

18. Thinking (America) After Cavell: On Learning and Becoming Different

ALONSO GAMARRA

I read Stanley Cavell's *This New Yet Unapproachable America*¹ for the first time over a two-day bus ride from Montreal to Chicago. This happened a little bit more than a year ago, in March 2018, when I came back to the US, where I grew up undocumented.

The following essay tries to respond to that reading from both a deep attachment to Cavell's writing and a wish to learn how to think after his picture of American thinking. Alternatively, I can also say that this essay is an attempt at sitting with an irresolvable pull between the unapproachability of things, and the need of confronting the world with itself along the lines in which it meets in a series of topics and a place.²

The first of this essay's two points of departure is a concern with the fate of philosophy in America.

In "Finding as Founding," Cavell introduces philosophy as the work of lasting in one's receptivity and responsiveness to a changing world by both maintaining an orientation and recovering some way to go on³ when faced with a "loss of foundation."⁴ Thus, philosophy can be seen as a continuous search for ground, or for the conditions in which getting from one place to another becomes possible, which includes the philosopher's desires to go on in a particular way. The action of walking offers a way of imagining this understanding of philosophy, as a matter "of enduring as on a track" and "following on," which includes taking successive steps as much as falling, sitting, leaping, and changing directions, and so turning from a given path.⁵ As an aversive suc-

1. Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures After Emerson After Wittgenstein* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

2. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 125.

3. Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, 77.

4. *Ibid.*, 109.

5. *Ibid.*, 115.

cessor of previous attempts at doing philosophy, Emerson's way of thinking and feeling the possibility of a trajectory consists not only in giving attention to what happens when we cannot go on—either because paths change, or because we have been ignorant of their limits—but also to what happens after these ruptures. A key feature of Cavell's reading of Emerson's way of philosophizing is an understanding of the transcendental as the actualization of latent (or immanent) possibilities, which is to say the transformation of an orientation and a set of circumstances, each by way of the other.

One way to think about what makes Emerson's mode of philosophizing American, then, is to centre its refusal to impose any static category as a stake or analytic when faced with a dead end. For Cavell, Emerson's essays enact an aversive mode of inquiry, which expresses a conviction that some particular aspects of what we say and how we live require attention. As attempts at describing how particular modes of inattentiveness impoverish a common existence, they register and respond to this demand for attention only by enacting an uncertain process of transformation, which is to say, learning. Emerson's essays—as Cavell presents them—matter to the practice of philosophy because they take for their topics nothing more nor less than the conditions an ordinary world offers for its reproduction and representation. It is part of Cavell's picture of Emerson that “the conversion narrative... the slave narrative, and... the narrative of voyage and discovery,”⁶ which constituted significant conditions of experience of his time, presented important Emerson with demands for attention. Similarly, it's also part of this picture that the object of Emerson's search lay beyond the conditions of his time, and that the form of his awareness of these limitations was chagrin. Thus, internal to Cavell's account of the practice of philosophy in America as exemplified by Emerson is an overcoming of the topics that express the conditions of experiencing the place from (and about) which Emerson was writing. After Cavell's own writing, these become imaginable as a process of learning that transforms existence, an aspiration for freedom, and a willingness for departure.

In returning to “Finding as Founding” while working this essay, I'm continuously made to see just how much more this piece of writing holds than what initially attracted me to it, and so how much more there is to give attention to than I am able to account for here. In particular, I struggle with questions on how to acknowledge the

6. *Ibid.*, 102.

ambivalence and complexity of the narratives Cavell offers as providing the structure and topics of Emerson's thinking. If Emerson is not the only one of his contemporaries to give serious attention to the topics of conversion, slavery, and voyage and discovery, then American philosophy—as Cavell understands it—holds many sources for us besides Emerson. Some of them, surely, necessary interlocutors on these themes.

*Scenes of Subjection*⁷ and *In the Break*⁸ come immediately to mind. Saidiya Hartman and Fred Moten's readings of Fredrick Douglass' transcription of his Aunt Hester's scream⁹ – of what happened before, alongside and after Douglas' writing – enact two deeply attentive searches for more sources of American thinking, which surely put pressure on what we might call philosophy (after Cavell). It seems to me that a serious reading of Hartman and Moten's works alongside Cavell's writings on Emerson would have to begin by turning Cavell's picture of philosophy on its side. In different ways, Hartman and Moten both refuse ideas of recovery in which the possibilities for community and reason come after rupture rather in and through it. (Moten's first book does this straight from the title. And so much of the rest his work seems deeply creative to me precisely for how it insists on a different picture of finding the journey's end in every step of the road. I mean, for how he cares to remind us that we are each other's means without ends.) So, I say that thinking Cavell's picture of American philosophy after Hartman and Moten's pictures of thinking in America would turn some idea of philosophy on its side rather than over because there are different ways of thinking about what Cavell means by "philosophy ends in a recovery from terminable loss."¹⁰ (Consider, for example, Cavell's remark on Wittgenstein bringing philosophy to an end 693 times in each of the 693 sections of the *Philosophical Investigations*.¹¹ This might come to describing something like the different ecologies of loss in and through which we try to get from one place to another.)¹² While thinking after Hartman, Moten, and Cavell's attempts at thinking and feeling

7. Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

8. Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black. Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2003).

9. Fredrick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass: An American Slave, Written by Himself* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

10. Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, 114.

11. *Ibid.*, 112.

12. James Baldwin and Mavis Nicholson, "Civil Rights | James Baldwin Interview | Mavis on Four," YouTube video, 1:08:08, posted by "ThamesTV," November 1, 2014, <https://youtu.be/3Wht4NSf7E4>, 16:36-17:22.

what it means to think and feel in America would surely rearrange every line of what we understand by philosophy, an exercise like this would hardly be philosophy's catastrophe. This comparative reading is not what I am prepared to do at the moment, though Hartman and Moten's works (as well as their ongoing conversations) shape my hesitation concerning how to talk about philosophy in America, a settler state, and—at times—whether this is something I wish to do.

This brings me to this essay's second point of departure, which is a concern with the claims of interrupted or unfinished attempts at recovering from loss. What are the claims of inchoate efforts at bringing terminable losses to an end?

The following excerpt is from my journal, written on March 15, 2018, when I crossed the border at Windsor:

... the guard that interviewed me also interrogated an iraqi man who was visiting his mother: "how often does she visit you? how often? mom—you—visit—when? here, maybe google will translate it for you!" when the same guard interviewed me, he wanted to know why i was visiting for so long. no. wait. i'm moving too fast... what details do i have to hold? the man was maybe in his 60s and seemed to be more and more disoriented by the guard's impatience, which came across in the way he stopped at the end of every question, abruptly, as if to surprise or to sneak up on the people he interviewed, a you-should-know manner of address that carried with it the underlying implication that he knew you didn't know—or anyway that he was going to act as if you were a horse painted like a zebra, or a fake barn: "when was the last time you came to the states? one month? when your mom came to see you, who brought her? when did you leave iraq? why?" i didn't hear the man's name. it might not have been said out loud... on the highway now: i can't not look out the window—new providence baptist church. breakfast all day every day! israel united church. car wash. support more victories for veterans. what do i know? what can i not fail to know? what is failure?

I have come to think of this moment as a scene of dictation rather than a scene instruction because it shows how a dominating source of diction is brought to bear on where and how someone is made to be.

After crossing the border, I felt anger at the cruelty I saw, and a deep sense of powerlessness mixed with relief at not having been called out myself. I did not want to be asked if I'd ever travelled to the US on another passport. I wanted to see my family and friends. What I remember most clearly is the fog that had settled over the highway, and the lingering texture of a long-ago uncertainty, which made departure and arrival feel different from voyage and discovery.

My father's family started migrating from Peru to the Washington DC area starting the 1980s. With their support, my father and I travelled to Maryland in December of 1999, when I was eleven years old, and overstayed our tourist visas, hoping to regularize our status over time. The year after our arrival, section 245(i) of the Immigration and Nationality Act was extended. This extension offered a viable way for us to apply for permanent residency without having to leave the country and receive a ban, which could last anywhere from three to ten years. We applied. We waited. We lived undocumented. My father found a job and I started going to school. We moved from his sister's basement and into a rented apartment. Years later, my dad got a mortgage for a townhouse, and my mother, who lived in Lima, visited every few months.

In 2007, I received a half-scholarship at the University of Chicago, which I took rather hastily, and without thinking about my parents' means. Two years later, college became unaffordable. My father and I still had no status, and my mother, who had moved to Toronto after successfully applying for a Canadian permanent residency, offered to sponsor me as a dependant. By the end of my sophomore year in college, I decided to move to Canada rather than continuing to live undocumented in the US or returning to Peru for good.

I opened *The Claim of Reason* for the first time at the Miami International airport—a copy given to me as a parting gift by my friend Jackson Keenan-Koch, whose company and conversation offered me a handsome place for thinking and feeling my attachment to the country where I had lived on an expired tourist visa for nearly half my life. Waiting at the departure gate, Cavell's words came less as consolation and more as a conviction that if “the wish and the search for community are the

wish and the search for reason,”¹³ then the constitution of a community, and the loss and generosity at its very centre, are matters of philosophical concern.

In 2015 I became a Canadian citizen and, in 2017, my father received his green card. Together, these two documents meant that I could legally come back to the US and see my family and friends; they meant that it was less likely for a border officer to look up the travel history on my Peruvian passport, and that if I had trouble crossing, I wouldn’t risk exposing my father to detention and deportation. I made two trips. First, I wanted to cross the border and let time sink in, to think through the conditions in which loss cuts into our American lives in just these ways. Then, I wanted to see my father with a clearer head and a more capacious attention.

The border is at the centre of a contradiction that reaches all the way to America’s own aspirations for freedom, which has greatly shaped my own life. However, the difficulties of countering the sources and dictations of supremacist nationalism and how these might come to bear on fate of American philosophy are concerns I can only approach partially and indirectly. I mean, they present conditions for which I cannot speak alone. In the second part of this essay, I will offer a few words for a conversation on the claim of uncertain or inchoate attempts at mustering a listening, persisting attention¹⁴ long-enough to find a way to go on in the wake of loss. To one’s own losses and those of others.

Through the process of writing this essay, I have also become convinced that the continuous effort at cultivating an empathetic ear—to what can and can’t be said—underwrites philosophy insofar as philosophy is both called for and a call for community. Many works of contemporary anthropology—some of which are indeed conversant with Cavell’s writing—attend to perilous attempts at re-inhabiting ordinary worlds in circumstances where endurance is a precarious material striving.¹⁵ I will not think through these works or their multiple connections to Cavell’s writing and

13. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 20.

14. Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, 101.

15. Diana Allan, *Refugees of the Revolution: Experiences of Palestinian Exile* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014); Anne Allison, *Prekarious Japan* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013); Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007); Angela Garcia, *The Pastoral Clinic: Addiction and Dispossession along the Rio Grande* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010); Clara Han, *Life in Debt: Times of Care and Violence in Neoliberal Chile* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012); Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Bhrigupati Singh, *Poverty and the Quest for Life: Spiritual and Material Striving in Rural India* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2015); Lisa Stevenson, *Life Beside Itself: Imagining Care in the Canadian Arctic* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2014).

concerns here, but limit myself to suggesting that insofar as they approach the generation, succession, and decay of relational forms by way of thick descriptions (or ostensive definitions), they may be read together in ways that are both orderly and frictionally generative.

Instead, I will turn to an early film by Pedro Almodóvar, *La ley del deseo* (*The Law of Desire*, 1987), for its detailed description of four attempts at becoming different, or at the very least, “open for change.”¹⁶ In order to transit from Cavell’s picture of pedagogy to Almodóvar’s depictions of its uncertain process, I will draw from Lauren Berlant’s reading¹⁷ of Mary Gaitskill’s novel, *Two Girls, Fat and Thin*.¹⁸ I am attracted to both of these works for their capacity to speak on the difficulties of falling into silence. While Berlant’s essay troubles neat distinctions between persistence and interruption, Almodóvar’s film, sketches the ambiguity of desire’s capacity to remember the world.¹⁹

In particular, I am interested in Almodóvar’s films because they explore the uncertainties of learning to desire community in aversion to the modes of diction that preceded, structured, and survived Francisco Franco’s dictatorship. In them, the desire for conversation certainly expresses a process of learning that transforms existence, an aspiration for freedom, and a willingness for departure. However, Almodóvar also shows the process learning something that cannot be taught in a mode ambivalent mood. Concerning the fate of democracy in America, then, I am taking Almodóvar’s films as capable of speaking to Cavell’s own study of loss and its relation to listening, albeit from a different place.

Forms of Life and Generalizations

In the second essay of *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, “Finding as Founding,” Cavell writes a description of philosophy after Emerson’s search for some way of registering loss and continuing beyond the paralysis of grieving a loss that he can-

16. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 122.

17. *Ibid.*, 121-160.

18. Mary Gaitskill, *Two Girls, Fat and Thin* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998).

19. Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, 21; Cavell, *Themes out of School: Effects and Causes* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

not grieve.²⁰ In announcing and approaching the death of his only son in the essay “Experience,”²¹ Emerson shows that philosophy stands for learning how to acknowledge and respond to loss, and that what is lost, which philosophy seeks to recover, is not an object, but a form of life.

The “Emerson essay” is Cavell’s name for a way of responding to loss that is structured both by what loss reveals and by how this revelation rearranges the conditions of a shared existence, which is exemplified in Emerson’s writing.²² In describing this genre, Cavell offers the figure of the circle for condensing characteristics he goes on to elaborate: it’s centre is everywhere and circumference, nowhere; every one of its sentences can be taken as its topic, such that there is no end to reading it; and its accomplishment depends on the will of a listening, persisting reader.

The Emerson essay stands for a radically plural and recursive of process of attunement and transformation that is accomplished as a piece of writing. It’s radical plurality, expressed in the first of the claims through which Cavell describes this genre, can also be glossed as the idea that when loss cuts all the way to one’s foundation, there is “no established public source”²³ on what direction is to be taken: everything matters. Every source of what we do and say comes to bear on each the attempt at recovering a connection with the world in and through a scene of rupture, such that the effort at learning what to make of a particular loss, which the Emerson essay enacts, consists in showing at least two different loops. As a mode of inquiry into what might come after rupture, one of its tasks is “to unearth the conditions of our diction,”²⁴ and so to place what has been lost within some larger picture of the world’s sequences and consequences. That is to say, the Emerson essay joins a description of what has been broken to a description of the conditions in which breaking becomes possible and recovery, possible. Cavell returns to this idea often in his writing by remarking on the homonymy of the words “mourning” and “morning,”²⁵ bringing this consideration to bear on the disposition the essayist. The manner of thinking that the Emerson es-

20. Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, 106.

21. Emerson, R.W. “Experience,” in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: The Major Prose*, ed. Ronald A. Bosco and Joel Myerson (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 2015).

22. Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, 108.

23. *Ibid.*, 106.

24. *Ibid.*, 81.

25. *Ibid.*, 84; Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

say enacts and stands for has the structure of mourning as a descent into night, which anticipates the possibility of coming into the world again.

What the Emerson essay recovers, therefore, are possibilities of and for a shared existence, not immutable truths, but the ground on which so much as a true statement can be made. Earlier, I called these possibilities “forms of life.” The concept of a form of life, in Cavell’s writing, registers the relation between the two mutually constitutive figures of community and reason. While the figure of community makes it possible to imagine a mode of association,²⁶ the figure of reason renders the ways of knowing and doing (topics, words)²⁷ that association both demands and enables. Rather than transcendental and timeless categories, forms of life are temporalized and emplaced attunements. In *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, Cavell describes the Wittgensteinian concept of a form of life in more detail by using the Emersonian figure of a generalization:

Generalization is an Emersonian tone or function most fully computed in “Circles” where the generation of new circles is associated with what we ordinarily call generalizations and genesis and generations; and also with the idea of general as meaning the multitude and as meaning a ranking officer and a ranking term; and equally with the idea of generosity. And if the figure of a circle is the self-image of an Emerson essay, then one generation in question refers to the genre of the Emerson essay.²⁸

A generalization names the normative order that binds a collection of common things (general), which is as emergent (genesis) as it is successive (generation) because it is achieved continuously as a matter of association (generosity) and patterning (genre). Roughly, this is the background over which Cavell’s picture of pedagogy can be understood: forms of life constitute the conditions in which possibility can be enacted and experienced.²⁹ Thus, the concept of a form of life can be used to describe situated knowledges and practices that continuously emerge through the specific communities

26. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

27. Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, 90, 93-4.

28. *Ibid.*, 99.

29. *Ibid.*, 81.

(or relationships) that make up an ordinary world.³⁰ On this picture, forms are vulnerable to the possibilities of coming undone and remaining unseen. This vulnerability, which I have so far referred to in very general terms as “loss” and “recovery,” is more amply registered in Cavell’s work also as a matter of flexibility, and—conceptually—as a concern with the truth and scandal of skepticism.

Cavell’s concept of skepticism registers the limits of our situated capacities to grasp and so reproduce the forms of a shared world.³¹ After Kant, Wittgenstein, and Emerson, Cavell describes this slipperiness as the “resistance of phenomena” and the “lubricity of things,”³² and as the grounds for “our disappointment” with the success of our knowledge rather than its failure.³³ Skepticism, then, marks our disappointment with the success of situated knowledge because it faces us with the constitutive vulnerability of the relations that make doing and knowing possible. Uncertainty, after all, is an unavoidable condition of finding oneself bound to a world whose places and topics cannot be reduced to a single set of terms. (We are continuously exposed to the irresolvable pull between the world’s demands and the limits of our partiality.) To frame skepticism as a recurrent possibility of knowledge implies accepting that we are irreparably exposed to loss, and so continuously called on to change courses, and to establish a way of moving between old and new trajectories.³⁴

Learning is one of Cavell’s names for the transformative process of becoming increasingly receptive to the world—a process that begins with finding it relevant (even if painful) when things shows themselves to be different than we expect. Wittgenstein’s concept of the scene of instruction registers not only our exposure to the truth and scandal of skepticism—that we are never beyond the claims of learning, and that learning is not pain-free³⁵—but also our acknowledgement of an imminent departure:

“If I have exhausted”—very famous remark of Wittgenstein’s scene—if I have exhausted the justifications for following the rules of mathematics or ordinary

30. Ibid., 81; Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14:3 (1988): 575-599.

31. Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, 88.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid., 89.

34. Ibid., 109.

35. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 171.

language as I do, I have reached bedrock and my spade is turned. Then, I am inclined to say, ‘this is simply what I do.’ That was Wittgenstein. How to read this scene is at the core of a disagreement about how to read *The Investigations* more generally... The moral I draw focuses on the moment of impasse depicted as the teacher’s falling silent, expressed, as I take the scene, not only in the sense of finality in the words, ‘this is simply what I do,’ but in the introduction of these words by the phrase, ‘then I am inclined to say,’ which suggests that the words are, in fact, not said... A way to draw what I think of as the moral of recurrent silence is to say that at some point in teaching, the pupil must go on, and want to go on, alone. Another way is to say that the teacher is to know both when even how to fall silent, and when and how to break his or her silence.³⁶

Insofar as a scene of instruction joins the possibility of learning and the disappointing (or devastating) moment when the world shows itself to be other than one was prepared to anticipate, it marks a process of transition where doubt can yield to a more receptive disposition: “as it were[, I] turn my palms outward, as if to exhibit the kind of creature I am, and declare my ground occupied, only mine, ceding yours.”³⁷ If generalizations—on this picture—stand for situated knowledge, then maybe the different ways in which people respond to skepticism can perhaps be imagined as situations of acknowledgement.

As a response to the scene of instruction, then, the figure of the posture of thinking registers different ways of searching for an orientation on uneven ground:

... suppose the leaps are uses of the feet to dance (not, say, to march)—as when one uses the hands to clap (not to clutch). But Nietzsche’s leaping and dancing, like Emerson’s dancing and standing and sitting, and like Thoreau’s sitting long enough in some attractive spot, pose further questions of the posture of thinking, following, succeeding; in particular questions of *starting* to think.³⁸

36. Cavell, “Points of Departure: Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow,” YouTube video, 1:08:08, posted by “GradSpotlight,” August 14, 2012, https://youtu.be/bTck_u1fpxc, 13:15-18:19.

37. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 115.

38. *Ibid.*, 115.

Here, marching appears as an overbearing way of moving (which is to say philosophizing), as if clinging to the ground with one's feet, expecting that the ground appear only as one is prepared to grasp it, in a straight line. Cavell often refers to this clutching disposition as the more unhandsome part of our own constitution, which denies the separateness of the very forms "to which we seek attachment."³⁹

Contrastingly, the more ecstatic postures of thinking that Cavell figures as falling and dancing enact philosophy as a capacious mode of receptivity and a capacity for transformation, which begins by abandoning any claims on the continuation of a sequence as one has known it. Indeed, this other way of recovering a way to go on requires letting the fragments of what has come apart, the world's parts to "draw attention to themselves according to their natural weight."⁴⁰ Of course, it's not easy. If forms of life constitute the (changing) ground beneath our feet—meaning, the conditions of a shared existence—then letting ourselves endure their foundering comes to letting the ground fall away beneath our feet. The invitation to imagine what it could mean for philosophy to proceed by leaping and dancing, however, is a reminder that our bodies can draw into the air—but only for a moment. Though we can leap, we cannot fly. This seemingly trivial observation can be given a deeper tone in the claim that there are no cures for being on earth,⁴¹ where gravity is the strongest natural weight or attractive force exerted on us.

When a rupture marks the distance between two possible worlds (old and new), the posture of thinking that the Emerson essay adopts is an appeal to one's experience, not as a search for concepts to apply,⁴² but as the achievement of silence.⁴³ As I understand it, rather than the absence of sound, Cavellian silence names the condition of being both exposed and attentive to an uncertain process of determination. This means enduring loss (or anyway, a negation of direction) along with observing the implications that ripple out from it, a practice where good-enough descripti-

39. Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, 86.

40. Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, enlarged edn. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979) 25.

41. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 129.

42. Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, 86.

43. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 159-160.

ons of the conditions in which the world achieved its old coherence make it possible to see and judge its new one.⁴⁴

As a generous response to rupture and skepticism, the Emerson essay not only musters the patience required for achieving a radical receptivity,⁴⁵ but also announces and provides the conditions of its search for recovery.⁴⁶ In this process, the essayist's task is to re-member what has been sundered, which is to say, to observe the interruptive elaboration of form as a process whose determining force is in every part's attraction for the others.⁴⁷ In writing after Emerson, Cavell uses the phrase "the power of passiveness"⁴⁸ to describe the capacity to receive the world as it shows itself (in media res), a power he contrasts with the powerlessness of "impotently clutching fingers"⁴⁹ and the denial the world's separateness in the forceful application of a concept. Philosophizing by leaping and dancing (both of which include falling) confronts us with a radical sense of our partiality, and so the need for a listening, persisting attention, which is certainly a matter of will,⁵⁰ but not only.

To me, there seems to be an irresolvable pull at the centre of what I earlier called the situation of acknowledgement. After all, our resources for learning – "economic, spiritual, epistemological, metaphysical, geographical" – are both "incompletely charted"⁵¹ and finite. I take this to mean that they can only be charted in and through the perilous work of essaying. (Tuition is costly. Is this cost pragmatic?⁵² The question, of course, cuts both ways. Is avoidance affordable?)

Another way of expressing this concern could be to say that the concept of situated knowledges and situations of acknowledgement prompt us to think about thinking in terms of sites (places, topics). Cavell's reminder that "where you can leap to depends on where you stand" 18 seems particularly important to me insofar as overcoming thinking as clutching means finding yourself perched at the threshold between two possible worlds, both leaping and falling into silence. These displace-

44. Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, 112.

45. *Ibid.*, 80.

46. *Ibid.*, 103.

47. *Ibid.*, 100.

48. *Ibid.*, 115.

49. *Ibid.*, 86.

50. *Ibid.*, 101.

51. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2000), 209.

52. Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, 115.

ments—gaps⁵³ or breaks that call for lingering attention⁵⁴—constitute a particularly difficult places to occupy, let alone describe. After Thoreau, Cavell’s name for whatever holds a reader long enough to start to think (again and again) is an attractive spot, a handsome place. Seen this way, a handsome place can be a resource for lasting through the exposures of falling into silence, and source for imagining what might be on the other side of an uncertain leap.

As a site where philosophy is possible, “what about America is forbidding, prohibitive, negative—the place or the topic of the place?”⁵⁵ This question loops back to the scene of dictation at the beginning of this essay. How might I account for the sources of the crossing guard’s inquisitional demands in their word choice and tone? In the force behind them? In the way that force reached to me and the other people waiting silently in line?

How are we to know the ground we can occupy without turning our separate-ness (or someone else’s) into isolation? And how are we to account for the expenses of occupying just this ground? Do I mean for these questions to sting? A sting is what you might feel when someone punches you with great force and agility, minimizing the surface area of the impact and drawing back their fist so as to both localize and intensify the impact. A sting, however, is also what you feel when you’re cleaning out a wound. So, it’s not in spite of knowing that a Cavellian interrogation of America would strive to leave us all intact that I ask these questions, but because of it. I would like all of us to be left intact. And what is that to look like? Where am I standing? (Of whom can I ask these questions? And who has been asking some version of them so long as what we call America has called for and provided topics for thinking and feeling deeply? My optimism here is not separable from a deep sense of hazard and uncertainty.) Having to learn something that no one can teach can inspire desire and dread, without either of these feelings shouldering out the other. (After all, isn’t it always possible that in falling into silence—or in taking or avoiding just this or that leap from it—you might fail, where you could have otherwise succeeded in thinking and feeling something through?)

53. Kathleen Stewart, *A Space on the Side of the Road: Cultural Poetics in an “Other” America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

54. Moten, *In the Break*.

55. Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, 92.

Originating in Dismemberment

In “Two Girls, Fat and Thin,” Lauren Berlant offers a picture of persisting, which stands in a more ambivalent relation to the possibility of learning something that can’t be taught than Cavell’s picture of the posture of thinking. Mary Gaitskill’s novel—the subject of Berlant’s essay—describes a friendship between Dorothy Never and Justine Shade, two women who share interest in the philosophy of Anna Granite, a figure who promises her readers “that identification with one’s sexual and intellectual power can produce happiness and fulfillment, achieving a victory over the deadening normal world.”⁵⁶ In addition to their interest in Granite, Dorothy and Justine also share “the painful optimism” of people trying to live with a history of hurt.⁵⁷ They struggle with the difficulty of finding a stable orientation after surviving child abuse.

With Gaitskill’s novel, Berlant draws her attention to unheroic modes of agency-in-crisis,⁵⁸ which take place between the loss of foundation and the possibility of falling into silence. She focuses on how the pleasures of food, sex, and intellection allow Dorothy and Justine to both maintain and undermine an attachment to the possibility of transformation. Eating, for example, offers “a formalist strategy... of time- and space- making” which allows Dorothy and Justine to make pockets of time where for evading the pressures of the present moment through tactics of counter-absorption;⁵⁹ reading protects fantasy while simultaneously hedging the difficulty of becoming receptive to a world that reveals itself by disappointing the subject’s (mis)recognitions;⁶⁰ using formal genres to over-determine the sexual encounter offers a holding environment while avoiding the threatening claims of inter-subjectivity.⁶¹

Moving swiftly from one pleasure to another means that there is no time for learning any lessons, though the possibility of turning avoidance into aversive thinking is not foreclosed altogether: “to live for one’s snack is to live by the rhythm of one’s own impulse for pleasure... a way of both being and not being in the world.”⁶²

56. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 127.

57. *Ibid.*, 126.

58. *Ibid.*, 101, 124.

59. *Ibid.*, 137.

60. *Ibid.*, 146.

61. *Ibid.*, 145, 151.

62. *Ibid.*, 135.

What could be reduced to compulsive behaviour, Berlant insists, actually expresses a complex relation to a wounded, wounding attachment, which is maintained by continuously staging a process of absorption that allows Dorothy and Justine to persist in the capacity to desire by entering and averting the world at the same time.⁶³ For Dorothy and Justine, then, pleasure becomes a way of avoiding silence, and the avoidance of silence becomes a manner of preserving a wounded optimism against enduring the formlessness of falling into silence. This makes for an ambivalent relation to the possibility of becoming teachable in a way bears further reading and thinking. For Dorothy and Justine, interruption is the cost of maintaining a fragile optimism, of marking “a direction for the will to take,”⁶⁴ which they continuously defer. Berlant’s reading of Gaitskill’s novel makes it possible to ask in more detail after the work of persisting not only to read and to think, but also to endure falling into silence.

Depending on how one reads Cavell (when he claims that Emerson’s writing is both pre-philosophical and already a work of philosophy), and on how one reads Berlant, the end of Gaitskill’s novel might or might not stand for (something close to) the beginning of philosophy. *Two Girls, Fat and Thin* ends shortly after Dorothy comes to Justine’s place unannounced and unexpectedly interrupts a sexual assault, helping Justine survive. Exhausted after this violent scene, “finally disburdened of the weight of bearing themselves,” Dorothy and Justine fall asleep together.⁶⁵ As Berlant notes, though “this mutual fall into bed is not nothing,”⁶⁶ it is not exactly clear what its relation might be to the possibility of becoming teachable. Berlant’s distinction between self-continuity and self-extension⁶⁷ is useful for articulating the ways in which persisting to read and to think implies more than one mode of endurance, and for describing a scene where endurance and perfectionism become troublingly folded into each other. Is the end of a “self-consuming negotiation of ambivalence”⁶⁸ imaginable as the end of a terminable loss? Is it the same as the possibility of becoming “awfully teachable, for a minute”?⁶⁹ Is it a lesson learned?⁷⁰

63. *Ibid.*, 133.

64. *Ibid.*, 138.

65. *Ibid.*, 158.

66. *Ibid.*, 152.

67. *Ibid.*, 99.

68. *Ibid.*, 159.

69. *Ibid.*, 125.

70. *Ibid.*, 152.

I have so far tried to describe Cavell's picture of philosophy as the work of recovering from a terminable loss, and then tried to place alongside it a more polyvalent and interruptive account of persisting to read to think, which is neither (straightforwardly) unhandsome nor pedagogical. Berlant's essay, I suggested, provides a description of a relation between pain, history, and desire, which both expresses a concern with learning, and suggests that persisting is a matter of attachment, alongside reading and thinking. Often, these different dimensions of a larger, more complicated pursuit get in the way of each other, and the possibility of perfectionism doesn't become debased as much as it stalls out and flounders. Now I want to turn toward Almodovar's work – particularly to the film *The Law of Desire* – in order to ask after scenes where desire flounders in ambivalent attempts to imagine a more satisfying way to live. Where Cavell's picture of patience and thinking emphasizes the work of giving up a standing generalization in order to become receptive to a new signal, Almodovar offers narratives of unruly desires caught between silence and white noise.

One way to begin sketching the connections between Cavell and Almodovar's works could be to observe that they both share an interest in the works of Alfred Hitchcock, and then to gesture to its significance. After William Rothman, Cavell observes Hitchcock's attention to the fact that filming "inevitably proceeds by severing things, both in cutting and, originally, in framing."⁷¹ Of course, this fact deserves keener attention than I can give at the moment, but for now, I will only say that Hitchcock's self-conscious use of film's murderous and idealizing capacity to dismember and re-member the world becomes a point of contact for Cavell and Almodovar's pictures of the truth and scandal of skepticism. Both Cavell and Almodovar explore narratives in which people come to know and respond to the lubricity of things by hazarding to become formless (nameless?) in order to become teachable (receptive?). Almodovar, however, seems to focus on markedly more ambivalent, ambiguous, and floundering attempts at transformation, caught between an ongoing history of hurt and the possibility of finding a more satisfying way to live.

Another way to sketch the possibility of putting Cavell's writing and Almodovar's films in conversation could be to ask after how Almodovar's characters meet the possibility of learning. Often, this is a question of the manner in which they come to

71. Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, 165.

approach and acknowledge tragedy in their own lives. This approach will take up most of my reading. Almodovar's lead characters are continuously faced with the difficulty and uncertainty of having to re-member their lives in imperfect conditions, which is to say both to recollect and to reinvent them (out of nothing more and nothing less than convention). They are creatures of transition. They flounder in their contradictory and often equivocal attempts at transformation, as these attempts require a confrontation between their lives and words, and the lives that are imagined for them in and through the generalizations that constitute a shared world.⁷² Bewildered by the lubricity of things, not knowing the meaning of their words, and wary (if not avoidant) of becoming formless, they don't so much leap as leap around. In a Cavellian mood, we might describe these attempts at becoming and remaining teachable as floundering modes of aversive thinking, caught in a struggle between the possibilities of achieving silence and refusing the world altogether.

Pablo (Eusebio Poncela) is a writer, filmmaker, and theatre director who enjoys being a small-time celebrity in Madrid, and Tina (Carmen Maura), his sister, is a trans woman, who is raising a teenage daughter – Ada (Manuela Velasco) – in an economically unstable situation. The relationship between Pablo and Tina is one of the film's centres for the ways in which it asks of them to improvise a conversation about a broken home and a shared history of abandonment. Another of the film's centres is Pablo's relationship with Juan (Miguel Molina), a lover whose desire for closeness and intimacy asks that Pablo examine what he takes love to be—and to acknowledge the separateness and partiality of a mutual education. Lastly, the film also turns on Pablo's relationship with Antonio (Antonio Banderas). Antonio is twenty years old. He idolizes Pablo and struggles with exploring his own desire for men in light of his family's conservatism. At the crossing of these pulls, Antonio becomes increasingly desperate and possessive until his refusal of the world's separateness turns fatal.

In this reading of *The Law of Desire*, however, I will focus on Pablo's writing as a medium for learning to think and to feel – which is to say, re-member – a shared world. This means that I will approach the film through Pablo's letters to Juan, as well as through the script he tries to write for a film loosely based on Tina's story. I

72. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 125.

am interested in these objects because of the ways in which they register the ambiguity of Pablo's use of writing to both acknowledge and avoid the people in his life.

An important scene for introducing Pablo's character, and showing his lack of clarity comes early in the film as a talk show interview, where the host (Rosy de Palma) prompts Pablo to describe what he would ask for from an ideal lover. Pablo responds with a list:

Well, [I would ask] that he not to come with me to parties but wait at home for the gossip; that he not interrupt me when I'm on the typewriter; that he read the same books as me; that he have knowledge of medicine, law, plumbing, and electricity. In short, that he adore me, but not nag me, and that he accept I am useless.

In declaring his uselessness at practical things along with his unwillingness to be bothered by other's people's desires, Pablo is saying at least two things. He prefers not to concern himself with figuring out how things work, or with thinking and feeling on terms other than his own. Paradoxically, though Pablo makes a living telling stories, he refuses to imagine what he cannot see. This scene announces Pablo's demand for extraordinary devotedness as one of the topics that will emerge throughout the film in Pablo's relationships with Tina, Antonio, and Juan.

We see Juan for the first time at the premier of Pablo's film. They go to the afterparty together, and during a brief conversation in a bathroom stall, we learn that Juan will be leaving Madrid for the summer to work at his sister's bar near the coast. For the rest of the evening, Juan and Pablo socialize separately, although exchanging glances at a distance. The sequence ends with Pablo leaving the club alone after seeing Juan flirting and kissing someone else. Juan follows Pablo home. They talk. They take sleeping pills. They embrace and fall into bed together.

Early in the summer, Juan sends Pablo a short letter and a photograph of the Trafalgar lighthouse: "Dear Pablo: This is the lighthouse I talked to you about. You would like to film here. I love coming here at dawn. How are you? Write to me. A kiss, Juan." Pablo responds with a message saying that Juan's letter is "good," but not

what he needs. He also sends Juan a separate letter, which he asks Juan to sign and send instead:

I didn't leave Madrid to forget you because if I forget about you, as you suggest, I'm afraid I'll be left empty. Tell me everything you're up to—the books you read, the films you watch, the records you've bought, if you've gotten a cold. I want to share everything that's yours. Only avoid telling me if you've met someone you like. That's the only thing I couldn't bear sharing. I want to see you. You decide when. I adore you.

Pablo's letter (to himself) exposes a range of ambivalent desires, proclaiming, hedging, and disavowing a wish for intimacy. For Pablo, as we see, to be adored is to be wanted beyond the responsibility of having to listen and to read long-enough to become receptive and responsive to an experience of the world when it exceeds his own. Juan's letter, on the other hand, expresses a desire for proximity rather than a particular object, and then describes his habit of sitting by the lighthouse and waiting for the sun to rise.

When Pablo's letters eventually stop, Juan calls to ask why he is not writing in a scene that makes explicit that the film is going to connect the topic of desire and the topics of writing and forgetting. As Pablo and Juan speak on the phone, we see close-ups of their faces looking (obliquely) in each other's direction across a split frame. Though Pablo is clearly moved by Juan's demand for reciprocity, it's impossible to tell whether he is willing to let Juan's feelings dawn on him—that is, appear as lost on him and so as requiring attention and recovery. Pablo's reply to Juan's question is as short as it is enigmatic: "I'm trying to forget, and when trying to forget, one doesn't write." It points in at least two different directions at once. On the one hand, Pablo is evidently saying that he is trying to forget—and move on from—Juan. On the other, however, he can also be understood as saying that he is trying to forget a way of knowing and doing desire, not so much for Juan's sake, as for his own. Do we know Pablo to be capable of this insight? And do we know him and Juan to share this intimacy? How does a person learn that someone else is capable of being different?

The film's concerns with desire, writing and forgetting take on a fuller dimension in Pablo's quarrel with his sister, Tina, over the script of his newest film. As with Pablo's TV interview, a scene that's significant for knowing Tina is her visit to the chapel of the school where she used to go as a child—the Ramiro de Maeztu Institute. This sequence begins with Tina and Ada—her daughter—walking down Serrano Street, passing by the school, and deciding spontaneously to sneak into the building. As they walk into the chapel, we hear and see the priest playing the organ to “O Virgen Más Pura,” a hymn that Tina knows by heart, and mouths along to as she takes off her sunglasses and begins to look through the space: “O Virgen... wipe away my tears of bitter pain.”

Singing, Tina approaches the priest—father Constantino (Germán Cobos)—and tells him that as a child she used to be a soloist in the choir. Father Constantino, his fingers still on the keys, replies that she reminds him of an old student, a bit. Tina shifts slightly, as if trying to find a more direct way to face him, before saying that she used to be that boy. Father Constantino stops playing the organ:

CONSTANTINO: Are you married?

TINA: No. I'm afraid I'm condemned to solitude.

CONSTANTINO: That can't ever be said.

TINA: I can. In my life there have only been two men. One was you, my spiritual mentor, and the other was my father. Both abandoned me. Now I can't trust in any other.

CONSTANTINO: Turn yourself to God. He will not ever abandon you.

TINA: Maybe you are right. I think I'd like to sing in the choir again.

CONSTANTINO: Not here, please.

TINA: Why?

CONSTANTINO: If it's God you're looking for, go to any other church. He's in all of them.

TINA: But my memories are here!

CONSTANTINO: Run away from them as I have run.

TINA: I don't want to. Memories are all I have left.

This sequence seems to announce Tina's difficulty in trusting others to acknowledge the claims of her pain. When Pablo tells Tina that he is writing a script inspired in her life, trust is at the centre of their argument:

TINA: I don't have problems with men because for me it's already a long time since they no longer exist.

PABLO: And that doesn't seem like much of a problem to you?

TINA: What's going on? Are you also going to treat me as if I were a freak?

PABLO: Hey stop. I didn't say that.

TINA: Talk about your own problems with men and leave me in peace!

PABLO: You want to listen to me?

TINA: I forbid you to touch even the most minor event in my life. For however ridiculous it might be, I have the right to be respected.

PABLO: But who said your life is ridiculous?

TINA: No one needs to say it. I know.

PABLO: Hey, hey, you wanna listen a minute?

TINA: Yes, of course, yes—my failures with men are more than the plot of a script. I won't allow you or anyone to play with them.

PABLO: No one is going to play with them!

TINA: They're mine, you hear? Mine!

PABLO: So go and poison your life with them if you like them so much

TINA: I don't like them, son of a bitch! But I've had to pay a very high cost for those failures. They're all I have.

Tina does not trust Pablo to receive her pain—say to make it present to himself beyond genres that would make it so extraordinary and grotesque as to put her beyond the claim to “respect,” taking her, for example, as something to be shown, an object of “ridicule,” a “freak” (“fenómeno”). Hours later, Pablo shows up at Tina's apartment bringing two photographs of them as children, which he confesses to having kept against her wishes and then tears in two: “I promised not to ask you anything and I think I've kept my promise for all these years, but don't forget that in your past, there's also part of mine.” Pablo's relationship with Tina—like his relati-

onship with Juan—demands that he re-member something he cannot see, a transformation, which the film makes possible in and through another loss.

Over the summer, Pablo begins an affair with a young man who is as extraordinarily devoted as he is possessive. Antonio paints the bathroom ceiling, fixes the light switch in the hall, and begins to manage more of Pablo's than than Pablo is willing to concede. When Antonio leaves Madrid to visit his family for a few weeks, he demands that Pablo write to him, and that he use a woman's name, "Laura P," so his family won't know that Pablo is a man. The letters Pablo exchanges with Antonio become—in a sense—an inversion of the letters he exchanges with Juan, as they place Pablo in the role of having to respond to someone else's denial of his separateness. This dynamic between Antonio and Pablo doesn't last, however, and Pablo eventually makes it clear that there is nothing between them: "Antonio: I don't love you. I still love Juan. I won't come to see you because I will go see him. Forget me and stop lying to yourself. I've never lied to you, Laura P." This exchange becomes a turning point in the film. After reading Pablo's letter, Antonio goes to look for Juan. Antonio finds Juan working the closing shift at his sister's bar and introduces himself as Pablo's new boyfriend. While Juan is confused by the news, he nevertheless accepts it. Wanting to talk in order to have a better picture of things rather than control them, Juan invites Antonio to see the lighthouse. While they walk along the cliffs, Antonio assaults Juan, throwing him down and to the water.

The following day, Pablo arrives in Juan's town to attend the funeral. After seeing Juan's body and his grieving relatives and neighbours, Pablo is met by a local police officer, who brings him into the station for questioning. Driven to learn what happened, Pablo drives to Antonio's house. To Pablo's horror, Antonio confesses to the murder. Both too early to recover from the loss and too late to prevent it, Pablo rushes out of the house and drives back to Madrid.

We see part of Pablo's drive as two superimposed shots half-dissolving into each other, a close-up of the car's wheels and an extreme close-up of his eyes as he begins to weep. The explicit blending of these two images seems to me to mark a not only an eminent voyage or willingness for departure, but also to indicate Pablo's eyes as the object that is to be transformed and liberated through mourning. As if it were Pablo's eyes that are on their way from one place to another. This sequence, however,

is interrupted by a crash. We see Pablo blink uncomfortably, as the tears obstruct his vision. Then the camera cuts to an approaching tree and we hear the crash.

The accident leaves Pablo severely injured and suffering from amnesia, allowing the film to loop back to its concern with writing, memory and desire. This happens in a scene at the hospital, which echoes the earlier quarrel between Tina and Pablo over the script of his movie. In an effort to help Pablo regain a knowledge of their bond, Tina tells him their life story, including her side of it, which she had earlier guarded:

Our parents separated when we were very young. You stayed with mom, here, in Madrid. This is Madrid, and I went with dad, to Morocco. He's a painter, and he had a studio there. Pablo, there are things we've never talked about. It was my fault that our parents separated. I was involved with dad. One day, mom found us out, and, well, just imagine.

Seeing that Pablo can't piece things together on his own, Tina begins to despair: "your amnesia leaves me without a past. If you don't recover your memory, I will go mad!" With these words, she rushes to her purse and pulls out the two photographs that Pablo tore up during their argument. We see a black and white image of two boys in shorts, the index of an irretrievable past, dis-membered and re-membered many times over—until then—in isolation.

The reversal of positions in this scene, which recalls an earlier quarrel between Pablo and Tina over the script of his film, renders an uncertainty internal to the film's picture of forgetting. On the one hand, forgetting seems to stand for the possibility of interrupting one's own suffering, which in turn makes one's experience of that suffering (and of the world as a place where people suffer) inaccessible. On the other hand, forgetting seems to also stand for the possibility of abandoning a pattern, and giving more generous attention to how different fragments draw attention to themselves according to their own weight.

At the end of the film, we know that Pablo recovers his memory, and that he has arrived at a good-enough position to begin thinking and feeling deeply, if he can find a place to read persistently and the willingness to listen. We don't know, howe-

ver, if he rebuilds his relationship with Tina, or whether he will let Juan and Antonio's deaths happen to him. We don't know, that is, whether Pablo will let his mourning for them transform him. Of course, there are many more details in the film than I have been able to describe, some of which come to bear on Pablo's writing, and others of which mark new lines of inquiry.⁷³ Nevertheless, I hope I have said enough to show that Pablo's arrival at a threshold where he can see that there is work to be done comes to "a medium for philosophy,"⁷⁴ which is to say, to an important part in a process of learning and transformation.

Outroduction

On March 15, 2018, I found myself standing somewhere unapproachable—waiting in line at the Windsor-Detroit border, where someone I didn't know was cruelly bullied by a border officer and then taken to a separate room for more questioning. The man was in his early sixties. English was not his first language, and he was crossing into US to see his mother. I was moved by his silence and paralyzed by the anger and fear I felt at the guard's cruelty. It took me more than a year to realize that I also felt profoundly sad. At the beginning of this essay, I said that I have come to think of this moment as a scene of dictation rather than a scene of instruction because it shows how a dominating source of diction is brought to bear on where and how someone is

73. I have in mind, for example, the film's first sequence, which shows the end of Pablo's latest film, and then shifts between different registers (say, levels) of the diegetic world—from Pablo's film to the studio where the film dubbed to the theatre where it's screened. (Is this Hitchcockian manoeuvre telling us something about the way desire can be haunted? Is it offering dubbing as a picture of conformity?) Another detail I will not be able to describe at length is the sequence in which Juan and Pablo exchange gazes across a crowded room after the premier of Pablo's film. (Does it show that they are both hesitant and capable of following each other? And is this capacity to follow a counterpoint to Pablo's claim to want to be adored? Do Pablo and Juan's gazes offer a parallel text for understanding their words?) Similarly, I said nearly nothing anything about Antonio's character. Though he appears to be the most clutching of the four, he is also the youngest and the most sheltered. For those paying close attention to him throughout the film, it's possible to see that he is trying to learn how to kiss (and to imagine that he is equally trying to learn how to bottom). (Would giving attention to Antonio's essaying prompt us to ask after his capacity to learn in relation to his isolation? Could Antonio have become a different person if Pablo had taken the trouble to read him more patiently? But isn't the very possibility of a shift in Pablo's capacity to read precisely the film's drama?) Similarly, though I hint at Juan's Emersonian posture, I never address it directly, nor what to make of its success and failure. Lastly, I also say nothing of Tina's relationship with the detectives and the doctor that become central to the second part of the movie. (There is simply no end to reading.)

74. Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, 90.

made to be. (Is policing anti-philosophical? I mean, is it clutching?) If there is a mode of optimism that I wish to insist on at the end of this essay, it's that what is prohibitive about a place stands not only as its unapproachability⁷⁵ but also for its newness. This, however, takes compassion, which is to say, a willingness for (finding our limits in repeated acts of) description.

75. Ibid., 92.