope of happy-family mimesis.3
En route to his brother’s home, there was, one assumes, the occasional stray dog, which, if Ethan had a mind to, he might have shot for fear of being bitten by something rabid, like a catastrophist performing a behavior of certain doubt. The homeless man refers to anyone as “pilgrim” who sets him on edge, whether owing to guile or inexperience. Ethan is a figure of what Ortega y Gasset called “radical solitude,” capturing the western definition of what a man is: not just “monolithic, silent, mysterious, impenetrable as a desert butte, he is the desert butte . . . a solid object, not only . . . relieved of the burden of relatedness and responsiveness to others, he is relieved of consciousness itself, which is to say, consciousness of self.”5 (“Ethan” translates from the original Hebrew as “strength,” “constancy.”) This lack of consciousness should not be confused with not knowing, as Wittgenstein suggests: “The word ‘know’ doesn’t denote a state of consciousness. That is, the grammar of the word ‘know’ isn’t the grammar of a ‘state of consciousness’ ” (PG §34). “The hero doesn’t need to talk; he just knows,” but it is a knowing bereft of (self-)acknowledgment, friendless, whose singularity is a sign not of particularity but only of non-correspondence, misanthropy. The western hero is suspicious of language and of the professional and professorial types (Wittgenstein interjects from his accustomed place in the theater’s first row), who would mystify all that is material and real to conceal their own incapacity to do for themselves unburdened of self-conscious, self-gratifying/self-lacerating thought. “The great difficulty here is not to present the matter as if there were something one couldn’t do” (PI §374), Wittgenstein wrote, perhaps with the over-articulated action grammar of the movie western in mind. Lee Braver states, “Wittgenstein wants to argue that it is incoherence rather than inability that keeps us from talking about that which transcends our talk.”6 A western antihero, Ethan is laconic and a Wittgensteinian figure of inchoate anxiety, misunderstanding and misunderstood, unknown to himself and to others, the lion whose roar cannot be parsed as “talk.” Although he doesn’t know it, his search is to imagine a self that materializes an incorporeal interiority apart from a landscape of stony exteriority that appears to authenticate who he is.

Edwards is in need of a ruler. Returned from fighting in the Civil War, he lifts his small niece Debbie up in the air in front of him, thinking that she is her older sister Lucy. Ethan tells Debbie—as-Lucy that she does not seem to have grown much bigger than when he last saw her, which was obviously a long time ago since the real Lucy is clearly now a teenager.7 During the many years that Ethan searches for Debbie, who is taken and raised by the Indians who burned her childhood home and killed her parents, she grows to Lucy’s approximate age and size, again standing in for her sister who is killed by the Indians, precisely because she has already reached young womanhood. As Ethan lifts the now grown Debbie in the air with possibly murderous intent at film’s end, his earlier mistakenness recertifies an old certainty not as to which one Debbie is, but who she is—family. Ethan arrives at this as
if it were foreknowledge, minus any outward show of self-questioning. His action appears to acknowledge kinship as being something other than a way of measuring similarity and difference.

Naming ultimately provides the clue to Ethan’s and the plot’s resolution. “Seven Fingers,” where Debbie’s captor was last sighted, does not appear on any map, but like “The Mittens” presents the hand as an extraordinary mental object. “The Mittens” conceals all digits save for the opposable thumb, enabling search and destruction by forging Promethean fire into instruments of war. “Seven Fingers,” on the other hand (and in the wake of the Civil War’s end and the ongoing American Indian Wars), names war surplus—extraneous, superfluous, vestigial like a human tail. The name of the Indian tribe that took Debbie translates into English as “roundabout,” as in Wittgenstein’s “I don’t know my way about,” a self-admission missing from Ethan’s experiential statement, “Man says he’s going one place, means to go t’other.” Still, it is Ethan’s essential apartness that calls to him to transform “into the figure that is [his] alone to be.”8 Wittgenstein wrote: “An actor may play lots of different roles, but at the end of it all he himself, the human being, is the one who has to die” (CV 50e).

Philosophy for Wittgenstein is about liberation from the compulsion of any picture(s).9

And the winds of questions, beyond the canyons will stop the moment we arrive.10

Handke’s Voyage to the Sonorous Land, or The Art of Asking employs The Searchers as a dramatic template, along with Chekhov and Ferdinand Raimund, who wrote satirical fairy-tale farces and shot himself after being bitten by what he believed to be a rabid dog. Onto this landscape of disingenuous self-questioning, “a plateau in the far-away heartland of the hinterland on the farthest continent in bright rehearsal light” (my emphasis), enter a number of self-acknowledged actors, “pilgrims” whose name (after John Wayne’s evaluative nomination) says they make a practice of guile and inexperience.11 “What is it like to concentrate on experience?” Wittgenstein asked. “If I try to do this I, e.g., open my eyes particularly wide and stare.”12 Does Wittgenstein here recognize the actor’s affect, his recognition that framing experience makes him into a spectator and so to some degree displaces experience? It is as if a western landscape had been painted on a backdrop, which “a pair of hands” taken from Kaspar suddenly drew up or down to affect a stage curtain.13 The hands’ appearance, “searching for something to hold onto,” recalls Heidegger’s characterization of hands as extending beyond grasping and holding to extension itself as a mental object.14 Sighting/citing the hands we await the whole actor’s reveal, but find that an actor can be awaited and still have appeared by being there in (a) part.
The character “Spoilsport” runs on like Jerry Lewis and Leonard Shelby, constantly “looking back for his pursuers as he runs,” the searcher pursued by a memory-limit that consciousness cannot define, except by likening it to the picture he is in, a condition that itself sets a limit to consciousness as he experiences it—leaving him only to stare at what may be only the rehearsed experience of looking back and running as a performance behavior. Here we are mindful of Derrida’s qualifying statement that “by definition, limit itself, seems deprived of a body,” although the meaning-body fictionalizes limit in the form of a picture. The actor again runs into the mental object and is head-wounded. In the immediate aftermath of “a sonorous sound” tuned to Chekhov’s breaking string, “the seven figures notice each other,” notice perhaps that they are in fact seven fingers as in The Searchers, meaning-flipping like Wellman’s “fates” and “facts,” and as such irregular and in discourse with something ontological and perhaps uncanny. Or as actors they might say it’s only a stage effect, without knowing what affects it. “Wide Eyes” (already cited in Wittgenstein’s experiential effort), his pupils permanently dilated in the theatrical darkness of not knowing the guile of his own performance, emerges travel-ready “with just the comb and toothbrush he puts in the breast-pocket of his jacket.” He is no doubt unfamiliar with the proposition “Reality is the toothbrush waiting at home for you in its glass, a bus ticket, a paycheck, and the grave.” Orson Welles intoned this in his self-directed “F” for Fake, a 1973 film about picture fakes and the sort of rough magic that made Harry Lime’s body disappear and reappear as a mental object. Wide Eyes does not see this prop, the mental object’s fake becoming a catastrophic sign when carried so near a heart that could stop beating at any time.

The play’s bipolarity not only of seeing and not-seeing but of saying and showing performs a Tractarian split after a book which can be read as a series of answers to questions that cannot yet be properly asked. It is possible the sound of the sonorous post-dramatic landscape that Handke describes allows us to see the otherwise unseen author slamming the book shut on Tractarian mental pictorialism, as Wittgenstein advised. And yet Spoilsport’s “mortal fear” summons before Wide Eyes’s intuited “terror” (terror’s wide eyes) another Abraham and Isaac scene, as if it knew nothing of The Hour We Knew Nothing of Each Other’s version. It’s a story of hands handed down in varying degrees of particularity. Here Abraham’s hand is “on little Isaac’s shoulder, reassuringly it seems, while in fact he is once again taking his son to the place of slaughter,” and, in the next moment, “he looks at the palm of his hand,” perhaps considering the irregularity of a severance akin to cutting off your own hand to prove a certainty (belief in and obedience to an authority outside the self) that can never be proved. To make a show of proof is merely to articulate apartness, the severance that some mental object demands to satisfy an authority of its own.

Spoilsport, like Chekhov’s Yepikhodov, a diminished catastrophic sign, further cites though not by name a likewise diminished, hand-me-down
Oedipus and Jocasta presented here as “a lame-footed idiot” and “she with her hand between her thighs so many nights past” who could “wrap her arms around this young man tonight.” Handke’s incestuous image recalls Wittgenstein’s intention (according to Braver) “to eradicate wonder, because it tempts us beyond ourselves, seducing us toward an airless space outside world and time.” The wandering eye (with its sexual connotation) is in need of blinding at the spectacle of life’s falling away from the beauty of the whole (in) to the seven-fingered hole of surreality. This oracular hole, “the oracle in the palm of my hand,” emits darkness not light, although that darkness may only be the swarm of ants inserted there by Buñuel and Dali to shock us with self-specularizing onanistic wonder, the mind in thrall to its own strangeness.

The audience too is struck dumb, made dumb by wonder. “Yes, I imagine them,” says Voyage’s Old Man (an actor), “sitting quietly in their seats, exactly the same way they started out, heads up, looking out.” In Leonid Andreyev’s self-referential symbolist drama Requiem (1916), a live audience is replaced by “flat wooden figures . . . [who] watch relentlessly with painted eyes, they do not move, they do not breathe, they keep totally quiet.” Andreyev’s is a theater of the dead, and Andreyev a devoted pessimist and catastrophist who unsuccessfully attempted suicide on three occasions, once by lying down on railroad tracks the wrong way, so as not to have his body severed. In Andreyev’s short story, “The Thief,” a young man entertaining the paranoid (and perhaps OCD) delusion that men have boarded the train he is on to arrest him for his commission of a crime jumps off the train and is immediately killed by an oncoming locomotive. The train that ran over the author’s body without killing him is in fact a train of thought, which sees itself unable to be suicided by the picture of a train about which it cannot stop thinking. Handke had by Voyage time already written: “Looking out the window of a waiting train, I had ridden ahead in my thoughts; then the train started and soon overtook me: strange moment of duplication, when my thought ride and the train ride coincided, a kind of flare-up, and then there was only the train running on.” Andreyev became so celebrated for exhibiting suicidal performance behavior that many others who were contemplating suicide wrote to him for confirmation. This in effect reaffirmed suicide’s co-opting of death’s final authority in the name of self-authorship while mentally simulating apartness as an act of showing. Andreyev meanwhile shot himself through his hand, which left the hand permanently twisted, one assumes with self-doubt, since Andreyev never did manage to kill himself.

“I simply embody,” says Handke’s “Actress,” which, of course, calls the question of how the body means to be presented and what body is presented and seen. “Does my body look like that” (PI §411), the body asks the mirror-image, which answers back in the deviant, theatrical grammar of inverse directionality and in/tangibility. “I never wanted to be anything but an actress,” declares the Actress, self-measuring apartness, her incapacity to play anyone but herself as a mental object she calls “Actress” marking the
aporia of dramatic character.27 The Actress begs the Diderotian paradox of not/being in character and sidesteps Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe’s reading of Diderot’s *Paradoxe sur comédien* as maintaining that the actor’s ability to imitate everything requires that he himself be nothing, a “subjectless subject (absent from himself, distracted from himself, deprived of self).” In this sense, “the law of mimesis” states “a law of impropriety,” meaning that there is nothing that properly belongs to the actor, no proper name and no specific property (*propriété*).28 This transparent nothingness allows the audience to call the actor “his,” as Andreyev’s performance for his (own) suicidal audience attests.29

The Actress and her fellow travelers fetishize a contentless picture of what acting or performance is. They cannot escape the picture, but they cannot understand it or what it means to be inside the picture either. They are fools for/of representation engaged in scenes that invariably are shaped by questions and devoid of context, like anxiety that is both self-doubting and contentless, “the thought that reflects on its own activity.”30 Anxiety is commensurate with thought in much the same way that, in this case, walking is commensurate with thinking. To the extent that they see themselves walking, actors are thinking in pictures, despite the fact that “the imperative itself is ungroundable and unrepresentable.”31 The Actress’s call for “a play of questions” in “the tone of psalms” resonates inexactly as “palms” and the openhanded gesture of sharing applause at suspended disbelief—although by now Spoilsport is already “[looking] at the palm of his hand,” a figure of doubt, as is “Parzival’s” mute Kaspar, a traumatized idiot (and an etymological “fool”) chased from his home by questions and questioners. Parzival is left to the homelessness of wandering and *wondering about*, which *The Searchers’* idiot Mose Harper forestalls by reserving himself the promise of a permanent place in the Edwards family home. “Which was the corner where you didn’t have to be afraid?” Spoilsport asks Parzival, the question as always being posed while looking back over your shoulder to see how soon, in what form and from which direction the catastrophe of homelessness might come.32 Spoilsport asks, of the now homeless (when is “now”?) Parzival, “where in your hometown was the border beyond which the air of home suddenly evaporated, where the light of home turned gray and you saw yourself dragged out of your corner of colors into pallor and confusion?” When and where in time and space did the incapacitating anxiety begin and “whom do you blame for your incurable wound?”33 And with “wound” we begin to suspect what we already knew, that Parzival is also an actor, *my* actor, who “can only be asked questions that do not begin with a ‘who’ or ‘what,’ nor with a ‘where’ or ‘when,’ not to speak of ‘why’ or ‘how,’ which can solely be answered with a yes or no.”34 A mind that cannot be bothered with logic but can still be bothered *by* logic is a poor candidate for question-and-answer language-gaming. Parzival re-inflects Kaspar’s signature line to speak of homelessness—“I don’t like to be where I come from”—thereafter
unspooling a Lucky-like flood of logorrheic free-associations the spectacle of which “seems a constant effort to shake off the words at the same time. But the more he tries to get rid of them, the more there are coming out of him. Now that he is quiet, the talking apparently continues non-stop inside himself.”35 Self-questioning thought behavior is a form of self-abasement as the fist and dog chain with which Parzival hits himself on the head enact. And yet, “the questioning imagination,” Wide Eyes says, “must not remain fettered. The cherry orchard of questions must not be cut down.”36 And with this citation, the sonorous hinterland of thought thinking itself reclaims a landscape of doubt disguised as certainty (Ranevskaya and family) and certainty disguised as doubt (Yepikhodov), the latter being another, better way of defining catastrophism.

The drama needs catastrophe, needs things not to work.37

In act 2 of *The Cherry Orchard*, The Homeless Man appears right after a snapped string has spoken to the problem of temporality as it relates to sonority, specifically to the noise that past time can/not still make, or in the case of the immanent and imminent future, make still and silent like a Tractarian question. If the past cannot change, can the same noise be heard in both the past and the present?38 The Homeless Man, who is at once a harbinger of the displacement and dispossession to come and the reality of these things having already come to pass, says in his person and in so many words that he does not know his way about (he appears to be looking for Andreyev’s train). Homelessness here functions as a sort of Wittgensteinian prophecy, as in Chekhov, a condition of being in the guise of becoming. But is the Homeless Man untimely or posthumous in Caccieri’s coinage?

Untimely people can always look ahead to their own time. Not so for posthumous people; they are absolutely protected from the risk of expectation. They cannot be reached, they cannot be understood. Their own lives do not signify their actuality, that is, the establishment of their rationale. They have too many rationales to be able to confirm them.39

My mind pictures “too many rationales” with the notation “polysemic perversity” as its legend, the replacement status of fact.

Handke’s version of Chekhov’s Homeless Man, rechristened “The Local Man,” lingers longer than his predecessor and says a good deal more but likewise brings with him a sense of perspective that cannot be trusted.40 “Although I love to give information,” The Local Man says, “I shouldn’t be asked anything, I always give the wrong directions. How often did I hide behind the bushes from the wrath of the people I had sent the wrong way.”41 All of these statements have in common the “I,” Wittgenstein’s inauthentic
sign. “Maybe I don’t look it,” says the Local Man, “but I’m not from around here either,” his nominal “localness” expressing the (appropriately) misleading double incapacity of not knowing where your name says you are from and/or not recognizing that expectations associated with your name (e.g., that being local you should know your way about) are misleading and possibly incorrect. The Local Man seems to be speaking as/of Don Juan, that is, the name running from itself as the isomorphic other of an actor legend accountable for the reputation of not/being who or where you are.

The right road is the road which leads to an arbitrarily predetermined end and it is quite clear to us all that there is no sense in talking about the right road apart from such a predetermined goal. Now let us see what we could possibly mean by the expression, “the absolutely right road.” I think it would be the road which everybody on seeing it would, with logical necessity, have to go, or be ashamed for not going. (“LE”)

The whole point of Handke’s play being, of course, that no one agrees on what “the absolutely right road” is, or even, where it leads, and that despite this fact, everyone appears to be ashamed, if not for not going a particular way, that is, in a particular direction, then for going in a particular way, that is, as a mode of performance. Performance wrests “direction” away from the fact of the physical imperative, offering instead staging as fiction and the actor who follows or “takes” direction, who goes nowhere real and yet is situated in an actual nowhere. And so John Wayne as Ethan Edwards cannot really play himself but cannot not play himself either, in the throes of certain uncertainty, wrestling with an ethics of which he cannot speak but only show in the form of a direction taken that is also a search that leads away from “home.”

From the opening stage directions of section 3.2 (Handke following Wittgenstein’s manner of numbering his philosophical propositions with decimal points), we pick out clues to another sonorous land: “[Trees,] thicker and taller [than before] . . . A solitary backyard gate without a handle, without an accompanying fence . . . A lifelike pair of pigeons [goluby in Russian] perched on top of it, their backs turned toward the audience . . . The playing area is reminiscent of the grassy field behind a former park . . . The actors as master and mistress . . . [and] Parzival on the trunk; its weight has driven the voices from his head for now.” David Lynch’s film Blue Velvet (1986), voicing Markson’s, “When I say heard, I am saying so only in a manner of speaking, of course,” begins with a sequence of artificially designed normative events such as watering a suburban lawn and watching television interacting with sights that are more normative in terms of simile than of actuality—a white picket fence fronted by flowers in full, color-saturated and possibly painted bloom; a red fire engine with a Dalmatian sitting on its running board, with both
firemen and fire dog acknowledging the unseen camera with stare, smile, and wave, all of this filmed in slow-motion; the knotting of the garden hose that is watering the suburban lawn to signal the as yet un-erupted aneurysm in the gardener and the quasi-erotic vertical spraying of water from the hose as if from the crotch of the fallen gardener as a Jack Russell terrier (celebrated for their trainability for performance) jumps and snaps at the water, on cue and again in slow motion. Following this mock introduction to the mythical northwestern U.S. town of Lumberton, young Jeffrey Beaumont crosses a grassy field en route to visit his now voiceless father (the home gardener who was earlier felled like a tree with a knot in it) in the hospital. On his way back from the hospital through the same grassy field (“behind Vista”), Jeffrey picks up some stones to throw at an abandoned, dilapidated house. The staging of obsessive thought as a form of *mise en abyme* is manifested at this juncture as a son’s anxiety over his father’s severance from/abandonment of home to homelessness, a state of disrepair.

Jeffrey discovers a severed ear, the aural equivalent of the father’s no longer oracular (patriarchal) voice, now reduced to a wound, a cry of self-pity or for help, the one sound nesting inside the other. The decontextualized severed ear is a sign of wonder, anomalously bobbing on the surface of the world as he found it, while likewise signaling the as yet unrecognized key to the map that will lead Jeffrey into the sonorous land that exists on another level. “A level,” as Lingis defines it,

is neither a purely intelligible order, nor a positive form given to a pure a priori intuition; it is a sensory phenomenon . . . neither a content grasped in a perception nor a form imposed on an amorphous matter of sensation; it is that with which or according to which we perceive. It is not an object formed nor an organization elaborated among objects but an ordinance taken up and followed through.

A level is an interior place in which voice creates its own dimension/dementia and Jeffrey bags an ear as (if it were) evidence, without exercising the detective’s/criminal’s care not to leave fingerprints. Jeffrey immediately takes the ear to Detective Williams, surnamed securely in his own actable identity, whose office number is nevertheless 221, recalling a means of fictional address. 221–B Baker Street is, of course, the home/office address of Sherlock Holmes, a homonym for “home” and a one-off of “house,” confirming that normative artifice is the film’s language-game, along the order of Dean Martin’s “I can’t even watch a house in my own home.”

Arriving at the detective’s home in his neighborhood (a roundabout journey recalling two anterior non-sleeping agents, Hackett and Harford), Jeffrey is instructed “not to tell anybody about your find, but also not to ask more about the case.” This “don’t tell, don’t ask” policy (the artifice of *not* asking questions on the journey to the sonorous land) puts Jeffrey out of the running
for a role in Handke’s play. “One day, when it’s all sewn up,” Detective Williams tells him without irony, “I’ll let you know all the details. Right now, I can’t.” But it is precisely this gag order, the severance of the power or ability to ask or tell about the severed ear that births (through the ear) the aural/oral world of sadomasochistic limit-fetish and OCD fixation to which Jeffrey’s senses have already begun to attend. “I’m just real curious, like you said,” says Jeffrey, who thinks that he understands what he does not yet know. “Are you the one who found the ear?” a dark voice asks Jeffrey. “How did you know?” Jeffrey asks the detective’s daughter Sandy, who answers in mock movie-western fashion, “I just know, that’s all.” What she knows but cannot say she knows is impairment, the sign under which the anxious mind sleeps, like she does below a bedroom poster of Montgomery Clift, whose actor’s face collided with anxious self-regard (so that he did not see the car coming), leaving his mind, like his face, permanently disfigured for his close-up.

The repeated “no” of “knowing” (the not-knowing that is implicit in this innocent knowing) rings with the sonority of a homonymic language-game. “It’s a strange world, isn’t it?” says Jeffrey, distracted by the contingent proximity that allows him to hear (about) “a woman singer” (another sonorous body), before he sees her (intuitively extrapolating from Wittgenstein the existence of a world we cannot imagine not existing). The singer lives “real close to” (just a whisper away from) Jeffrey’s house and the field where he found the severed ear. Jeffrey’s own ear-ring lets him know this at the point his ear is masochistically pierced. Jeffrey knows the singer is married to Don Watts, the severed ear’s rightful owner, while not yet recognizing that “Don Watts” may only represent his own language-gaming to encrypt his own present condition of having too many questions (“whats”) to try on (to “don” or consider) in the wake of his father’s imminent lateness. “Naming,” Wittgenstein asserted, is a “preparation for the use of a word. But what is it a preparation for?” (PI §26). Why is the singer’s captor named “Frank,” as if something wants to be revealed, but surnamed “Booth” as if it didn’t just want to be shown but performed, “acting in a play” being on Wittgenstein’s list of language-games (PI §23). Does Jeffrey’s mind render Frank as a Wittgensteinian thing with a name but without an authentic action attached to it (thus, the apparently contradictory name “Frank Booth”), because he can only exist inside a language-game? (PI §49). Is Frank’s telling the singer, whose name is Dorothy, to “stay alive” a command, “(Do not) Surrender Dorothy!” in the secret hope of displacing and calming “Dorothy” as the anxious, homeless sign of there being no place like (i.e., resembling) home in this strange world? Does Frank breathe in amyl nitrate while compelling the singer to simulate her own masochistic compulsion, not primarily to increase sexual arousal but because it smells (surreally) like crushed ants and mostly because it is also used to treat angina and so might cure Jeffrey’s father’s and indirectly the son’s own incapacity? Jeffrey’s head voice closes off the ends of his vocal chords and produces higher-pitched singing that births a female
singer reading the musical notes off of her abducted son’s party hat as if it were a score of parent-child reconciliation. Jeffrey’s chest voice, primarily used in speaking, is materialized in/as Dorothy’s grunting captor, who demands that blue velvet be stuffed in his mouth to keep him from uttering decipherable speech. Are musical notes and recessed syllables some kind of unspoken code? A man lip-syncs to Roy Orbison’s “In Dreams” because the original singer lost his family in a house fire. The nominally sound-effected Lumberton’s polyphony corresponds with and to the sonorous land’s perverse polysemy, in which hearing loss means loss of meaning as the mind’s (counter-)objective.

“How low your voice has become,” the “Old Woman” tells the “Old Man” in Voyage, his chest voice taking the place of the head. He assures her that her voice has remained the same, but the Old Man’s mention of a missing key (a vocal referent, an anxiety remnant from a house’s possibly unlocked door and a map’s possibly unreadable or even missing metonymic sign) turns the spade in the hole that grows simultaneously no/deeper as the dirt slides back inside, the done back into the doing. An OCD self-checking shopping list from which no item can be checked off is assembled, asking questions the mind can no longer contain: did you leave the key in the lock; the door open; the iron turned on; the lamp turned off so that the automatic timer is not on, alerting burglars to our absence; did you forget to purchase “insurance for the return of our bodies” just in case the burglars broke into our home we’re not in and murdered us in our anxiety dreams? “To an answer that cannot be told, there is no question that can be asked,” says the Local Man, and Spoilsport asks whether “this place where we were to play the adventure of asking reveals its real name to me: ‘bottleneck,’ ” the Wittgensteinian fly-bottle or the aporia of real or simulated doubt reflected in the word “play.” “Could it be that what is most alive in us does not have its own form? That it is unplayable?”

The Cat at the Mouse-Hole

“Certain questions would appear unanswerable.”
—Markson, Wittgenstein’s Mistress

Do I inherently resonate with certain experience(s) that cannot be otherwise explained? Should we simply allow this world and its objects to draw us out along our experiential base, as phenomenologically minded philosophers like Merleau-Ponty, Nancy, and especially and with less mental mediation and as an imperative, Lingis suggest? Should we, as Lingis proposes in relation to “the imperative of the night,” give ourselves over to what he calls “an immensity without tasks”? Or would such immensity return us to the non-task-driven or non-task-equivalent generalized anxiety that already has us in
its grasp? Does a philosophical prescription to cure self-ascription come in an even smaller, more agoraphobic fly-bottle that I should not be prescribed? To give one’s life over to the givenness of the world, to “the weight of the given” is, in effect, to return to the original pain of knowing without knowing, to the performance of answerless questions and the questionable practices of language and pedagogy, the failed mastery of naming as knowing what one (another) thinks. Even our pain is not so much known as self-ascribed, making us all susceptible to neurotic performance. And this, as Budd reminds us, is at the basis of Wittgenstein’s overall philosophical project to which the sensory returns us: “how we are inclined to misrepresent [our pain] to ourselves in false pictures that we conjure up when we are bewitched by our language?”

Can thought be pictured, and if so, does this mean that it can only be seen as if it were in a picture? Probably so. But an actual thought cannot be conveyed to another person by way of a picture, since all that is being conveyed is a picture of the original thought. “The picture was the key,” wrote Wittgenstein. “Or, at any rate, it seemed like the key,” he observed of his earlier philosophy (RPPI §893). The picture is, in the end, printed like the legend that replaces fact as history, which of course, includes medical history. Language is important because it allows us to exchange pictures of what we mean when we use or even infer the word “thinking.” Thinking being a process, it cannot, in the end, be depicted. No processing of the brain, not even by a SPECT SCAN, can read my thoughts. The best that Hamlet can do is provide us with a picture of thinking. It is not a wrong picture in as much as “thinking” plays a role in a language-game that likens pictures to thinking. But in the end, such pictures are devalued by the context that enables them, that being the language-game itself that accounts only for the word “thinking” and not the experience of thinking. Is it possible, though, that thinking is a language-game we cannot learn, one whose context is, as yet, unknown to us? Wittgenstein allows that such language-games may exist (RPPI §606).

“In philosophy,” says Wittgenstein, “the comparison of thinking to a process that goes on in secret is a misleading one” (RPPI §580). The problem may well reside in comparison itself, under whose rubric we may also include “similarity,” “likeness,” “simile,” and “analogy.” All these word-concepts represent thinking in a pictorial mode, thinking-as-seeing and as show. Having argued for showing versus telling in his early philosophy on the basis of showing’s greater usefulness (and thus a potential path back to the ordinary), Wittgenstein’s discontinuous analogical way of doing philosophy came to want to make greater sense of telling and to make less out of showing in the end. Why, he asks, must we make anything out of observed pain, our own or another person’s? At the same time, Wittgenstein can assert: “You must seriously imagine that there really could be a word in some language that stood for pain-behaviour and not for pain” (RPPI §1133). But Wittgenstein is not affirming pain behavior, which I have been calling “performance
behavior” throughout this study. He is only acknowledging such behavior as a language-game that some people might play. By inferentially critiquing the viability or usefulness of pain behavior, Wittgenstein is, in a sense, asking the individual what he is asking man-made philosophy and psychology, namely: why would you voluntarily incapacitate yourself with your own devices?

The conditional answer to this question is that the problem of incapacity can only be understood as being specific to an individual by obsessively asking questions that are “tokens of the questioner’s intellectual disquiet.” Wittgenstein’s philosophical method is therapeutic not only because it consciously exposes the otherwise neurotically picture-making mind to the clarifying light of analysis, but because it does so in light of philosophy’s obsessive questioning of the meaning of consciousness in the abstract. Psychology errs, says Wittgenstein, by asking the wrong questions and thereby seeking to solve and saying it has solved what are, in fact, the wrong problems. In so doing, psychology “by-pass[es] the thing that is worrying us” (RPPI §1039). Wittgenstein occasionally appears to mimic the psychiatrist’s voicing of original trauma: “The egg-shell of its origin clings to any thinking, shewing one what you struggled with in growing up” (RPPI §1124). However, the second part of this proposition which reads, “What views are your circle’s testimony: from which ones you have had to break free,” suggests that it is thought’s self-expression through language and performance behaviors that continually entangle us. Philosophy does worse, says Wittgenstein, “often solv[ing] a problem merely by saying: ‘Here is no more difficulty than there.’ That is, just by conjuring up a problem, where there was none before. It says: ‘Isn’t it just remarkable that . . . ,’ and leaves it at that” (RPPI §1000). In truth, philosophy and psychology both do this, each via its own method that overlays the appearance of thought-economy on a subject that is inherently abstract, and by so doing enabling performance behavior, an acting out of the problem as if it were the problem’s solution. This is because, as Wittgenstein said of the philosophical method, the problem’s solution and the problem itself may be in equal measure conjuring acts.

Why would you, in some sense or at some time, knowingly obscure (occlude as in seeing) the ordinary with the uselessly decorative or descriptive, on the order of “I know I am groaning dreadfully, I must see a doctor?” (RPPI §912). How can I know that someone else experiences a word, let alone a word describing a sensation, as I do? (RPPI §876). How do I know that we are seeing the same picture of the word, or are more broadly in the same picture that the language-game that produces the word describes and by which it is in turn described? When one Mamet character asks another via shorthand “In or out?” (as in “Are you in or out of the game?”), the answer is made to seem finite and simple—but it is not, precisely because of what language does and what language cannot do in relation to thought. The fact is, as Wittgenstein argues, that we all see differently because we all see in aspects, meaning that we not only see in pictures, but we “see something into
the picture” (RPPI §1028). Mise-en-scène strives to enchant the distracted mind into unseeing, for example, the Hamletism that stands in the same space as Hamlet, the performance behavior overriding any honest performance of the Dane’s “feeling of unreality” (the antithesis of a hackneyed stage Ghost) the audience might hope to experience (RPPI §789).

Wittgenstein asks, “When a cat lies in wait by a mouse-hole—do I assume that it is thinking about the mouse?” (RPPI §829). In theater, the answer to this question is most often, inherently “yes,” with the apparati of stage, frame, and curtain signaling the question’s rhetoricity and performance as being the solution of whatever problem it chooses to pose. However, when the stage speaks plainly of itself, of the mechanism of its own production, of “the boredom of doors” as signs of predictable outcomes, unhinging said predictability and asking the actors assigned to open them “in or out?” the ontologically sealed stage picture (the mise-en-scène’s picturization of the stage’s ontology) is likewise interrogated. And in that picture, locked into the scenic room, stranded on the stage, is the wounded actor, the audience’s depicted self.

“What does it mean,” Wittgenstein asks, “to say that self-observation makes my acting, my movements, uncertain?” At the same time, he offers, “I cannot observe myself unobserved” (RPPI §839). And here he and we are caught, as always, between the incapacity of seeing as a way of saying with certainty and saying what it is we think we see, what we see as thinking. Can you act this? Can you cross a stage involuntarily? Can you be made to act? Does being made to act necessarily free you from motive, or does it instead make your acting even more motive-driven? OCD answers this last question with a resounding, if troubled, “yes.”

Certainly the answer to the question “At what point does such neurotic performance behavior actually become creative?” must be subjective, especially given the ongoing debate over what constitutes the limits of performance. Perhaps we can agree that in the end both creative performance and performance behavior constitute their own forms of rule-following. But in the case of performance behavior, these rules take the form of a person’s own real or imagined-to-be transgressive mental directives, intrusive thoughts in relation to representational constraints (which the creative product externalizes).

At what point does the mental risk of performance behavior outweigh its real or quasi-artistic reward? At what point does the weight of being yourself, of what Wittgenstein described as “the consciousness of the uniqueness of my life” and Frank Cioffi calls “the loneliness of being the only specimen of yourself” wear you out (“you,” of course, here being a mental object)? Is there an end to what William James referred to as “egological wonder sickness,” and is that the unplayability at which Handke hints at the end of his surrogate characters’ benighted Voyage to the Sonorous Land, in which the final unaskability (and not unanswerability) of questions would seem to lay the late (deceased) and the later (rethought) Wittgenstein to rest? I think here again of Handke’s Kaspar, a byproduct of the first or early Wittgenstein,
who even then wondered aloud what might be said, and what left unsaid. Kaspar’s un/spoken words are Handke’s but also mine, and not just because, like Borges’s fictional scribe Pierre Menard, I wrote them down. What would it take for Kaspar to be able to say what it is he has to say in an unrehearsed and non-self-ascribed manner, in language unbewitched by itself that is comprehensible and creative insofar as mind and the possibility of other minds allow? What would it take for Kaspar’s audience to recognize his hand, which first pushes through the stage curtain, as constituting the shape of the pain of disarticulating stage space in all its knownness, so that its givenness can articulate the sort of ordinary meaning that so obsessed Wittgenstein?58

In the end, reading Wittgenstein has brought me to another level of empathy not only with his frustration at not being understood but with my own frustration with trying to articulate the experience of thought and thinking as a scriptable medium. Misreading Wittgenstein is commensurate with my own resourcelessness as a reader, making incapacity its own aporia. If aporetic mind-reading speaks to lack, what it may most fear is a lack of problems to articulate in the form of a thought process.59 When Wittgenstein asks, “doesn’t testing come to an end?” (OC §164), he is speaking to the problem of certainty, but this is bolstered by the certainty that there are problems, which though they may not be solvable or because they are not solvable, allows the speaker a certain measure of optimism in what otherwise appears to be a form of complaint.

Wittgenstein’s famously remarked, “Once I have exhausted the justifications, I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am simply inclined to say: ‘This is simply what I do.’ ” Wittgenstein makes this statement following his own question, “How am I able to follow a rule?” (PI §217). He may or may not have been using the pronoun “I” to speak of himself, even as a hypothetical example, but insofar as reading him has enabled me to play a scriptive role, I know that he is speaking to me. By playing this role, I have, in a sense, enabled Wittgenstein’s writing to fulfill what its author saw as being the two mandates of philosophy—to perform its writing like poetry and to write its reader toward acting.60 My life has been lived as an anxious, obsessive, and melancholic proposition that has compelled me to make up my own rules, however much their enactment may overdramatize the performance of my own incapacity.