

The Uncanniness of the Ordinary

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The prospect of delivering the Tanner Lecture inclined me and encouraged me to attempt to fit together into some reasonable, or say convivial, circle a collection of the main beasts in my jungle or wilderness of interests. An obvious opening or pilot beast is that of the concept of the ordinary, since the first essay I published that I still use (the title essay of the collection *Must We Mean What We Say?*) was begun as a defense of the work of my teacher J. L. Austin, the purest representative of so-called ordinary language philosophy. In anticipation of this attempt I scheduled last year at Harvard a set of courses designed to bring myself before myself. In that fall I offered a course entitled *The Philosophy of the Ordinary* in which I lectured for the first time in six or seven years on certain texts of Austin's and on Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, with an increasing sense at once of my continuing indebtedness to this body of thought and practice, and at the same time with a sense of its relative neglect in contemporary intellectual life — a neglect at any rate of the aspect of this thought and practice that engages me most, namely the devotion to the so-called ordinariness or everydayness of language. In the spring semester I turned to one seminar on recent psychoanalytic literary criticism and to another on some late essays of Heidegger's, in both of which bodies of work desperate fresh antagonisms seem to be set up against the ideas of ordinary language philosophy. What I propose to do here is mostly to sketch a topography of certain texts and concepts from that year of courses in which these fresh antagonisms may serve to test the resources of the views in question.

Before entering the topography I must say something about the title I have given this material — the uncanniness of the ordinary. When I hit on this phrase I remembered it as occurring in

Freud's essay "The Uncanny,"¹ but when I checked the text I learned that it does not. I had at the same time forgotten that the phrase more or less does occur in Heidegger, in "The Origin of the Work of Art."² Its occurrence in Heidegger is pertinent, but my intuition of the ordinariness of human life, and of its avoidance of the ordinary, is not Heidegger's. For him the extraordinariness of the ordinary has to do with forces in play, beyond the grasp and the reach of ordinary awareness, that constitute our habitual world; it is a constitution he describes as part of his account of the technological, of which what we accept as the ordinary is as it were one consequence; it is thus to be seen as a symptom of what Nietzsche prophesied, or diagnosed, in declaring that for us "the wasteland grows."³ Whereas for me the uncanniness of the ordinary is epitomized by the possibility or threat of what philosophy has called skepticism, understood (as in my studies of Austin and of the later Wittgenstein I have come to understand it) as the capacity, even desire, of ordinary language to repudiate itself, specifically to repudiate its power to word the world, to apply to the things we have in common, or to pass them by. (By "the desire of ordinary language to repudiate itself" I mean — doesn't it go without saying? — a desire on the part of speakers of a native or mastered tongue who desire to assert themselves, and despair of it.) (An affinity between these views of the ordinary, suggesting the possibility of mutual derivation, is that both Heidegger's and mine respond to the fantastic in what human beings will accustom themselves to, call this the surrealism of the habitual — as if to be human is forever to be prey to turning your corner of the human race, hence perhaps all of it, into some new species of the genus of humanity, for the better or for the worse.

¹Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," Standard Edition, vol. 17, pp. 219-52.

²In *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 54.

³Martin Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?*, trans. J. Glenn Gray and Fred D. Wieck (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), pp. 38, 49, 60, 64, and elsewhere.

I might describe my philosophical task as one of outlining the necessity, and the lack of necessity, in the sense of the human as inherently strange, say unstable, its quotidian as forever fantastic. In what follows I am rather at pains to record variations of this sense in certain writers not customarily or habitually, say institutionally, called philosophers.) What all of this comes from and leads to is largely what the five hundred pages of *The Claim of Reason* is about. I hope enough of it will get through in this lecture to capture a sense of what I take to be at stake.

One general caution. I am not here going to make a move toward deriving the skeptical threat philosophically. My idea is that what in philosophy is known as skepticism (for example as in Descartes and Hume and Kant) is a relation to the world, and to others, and to myself, and to language, that is known to what you might call literature, or anyway responded to in literature, in uncounted other guises — in Shakespeare's tragic heroes, in Emerson's and Thoreau's "silent melancholy" and "quiet desperation," in Wordsworth's perception of us as without "interest," in Poe's "perverseness." Why philosophy and literature do not know this about one another — and to that extent remain unknown to themselves — has been my theme it seems to me forever.

It may help give a feel for what is at stake for me if I spell out a little my response to discovering that the phrase "the uncanniness of the ordinary" is not in Freud's text. My response was, a little oddly and roughly, to think: "That's not my fault, but Freud's; he hadn't grasped his own subject." A cause of my response has to do with a pair of denials, or rather with one denial and one error, in Freud's reading of the E. T. A. Hoffmann story called "The Sandman" with which the essay on the uncanny occupies itself.⁴ Freud introduces the Hoffmann story by citing its treatment in the only discussion in German in the "medico-

⁴I use the translation of the Hoffmann story in *Selected Writings of E. T. A. Hoffmann*, ed. and trans. by Elizabeth C. Knight and Leonard J. Kent (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), vol. 1, pp. 137-67.

psychological” literature Freud had found on the subject of the uncanny, an article from 1906 by a certain Jentsch. Jentsch attributes the sense of the uncanny to the recognition of an uncertainty in our ability to distinguish the animate from the inanimate: Hoffmann’s story features the beautiful automaton Olympia whom its hero falls in love with (precipitated by his viewing her through a magic spyglass constructed by one of her constructors). At first this love serves for the amusement of others who are certain they see right through the inanimateness of the machine; but then the memory of the love serves to feed their anxiety that they may be making the same error with their own beloveds — quite as though this anxiety about other minds, or other bodies, is a datable event in human history. (As in Hoffmann’s story: “A horrible distrust of human figures in general arose.”) The hero Nathaniel goes mad when he sees the automaton pulled apart by its two fathers, or makers. He is, before the final catastrophe, nursed back to health by his childhood sweetheart Clara, whom he had forgotten in favor of Olympia.

Now Freud denies, no fewer than four times, that the inability to distinguish the animate from the inanimate is what causes the sense of the uncanny, insisting instead that the cause of the undoubted feeling of the uncanny in Hoffmann’s tale is the threat of castration. I find Freud’s denial in this context to be itself uncanny, I mean to bear a taint of the mechanical or the compulsive and of the return of the repressed familiar, since there is no intellectual incompatibility between Freud’s explanation and Jentsch’s. One would have expected Sigmund Freud, otherwise claiming his inheritance of the poets and creative writers of his culture, to invoke the castration complex precisely as a new explanation or interpretation of the particular uncertainty in question, that is, to suggest it as Hoffmann’s insight that one does not resolve the uncertainty, or achieve the clear distinction, between the animate and the inanimate, until the Oedipal drama is resolved under the threat of castration. Put otherwise: until that resolution one does

not see others as other, know and acknowledge their (separate, animate, opposed) human existence. So put, this issue of the other's automatonity shows itself as a form of the skeptical problem concerning the existence of (what Anglo-American philosophy calls) other minds. And this opening of philosophy in the Hoffmann story suggests a way to understand Freud's as it were instinctive denial of the problem of animatedness as key to it. It is a striking and useful instance of Freud's repeated dissociation of psychoanalysis from philosophy, a dissociation, as I have argued elsewhere, in which Freud seems to me to be protesting too much, as though he knows his own uncertainty about how, even whether, psychoanalysis and philosophy *can* be distinguished, without fatal damage to each of them.⁵

Freud's insistent denial that the uncanny is unsurmountable (that is, his denial that it is a standing philosophical threat) is perhaps what causes (or is caused by) the straightforward error he makes in reading (or remembering) the closing moments of Hoffmann's tale.⁶ Freud recounts as follows:

From the top [of the tower] Clara's attention is drawn to a curious object moving along the street. Nathaniel looks at this thing through Coppola's spy-glass, which he finds in his pocket, and falls into a new attack of madness. . . . Among the people who begin to gather below there comes forward the figure of the lawyer Coppelius, who has suddenly returned. We may suppose that it was his approach, seen through the spy-glass, which threw Nathaniel into his fit of madness.

It is true that one *expects* Nathaniel — and doubtless so does he — as he takes out the glass, to direct it to whatever had caught

⁵Freud's repeated attempts to dissociate psychoanalysis from philosophy is one of the guiding topics of my essay "Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Melodrama of the Unknown Woman," to appear in a volume entitled *The Images in Our Souls: Cavell, Psychoanalysis, Cinema*, constituting Volume X of the series sponsored by the Forum on Psychiatry and the Humanities, edited by Joseph Smith, M.D., to be published by the Johns Hopkins University Press in 1987.

⁶Samuel Weber, "The Sideshow, or: Remarks on a Canny Moment," *MLN* 88 (1973), 1102-33, notes the error but interprets it differently.

Clara's attention, and the ending suggests that this would have been his father. But in fact (that is to say, in Hoffmann's tale) what happens is something else: "Nathaniel . . . found Coppola's spy-glass and looked to one side. Clara was standing in front of the glass. There was convulsive throbbing in his pulse" What we are, accordingly, climactically asked to think about is not why a close spotting of Coppelius (whom Nathaniel never finds in the glass), but rather a chance vision of Clara, causes Nathaniel's reentry into madness. (We are asked to think indeed of the significance that the woman has come between Nathaniel and the object he sought, call this his father; rather than, as Freud claims, of the father coming between the man and his desire. The divided pairs of fathers would then signify not the father's power but his impotence, or resignation.) Then the leap from the tower is to the father, in accusation and appeal. Freud is awfully casual about the power of the father's gift (or curse) of vision: what we know about the father's glass until the climax on the tower is that, in the glass, inanimate, constructed Olympia achieves animation for Nathaniel. So let us continue at the end to grant the glass that power. But how? Since Clara is — is she not? — animate, shall we reverse the direction of the power of the glass and say that it transforms Clara into an automaton? This is not unimaginable, but the irony of reversal seems too pat, too tame, to call upon the complexity of issues released in Hoffmann's text.

I recall that Nathaniel had, in outrage at Clara's rejection of his poetry, called her a "damned lifeless automaton," and from the opening of the tale he expresses impatience with her refusal to credit lower and hence higher realms of being — impatience with, let me say, her ordinariness. (He has something of Heidegger's sense of the ordinary, the sense of it in one form of Romanticism.) Then when Nathaniel glimpses Clara in his glass we might glimpse that again something has come to life for him — Clara as she is, as it were, in her ordinariness, together with the knowledge that he could not bear this ordinariness, her flesh-and-bloodness,

since it means bearing her separateness, her existence as other to him, exactly what his craving for the automaton permitted him to escape, one way or the other (either by demanding no response to the human or by making him an automaton). The concluding paragraph of the tale passes on a report that many years later Clara “had been seen in a remote district sitting hand in hand with a pleasant-looking man in front of the door of a splendid country house, two merry boys playing around her . . . that quiet, domestic happiness . . . which Nathaniel, with his lacerated soul, could never have provided her.” My reading in effect takes this description as of the image Nathaniel came upon in the spyglass on the tower.

The glass is a death-dealing rhetoric machine, producing or expressing the consciousness of life in one case (Olympia’s) by figuration, in the other (Clara’s) by literalization, or say defiguration. One might also think of it as a machine of incessant animation, the parody of a certain romantic writing; and surely not unconnectedly as an uncanny anticipation of a movie camera. The moral of the machine I would draw provisionally this way: There is a repetition necessary to what we call life, or the animate, necessary for example to the human; and a repetition necessary to what we call death, or the inanimate, necessary for example to the mechanical; and there are no marks or features or criteria or rhetoric by means of which to tell the difference between them. From which, let me simply claim, it does not follow that the difference is unknowable or undecidable. On the contrary, the difference is the basis of everything there is for human beings to know, or say decide (like deciding to live), and to decide on no basis beyond or beside or beneath ourselves. Within the philosophical procedure of radical skepticism, the feature specifically allegorized by the machine of the spyglass is skepticism’s happening all at once, the world’s vanishing at the touch, perhaps, of the thought that you may be asleep dreaming that you are awake, the feature Descartes expresses in his “astonishment.”

The essay of mine I cited a moment ago (note 5) in which I press the case of Freud's inheritance of philosophy, against his fervent dissociation of his work from it, is framed by a reading of Max Ophuls' film *Letter from an Unknown Woman* focused on the melodramatic gesture of horror elicited from the man who is sent the depicted letter, as he completes its reading. My reading of his death-dealing vision is very much along the lines of the one I have just given of Nathaniel's horror on looking through (or reading the images offered by) the spyglass — a horrified vision of ordinariness, of the unremarkable other seen as just that unremarkable other. You may feel, accordingly, that I wish to force every romantic melodrama to yield the same result. Or you may, I hope, feel that I have honestly come upon a matter that romantic tales of horror, and certain films that incorporate them, have in fact and in genre taken as among their fundamental subjects for investigation, say the acknowledgment of otherness, specifically as a spiritual task, one demanding a willingness for the experience of horror, and as a datable event in the unfolding of philosophical skepticism in the West.

Now let us turn to those courses I mentioned and their topography, associated with ideas of the ordinary, with the name of Heidegger, and with psychoanalytic literary criticism.

Wittgenstein says in the *Investigations*, "When I talk about language (words, sentences, etc.) I must speak the language of every day. Is this language somehow too coarse and material for what we want to say? *Then how is another one to be constructed?* —And how strange [merkwürdig] that we should be able to do anything at all with the one we have!" (§120). Strange, I expect Wittgenstein means immediately to imply, that we can formulate so precise and sophisticated a charge within and against our language as to find it "coarse" and "material." Are these terms of criticism themselves coarse and material? Now listen to words from two texts of Heidegger's, from the essay "Das Ding"

(“The Thing”)⁷ and from his set of lectures *Was Heisst Denken?* (translated as *What Is Called Thinking?*), both published within three years before the publication of the *Investigations* in 1953. From “The Thing”: “Today everything present is equally near and far. The distanceless prevails.” And again: “Is not this merging [or lumping] of everything into [uniform distancelessness] more unearthly than everything bursting apart? Man stares at what the atom bomb could bring with it. He does not see that the atom bomb and its explosion are the mere final emission of what the atom bomb could bring with it. He does not see that the atom bomb and its explosion are the mere final emission of what has long since taken place, has already happened.” What has already happened according to Heidegger is the shrinking or disintegration of the human in the growing dominion of a particular brand of thinking, a growing violence in our demand to grasp or explain the world. (I put aside for the moment my distrust, almost contempt, at the tone of Heidegger’s observation, its attitude of seeming to exempt itself from the common need to behave under a threat whose absoluteness makes it [appear to us] unlike any earlier.) A connection with ordinary language of the fate of violent thinking and of distancelessness comes out in *What Is Called Thinking?*, where Heidegger says:

A symptom, at first sight quite superficial, of the growing power of one-track thinking is the increase everywhere of designations consisting of abbreviations of words, or combinations of their initials. Presumably no one here has ever given serious thought to what has already come to pass when you, instead of University, simply say “Uni.” “Uni”—that is like “Kino” [“Movie”]. True, the moving picture theater continues to be different from the academy of the sciences. [Does this suggest that one day they will not be different? How would this matter? How to Heidegger?] Still, the designation “Uni” is not accidental, let alone harmless. [P. 34]

⁷In *Poetry, Language, Thought*.

Reading this I ask myself: When I use the word “movies” (instead of “motion pictures”?, “cinema”?) am I really exemplifying, even helping along, the annihilation of the human? And then I think: The writer Heidegger cannot hear the difference between the useful non-speak or moon-talk of acronyms (UNESCO, NATO, MIRV, AIDS) and the intimacy (call it nearness) of passing colloquialisms and cult abbreviations (Kino, flick, shrink, Poli Sci, Phil). But then I think: No, it must be just that the force of Heidegger’s thought here is not manifest in his choice of examples any more than it is in his poor efforts to describe the present state of industrial society (as if our awareness of the surface of these matters is to be taken for granted, as either sophisticated or as irredeemably naïve). In descriptions of the present state of Western society, the passion and accuracy of, say, John Stuart Mill’s prose quite eclipses Heidegger’s. And as to his invoking of popular language and culture, Heidegger simply hasn’t the touch for it, the ear for it. These matters are more deeply perceived in, say, a movie of Alfred Hitchcock’s.

To dispel for myself Heidegger’s condescension in this region I glance at a line from Hitchcock’s *North by Northwest* (the one in which Cary Grant is attacked by a crop-dusting plane in a Midwestern cornfield and in which he rescues a woman from the Mount Rushmore monument of the heads of four American presidents). The line is said by a man in response to Grant’s asking him whether he is from the F.B.I.: “F.B.I., C.I.A., we’re all in the same alphabet soup”; after which their conversation is drowned out by the roar of an airplane, toward which they are walking. At first glance, that line says that it doesn’t matter what you say; but at second glance, or listening to the growl of the invisible motor, what the line says is that it matters that this does not matter. That line invokes (1) the name of a child’s food, something to begin from; and (2) a colloquialism meaning that we are in a common peril; and (3) is a sentence whose six opening letters (initials) signal that we have forgotten, to our peril, the

ABC's of communication, namely the ability to speak together out of common interest. But have we forgotten it because we lack long or ancient words? It seems more worthwhile to ask why "F.B.I." abbreviates a name that has in it the same word as Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, and to ask what the concept of intelligence is that the military have agencies and communities of it whereas universities do not. But if I am willing to excuse Heidegger provisionally for his lack of ear in such regions, then I must wait for my approach to them until I can invoke the writing of Ralph Waldo Emerson and of his disciple Henry David Thoreau, for both of whom the idea of nearness, or as Thoreau puts it, of nextness (by which he explicitly says he means *the nearest*), is also decisive, and whose concepts I feel I can follow on.

For the moment I turn to the other material I mentioned that is apparently antagonistic to ordinary language and its philosophy, that represented in my seminar on recent psychoanalytically shaped literary criticism, which began — in my effort to begin studying recent French thought in some systematic way — by reading moments in Jacques Lacan's controversial and perhaps too famous study of Edgar Allan Poe's tale "The Purloined Letter."⁸ Lacan's professed reason for taking up the Poe story is its serviceability as an illustration of Freud's speculations concerning the repetition compulsion in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, an illustration suggested by the narrative feature of Poe's tale that a compromising letter, stolen by one person who leaves a substitute in its place, is restolen and returned to its original position by another person who leaves another substitute (or construction), in turn, in its place. Fastening on the shifts of identification established by this repeated structure of thefts or displacements of a letter, Lacan in effect treats Poe's tale as an allegory of what he understands psychoanalytic understanding to require — the tracing and return

⁸Jacques Lacan, "Seminar on the Purloined Letter," *Yale French Studies* 48 (*French Freud*) (1973).

of displaced signifiers. This understanding, together with the special art by which the letter is concealed, also constitutes the tale as an allegory of writing. I ask those of you for whom this, and the aftermath it has inspired, has all become too familiar to bear with me while I go over the tale again just far enough to indicate (something that has surprised me, even alarmed me) that it also forms at least as exact and developed an allegory of ordinary language philosophy. The sense of this application is given in Poe's tale's all but identifying itself as a study — and hence perhaps as an act — of mind-reading.

I believe that a certain offense taken toward ordinary language philosophy (from its inception in Austin and Wittgenstein until the present) is a function of some feeling that it claims mind-reading powers for itself: what else in fact could be the source of the ferocious knowledge the ordinary language philosophers will claim to divine by going over stupidly familiar words that we are every bit as much the master of as they? For example, Austin claims⁹ that when I say "I know" I am not claiming to penetrate more deeply or certainly into reality than when I say "I believe"; I am, rather, taking a different stance toward what I communicate, I give my word, stake my mind, differently — the greater penetration is perhaps into my trustworthiness. And it seems to me that an immediate philosophical yield Austin wants from this observation (and perhaps similar yields from a thousand similar observations) is its questioning, perhaps repudiation, of Plato's ancient image of one set of ascending degrees of knowledge, an image Plato specifies in his allegory of the "divided line" of knowledge, an idea, if not an image, philosophers are still likely to hold without being able to question. From Austin's questioning or repudiation here a further consequence would be to question whether there is, or ought to be, or what the fantasy is that there is, a special class of persons to be called philosophers, who possess and

⁹In his great essay "Other Minds," in *Philosophical Papers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961).

are elevated by a special class or degree of knowledge. Austin's idea would seem to be that the decisive philosophical difference between minds lies not in their possession of facts and their agility of manipulation — these differences are reasonably obvious — but in, let us say, their intellectual scrupulousness, their sense of what one is or could be in a position to say, to claim authority for imparting, in our common finitude, to a fellow human being.

Does my elaboration of Austin's implication from the difference he has discovered between saying "I believe" and "I know" (that is, the difference between belief and knowledge) convey the kind of offense he may give, may indeed cultivate? I guess I was just now cultivating, or inviting, offense in my parenthetical, casual use of "that is" to move from our use of the words "belief" and "knowledge" to, perhaps I can say, the nature of belief and of knowledge. This casual move (or, as Emerson would put it, this casualty) is worded in Wittgenstein's motto "Grammar says what kind of object something is" (§373). This is, I think, not just one more offense, because without this sense of discovery (of the nature of things) the examples of ordinary language philosophy would altogether, to my mind, fail in their imagination; but if this is right, its persistent obscurity is a reason that the production of such examples is so hard, perhaps impossible, to teach. When in the opening essays of *Must We Mean What We Say?* I sought to characterize and defend this move by aligning the motivation of the *Investigations* with that of the *Critique of Pure Reason* as the exploration of transcendental logic, not only was I not given credit but my work was accused of being a discredit to empirically sound philosophy.¹⁰ While as an initial reaction this is understandable enough, and while I am not now attempting to add to *this* defense, but rather to take up what I called at the beginning of this essay "fresh antagonisms" to the ordinary, I yet wish to derive a practical consequence from the move I described as

¹⁰See "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy," in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 65.

from language to nature (a move that cries out for further description, in particular descriptions that account for the sense of there being so much as a “move” in question) — the practical consequence, namely, that one cannot know in advance when or whether an example from the appeal to ordinary language will *strike* the philosophical imagination, motivate conversation philosophically. As if ordinary language procedure *at each point* requires the experience of conversion, of being turned around. Talk about offense.

Take one further example, this time from Wittgenstein: “Other people cannot be said to learn of my sensations *only* from my behavior — for I cannot be said to *learn* of them. I *have* them” (*Investigations*, § 246). But first of all, virtually every philosopher who has been gripped by the skeptical question whether and how we can know of the existence of so-called other minds has found himself or herself saying something of this sort, that others know of me at best from my behavior (as if facing themselves with the queries: How else? Through mind-reading, or some other telepathy?). And one might imagine the fun an advanced Parisian sensibility might wish to make out of such a prim appeal to what “cannot” be said, as though Wittgenstein were appealing to our sense of propriety or of, say, linguistic cleanliness — why should we, especially we serious philosophers, stoop to such considerations, or propriety, mere manners? (Would this be a fresh criticism? It seems to resemble the criticism Bertrand Russell and others in the English-speaking world of philosophy initially leveled against the *Investigations* upon its first appearance and to Austin’s work published in the preceding years, that such work amounted to exhortations about how we ought to speak, that it sought to correct our, as it were, rough deportment. This is surely not entirely, or on every understanding, wrong. It is a piece of what Wittgenstein would mean in comparing the present philosophically advanced human race with “primitives.”)

Yet it may at any time come over us, the truth of the matter, that we cannot, so to speak, speak of someone learning of our sensations only from our behavior, without *insisting* that the words make sense; and on no apparent ground for this insistence than philosophical need: and *should* this need be satisfied? But why should philosophy insist on the significance of “only” here? “Only” here suggests some disappointment with my behavior as a route to the knowledge of what is going on in me, our route *faute de mieux* — not a disappointment with this or that piece of my behavior, but with behavior as such, as if my body stands in the way of your knowledge of my mind.

This now begins to show its madness, as though philosophy is insisting on, driven to, some form of emptiness. And some such diagnosis is indeed Wittgenstein’s philosophical conclusion, or his conviction about philosophy. His idea, I might say, is that this philosophical use of “only” — that all but unnoticeable word in his apparently trivial claim about what cannot be said (one triviality among a thousand others) — is not merely a sign that we, say, underestimate the role of the body and its behavior, but that we falsify it, I might even say, falsify the body: in philosophizing we turn the body into as it were an integument. It is as though I, in philosophizing, *want* this metamorphosis, want to place the mind beyond reach, want to get the body inexpressive, and at the same time find that I cannot quite want to, want to without reserve. Wittgenstein is interested in this peculiar strain of philosophy (it may be philosophy’s peculiar crime) to want exactly the impossible, thought torturing itself, language repudiating itself. In Wittgenstein’s philosophizing he seeks the source in language of this torture and repudiation — what it is in language that makes this seem necessary, and what about language makes it possible. He speaks of our being bewitched by language; hence his therapeutic procedures are to disenchant us. Lacan in a comparable way, I believe, speaks of his therapy as reading the

unreadable. (Or Shoshana Felman speaks of it for him, in “On Reading Poetry,” to which, and in further matters, I am indebted.¹¹)

Let this serve to indicate the kind of offense the claims of ordinary language philosophy can, and should, give. It is, at any rate, the attitude or level at which I find Poe’s “The Purloined Letter” to serve as their allegory.

The tale opens, I remind you, as the Prefect of the Parisian police calls upon the detective Dupin to ask his opinion about some troublesome official business. The first words of dialogue are these:

“If it is any point requiring reflection,” observed Dupin, as he forebore to enkindle the wick, “we shall examine it to better purpose in the dark.”

“That is another of your odd notions,” said the Prefect, who had a fashion of calling everything “odd” that was beyond his comprehension, and thus lived amid an absolute legion of “oddities.” . . . “The fact is, the business is *very* simple indeed, . . . but then I thought Dupin would like to hear the details of it, because it is so excessively *odd*.”

“Simple and odd,” said Dupin. . . . “Perhaps it is the very simplicity of the thing which puts you at fault.”

“What nonsense you *do* talk!” replied the Prefect, laughing heartily.

“Perhaps the mystery is a little *too* plain,” said Dupin.

“Oh, good heavens! who ever heard of such an idea?”

“A little *too* self-evident.”

“Ha! ha! ha! — ha! ha! ha! — ho! ho! ho!” roared [the Prefect], profoundly amused, “Oh, Dupin, you will be the death of me yet!”¹²

The narrative comes to turn on the fact that a purloined letter was hidden by being kept in plain view, as if a little too self-evident, a

¹¹In *The Literary Freud: Mechanisms of Defense and the Poetic Will*, Joseph Smith, M.D., ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), pp. 119–48.

¹²I use the Thomas Ollive Mabbott edition of Poe’s *Collected Works* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), vol. III, pp. 972–97 (including notes).

little too plain to notice, as it were beneath notice, say under the nose, and then moves to an examination of competing theories of the way to find the truth of hidden things. Now of course a reader of Wittgenstein's *Investigations* may well prick up his or her ears at the very announcement of a tale in which something is missed just because obvious. One remembers such characteristic remarks from the *Investigations* as these:

The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and [ordinariness, everydayness]. (One is unable to notice something — because it is always before one's eyes.) [§ 129]

Philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything. — Since everything lies open to view there is nothing to explain. For what is hidden, for example, is of no interest to us. [§ 126]

But a philosopher other than one of ordinary language may make comparable claims, for example the Heidegger of *Being and Time*, whose method can be said to be meant to unconceal the obvious, the always present. The allegorical pivot from Poe's tale specifically to ordinary language philosophy is the tale's repetition of the idea of the *odd*, and specifically its associating this idea of the odd with the consequence of laughter. For the producing of examples whose oddness rouses laughter (no doubt mostly muted) is a feature of Austin's and of Wittgenstein's methods at once philosophically indispensable and (so far as I know) philosophically unique to them. Austin is the more hilarious perhaps, but here I remind you of this sound in the *Investigations*:

Imagine someone saying: "But I know how tall I am!" and then laying his hand on top of his head to prove it. [§ 279]

The chair is thinking to itself: . . . WHERE? In one of its parts? Or outside its body; in the air around it? Or not *anywhere* at all? But then what is the difference between. this chair's saying something to itself and another one's doing so, next to it? — But then how is it with man: where does *he* say things to himself? [§ 361]

It would be possible to imagine someone groaning out: "Someone is in pain — I don't know who!" — and our then hurrying to help him, the one who groaned. [§407]

But such examples only scratch the surface of the dimension of oddness in the *Investigations*. There is, beyond them, Wittgenstein's frequent use of the word *seltsam*, characteristically translated in the English as "queer," which also translates Wittgenstein's frequent use of *merkwürdig*, as does the English "strange." *Of course* they are frequent, since both exactly contrast with what is *alltäglich*, ordinary, everyday, the appeal to which is Wittgenstein's constant method and goal. Wittgenstein sometimes explicitly undertakes to instruct us when to find something odd ("Don't take it as a matter of course, but as a remarkable fact, that pictures and fictitious narratives give us pleasure, occupy our minds" [§ 524]); as well as sometimes to give directions for overcoming a self-imposed sense of strangeness ("Sometimes a sentence only seems queer when one imagines a different language-game for it from the one in which we actually use it." [§ 195]). He speaks to us quite as if we have become unfamiliar with the world, as if our mechanism of anxiety, which should signal danger, has gone out of order, working too much and too little.

The return of what we accept as the world will then present itself as a return of the familiar, which is to say, exactly under the concept of what Freud names the uncanny. That the familiar is a product of a sense of the unfamiliar and of the sense of a return means that what returns after skepticism is never (just) the same. (A tempting picture here could be expressed by the feeling that "there is no way back." Does this imply that there is a way ahead? Perhaps there are some "back's" or "once's" or pasts the presence to which requires no "way." Then that might mean that we have not found the way away, have never departed, have not entered history. What has to be developed here is the idea of difference so perfect that there is no way or feature in which the difference consists [I describe this by saying that in such a case there is no

difference in criteria] — as in the difference between the waking world and the world of dreams, or between natural things and mechanical things, or between the masculine and the feminine, or between the past and the present. A difference in which everything and nothing differs is uncanny.)

But the-angel of the odd hovers over the *Investigations* yet more persistently. The whole of the book can be seen to be contained in the book's opening of itself with a quotation from the *Confessions* of St. Augustine in which its subject describes his learning of language. This possibility depends upon seeing that the quotation contains the roots of the entire flowering of concepts in the rest of the *Investigations*. But it equally depends on seeing that the most remarkable fact about the quotation from Augustine is that anyone should find it remarkable, strange, odd, worth quoting, at all: "When they (my elders) named some object, and accordingly moved towards something, I saw this and I grasped that the thing was called by the sound they uttered when they meant to point it out. Their intention was shown by their bodily movements . . . and after I had trained my mouth to form these signs, I used them to express my own desires." (To glimpse the oddness, imagine the final sentence as from Samuel Beckett.) It presents the opening segment of countless moments in the book in which we are made uncertain whether an expression is remarkable or casual, where this turns out to be a function of whether we leave the expression ordinary or elevate it into philosophy, an elevation that depends on escaping our sense, let us say, of the ridiculous, one sense Wittgenstein undertakes to awaken. Philosophy in Wittgenstein turns out to require an understanding of how the seriousness of philosophy's preoccupations (with meaning, reference, intention, pointing, understanding, thinking, explaining, with the existence of the world, with whether my behavior consists of movements), its demand for satisfaction, its refusal of satisfaction — how this seriousness is dependent on disarming our sense of oddness and non-oddness, and therewith see-

ing why it is with the trivial, or superficial, that this philosophy finds itself in oscillation, as in an unearthly dance. (It was my sense of this unearthly oscillation that led me, early in my interest in Wittgenstein, to compare his writing with the writing of Beckett [for whom the extraordinary is ordinary] and with that of Chekhov [for whom the ordinary is extraordinary], who thus inescapably court the uncanny.)

I would love now to go on to a detailed working out of Poe's tale's allegory of ordinary language philosophy, but the most I can do here is flatly to assert a few claims about the issue. The second half of the tale is constituted by a narration of Dupin's narration and explanation of his powers of unconcealment. He begins by describing a childhood game of "even and odd" in which one player holds in his closed hand a number of marbles and demands of another whether that number is even or odd. An eight-year-old champion at the game explained his success to Dupin as one of determining whether his opponent was wise or stupid; and the method the boy used for this Dupin cites as the basis of the success of, among others, Tommaso Campanella (whose system of mind-reading the boy has described) and of Machiavelli, no less. Lacan to my mind undervalues the relation of Dupin's story of the contest to the Prefect's opening vision of universal oddness. This relation depends on taking to heart Poe's pun, or pressure, on the English word "odd." Baudelaire does not try in his translation to preserve, or bother to note, this recurrence; he uses *bizarre* for the Prefect's "odd" and for Dupin's "even or odd" he uses *pair ou impair* — what else? Lacan of course knows this, but he seems to me over-casual in deciding (certainly correctly) that a "better" translation of "odd" in this story is a word for "singular." Singular is, elsewhere, a sensitive word for Poe, but in the text of "The Purloined Letter" the separated uses of "odd" to name what is at once funnily obvious and at the same time constitutes a possibility in a mind-reading contest with concealed counts — the untranslatable coincidence in Poe's words — should not be smoothed but

kept in friction. Smoothing them would help Lacan's apparent neglect of the mind-reading contest of odd and even (masterable by a child of eight) as some kind of figure for communication, say for writing and reading, in particular for reading this text of Poe's that recounts this contest. The funny obviousness of this figure, its banality, its depth concealed in plain view, ought not to cause us not to see what it is.

Lacan's fruitful perception that Poe's tale is built on a repetition of triangular structures in the theft of the letter is the basis of the ensuing controversies about the tale, and it is only in the way he reads the repetition, or stops reading it, that my present reservation arises. Here is the sort of thing I get out of stopping over the thematization of odd and even mind-reading. When in the second triangle Dupin takes the position of the Minister in the first (the position of thief, the one who sees what the others see, namely that the King does not see the letter and that the Queen sees that the King does not see, hence falsely feels secure) and the Minister in the second triangle takes the position of the Queen in the first (the position of the one stolen from, under her very eyes, or nose), then the position of the King in the first (the one who is blind) Lacan finds to be occupied in the second by the Police (who were blind to the thing hidden in plainness). Without denying this, we should also note that in the second interview (in which Dupin robs the robber) the third party of the triangle (the Police) is present only by implication (Dupin and the Minister are fictionally alone); and then note further that another party is equally present there, specifically present (only) by implication, namely the reader, myself, to whom the fictional letter is also invisible. So I am to that extent both the King and the Police of Poe's letter(s). But since I am (whoever I am) after all shown the contents of the literal thing called "The Purloined Letter" (that is, Poe's tale), since they are indeed, or in art, meant for me, even as it were privately, I am the Queen from whom it is stolen, as well as the pair of thieves who remove it and return it, therapeutically, to me (for who else but myself could

have stolen *this* from myself?). And if I am to read the mind of the one whose hand it is in (that is, mine, so my mind) but also the mind going with the hand it is written in (that is, the author's — but which one, that of the literal "Letter" or that of the fictional letter?), it is also to be read as the work of one who opposes me, challenges me to guess whether each of its events is odd or even, everyday or remarkable, ordinary or out of the ordinary. (I am here invoking not what I understand as a reader-response theory, but something I would like to understand as a reader-identification theory.)

So this text of Poe's "tale" presents the following representation of textuality, or constitution of a text. It is an artifact, in a contested play of mind-reading, that is openly concealed in and by the hand. I steal it from myself and return it to myself — steal when I am wise or stupid (agree to play as a game of concealment) and return when I can relate concealment and revelation, or say repression and power (when I can know that the hand in question does not conceal by closing). Yet I am to know that no matching of minds can be open-handed either, that the artifact of the text is the scene of a crime, because it is an expression of guilt, because it is of knowledge that must be confessed, exacted, interpreted. Is this a representation? And what crime does the hand as such reveal? No doubt, along with other notorious matters, it will have to do with the circumstance that only humans have hands (with *those* thumbs), and the consequent fascination of the hand for philosophers. The writer of *Walden* confesses at the opening of the book that the pages to follow are the work of his hands only; and later in his opening chapter, as he enumerates the debts he has encountered in setting out on his own life — saying that he "thus unblushingly publishes [his] guilt" — the arithmetic is of food, betraying the necessity of his having to eat, to preserve himself. As if his debt is for his existence as such, for asking acknowledgment (payable how? to whom? or is it forgivable? by whom?).

An urgent methodological issue of ordinary language philosophy — and the issue about which this cast of thought is philosophically at its weakest — is that of accounting for the fact that we are the victims of the very words of which we are at the same time the masters. I have mentioned that one of Wittgenstein's favorite terms of criticism, or account of this recurrent failure in our possession of or by language (if failure is what it is), is to speak of our being bewitched by language. But that hardly accounts for such a crossroads as the emptiness of the word "only" in "knowing only from behavior." Perhaps my suggestion of "emptiness" and of a "will to emptiness" will prove to be an advance as a term of criticism (if, say, its invocation of Nietzsche's perception of nihilism can be made out usefully). And so perhaps will the idea of the unreadable, in the suggestion it would seem to carry, that ordinary language philosophy has not accounted for why the odd is laughable, for what it is we are laughing at philosophically, anxiously. Poe's tale imports a concrete and elaborate web of ways for conceptualizing these facts. What it may betoken that it at the same time allegorizes Lacanian psychoanalysis, together with the acts of writing and of reading, I leave open.

To complete the little topography I project for this occasion and bring Heidegger back explicitly into a bearing on the ordinary and the odd, I would have, as I indicated in putting him aside earlier, to undertake certain tasks pertaining to American transcendentalism, two in particular. First, to give an account of Thoreau's *Walden*, the major philosophical text in my life — other than the *Philosophical Investigations* — that deals in endless repetition, that begins with a vision of the extreme oddness of the everyday world, and that portrays its goal as the discovery of the day, his day, as one among others. Thoreau's guiding vision of the oddness of our everyday (its nextness, flushness, with another way) produces a response, that is, a texture of prose, hugging the border between comedy and tragedy. Second, I would

have to say what I have meant in expressing my intuition that Thoreau, together with Emerson (having insisted upon their relation to Heidegger), underwrite the procedures of ordinary language philosophy, an intuition I have expressed by speaking of them as inheritors of Kant's transcendentalism and as writing out of a sense of intimacy of words with the world, or of intimacy lost. Again there is time here only for mere assertion.

The background of the intuition is the work of mine I cited earlier that I count on to show both the *Investigations* and *Walden* sharing an aspiration of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, namely to demonstrate the necessity in the world's satisfaction of the human conditions of knowledge. *Walden's* way of summarizing the first *Critique* may be heard in its announcement that "The universe constantly and obediently answers to our conceptions." And when in the *Investigations* Wittgenstein calls his investigation "a grammatical one," and says "Our investigation is directed not toward phenomena but, as one might say, toward the 'possibilities' of phenomena," this may be taken as saying that what he means by grammar, or a grammatical investigation, plays the role of a transcendental deduction of human concepts. The difference relevant for me is that in Wittgenstein's practice every word in our ordinary language requires deduction, where this means that each is to be tracked, in its application to the world, in terms of what he calls criteria that govern it; and our grammar is in some sense to be understood as *a priori*.¹³ (It is the sense in which human beings are "in agreement" in their judgments.)

The mutual relation to Kant I called the background of the intuition of American transcendentalism as underwriting ordinary language philosophy. The foreground is the recognition that the *Investigations*, like the work of Emerson and Thoreau, is written

¹³This is a way of putting the burden of chapters I and IV of my *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979). This generalization, as it were, of Kant is something I claim for Emerson in "Emerson, Coleridge, Kant," in *Raritan* 3, no. 2 (Fall 1983).

in continuous response to the threat of skepticism. It seems to me that the originality of the *Investigations* is a function of the originality of its response to skepticism, one that undertakes not to deny skepticism's power (on the contrary) but to diagnose the source (or say the possibility) of that power, to ask, as I put it a while ago, what it is about human language that allows us, even invites us, to repudiate its everyday functioning, to find it wanting. I might epitomize Wittgenstein's originality in this regard by saying that he takes the drift toward skepticism as the *discovery* of the everyday, a discovery of exactly *what* it is that skepticism would deny. It turns out to be something that the very impulse to philosophy, the impulse to take thought about our lives, inherently seeks to deny, as if what philosophy is dissatisfied by is inherently the everyday.

So the everyday is not merely one topic among others that philosophers might take an interest in, but one that a philosopher is fated to an interest in so long as he or she seeks a certain kind of response to the threat of skepticism. (It is a response that would regard science not as constituting an answer to skepticism but rather, taken as an answer, as a continuation of skepticism — as if the mad scientist in us is the double of the mad skeptic.) The everyday is what we cannot but aspire to, since it appears to us as lost to us. This is what Thoreau means when he says, after describing several of what he calls his adventures (a number of which take place while he describes himself as sitting down), “The present was my next experiment of this kind, which I purpose to describe at more length.” By “the present experiment” he means of course the book in our hands, but he simultaneously means that the experiment is the present, i.e., that the book sets itself to test ways of arriving at the present, not merely at what people call “current events,” which for him are not current, but old news, and are not events, but fancies. He is repeating the thought when he says “The phenomena of the year take place every day in a pond on a small scale.” That is, there is nothing

beyond the succession of each and every day; and grasping a day, accepting the everyday, the ordinary, is not a given but a task. This is also why Emerson says “Give me insight into today, and you may have the antique and future worlds.” His words have the rhetoric of a bargain, or a prayer, as in “Give us this day our daily bread”; it is not something to take for granted.

The implication of this view of skepticism as the measure of the everyday is worked out in torturous detail in *The Claim of Reason* and I will not try to characterize it further here. Instead I will head for a conclusion by asking where Emerson and Thoreau see the answer to skepticism to lie.

I still concentrate on *Walden* and cite two foci of its conceptual elaboration. The first focus is the theme of mourning (or grieving) which, in conjunction with morning (as dawning) forms a dominating pun of *Walden* as a whole; it proposes human existence as the finding of ecstasy in the knowledge of loss. I call *Walden* a book of losses, saying of the book’s creation of the region of Walden Pond, the world as an image of Paradise (Walled In), that it is everything there is to lose, and the book opens with it gone, forgone. Hume had said in the *Treatise of Human Nature* that skepticism is a malady that can never be cured. But the scene Hume thereupon portrays for us is one in which he returns from the isolation of his philosophical study into the company of his friends, where he finds welcome distraction from the sickening news his philosophical powers have uncovered. Incurable malady, as a metaphor for some grievous human condition, suggests an imaginable alternative, yet one not open to use. It would seem to have to be an alternative to the grievousness of the condition of being human. (Philosophers do sometimes suggest that the human possession of, say, the five senses is an unfortunate fact about us. It is within and against such a suggestion of the contingency of human existence that Beckett’s character Hamm in *Endgame* protests when he cries, “You’re on earth, you’re on earth, there’s no cure for that!”)

Distraction (as in Hume) is one, surely understandable, reaction to these tidings. But, depending on how you take the alternative to the malady of skepticism, a more direct response, perhaps in a more acute stage, is that, as in Thoreau, of mourning — the path of accepting the loss of the world (you might say, accepting its loss of presence), accepting it as something which exists for us only in its loss (you might say its absence), or what presents itself as loss. *The Claim of Reason* suggests the moral of skepticism to be, that the existence of the world and others in it is not a matter to be known, but one to be acknowledged. And now what emerges is that what is to be acknowledged is this existence as separate from me, as if gone from me. Since I lose the world in every impulse to philosophy, say in each of the countless ways the ordinary language philosophers find that I make my expressions unreadable, the world must be regained every day, in repetition, regained as gone. Here is a way of seeing what it means that Freud too thinks of mourning as an essentially repetitive exercise. It can also be made out, in his little essay “Transience,” that Freud regards mourning as the condition of the possibility of accepting the world’s beauty, the condition, that is to say, of allowing its independence from me, its objectivity.¹⁴ Learning mourning may be the achievement of a lifetime. (“I am in mourning for my life.”)

In addition to distraction and mourning, Heidegger’s perception of the violence of philosophical thinking, its imperative to dominance of the earth, I see as something like a competing response to, or consequence of, skepticism. One might take this violence as the response that supervenes when distraction and mourning are no longer humanly available options. Twenty years ago in an essay on *King Lear* I put the matter, or left an open suggestion for putting the matter, somewhat differently, in a way that I must interpolate here.¹⁵ (My early suggestion originally occurs

¹⁴Standard Edition, vol. 14, pp. 305-7.

¹⁵“The Avoidance of Love,” in *Must We Mean What We Say?*

within an interpolation in the *Lear* essay. Its recurrence here suggests, more or less impossibly, that the entire present paper could or should have been that earlier interpolation.)

In the unbroken tradition of epistemology since Descartes and Locke (radically questioned from within itself only in our period), the concept of knowledge (of the world) disengages from its connections with matters of information and skill and learning, and becomes fixed to the concept of certainty alone, and in particular to a certainty provided by the (by my) senses. At some early point in epistemological investigations, the world normally present to us (the world in whose existence, as it is typically put, we “believe”) is brought into question and vanishes, whereupon all connection with a world is found to hang upon what can be said to be “present to the senses”; and that turns out, shockingly, not to be the world. It is at this point that the doubter finds himself cast into skepticism, turning the existence of the external world into a problem. Kant called it a scandal to philosophy and committed his genius to putting a stop to it, but it remains active in the conflicts between traditional philosophers and their ordinary language critics, and it inhabits the void of comprehension between continental ontology and Anglo-American analysis as a whole. Its relevance to us at the moment is only this: The skeptic does not gleefully and mindlessly forgo the world we share, or thought we shared; he is neither the knave Austin took him to be, nor the fool the pragmatists took him for, nor the simpleton he seems to men of culture and of the world. He forgoes the world for just the reason that the world is important, that it is the scene and stage of connection with the present: he finds that it vanishes exactly with the effort to *make* it present. If this makes him unsuccessful, that is because the presentness achieved by certainty of the senses cannot compensate for the presentness which had been elaborated through our old absorption in the world. But the wish for genuine connection is there, and there was a time when the effort, however hysterical, to assure epistemological presentness was the best expression of seriousness about our relation to the world, the expression of an awareness that presentness was threatened, gone. If epistemology wished to make knowing a substitute

for that fact, that is scarcely foolish or knavish, and scarcely some simple mistake. It is, in fact, one way to describe the tragedy *King Lear* records.

It took a good lapse of time for me to come to see how to unfold the implications in this juxtaposition) to see how tragedy is a projection or an enactment of a skeptical problematic and at the same time how skepticism traces in advance, or prophesies, a tragic structure, say a structure of revenge. What the passage I just quoted accordingly says to me now is that the loss of presentness (to and of the world) is something that the violence of skepticism deepens exactly in its desperation to correct it, a violence assured in philosophy's desperation to answer or refute skepticism, to deny skepticism's discovery of the absence or withdrawal of the world, i.e., the withdrawal of my presentness to it; which for me means the withdrawal of my presentness to language.

Perhaps something like this is what an old philosophical acquaintance, who had studied philosophy in Europe from the mid-fifties throughout the sixties, had in mind when he told me in the months after my *Must We Mean What We Say?* (which concludes with the essay on *King Lear*) appeared, that my work bore affinities with that of someone in Paris named Derrida, an observation I could not assess then and can barely begin to assess now. (Perhaps it was always, for me, too early or too late for this.) The differences, apart from the worlds of difference, are registered in my speaking of presentness (which is about me and my world) instead of (meaning what?) presence (which is about Being, not something I will ever be in a position, so far as I can judge, to judge); and my criticism of "philosophy" (by which I take myself to mean a way human beings have of being led to think about themselves) instead of something I can spell "Western metaphysics") is not, anyway not at first, that it originates in a domineering construction of (false) presence, but that it institutes an (a false) absence for which it falsely offers compensations. Even if it could be shown, and were worth someone's while

to show, that these institutions are not so different, my claims do not arise from a study *of* classical philosophy but are limited to strands within the period of philosophy since the emergence of modern skepticism. While I take it that this radical skeptical suspicion of the “external” world as a whole, and of others in it, is not a speculation known to the classical philosophers, I also take modern skepticism to be philosophy’s expression or interpretation of the thing known to literature (among other places) in melodrama and in tragedy. (By the thing known in melodrama and in tragedy I mean, roughly, the dependence of the human self on society for its definition, but at the same time its transcendence of that definition, its infinite insecurity in maintaining its existence. Which seems to mean, on this description, in determining and maintaining what “belongs” to it. “It.”) Something like what we mean by melodrama and tragedy were known to the classical philosophers, hence would always have been implicated in the “Western” impulse to epistemology and metaphysics. It is perhaps this relation to tragedy that allows me the patience to put aside the metaphysical mode, in which *all* false presence is to be brought to an end before its own impossible beginning, and instead to speak within the sense that *each* impulse to metaphysical presence is to be brought to its own end by diagnosing its own beginning. In Derrida’s heritage we “cannot” truly escape from the tradition of philosophy; in mine we cannot truly escape *to* philosophy. For him philosophy is apparently as primordial as language, or anyway as prose; for me it is skepticism that is thus primordial (or its possibility).

The other focus in *Walden*, in conjunction with mourning, around which skepticism tracks its answer, is constituted by the overarching narrative of the book, the building of a house, that is, the finding of one’s habitation, of where it is one is at home; you can call it one’s edification. The guiding thought of Heidegger’s essay “Building Dwelling Thinking,”¹⁶ a companion essay to his

¹⁶In *Poetry, Language, Thought*, pp. 143-62.

“Das Ding,” is that dwelling comes before building, not the other way around; and one can take this as the moral of *Walden*. But in *Walden* the proof that what you have found you have made your own, your home, is that you are free to leave it. *Walden* begins and ends with statements of departure from Walden. Emerson’s complex structuring concept for this departure is *abandonment*. The significance Heidegger finds in his words, and Emerson and Thoreau find in theirs, is remarkable enough; but that in the face of this significance, to discover that their thoughts are intimately, endlessly related, has become for me unforgettably interesting. The direct historical connection (of Emerson with Heidegger) is through Nietzsche, but the intellectual conjunction has been a touchstone for me in the past few years in exploring the idea that Romanticism generally is to be understood as in struggle with skepticism, and at the same time in struggle with philosophy’s responses to skepticism, (How generally this applies is not yet important. It is indicated by the figures of Coleridge and Wordsworth behind Emerson and Thoreau, and by Holderlin’s shadow in Heidegger.)

With one further corner in the topography of the everyday that I am outlining, I will be ready to take up a moment of unfinished business with Heidegger’s “Das Ding” and then tell you a parting story. If you take Edgar Allan Poe (together with Nathaniel Hawthorne), on some opposite side of the American mind from Emerson and Thoreau, also to be writing in response to skepticism, then it becomes significant that they too write repetitively about dwelling, settling, houses; about, call it, domestication. Since their tales, unlike the scenes of Emerson and Thoreau, typically have other people in them, they think of domestication habitually in terms of marriage or betrothal. And habitually they think not about its ecstasies but about its horrors, about houses that fall or enclose, ones which are unleaveable and hence unliveable. I said that the new philosophical step in the criticism of skepticism developed in ordinary language philosophy is its dis-

covery of skepticism's discovery, by displacement, of the everyday; hence its discovery that the answer to skepticism must take the form not of philosophical construction but of the reconstruction or resettlement of the everyday. This shows in its treatment of skepticism's threat of world-consuming doubt by means of its own uncanny homeliness, stubbornly resting within its relentless superficiality; and not, as other philosophies have felt compelled to proceed, by way of isolated, specialized, highly refined examples (Descartes' piece of wax, Kant's house, Heidegger's automobile turn signal, G. E. Moore's envelope). This is the level at which I hear Poe's declaration, at the beginning of one of his most famous tales of horror, "The Black Cat," that he "[is placing] before the world, plainly, sincerely, and without comment, a series of mere household events."¹⁷ It stands to reason that if some image of human intimacy, call it marriage, or domestication, is the fictional equivalent of what the philosophers of ordinary language understand as the ordinary, call this the image of the everyday as the domestic; that then the threat to the ordinary that philosophy names skepticism should show up in fiction's favorite threats to forms of marriage, namely in forms of melodrama and tragedy.

This takes me back to Heidegger's "Das Ding," in which the overcoming of our distancelessness, of our loss of connection, or rather our unconnectedness, with things, our being unbethinged, *unbedingt*, that is, unconditioned (hence inhuman, monstrous, figures of a horror story), is expressed by Heidegger in terms of "the marriage of sky and earth," of the "betrothal" of "the earth's nourishment and the sky's sun." One might have imagined that this image is only accidental in Heidegger's essay, but it is essentially what goes into his extraordinary account of the thinging of the world as requiring the joining of earth, sky, gods, and mortals in what he calls "the round dance of appropriating" (*der Reigen des Ereignens*); and when he goes on to say "the round dance is the ring" that grapples and plays, he can hardly not have in mind

¹⁷In the Mabbott edition, pp. 847-59.

the wedding band (an image in this connection that he would have taken from Nietzsche's Zarathustra), something confirmed by his speaking of "the ringing of the ring" (*das Gering des Ringes*), where what he seems to want from the word *Gering* is both the intensification of the idea of being hooped together and at the same time the idea of this activity as slight, trivial, humble; it is the idea of diurnal devotedness. Thus does the idea of the everyday, which Heidegger has apparently disdained, recur, repeat itself, transformed, as the metaphysical answer to that empirical disdain.

Heidegger's idea of the humble, with its implication of cosmic radiance, may not seem very close to what Wittgenstein means in his insistence on looking for the humble use of famously philosophical words (like "language," "experience," and "world"). But the connection serves to register our sense that neither of them is as clear as their admirers would like them to be in philosophically accounting for their philosophical practice. Both wrestle against the human will to explain, but when Wittgenstein says "explanations come to an end somewhere," what he means is that philosophy must show, of each effort at philosophical explanation, the plain place at which it ends. Whereas Heidegger means to portray the shining place before which *all* explanations end. Still, we are reminded that both Wittgenstein and Heidegger were readers of Kierkegaard and that Kierkegaard's Knight of Faith exhibited what in English translates as "the sublime in the pedestrian."¹⁸

For the parting story I wish to tell you, I gesture toward that favorite region of mine that came up earlier for a glancing blow in Heidegger's allusion to it as symptomatic of our common, annihilating one-track thinking — the region of movies. I turn in conclusion here to a passage from a movie as also symptomatic of everyday thinking, but this time as symptomatic of the everyday

¹⁸Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Walter Lowie, Anchor Books edition, p. 52.

recognition that our habitual modes of thought are destructive, and as an everyday effort to step back from them. The passage is from the concluding sequence of a film called *Woman of the Year* (directed by George Stevens in 1942, with Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy), a relatively minor member of a genre of movie I have called “the comedy of remarriage” and that I define through certain movies from the Hollywood 1930’s and 1940’s. The woman in *Woman of the Year* is a world-famous, syndicated political journalist, the man a lower-class sports reporter on her house newspaper. After satisfying a number of features required by the genre (their separation and threatened divorce; the woman’s particular understanding with her father and the absence of her mother; a solemn discussion of what constitutes marriage and a scene of instruction of the woman by the man which is later undermined [in this case it is instruction in the rules of baseball]; an explicit renunciation of children and the establishing of a sense that while these two may not manage to live together they are certainly not prepared to share their lives with anyone else; and a move to a smaller, more modest dwelling than they begin in), there is a final sequence in which the woman appears about dawn at her estranged husband’s apartment and while he is asleep attempts, with hopeless incompetence, to cook breakfast for him. He is awakened by the noise of her incompetence, interrupts her pitiful efforts, and is treated to a humble declaration from her which begins, significantly for the genre of remarriage, “I love you, Sam. Will you marry me?” He treats this outburst from his wife with a mocking tirade of disbelief, to which she replies: “You don’t think I can do the ordinary things that any idiot can do, do you?” He says no; she asks why not; upon which he delivers a long remarkable lecture which begins, “Because you’re incapable of doing them,” and ends by saying that she is trained to do things incompatible with the training that doing those ordinary things demands. All I call attention to here is that this proves to be all right with him, with both of them; that for example in

this genre of movie if anyone is seen to cook it is the man, never the woman (or never without him); that, uniquely in this genre of comedy, so far as I know, the happiness of marriage is dissociated from any *a priori* concept of what constitutes domesticity (you might also call marriage in these films the taking of mutual pleasure without a concept — whether two people are married does not necessarily depend on what age they are, or what gender, or whether legally). Marriage here is being presented as an estate meant not as a distraction from the pain of constructing happiness from a helpless, absent world, but as the scene in which the chance for happiness is shown as the mutual acknowledgment of separateness, in which the prospect is not for the passing of years (until death parts us) but for the willing repetition of days, willingness for the everyday (until our true minds become unreadable to one another).