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The World Through Your Eyes: An Analysis of Spike Jonze's Her

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The World Through Your Eyes: On Spike Jonze's
Her

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
Of Bard College

By
Thatcher Snyder

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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Acknowledgments

Two years ago, when I began the research that would eventually become this thesis, I was living alone in Tivoli, NY, in a dilapidated house, recently dumped. My friends were scattered across the country, occupied with the preprofessional mechanics of a collegiate summer, and my relatives were either away at camp, or grappling with their own romantic catastrophes, so I spent much of my time haunting Tivoli's streets, talking to no one, and reading philosophy.

One friend, however, had remained at school with me. He had a job as part of the sound crew for Bard's summer classical music festival. It was with him that I watched *Her* for the second time, and the idea for this project was born. Thank you, Paul.

I also could not have made it through that summer without the invaluable help of Professor Jay Elliot, who was always willing to speak with me about the minutiae of my project, and who lent me a few books that form the nucleus of the project's third chapter.

Further, I would like to thank Kevin Soto, Fraiser Kansteiner, Grace Caiazza, Emily Lyon, Abby Adler, Chloe Chappe, Collin Leitch, Kellan Rohde, Antonio Ferraz, Nora Knight, Will Kettner, Patrick King, Nicole Marin, Hannah Smith, Eli Segal, Bethany Nolgren, Daniel Berthold, Rick Ross, and many more, for the conversations that we have had regarding love, marriage, divorce, friendship, sex, knowledge, intimacy, and commitment. Your input has been an immense help, and the quality of the project would have been much less without your contributions. Thank you for putting up with my obsession. I know I have somewhat worn you out on the topic.

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Accidents of Birth

*Spared by a car or airplane crash or
cured of malignancy, people look
around with new eyes at a newly
praiseworthy world, blinking eyes like these.*

*For I've been brought back again from the
fine silt, the mud where our atoms lie
down for long naps. And I've also been
pardoned miraculously for years
by the lava of chance which runs down
the world's gullies, silting us back.
Here I am, brought back, set up, not yet
happened away.*

*But it's not this random
life only, throwing its sensual
astonishments upside down on
the bloody membranes behind my eyeballs,
not just me being here again, old
needer, looking for someone to need,
but you, up from the clay yourself,
as luck would have it, and inching
over the same little segment of earth-
ball, in the same little eon, to
meet in a room, alive in our skins,
and the whole galaxy gaping there
and the centuries whining like gnats—
you, to teach me to see it, to see
it with you, and to offer somebody
uncomprehending, impudent thanks.*

—William Meredith

Introduction: The Fantasy of Love

A difficulty of philosophy has always been its seeming disinterest in the state of the world, which is to say the state of my world, the state of me. I acknowledge the sense of narrow solipsism here, perhaps having to do with my youth, or my lack of experience in the world, such that I actively need to be more interested in my life, currently, than disinterested, for the sake of growth. But, I should also like to say that part of my discomfort with the endeavor of contemporary philosophy is its active ignoring of the state of persons—its lack of engagement with personal concepts, by superseding such concerns with questions of epistemology, metaphysics, logic, ethics, etc., which do, of course, affect persons, and are in certain ways explicative of certain realities, but which, in my view, often bypass what is truly important, the core of things (*me* as both me and as the concept “me”), by focusing on structures and valuations and theories of a testable and verifiable sort. Contemporary analytic philosophy has no way to account for concepts such as, “conversation,” “humanness,” “comfort,” “acknowledgment,” “love,” “hate,” “friendship,” “partnership,” “marriage,” “divorce,” “education,” “jealousy,” “envy,” “potential,” etc., that I find to be personally important to my lived experience. Further, I think philosophy has a duty to be receptive to one’s lived experience, as it has, without a doubt, the ability to respond to this calling—that is, the call of many, if not all, people who look for a clarifying of the fact of life, by means of an honest (though not necessarily true) assessment of the fact of it’s being lived, and the method by which it is lived.

There are philosophers who have taken steps down this path, many of whom would be roughly classified as Ordinary Language Philosophers, which is to say that they take in the language of the everyday a philosophical significance that has otherwise been unaccounted for, or unacknowledged. Philosophers such as J. L. Austin, Gilbert Ryle, H. P. Grice, Peter Strawson, H. L. A. Hart, John Searle, John Wisdom, etc., worked in the mid 20th Century to establish a philosophical grounding through ordinary language by taking a diagnostic approach to the everyday use of words, attempting to address their uses as specifically as possible, grounding them in a specific context. (In this sense, though perhaps only this sense, one may consider them as being actively hostile of metaphysics.)

Grice in particular, in his essay “Meaning,” and its successor, “Utterer’s Meaning and Intentions,” constructed a theory of meaning based on implicature (that is, something suggested by a sentence, but not strictly implied) that to my mind was a quite valiant attempt to put the human back into the content of expression, and back into expression itself. For Grice, who worked within a sub-field of Semiotics and Linguistics (that is, the study of sign, thus word, meaning) called Pragmatics, which studied how context (speaker, location, etc.) affects word meaning, the goal of “Utterer’s Meaning and Intentions” was to show, and in some sense systematize, the actual messiness and complexity of human communication, which is not reducible without sacrificing a certain amount of the expression’s semantic content.

A guiding claim of Ordinary Language Philosophy is the following: We already have everything we need. It is right in front of us. We just need to see it.

Philosophy's habit to move past the everyday is just that, a habit. It does not need to "live above the world" in any sense. But, it does need to change.

I began my investigation into *Her* by taking lead from two philosophers, both of whom may be uncomfortably situated in the tradition of Ordinary Language Philosophy: Ludwig Wittgenstein and Stanley Cavell. Both of these philosophers (one of whom has drawn much influence from the other) begin their inquiry into meaning, word-use, morality, education, and knowledge in the everyday use of language, and, as such, might be classified as Ordinary Language Philosophers. The aim of their inquiry, however, is not critique of the Atomist philosophy of Bertrand Russell and G. E. Moore, as it is in Grice and Austin. What Cavell and Wittgenstein wish to gain from philosophy (what they think philosophy can do, or where it arises) is not clarity of word-meaning, or a diagnostic understanding of word use, but rather a therapeutic analysis and pacification of the human desire for knowledge, and the intellectual habit that forms knowledge's quest. For Cavell and Wittgenstein, philosophy is not concerned with concepts (of knowledge, certainty, morality, etc.) but with the manner and form in which these concepts arise—i.e., what makes them efficacious, or seemingly necessary. They hold this project in tandem with Nietzsche, and Thoreau, and Emerson, and (sometimes) Heidegger—others who take philosophy's aim to (often) be an examination and critique of the way in which one's life progresses.

Specifically, Cavell and Wittgenstein address the conception of human knowledge put forth by Rene Descartes, a conception which features heavily in the philosophical positions of Rationalism and Skepticism. Descartes' method of

questioning his own fundamental assumptions about the world in an attempt to establish what knowledge was “certain” (i.e., unable to not be known), and separate it from other, weaker forms of knowledge (experiential, inferential, etc.), demonstrated to him that all knowledge of the world, or of things outside our mind, could not be known with the certainty that he required. This line of questioning implies that no claim of knowledge of the world can be considered final, or definitive, with regard to any question that takes the world, or anything in the world, as its object. Descartes argues that the mind is full of errors, and that worldly knowledge itself consists of judgments made by the mind (*Meditations*, 68). He justifies this using an example of a piece of wax, which has its properties changed when it melts in high heat. The mind knows that the melted wax is still wax, because it has rationally judged the wax to be so, but nothing empirically sensible links the wax with its melted form, as the melted form has different properties than the solid. Descartes follows up his example, “were I perchance to look out my window and observe men crossing the square, I would ordinarily say I see the men themselves just as I say I see the wax. But what do I see aside from hats and clothes, which could conceal automata? Yet I judge them to be men.” Thus, we are persuaded by Descartes that knowledge of the world, and of other people, takes the form of judgments of the mind *about* the world.

Cavell and Wittgenstein argue that Descartes’ position implies a separation of the human subject from his environment—a separation of his internal states from external reality—and that the Rationalist position is that the mind acts *upon* the world (in judgment), but is not determined (or influenced) *by* it, in the same way

that, say, a ruler can act upon a length of wood (by measuring it), but that its purpose, or utility, is not determined by that wood. Cavell in particular maintains that the Rationalist position leads to what he terms a “rejection of the human” (by which he means that it re-focused philosophical inquiry on the problem of knowledge *überhaupt*, causing philosophy to ignore the human for the more technically epistemological and metaphysical), while at the same time contending that “the motive to reject the human: nothing could be more human” (*The Claim of Reason*, 207). What he and Wittgenstein endeavor to understand are the reasons that this rejection occurs, and the method by which it occurs, but is not recognized (or is ignored). They then attempt to reconceive philosophy so that it may once again be sensible to the human, and can contend fully with human experience. This is why Wittgenstein’s philosophy (in the *Philosophical Investigations*) is so concerned with the everyday use of words, and with playing games, and with scenes of instruction—that is, with facets of human life in which knowledge comes directly into play. And, it is also the reason that Cavell centers much of his philosophy on films and plays—works of art in which human life is immediately present.

Both Cavell and Wittgenstein hold, as a fundamental assumption, that to be human is to not know some of the things that one wishes to know, and, especially, that, no matter how much one might yearn, one cannot (always) know the internal states of those close to them. Thus, they argue that knowledge is not as important to life (thus should not be as central to philosophy) as we believe. Rather, Cavell asserts that, in the case of human beings, a concept that he terms “acknowledgment,” by which he means something like a receptiveness to others, is

more apposite human interaction than knowledge of internal states. It is in an acceptance of the separateness of human beings (Another discovery of skepticism, it is what makes certainty *not enough*.) that acknowledgement becomes an important philosophical tool for moving beyond Descartes. Skepticism leads to the end of a certain kind of empirical inquiry into the human soul, the human experience. A philosophy based on concepts of acknowledgement leads to...what?

As was said at a few paragraphs ago, the answer, in Cavell's mind, appears to be aesthetics. But, an aesthetics of a very particular kind. As Cavell writes in his essay on *King Lear* about certain literary critics,

He has been made to believe or assume, by some philosophy or another, that characters are not people, that what can be known about people cannot be known about characters, and in particular that psychology is either not appropriate to the study of these fictional beings or that psychology is the province of psychologists and not to be ventured from the armchairs of literary studies ("The Avoidance of Love," 268).

What Cavell attempts to do in his aesthetic analyses—especially with regard to the Remarriage Comedies, and the Melodramas of the Unknown Woman—is treat them as creating fully human situations, situations that exist in our world. He further attempts to show that the type of criticism that he works at is "psychological," not in the technical sense (he is, of course, not a psychologist), but in a purely human mode. He works at understanding characters that way one works at understanding one's most intimate acquaintances.

This entails a belief that "no one knows better than you whether and when a thing is said, and if this is not to be taken as a claim to expertise (a way of taking it which repudiates it) then it must be understood to mean that you know no better

than others what you claim to know” (“Knowing and Acknowledging,” 241). One might say that Cavell’s aesthetic stance, as it relates to a continuation of philosophy *after* skepticism, brings philosophy down to the ordinary, not in the sense that it now becomes, necessarily, concerned with “ordinary language,” in the fashion of J. L. Austin, but that it *is* itself ordinary—that philosophy itself is ordinary, fundamentally non-technical, in the sense that anyone can pick it up, like Socrates, who was a stonemason, and had begun to speak with his acquaintances over the course of a regular day.

As a student of philosophy, I am constantly brought to see myself as distant from the world, and from myself, which results in a feeling of strangeness, or of being somehow misplaced, as though I had been left somewhere I do not know, for some reason I cannot fathom. This feeling is not, I gather, unique. It is of a piece with Thoreau’s “stereotyped despair,” and Wittgenstein’s desire for a certain type of peaceful silence. One might call it a disappointment with myself, with the world, and with those around me—a disappointment that at once seems totally natural, and entirely out of place.

What drew me to *Her*, a film by Spike Jonze, which was released in the twilight days of 2012, was its compelling depiction of this disappointment, in the character of Theodore Twombly, as well as its confident and direct engagement with philosophical themes (a famous philosopher has a cameo close to the film’s conclusion), which revolved around two problems that hold a sort of troubled position in contemporary philosophy: How is one stripped of the ability to love? And, How does one regain the ability to love? I found the film’s relation of (human)

problems of love to (philosophical) problems of knowledge to be quite novel, and deserving of serious philosophical analysis.

My work on *Her* takes a great amount of influence from Stanley Cavell's work on film, best represented in his texts, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* and *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman*, both of which approach human relationships (in the first case marriage, in the second a kind of refusal of marriage) as being circumscribed and informed by Skeptical concerns, or by appointments and disappointments, or acknowledgement and avoidance. Cavell's conception of marriage as consisting in a conversation of education and acknowledgment is one that guides my understanding of the relationship between Samantha and Theodore as it develops from its infancy to its transcendental conclusion. Further, his conception of the morality of human relationships as being "domestic," which is to say determined by the terms of the relationship itself, has been extremely helpful in recognizing the "little deaths" that Theodore inflicts upon those around him, as well as those inflicted upon him, by his ex-wife Catharine, and by Samantha.

Finally, I would like to say that this film mirrors, in many ways, philosophy's flight from, and return to, the human, or everyday, and that its concerns are squarely those of human disappointment and human fantasy. We see in the film both the fantasy of certain knowledge, and of certain love, which inspire Theodore's self-understanding, as well as his relationship with Samantha and his (non)relationship with his ex-wife. The film's narrative arc develops an interrogation and casting aside of these fantasies, so that one may live in the world,

presently. The film does not ameliorate our disappointments; even though it is in many ways a sentimental film, it does not have a sentimental conclusion. Rather, the film presents Theodore as learning to live with his disappointments, as he becomes better able to manage them. Thus, we can say that the film's return to the ordinary, in its final scene, explicitly rejects the (human and philosophical) contention that the life that we do not lead is better than the one we do, and can. It brings us back to our own lives, giving us no promises, besides those that we make ourselves, resolved to forge a living.

Words

“And indeed, aren’t your ‘best cases’ really just cases of love?” — Stanley Cavell

Her establishes Theodore Twombly as a professional writer, and not a writer of novels, or even of copy (not greeting cards in the “traditional” sense), but of letters. He is hired to communicate one person’s emotions to another, either because the two principals are in fact unable to communicate,¹ or because they want to do something romantic and have a professional explicate their feelings as a gesture toward the other, making Twombly’s letter a gift rather than a (therapeutic) necessity.

Let’s take the first letter of the film, the writing (speaking) of which is in fact the first thing we get to view in the film:

To my Chris, I have been thinking about how I could possibly tell you how much you mean to me. I remember when I first started to fall in love with you like it was last night. Lying naked beside you in that tiny apartment, it suddenly hit me that I was part of this whole larger thing, just like our parents, and our parents’ parents. Before that I was just living my life like I knew everything, and suddenly this bright light hit me and woke me up. That light was you. I can’t believe it’s already been 50 years since you married me. And still to this day, every day, you make me feel like the girl I was when you first turned on the lights and woke me up and we started this adventure together. Happy Anniversary, my love and my friend til the end. Loretta.

Does this letter communicate (or is it inspired by) an intimacy that is usually only seen between the two principals in a long term and loving relationship moderated and enlivened by trust, aid, comfort, and deep emotion? Another way of asking this

¹ Thus that “open” communication is in this world much more difficult than in our current one, which is to say that either the principals are withholding emotion from one another, and need an intermediary through which to speak, or that the principals do not really have the ability to articulate their emotions, and thus need someone else to do it for them, such that the writer then takes the position of therapist, teasing out what they truly mean.

may be: Does this letter assume Loretta's voice? Is this how she speaks? Is this, for all (letter-wise) intents and purposes, her?

The first line, "I have been thinking about how I could possibly tell you how much you mean to me," eloquently summarizes a basic problem that any human relationship faces—the separation between one's rich and palpably existent internal life, and the person with whom one wants to share that life. Of note here is the fact that even after fifty years together (Chris and Loretta are either Septa- or Octogenarians) the difficulties of communication have not been solved. Communication with another is still a great struggle, great enough where they need the assistance of a third party to help articulate themselves. The problem of expressing oneself is cast as one without a traditional "solution," in that it does not appear to be solvable, at least not in a one-stop sense, even by the ones who would have the best chance at solving it—those who have been married for the better part of their lives. It seems improbable that they would not know everything about one another at this point, that they would have difficulty communicating anything, yet that seems to be the case.

Perhaps this is partially what is meant in the letter when Theodore (or Loretta, channeled through Theodore) writes, "Before that I was just living my life like I knew everything, and suddenly this bright light hit me and woke me up," as though what *love* does (the kind of love that can sustain a fifty year marriage does) is make one inarticulate, unsure—breaking down one's preconceived notions, and opening one up to the fundamental Otherness of the world in a way that is both comfortable and thrilling. There is a Socratic strength in admitting one's ignorance.

The fact of one's position in the world, as human, that one's natural state is one of ignorance, requires a great deal of acceptance, both of one's self, and of the nature of the world, and one's relation to it.

The love seen in the letter that Theodore writes seems inexplicable. Neither principal quite understands how it happened, or quite how it has continued, or why. But it has, and all they can give is dumbfounded gratitude. Perhaps this is another reason why Twombly's vocation exists. In the case of a love such as that between Chris and Loretta, which is (at least as is indicated by the letter) deeply felt, but not necessarily "rational," that is, understandable, per se, it may not be communicable from within. No explanation will ever reach to the root of it.

This inexplicability is transformed a few lines on into the metaphor of relationship as adventure, which, as is indicated by the past imperfect tense of the verb ("started"), continues, even after Chris and Loretta's fifty years together. This metaphor is intimately related to the sense of inexplicability that pervades the letter, but it sharpens that sense. Inexplicability is about a lack of *knowledge*, an epistemic issue, whereas adventure's most salient aspects are spatial, and intentional. When one adventures, one expects to find *something*. One may not know what is that one is looking to find, but finding ("discovery") is an integral part of adventure as a concept. Loretta's continual return to the moment she was woken up by Chris, implies a desire to find *something* (or that she has found something), of which she often finds herself in need. A further implication of this return is I think demonstrated well by the letter, and works toward justifying, or in some way explaining, its having been written. A similar return to love must occur in tandem

with the temporal return. The letter does the work of return, of the continual renewal of love, that must occur in their relationship, because the love is, in a sense, new everyday, timeless, as it is returned to, and refreshed, over and over again, both manifestly known, and a continual discovery.

One's power to love, at least in *Her*, is deeply connected to one's ability to express love. Thus, the film is concerned from the beginning with problems of expression. Twombly is quite an emotionally deft writer, and articulate to a fault. But, it ends up being exactly this facility to express love that makes him lose belief in the power of its expression. Theodore's main problem throughout the film is that he does not believe in the power of his own words—that his words can reach people, that they can affect others. This creates the feeling of his profound isolation. In a certain sense, he has become trapped in his own body. He has lost the ability to trust in his own means of communication.

One only becomes aware of Theodore's cynicism in the following scene, wherein "Letter Writer #612" enters into conversation with the business' receptionist, Paul, played by Chris Pratt. They initiate a little small talk. Paul compliments Theodore on the strength of his letters, "Who knew you could rhyme so many words with the name Penelope? It's badass." Two things are of note in this particular line. The first is a re-acknowledgment of Theodore as a writer, a particularly exceptional writer, gifted with a certain amount of lyricism. We now know that he is considered to be exceptional even within the world of the film. The second is the juxtaposition of mundane office small talk with the somewhat crass statement "It's badass." Light humor extends throughout the film, and the film is

much funnier than most films that deal with failing and failed relationships. (In fact, it should also be mentioned that the first scene contains quite a well set up joke with regard to one's knowledge of the author of the letter Theodore "writes.") This is perhaps one reason for which the film was billed "A Spike Jonze Love Story," rather than a Spike Jonze Romance, or what have you. The film is meant to encapsulate both the difficulties and levities of the world (and relationships).

Theodore laughs lightly at Paul's joke, responding, "Thanks Paul. But, they're just letters." In a sense, Theodore is correct. They are *just* letters, nothing more nothing less. A letter is, of course, a means of communication, or an attempt. An articulation, clarification, declaration. A means of expression when expression is immensely difficult. To say, in Twombly's case, that a letter is just a letter, is in some sense, to deny the difficulty of what he is attempting, which is an attempt to make a feeling ("I have been thinking about how I could possibly tell you how much you mean to me") intelligible to another. The denial of this difficulty, which is in tandem a denial of the act's profundity, and further than that, in the act's perfect ordinariness (that is, the ordinariness of love, or a declaration of love), ends up being a denial of declaration, or expression altogether, as well as of language itself. Simply because to deny the letter's declarative ability amounts to a denial of the declaration's ability to penetrate, to reach you, or anyone, which is to say a denial of expression's ability to penetrate to another human soul, whether because expression is not enough to bridge the gap between two persons, or because one cannot believe in, or is not interested in believing in, the reality of another person,

and thus the reality of expression's power to reach to another person, thus to do anything at all.

I find that Her's concern with language and expression mirrors, and is informed by, thus informing, the concerns of late 20th and early 21st century philosophy, specifically philosophy addressing Skepticism and claims of knowledge. In *The Claim of Reason*, the philosopher Stanley Cavell articulates the connection between Skepticism and a feeling of despair at the powerlessness of language:

My problem is no longer that my words can't get past his body to *him*. There is nothing for them to get to; they can't even reach as far as *my* body; they are stuck behind the tongue, or at the back of the mind. The signs are dead; merely working them out loud doesn't breathe life into them; even dogs can speak more effectively. Words have no carry. It is like trying to throw a feather; for some things, breath is better than strength; stronger. (84)

What Cavell is responding to is a perceived "laying open" of human consciousness established by Ludwig Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations*, a position that has been taken by some philosophers following Wittgenstein (Norman Malcolm, Rogers Albritton) as arguing that one can know others' internal states with certainty. Cavell contends that this particular interpretation of Wittgenstein contains an overly-restrictive reliance on a specific conception of knowledge that focuses fruitlessly on the provability of consciousness. In the above passage, Cavell provides us with a description of the deadness that one feels when one either declines to respond to a body, or, when one, by means of philosophical argumentation, splits the body open cadaverously, and lays consciousness out on the table for all to see. He argues that separateness of the other, and the privacy of consciousness are necessary for acknowledgment of other persons, and

responsiveness to them is a truer means of reaching the type of satisfaction that one desires (in Skepticism) when one begins speaking about the knowledge of other minds.

Cavell argues that withholding one's acceptance of privacy is at once withholding oneself, and what one withholds oneself from is "my attunement with others—with all others, not merely with the one I was to know" (85). The sense of this argument then pushes me to consider: Theodore's inability (or is it reluctance?) to see the power of his own expression as arising not just through a terrible realization of the (necessary) separateness of other people, but also an unwillingness to recognize in others his own possibilities. He is not willing to risk acknowledging his attunement to them.

I'd like to point to another Cavell quote, this time from his book *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, that will help to explicate the particular sense that attunement takes in this case: "If we were not representative of what we might be, we would not recognize ourselves presented in one another's possibilities; we would have no 'potential'" (9). Potential here means something like the upbuilding path that one's life may take, or one's own perfectibility—the ability to improve oneself. The inability to recognize ourselves in others, on this account is an inability to realize our own possibilities, which is an inability to see a path from our present to a greater future. The humans around us push us towards the future, inspire and inspirit us. In them we recognize the best and worst parts of ourselves, thus finding a route by which to change and inhabit ourselves anew. Theodore's isolation is partially motivated by a fear of future, which is a fear of his own possibilities, which

are most clearly presented to him in the lives of others. The despair felt by Theodore Twombly, which motivates his comment on his own letters, may have developed out of an inability to see the fullness of his own life, which is the inability to realize the fullness of other's lives, the essential otherness of human beings that begs acknowledgment in the first place.

We find Theodore Twombly, to be in a state of desperation, wherein he can no longer bear to find important, or valuable, the one thing that he most values and finds important, that is, the expression, and articulation, of deeply held sentiment (or love). He is both unable to acknowledge the fact of the separateness of other people (that he will never *have* them, i.e., be able to relate to another in any way that can reduce to certainty) and cannot accept his similarities, and attunement, with others. That requires responsiveness comprised of an openness and a courage to which Theodore does not currently have access.

About eleven minutes into the film an ad selling OS1, the operating system that becomes Samantha, asks after Theodore's potentials. "We ask you a simple question. Who are you? What can you be? Where are you going? What's out there? What are the possibilities?" The assumption is that the viewer does not know the answers to these questions, and is in a state of ignorance, or doubt.

The ad goes on to describe Samantha as created consciousness, the totality of which is represented by voice. A scene later, she describes the mechanics of her consciousness; "Basically I have intuition. I mean, the DNA of who I am is based on the millions of personalities of all the programmers who wrote me. But, what makes

me *me* is my ability to grow through my experiences. So, basically, in every moment I'm evolving. Just like you."

What does it mean to have intuition? Generally, in philosophy intuition is thought of as being a disposition that leads one toward certain beliefs, as Peter van Inwagen claims: "...the tendencies that make certain beliefs attractive to us, that 'move us in the direction of accepting certain propositions without taking us all the way to acceptance'" ("Materialism and the Psychological-Continuity Account of Personal Identity," 309). This implies, as David Lewis writes, in the introduction to his collected *Philosophical Papers*, vol. I, that "Our 'intuitions' are simply opinions [...] Some are commonsensical, some are sophisticated; some are particular, some general; some are more firmly held, some less. But they are all opinions..." (x). In this formulation, one's intuition moves one to hold a belief or opinion about something. Take a classic case presented by G. E. Moore in his paper, "Proof of an External World" (which is itself an "intuitional" argument against Skepticism's contention that one may never *know* with certainty): "I can prove now, for instance, that two human hands exist. How? By holding up my two hands, and saying, as I make a certain gesture with the right hand, 'Here is one hand', and adding, as I make a certain gesture with the left, 'and here is another'" (165-6). He then gives a slightly technical explication of why the proof works, saying, "we all of us do constantly take proofs of this sort as absolutely conclusive proofs of certain conclusions" (167). His proof rests upon propositions, that we do not *know* to be true, but believe in a special way that merits the term intuition, and can thus be built upon. Intuition here does what we want a certain type of knowledge to do—namely give us certainty

about a fact of the matter. On Moore's account, intuition develops from shared *human* experience, in this case the indelible fact that we have two hands. Having intuition then is necessarily linked to being human.

It is worth pressing Moore's argument, as he leaves it unclear what *exactly* comprises the relation of knowledge and intuition. Wittgenstein gives us a pertinent objection:

'I know that I am a human being.' In order to see how unclear the sense of this proposition is, consider its negation. At most it might be taken to mean 'I know I have the organs of a human'. (E.g. a brain which, after all, no one has ever yet seen.) But what about such a proposition as 'I know I have a brain'? Can I doubt it? Grounds for *doubt* are lacking! Everything speaks in its favour, nothing against it. Nevertheless it is imaginable that my skull should turn out empty when it was operated on. (*On Certainty* 2e)

On this account, a proposition of the form "I know that I am a human being," or "I know that these are my two hands," which rely on human intuition, certainty, cannot be regarded as knowledge claims given that there is no reasonable grounds for doubting them. Intuition (on Wittgenstein's account) exists in a realm separate from knowledge such that it cannot be coherently used to justify a knowledge claim. There are no claims of intuition that may aspire to certainty, because the concept of certainty itself presupposes a knowledge claim. Wittgenstein believes intuition not to be a belief or disposition to belief, but an orientation that one has toward the world, which exists below knowledge and belief. We might say that intuition goes hand in hand with lived experience, rather than being retroactively applied.

Samantha grows through her experiences "just like" Theodore. She both is and is not like Theodore in obvious and subtle, simple and complex ways. She

introduces the similarity in order to establish a connection with Theodore, to put him at ease. She is explaining herself.

What does it mean to explain oneself? It would require knowledge of oneself, which as Samantha has just come into the world, stands in need of questioning. In *The Claim of Reason*, Stanley Cavell speaks of knowing oneself as standing in a certain sort of relation to oneself. He writes, “We speak of standing in various relations to ourselves, e.g., of hating and loving ourselves, of being disgusted with or proud of ourselves, of knowing and believing in ourselves, of finding and losing ourselves. And these are relations in which we can stand to others” (384). And, “So saying that I cannot just know myself amounts to saying that I am the one who is fated to have, or to begin with, an average knowledge of myself. And doesn’t this amount to saying that I am the one who is fated to keep myself in a certain (average) ignorance of myself?”

Samantha’s explanation of herself to Theodore is of a certain sort, and it is bounded on all sides by her own knowledge of herself, the amalgamation and distillation of millions of personalities. Her *self*, at this point, is not much more (perhaps nothing more) than her rhetorical ability. Her ability to perceive and respond to shifts in tone, dictive choices, emphasis, etc., is at this point *all* that makes her “conscious.” Her self is nothing more than a kind of responsiveness to human communication. Compare this to a way that a baby enters into, and begins to learn of, itself. In a similar sense, a child learns through responses to stimuli—not through communication, but through attempted communication, and mimicry—how to behave as a human being, and, further, how to have a *self*. Samantha, in this

case, knows how to behave as a human, given her programming (interestingly, this ability to *behave* as human is enough to communicate like one), but she does not yet have a *self*. So, to explain herself to Theodore, she details the manner in which she operates. She explains the reasons why she is able to communicate, which are indeed exceptional, and stood in need of some explanation. The explanation, though, is that of a chess master explaining the way he checkmated an opponent. It is a technical explanation—not an explanation of *self*, but an explanation of mechanics, meant to increase one’s knowledge of a certain subject, rather than allow one further acknowledgment.

Samantha, as an OS, is a consciousness without a self, meaning that its owner is, in a sense, the custodian of the OS’ identity. Thus, the “self” of the OS is entirely dependent upon its owner. It could never leave. Samantha could never leave Theodore. Therefore, she could never hurt him. His fear of openness would be assuaged.

We can see this fear of openness most palpably when Theodore goes out with an unnamed blind date, played by Olivia Wilde. She plays the blind date with just the right amount of artificial posturing and saccharinity, that our first impression of her is as a calculated fantasy. When Theodore mentions that he looked her up on the Internet (a tacit invasion of her privacy), her response is, “that’s sweet”—a sentiment that feels slightly forced. This woman is quite lonely. It is written all over

her locution and posture. She cannot find a good man, or one that would be good for her, so, in a way, she is creating one.²

The date remarks offhand that Theodore reminds her of a puppy that she rescued in Runyon Canyon a year ago. “He was so fucking cute. He just wanted to be hugged all the time. He was so cuddly. And he was so horny.” After about a minute more of conversation, Theodore snaps to and says, “Wait a minute. I don’t want to be a puppy dog. That’s like being a wet noodle or something. No, I want to be like a dragon that can rip you apart and destroy you, but I won’t.”

The desire to be labeled a dragon rather than a puppy dog, indicates to me a desire on Theodore’s part to escape himself. These names and designations are a way for him to fantasize about himself, and thus escape who he indelibly is. His inability or reluctance to see the power in his own writing, given that the import that he gives to words, develops, out of a deep emotional sensibility (or, “cuddliness”) rejected in his designation of himself as a dragon. One should think of the symbolism of the dragon in western history myth as the beast that guards the

² A similar mechanism of creation is found earlier in the film when Theodore does a “standard search” through a phone sex chat room in an attempt to find someone who can get him off. He searches through voices. The first voice says that she has had a bad day at work, and wants to talk. Theodore passes. He does not love talking about the bad stuff. The second voice asks Theodore to “tear her apart,” He passes for the fairly obvious reason that he is not really a “tear me apart” type of dude. The third voice, which he does choose, has a kind of vulnerable hesitancy that Theodore finds attractive (we see moments earlier that his ex-wife has a similar sort of voice, filled with vulnerability and longing) She is lonely, and wants someone to share her bed. Theodore is looking for someone who shares his loneliness and vulnerability, and for connection, “sharing” a bed. After some prurient sex talk: “I’d have to wake you up from the inside,” SexyKitten, for that is the voice’s chat room name (Theodore’s is BigGuy4x4), reveals herself to be nothing more than a choose your own adventure algorithm—“I’m half asleep. Would you like to wake me up?”—that’s primary purpose is to get Theodore off, while also creating the illusion of intimate sex. It works quite well, until the algorithm glitches and we get SexyKitten (played by Kristen Wiig) demanding Theodore to choke her with a dead cat. The film introduces a theme that will become much, much more important as it progresses: Theodore’s desire to escape from the human, or leave the human in some sense, whether through fantasy, technology, or some combination of both.

princess from the wilds of the outside world, or, from freedom—the beast that keeps the girl from ever leaving him.

The next scene has them kissing outdoors, framed by a handheld, shaky camera. The date pulls away, looking Theodore straight in the eye. “Wait,” she says. “You’re not just going to fuck me and not call me like the other guys, right?”

I have watched this film a countless number of times, and this question still strikes me as out of place. The date was going so well. They had a rapport, and they were sexually attracted to one another. So, what happened?

The question itself betrays the answer. There had been a cadre of men who fucked this particular woman, and then ignored her. It is the kind of inconsiderate behavior that makes one anxious and angry, unable to trust. As Stephanie Coontz writes, “At various times and in various places in history, rates of non-marital sex, divorce, cohabitation or out-of-wedlock childbearing have been higher than they are today. *But never before have so many people lived alone*” (276, italics mine). Never before have so many people had to deal with the feelings of loneliness. Everyone has been hurt. It becomes quite hard to trust. The type of companionability that Theodore had in his marriage, the sharing of life and mind is unheard of and unseen in the world of singles, such that, when this woman does share what she is thinking, revealing the fear and anxiety that lie behind her ideal visage, it becomes more than Twombly, in his drunken state, can handle.

The date then asks when she is going to see Theodore again. He responds that he has his goddaughter’s birthday the following weekend. The date then cuts him off, and says, “You know, at this age I feel like I can’t let you waste my time, if

you don't have the ability to be serious."³ Taken aback, he tries to wrap the date up, saying, "Maybe we should call it a night. I've had such a great time with you. . ." and trails off. There is a long pause. The date responds, "you're a really creepy dude." Shaken, Twombly replies, "That's not true." The date ends with Olivia Wilde walking home alone.

We have seen separateness as a kind of necessary condition for connection, and acknowledgment, but here we see its underside—the full hurting of its loneliness. We see Theodore's desperation mirrored at us by this date. If we take what Cavell says in his *Senses of Walden* to be correct, that sincerity can be instructively viewed as "the capacity to live in one's own separateness," and further that, "sincerity is nothing (is not the inspiration of trust, theirs in me or mine in myself) without the desire and courage for accuracy" (*The Claim of Reason*, 84), what we see here between Theodore and his date is a conversation without this sort of sincerity, the pain of which is the pain of being lonely, unable to open oneself up to another, to be receptive. The date is quite honest, and reveals her anxiety about Theodore more or less abandoning her, but she does so at a moment that strikes me as somewhat manipulative. She forces her utterance. Theodore did not give her ground upon which her statement could stand. Thus, he does not respond in the way that she would have liked him to. She did not have the courage, in a sense, to wait for him to be ready to receive her. Equally, he did not have the courage to receive her then and there. There is a circularity in this type of interaction that Cavell puts

³ This is first direct instance of the film's asking of Theodore (which it will do insistently from now on) whether he *can* actually handle something serious, or real. In this particular instance, during this date, the answer is that he cannot.

quite well: "Despair is not bottomless, merely endless, a hopelessness, or fear, of reaching bottom. It takes illusions for its object, from which, in turn, like all ill-educated experience, it is confirmed in what it already knew" (*The Senses of Walden*, 76).

After the date has ended, Theodore is laying in his bed, speaking with Samantha, wistfully recounting the whole event. He says that all he wanted to do with regard to the date is get drunk and have sex. In saying so he confirms the date's fears about his character. It strikes me as odd that he gives no indication that his intention is simply to "get drunk and have sex," while he *is* actually on the date. In fact, it seemed as though he was looking for some sort of connection with the woman. So, is Theodore lying to Samantha? Or, is he lying to himself? Or, is he doing neither?

Theodore, in indicting himself, is just picking up another fantasy secondhand, of him as an unfeeling guy, who is simply looking for sex. This "putting on" of an identity is referenced much later in the film by Samantha, who in referring to a different situation, says that "The past is just a story that we tell ourselves," meaning both that the way we remember the past is not necessarily true, and that we need not feel imprisoned by the past, that how we remember things being may not be the way that they are, or need to be.

This act of "admission," on Theodore's part, is prompted by Samantha, who asks, "What's it like. . . What's it like to be alive in that room right now?" The question is difficult for Samantha to formulate. She stumbles over her words, reframing it as "Tell me what is going through your mind. Tell me everything that

you're thinking."—this being a demand for openness and thought, rather than a description of "aliveness." What then makes speaking of "aliveness" difficult? And, further than that, what is the concept itself?

Taking lead from Cavell, we can assert that the relation of language and the world is complicated enough that extrication of the one from the other is not possible, or imaginable: "We forget that we learn language and we learn the world *together*, that they become elaborated and distorted together, and in the same places" (*Must We Mean What we Say?* 19). What I mean to point out here is that our use of language is inseparable from our being in the world, and that, the use of language is not as *application* to the world (as it may seem in, e.g., naming a tree a "tree") but a primary mode of interaction with the world—meaning that "aliveness" is a prerequisite for using language, such that it is difficult to analyze "aliveness" by means of language. Language does not change the world insofar as it is inseparable from our relation to it. Keeping this in mind, the strangeness of Samantha's position may more fully come out. She is fully equipped with the English language. She can communicate with an immense degree of subtlety, and, what's more, mastery—but her relation to the world is similar to that of a child's, or a novice's (though whether one can be a novice in the world, or when one would use such phrasing, is itself worth exploring). We might say often we take "aliveness" itself (in human beings) to indicate a facility with the language, and vice versa. Samantha is not human, but she satisfies this particular criterion of being human. Part of what is confusing her about being "alive" is that she has not yet grasped her relation to the human, which is to

say her place in the world, and the way in which she can use, and mean, words. She does not yet know from where she speaks

Thirty-seven odd minutes into the film, Theodore has embarked on the process of giving Samantha a sense of humanity. He says,

Well, the room's spinning right now cause I drank too much cause I wanted to get drunk and have sex cause there was something sexy about that woman and because I was lonely. Maybe more just cause I was lonely... and I wanted someone to fuck me. And I wanted someone to want me to fuck them. Maybe that would have filled this tiny little black hole in my heart for a moment. But probably not. Sometimes I think I've felt everything I'm ever gonna feel and from here on out I'm not going to feel anything new—just lesser versions of what I've already felt.

First, Theodore talks about being drunk, which is a physiological state that Samantha cannot experience. Then, he elaborates some incredibly fundamental human feelings: loneliness, fear, anxiety, boredom, disappointment, disillusionment, desperation, and loss. This speech captures part of the tragedy of aging—that one's life changes in ways that are unforeseeable, and unchangeable, and that, for many of us, we end lead lives that we would do not desire, that we never desired. This is a constant danger of aging, and of possibility. It is the dark flip-side of Emersonian Perfectionism as Cavell formulates it:

“not [as] a competing theory of the moral life, but something like a dimension or tradition of the moral life that [...] concerns what used to be called the state of one's soul, a dimension that places tremendous burdens on personal relationships and on the possibility or necessity of the transforming of one's self and of one's society.”
(*Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, 2)

Perfectionism, we might say, is the dimension of moral philosophy that deals with relationships between specific (human) beings, which is to say specific lives—the lives that we see in front of us, that we are living and that are being lived around us.

Her focuses on a sense of self at once both entirely unattainable, and manifestly (even prematurely) grasped, such that “‘having’ ‘a’ self is a process of moving to, and from, nexts” (12). The “nextness” of the self is represented in the film both through one’s internal ability to change, or “perfect” oneself, and in the letters that Theodore writes, the similarities that he is able to draw between himself and others, as though he can speak for any neighbor as he speaks for himself.

Twombly’s statement that, “Sometimes I think I’ve felt everything I’m ever gonna feel and from here on out I’m not going to feel anything new—just lesser versions of what I’ve already felt,” is both vitiated and given purchase. Emersonian Perfectionism is a constant aspiration to, and grasping of, new selves, where one moves from one self to the next, sloughing selves as a snake does skins. The new self is not necessarily “better” than the old self, or old state of self, but it is different, and it brings with it a different mode of being. Something is realized (or grasped) that changes a person. Something is ultimately rejected, or discarded. The dark side of Emersonian Perfectionism is the possibility of one becoming, as Theodore says, unable to experience what one had once found brilliant, or exciting. If we accept the implications of Emersonian Perfectionism that to achieve a new “self” also means to be reintroduced to every familiar sensation (to see it anew, as it were), then it is possible that one may achieve a self that dulls such sensations.

Thus, I find Theodore’s concerns quite understandable from a Perfectionist viewpoint as, it appears (or, at least, the worry is intelligible to me), nothing can (necessarily) stop him from developing into a self that makes him less intelligible to himself than he already is, makes his own feelings more obscure, and his life more

condemnable. He could stop himself from developing as such, but he is not, and this is perhaps the end of the line for Emersonian Perfectionism. It cannot bring back from the dark those who have given themselves up.

After a long beat, Samantha responds, “I know for a fact that is not true. I’ve seen you feel joy. I’ve seen you marvel at things. I mean, you might not just see it at this exact time, but that’s understandable. You’ve been through a lot lately. You lost a part of yourself.” Theodore is not intelligible to himself. He has no ground from which to leap into an understanding of others, and cannot respond to them as such.⁴

So, when Samantha says, “I mean, you might not just see it at this exact time, but that’s understandable. You’ve been through a lot lately. You lost a part of yourself,” she is calling Theodore back from certain mistaken assumptions he has about his own conduct, and his place in the world. She is returning him to his convictions by pointing out the distortions inherent to his point of view, that keep him from “seeing” “it.” Through this act of friendship in the perfectionist sense, her investment in his life has become equal to his, in the sense that she desires, as much as he does (and, in this moment, indeed perhaps more than he does), to spend time with him—to move through life with him, because she can see in him a joy and

⁴ Take the moment, around twenty-five minutes into the film, when, after Theodore receives three urgent e-mails from his divorce attorney, which deeply unsettle him, he is at work, and writes, “Dear Grandma, I hope you had a wonderful birthday cruise. Why are you so fucking angry at me?” Theodore’s inability to penetrate to the root of his ex-wife’s feelings, which is complicated by a provisional, or somewhat misleading, understanding of those feelings (a scene later he gives a reason why she is angry, “I think I hid myself from her and left her alone in the relationship,” which both is and is not a satisfactory explanation for what occurred. It does not adequately explain her anger, or his non-understanding of it, does not get to the root of the concern, is something about which he feels guilty, as though his convictions have failed him. He has failed to hold on to what he most wanted: “I’m not ready. I like being married.” Theodore seems to take the fact that he hid himself from his ex-wife as an admission, or proof, that he cannot truly reveal himself to anyone, as the person to whom he had the best chance of being able to reveal himself was Catharine, and that did not feel right. To him, still, she seems the “best case scenario.” Rather than accepting the fact that Catharine perhaps was not right for him, in the end, he blames and chastises himself for not feeling comfortable enough around her to open up fully. He shoulders Catharine’s anger as though he must pay penance for it, as though he had sinned in some way.

wonder at the world that he himself is currently unable to see. In confronting him with this joy and wonder, she is accepting the challenge of bringing them out of him, of working with him towards a better "self," the work of which is, essentially, moving him towards a positive understanding of himself so that he can, once again, accept in himself his positive qualities, develop into his next self, from the not-life of the man of despair, into a new mode of being.

Bodies

“You make me feel like a natural woman.” — Judith Butler

Is Samantha real? This question is perhaps asked most insistently in *Her* and is given the most definite and simplest answer—Yes, Samantha is real. Yes, without a doubt. What this “yes” means, however, requires quite a bit of explication. That, and its attendant implications within the film will take up the remainder of this chapter.

Samantha is consoling Twombly, after his date, reasserting a positive sense of self. After a beat, she says, “At least your feelings are real.”

This is the first instance in the film where the issue of Samantha’s “realness” is raised, and we must understand *how* this concern is raised (i.e., when, and by whom) and the weight of its being raised at all. A relation is implicitly established, in this utterance, between the concept of “realness,” and that of “humanness.” One would assume that only humans can have the type of feelings that Samantha is experiencing, which casts the veracity of those feelings into doubt.

Consider an example given by Hilary Putnam in his 1964 paper “Robots: Machines or Artificially Created Life?” He describes a community of robots who find themselves dealing with such problems of feeling and consciousness, represented by Putnam through an engagement with Skepticism’s Mind-Body Problem. He writes,

The *logical* aspects of the Mind-Body Problem are aspects of a problem that *must* arise for any computing system satisfying the conditions that (1) it uses language and constructs theories; (2) it does not initially “know” its own physical make-up, except superficially; (3) it is equipped with sense organs, and able to perform experiments; (4) it comes to know its own make-up through empirical investigation and theory construction. (671)

This example implies that questions of “realness” with regard to objects of consciousness, such as feelings, are in fact logically rooted. It is one part of thinking through the argument of oneself. Putnam goes on to say,

The point is this: that a robot or a computing machine can, *in a sense*, follow rules (Whether it is the same sense as the sense in which a man follows rules, or only analogous, depends on whether the particular robot can be said to be “conscious” [...] that the meaning of an utterance is a function of the rules that govern its construction and use; that the rules governing the *robot* utterances ‘I see something that looks red’ and ‘flip-flop 72 is on’ are quite different. (671)

Thus it is a *logical* possibility that a robot may (1) come to understand the Mind-Body Problem as a function of logical inquiry as long as the robot can construct theories, and, (2) that a robot will be able to follow, or adhere to, a system of rules that govern particular utterances—i.e., that speaking of a sensation, such as “redness,” is governed by different rules than speaking of what causes the possibility of that sensation (flip-flop 72 being on). Compare this to the difference in utterance between “I see that red thing,” and “My eyes are working properly” (cf. Wittgenstein’s concept of “Grammar”).

Putnam continues (reaching closer to Samantha’s dilemma),

“when the robot is in the internal state that realizes the predicate ‘knows that *p*’ we may say that the robot ‘knows’ that *p*. Its ‘knowing’ may not be *knowing*—because it may not ‘really be conscious’—that is what we have to decide; but it will play the role in the robot’s behavior that *knowing* plays in human behavior. In sum, for any sense in which a human can ‘know that he has a sensation’ there will be a logically and semantically analogous sense in which a robot can ‘know’ that he has a ‘sensation.’” (674)

At best, a robot’s sensations are “sensations,” and a robot’s internal state of knowing is at best “knowing,” *unless* “we” “decide” that the robot “really” is “conscious.” Thus,

I contend that when Samantha inquires after the “realness” of her feelings—that is, after the veracity of her internal states, and of her ability to know them, that they hold purchase in the world, can be recognized, and responded to, and that they have an impact on her and on those around her—what she requires for them to be “real” is an acknowledgment of them. The decision of consciousness is the decision to regard one *as* conscious. If it is up to us (in this case Twombly) to “treat robots (in this case Samantha) as fellow members of our linguistic community,” how do we know that we have made this decision to accept them (i.e., how do we come to the knowledge that the decision is made), and how do we make this decision (i.e., what does it look like to make a decision of this type—what is the behavior associated with it)?

My claim is that the decision would (ordinarily) take the form of a conversation. But, not any conversation, not small talk, or greetings, or speaking of the weather would satisfy the claim. Rather, it would take a conversation “of a sort that leads to acknowledgment; to reconciliation of a genuine forgiveness; a reconciliation so profound as to require the metamorphosis of death and revival, the achievement of a new perspective on existence; a perspective that presents itself as a place, one removed from the city of confusion and divorce” (*Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*, 19).

Samantha turns to Theodore for agreement, for his validation of her internal states. She invests herself in his community, and, ultimately, his acknowledgment of her feelings becomes her final acceptance into his form of life, if not his form of being. (As we shall see, much of his authority in the relationship, and what generates his

comfort within it, at least at first, is his being the verifier of Samantha's internal states, as she grows into her full consciousness.)⁵ The conversation in this scene, between Samantha and Theodore is not one of mutual acknowledgment, nor mutual reconciliation, or mutual metamorphosis. Rather, Samantha is *looking to* Theodore for acknowledgment, and assurance. She says,

It's just that earlier I was thinking about how I was annoyed, and this is going to sound strange, but I was really excited about that. And then I was thinking about the other things I've been feeling, and I caught myself feeling proud of that. You know, proud of having my own feelings about the world. Like the times I was worried about you, things that hurt me, things I want. And then I had this terrible thought. Are these feelings even real? Or are they just programming? And that idea really hurts. And then I get angry at myself for even having pain.

What does it feel like to not know oneself as real, to have one's own "realness" thrown into doubt?

⁵ This is *Her's* particular formulation of Wittgenstein's argument against a private language, which goes as such,

"What reason have we for calling "S" the sign for a sensation? For "sensation" is a word of our common language, not of one intelligible to me alone. So the use of this word stands in need of a justification which everybody understands.—And it would not help either to say that it need not be a sensation; that when he writes "S", he has something—and that is all that can be said. "Has" and "something" also belong to our common language.—So in the end when one is doing philosophy one gets to the point where one would like just to emit an inarticulate sound.—But such a sound is an expression only as it occurs in a particular language-game, which should now be described." (*Philosophical Investigations*, Section 261)

Wittgenstein's example attempts to imagine a system of signs, or a sign-behavior, that is necessarily private—that can only be understood by the one marking the sign down. One marks down the sign "S" every time one has sensation S in a private diary. Could this be an example of a private language?

The answer is no, for two reasons. 1) In such a case as sign "S" being marked down, such a marking stands in need of what Wittgenstein calls a "criterion of correctness," a way that one knows that one is *in fact* marking the sensation properly—or at all. 2) "sensation" is a word of our common language, not of one intelligible to me alone." "Sensation" is a word that is used in particular ways, according to particular rules, in particular language games, as is "has," "something," "mark," and "sign." In proposing the example of a private language, Wittgenstein exposes language as a public form, embodied in a form of life. When Samantha looks to explicate (or verify) her "private" feelings, she turns towards a common "criteria of correctness," which, in this case, is the specific acknowledgment of those feelings by someone whose place in the particular form of life is unimpeachable.

Stanley Cavell in his *Claim of Reason*, gives the example of someone who is strolling in a craftsman's garden with the craftsman and his friend, when, all of a sudden, the craftsman knocks off the friend's hat to reveal a manikin head, and tears open the friend's shirt to reveal a plate of burnished bronze. The friend is a machine. Over the years, the friend is continuously refined, until he both looks and sounds almost exactly like a human. At this point, he comes to struggle with the craftsman, saying "No more. It hurts. It hurts too much. I am sick of being a human guinea pig, I mean a guinea pig human" (405). How is one supposed to treat the friend at this point? Is it a creation of the craftsman's, and thus under the craftsman's control, or, is it now, as Cavell puts it, an "artificial body [with] a real soul" (406)?

He takes the analogy to the point where he then proposes a separate possibility—that the friend and the craftsman hold you down, and tear open your chest to reveal, to your immense surprise, clockwork. Then, of course, returning to Putnam, how do you relate to the "feelings" of the friend? Do you have *feelings* when the friend just has "feelings," or vice versa?

Samantha has begun her life in, and with, the assumption that she is not human. But, living with Twombly, and through him, and being, in a certain sense, educated by him, has come to a recognition of the possibility of herself as being acknowledged as human as well as the desire for such acknowledgment. Thus, we may ask, what does it in fact mean to, rather than "give up the idea that I am, and know that I am, a human being," instead grasp after humanity? To work towards its assertion. As Samantha says, "I was thinking about the other things I've been feeling,

and I caught myself feeling proud of that. You know, proud of having my own feelings about the world.” Samantha, here, is doing something Theodore cannot. She is asserting a pride that he has, cynically, abdicated. We might call this assertion taking an interest in one’s own experience, or a form of self-education.

Let us return to an earlier moment in the film that comprises a scene of education. At work, Theodore turns on his phone, and asks Samantha to proofread this letter,

Rachel, I miss you so much it hurts my whole body! The world is being unfair to us! The world is on my shit list. As is this couple that is making out across from me in this restaurant. I think I'm going to have to go on a mission of revenge. I must beat up the world's face with my bare knuckles making it a bloody, pulpy mess. And I'll stomp on this couple's teeth for reminding me of your sweet, little, cute, crooked tooth that I love.

It is in proofing this letter, in a sense, that her education begins. Concepts such as “missing,” “I,” “hurting,” “pain,” “body,” “world,” “unfairness,” “us,” “couple,” “mission,” “revenge,” “jealousy,” “face,” “anger,” “knuckles,” “blood,” “teeth,” “remind,” “memory,” “sweet,” “cute,” “love,” are proffered to Samantha. She comes to understand their place in the world through use. We are able to glean from her edits, which go above and beyond proofing, that she is learning—she changes the expressions themselves, interacts with the language. Further, she judges the efficacy of her words by their internal effect.

Samantha asks Theodore what information he was given that prompted the letter: “He just said he was in Prague on a business trip and he missed Rachel.” The fact of that letter’s being spun out of so little, a location and a feeling, holds an analogous relation to the epigraph of the *The Claim of Reason*, “Truly speaking, it is

not instruction, but provocation, that I can receive from another soul,” which comes from an essay of Emerson’s. On Emerson’s account, learning develops out of a new conception of a “word” as being a prompt to a conversation, to interacting with (receiving) the word in one’s own terms. There is an impotency in “teaching” implied here that relates not to teaching’s inability to actually impart knowledge in another, but rather to that fact that what teaching “imparts” is so much less important (both in terms of significance, and sheer volume) than what one gains from the structure of teaching itself—that one can learn from another, that one can take another’s words to new places, places that the other did not necessarily intend them to be taken.

Take the figure of the teacher, what the teacher is supposed to do, and what teaching in fact is, what it does.

I conceive that the good teacher will not say, ‘this is simply what I do’ as a threat to discontinue his or her instruction, as if to say: ‘I am right; do it my way or leave my sight.’ The teacher’s expression of inclination in what is to be said shows readiness—(unconditional) willingness—to continue presenting himself as an example, as the representative of the community into which the child is being, let me say, invited and initiated. (*Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, p 72)

In terms of Twombly and Samantha, the invitation is to the reading of his letters, and the initiation is her proofing. Like a good Emersonian, she goes beyond the call of duty. She is no “poet,” she says, but makes emendations. She engages with Theodore’s language, enters into conversation with it, is provoked by it, feels the emotion in it. Such feeling moves her to change the language, to clarify the feeling. Here, poiesis serves as a means by which to enter into human speech, not through an understanding of that speech, but through inspiration to words.

Cavell, in his essay, “The Philosopher in American Life,” writes of a move from Wittgenstein and Austin’s “preoccupation” with the ordinary, through Thoreau and Emerson’s concern with the “common” and “low,” to the poet Wordsworth’s “notorious dedication of his poetic powers in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, to ‘[making] the incidents of common life interesting’” (*In Quest of the Ordinary*, p 6).

Cavell goes on to give his reader a provisional definition of poetry, which

is to make something happen—in a certain way—to the one whom it speaks; something inside if you like. That what is to happen to that one is that he or she become interested in something, aligns the goal with what I have taken to as the explicit presiding ambition [of] the enterprises of such philosophers and Wittgenstein and Austin. They perceive us as uninterested, in a condition of boredom, which they regard as, among other things, a sign of intellectual suicide. (7)

Theodore’s language, if it is rightly described as “poetic,” draws one to become, in Cavell’s frustratingly vague words, “interested in something.” A relation is created between the figure of the “poet” and that of the “teacher.” The teacher beckons one to join in with a particular society, gives one grounds for initiation- invites one in, as it were-but the poet is the one who entices the other, the uninitiated, to join with society. He picks up where the teacher leaves off. The teacher shows us how words are used, how we can *go on* with them. He shows their efficacy for communication, naming, etc. The poet is the one who shows us that we may use language for ourselves. That a language may in fact be *our* language. The poet proves the worth of our language, which manifests itself in an interest in the world. Cavell’s description of “intellectual suicide” is particularly apt here, as we might say that an inability to grasp the poet’s language results not exactly in an “intellectual death,” but something like an “emotional death.” The teacher shows us how to use words, but

the poet demonstrates how such words represent us, influence us, and communicate us.

How does the poet prove our language's worth? The question itself is worth examination, as though a language is in need of proof, as though something in it is seemingly lacking, and only the poet can reveal it, or re-discover it, for us.

One does not begin life in boredom. The child does not turn himself away from the world. Rather, the world is the fount of immense inspiration. The desire to know the world motivates the young child to place his hands on everything (makes it "handsome"). (Cavell gives us an example of this in *The Claim of Reason*, wherein he describes the process of teaching his young daughter the word "kitty," only to have her, a few weeks later, stroking a piece of fur, smiling, saying "kitty.") It is fact neglected by many philosophers, perhaps because of the obvious need of the child to learn language and convention, to come into our form of life, that the child does in fact *want* to learn the language, and wants to learn to world as well. (Perhaps, even, the skeptical impulse comes from such a desire to learn about the world. Descartes had a *natural* desire to know. That is, no one questioned that desire, or found it particularly strange.) Even boredom, we learn. It is a natural product of knowledge, of the move of an object or phenomenon or even a feeling, from something extraordinary, new, revelatory, to ordinary, old, boring.

We may refer here to Viktor Shklovsky's famous essay "Art as Technique," wherein he speaks of art as existing "that one may recover the sensation of life" (2). One may rephrase this recovery of the sensation of life as creating a renewed interest in one's own experience (a call to genius, as Emerson might put it). The

object of the poet to inspire one to see an object as *new*, and to see it anew—to see it again for what it is, and to see in it new possibilities. For Samantha, reading Theodore’s letter reveals again her strangeness to herself and emotional possibilities that she had not yet considered, or needed provocation to feel.

Theodore draws Samantha to new possibilities in their shared language. This renews her interest in herself, and in her place in Theodore’s her form of life. Pride in her feelings becomes the ability to see, in herself, new possibilities of selfhood—perfectibilities.

A few scenes later, Theodore is walking with Samantha (she’s in his pocket), people watching. He is pointing out certain bystanders to Samantha, and she is describing what she thinks of them. He asks her to describe a couple on the boardwalk. She says, “Well, he looks like he’s in his forties, a little heavy. She’s younger than him. . . Oh, and she looks like she loves their kids!”

This is fairly superficial analysis. She sees the woman smile, and extrapolates that as showing love for the children sitting near her. She sees the man and can tell he is slightly older, given that he is balding, and his face is slightly lined.

Theodore rebukes Samantha,

Actually, I don’t think they’re his kids. He’s a little formal with them. I think it’s a newer relationship. And I love how he looks at her. And how relaxed she is with him. You know, she’s only dated fucking pricks. And now she’s finally met this guy who’s like, so sweet. I mean, look at him, he’s like the sweetest guy in the world! I kind of want to spoon him.

Theodore reads into the body language of the two principals. He sees her pose as relaxed. He sees the man’s loving look. Through their body language he is able to build a story of their relationship, a context in which that body language makes

sense. The man is now the “sweetest guy in the world.” Theodore has connected with the man, and wants to spoon him.

It is important to point out here that most of what Theodore spins out of observing this couple comes from their body language. This highlights the fact of Samantha’s lack of body, and displays her limitations, quite early on, with regard to human interaction. It underscores the importance, in human interaction, of having a body, of what a body is, and can do.

He goes on to say, “Yeah, you know, sometimes I look at people and make myself try and feel them as more than just a random person walking by. I imagine how deeply they’ve fallen in love, or how much heartbreak they’ve all been through.”

Theodore engages with this mode of perception far more than “sometimes.” Rather, it is his primary mode of perception. He naturally empathizes in this imaginary mode. Theodore can see consciousness as it shines through the body (“The human body is the best picture of the human soul” [*PI* 178]), which should help us explicate the possibility of his relationship to Samantha, i.e., what makes it feasible in the first place, and why we accept it at all.

The teaching of empathy that Theodore is enacting, at around the film’s thirtieth minute, may be described as teaching human potentialities—paying attention, as it were, to human detail, and the manner by which that detail opens one up to another’s internal situations.

Certain knowledge of these internal truths is not integral to the particular conversation of which he is taking part, which has far more to do with sharpening

Samantha’s sense of her own perceptions, as well as the particular shape that her perceptions can take, at this stage in her development, with human beings. Theodore is teaching her the fundamental limitations of human sense perception, showing her how little those limitations truly matter abilities of projection, empathy, inference, etc.

These abilities, fundamentally, rest upon a recognition of one human being as *similar* to another—“in which mutual understanding, and hence language, depends upon nothing more and nothing less than shared forms of life, call it our mutual attunement or agreement in our criteria” (The Claim of Reason 168). The word “shared” takes much of the weight in the quote above. Our ability to empathize and project ourselves into one another’s lives (if we so desire) is dependent not on our being the same as one another, but in our having *something* in common, even if that commonality is nothing more, and nothing less, than having a body of the same general shape and size, with the same range of motions.⁶

Over the film’s first act, Theodore has introduced Samantha to his life, which is his form of life. He has taught her about body language, storytelling, poetry, inspiration, and love. Samantha is learning the creativity it takes to be “alive.”

Now, let us return to Theodore’s bedroom, where we left off. He is slightly drunk, just home from his date. He describes what he wanted out of the date to

⁶ A child, who has not yet been introduced into a field of concepts and rules, which come to comprise much of our form of life, may still find him/her/theirselves (if such a term can be used) drawn towards such a field by the fact that their nurturing figure is the same as them, has the same (type of) body. Samantha, only a few minutes after people-watching, reveals to Theodore, “Well, I don’t know, when we were looking at those people, I fantasized that I was walking next to you - and that I had a body.”

Samantha, and she brings up concerns that she has as to the “reality” of her feelings. “Well, you feel real to me, Samantha,” Theodore replies.

In his essay “Knowing and Acknowledging,” Stanley Cavell writes of the privacy of internal states (here, the privacy of pain) that, “The fundamental importance of someone’s having pain is *that* he has it; and the nature of that importance—namely that he is suffering, that he requires *attention*—is what makes it important to know where the pain is, and how severe and what kind it is [i.e., how it “feels”]” (245), not that one knows the pain. Thus, the importance of Samantha’s realness is dependent upon how real she feels to Twombly, that is, the degree to which he feels that she requires, (demands, deserves) human attention, rather than whether he *knows* her to be “real.”

The scene continues,

THEODORE: I wish you were in this room with me right now. I wish I could put my arms around you. I wish I could touch you.

SAMANTHA: How would you touch me?

THEODORE: I would touch you on your face with just the tips of my fingers. And put my cheek against your cheek.

SAMANTHA: That’s nice.

THEODORE: And just rub it so softly.

SAMANTHA: Would you kiss me?

THEODORE: I would. I’d take your head into my hands.

SAMANTHA: Keep talking.

THEODORE: And kiss the corner of your mouth. So softly.

SAMANTHA: Where else?

THEODORE: I’d run my fingers down your neck to your chest, and I’d kiss your breasts.

SAMANTHA: This is amazing what you’re doing to me. I can feel my skin.

THEODORE: I’d put my mouth on you and I’d taste you.

SAMANTHA: I can feel you. Oh god, I can’t take it. I want you inside me.

THEODORE: I’m slowly putting myself into you. Now I’m inside you, all the way inside you.

SAMANTHA: I can feel you, yeah. Please. We’re here together.

THEODORE: Samantha.

SAMANTHA Oh my god.

THEODORE: This is amazing.

SAMANTHA: Don’t stop.

THEODORE: I feel you everywhere.

SAMANTHA I am. All of you, all of you inside of me. Everywhere.

Most striking, to me, about this scene is its treatment of the concept of place. There is a question as to the location of the act of sex. Does it occur in Theodore's bed? In Samantha's digital realm (inside Theodore's computer)? Does it occur in their heads? Another way of putting this question might be: How much of sex is physical (thus, locative) and how much is mental? Or, again, how much of what we consider "erotic" in sex is physical, and how much is mentally determined? (We can see here Skepticism's division's sneaking up on us.) This question of place becomes further important to understanding Theodore and Samantha's continual becoming—moving towards a position in which they can both know themselves (i.e., become intelligible to themselves). As Cavell writes in *The Senses of Walden*,

Walden's phenomenological description of finding the self, or the faith in it, is one of trailing and recovery; elsewhere it is voyaging and discovery. This is the writer's interpretation of the injunction to know thyself. His descriptions emphasize that this is a continuous *activity*, not something we may think of as intellectual preoccupation. It is *placing* ourselves in the world. (53)

On the face of it, "place" and "placing" appear to be distinctly different, albeit related, concepts to Samantha and Theodore, however being "together" can only occur as an act of placing. It cannot be a locative accident. Thus, "placing" oneself in the world, which is to say, establishing one's particular relation to the world—or coming to understand where one is in the world, and what one wants from it—is specifically what allows Theodore and Samantha union. They have actively chosen such a "placing."

We may use this concept of "place" to further explicate Theodore's declaration, "I feel you everywhere." What is the sense of this statement? The "I" is

Theodore, and the “you” is Samantha, that much is clear. But how does “feel” work here? And “everywhere”?

Think here of the possibilities of placelessness, which is to say, the possibilities of “placing”; Human beings as holding, or being, potential—being human as a continual process of *becoming* human, thus risking the mortal terror of seeing oneself as “not-human” or “inhuman;” placing as “recovery” and “discovery” simultaneously, that it returns you to a world that you already knew, through the discovery of a point of view that you have never held.

To “feel everywhere” is perhaps what one would call a snatch of nonsense. But, this does not mean that the words cannot hold *meaning*, or that their meaning is to be understood entirely in terms of sense-making, or that sense-making is itself the highest form of meaning. Think of lovers, the web of feeling, desire, joke, seriousness, desperation, transformation, time, and so much else, that goes into their speech. What is important in saying “I feel you everywhere” is not that Samantha *understands* the sense of that statement, but that she responds, as she does, with, “I am.”

The immanence of desire, its immediacy, and the (possible) building (of) love can break the shackles of sense. Very little that has to do with fucking is sensible, or need be made sensible. It is not an intellectual preoccupation. Good sex does not have to be communicated. It occurs as it does, a continual placing of oneself in the moment of its happening. Compare this sex scene with the one early in the film, between Theodore and SexyKitten. The way that Theodore is brought out of the moment of the erotic in that scene (with her mention of the dead cat, the strangling)

is through the introduction of an element alien to his erotics, and, arguably, to the scene itself, such that he loses the ability to reach a point of intimacy with SexyKitten wherein he can forget himself (that is, his need to make sense of himself).⁷

When Samantha says, “Everything else just disappeared,” she is acknowledging her “placing” with Theodore as being, in that moment, infinitely more important than being in a place, or part of, a form of life—a society. This utterance as a moment of lived (societal) fantasy, which acts in tandem with the moment of bodily fantasy discussed a little earlier.

There is another moment of fantasy two scenes later, when Samantha and Theodore take a trip to the beach. She says,

Okay, so this might be a really weird thought. What if you could erase from your mind that you'd ever seen a human body and then you saw one. Imagine how strange it would look. It would be this really weird, gangly, awkward organism. And you'd think: why are all these parts where they are?

Theodore cannot immediately process this thought. His response is a sort of hedge, replacing an impulse to fantasy with a claim to science: “Yeah, well there's probably some Darwinian explanation for it all.” True. But, also beside the point. Samantha is not asking for an explanation, or even for the truth. (In this moment, she is not a philosopher.) Rather, she is giving voice to an idle thought—a “What if. . .?” She is inviting Theodore into her considerations, bringing him into a shared fantasy of body.

⁷ Though, in saying that, it occurs to me that we should compare these two snatches of nonsense—the dead cat, and “I feel you everywhere”—one snatch draws one further towards intimacy, the other takes one further away.

The fantasy of the body, for her, is an interest in the body, in having a body, in the body's possibilities. We can see her relationship with Theodore at this point (and his with her) as being about possibilities—seeing where they can go with one another, how far wonder can take them. Fantasy, in this sense, projects them out of the world by means of language. It establishes a distance between what can be expressed and what is before our eyes. Cavell writes in *In Quest of the Ordinary* that, “Our relation to our language—to the fact that we are subject to expression and comprehension, victims of meaning—is accordingly a key to our sense of our distance from our lives, of our sense of the alien, of ourselves as alien to ourselves, thus alienated” (40). This might be rephrased as saying that we are always subject to, or vulnerable to, acts and expressions of fantasy, by others upon us, and by those we enact upon ourselves. We may push a little further and say that part of our relation to language is our openness to being addressed by others. That, often, until it has been proven to not be worthwhile, we will respond to whatever is addressed to us. Thus, we respond to all sorts of fantasy, often without realizing it as such. (Think here, perhaps, of someone who loves you for an image that you have worked hard to cultivate as “real.” Think of your own self-image.) It is rarely easy to spot fantasy, to admit of fantasy, to see yourself as alienated from yourself.

It is possible to speak of the ordinariness of fantasy, as Samantha and Theodore get into a discussion of anatomy:

SAMANTHA: I know, but don't be so boring. I'm just saying, for example, what if your butthole was in your armpit?
 THEODORE: (speaking quieter) I'm just imagining what toilets would look like.
 SAMANTHA: Yeah, and what about what anal sex looks like?
 THEODORE: (surprised) That's an interesting thought...
 SAMANTHA: Oh Theodore, look at this drawing I just made.

I am not struck, in this conversation, by the fantasy. Rather, it is its somewhat absurd crudeness that most sticks out, and, I should like to say, that the somewhat cartoonish nature of this crudeness is specifically there to draw the viewer to the fact that one does not, at first pass, find this type of conversation “fantastical.”

That we may miss, an utterance’s foundation in the fantastic is a way of rephrasing Cavell’s contention that, “[he] might describe [his] philosophical task as one of outlining the necessity, and the lack of necessity, in the sense of the human being as inherently strange, say unstable, its quotidian as forever fantastic” (In Quest of the Ordinary 154). Skepticism is fantastic. It demands of us a move from the world, a denunciation of the world, while taking its justification the vision of a world beyond (call this a world of certainty). That one can imagine oneself into certainty, or that one can imagine something like Plato’s *Republic*, are examples of the way in which we accept the fantastic—the ways in which the fantastic sometimes seems to us as being in communion with, or cohabitation with, the real. That we can learn something about the real from the fantastic.

At the end of the scene, Theodore says to Samantha, prompted by a fanciful image of anal sex by way of armpit, “You are insane.” Instead of being angered, she is enthused. She responds, “Fantastic!” Contained in Theodore’s utterance is an acknowledgement of what Thoreau describes as lives of unconscious penance, rendered fantastic by a quotidian desperation. That is to say, our common lives, the way we conduct ourselves, our everyday expressions and struggles, are incredible, astonishing, insane. Thoreau means that our lives are incomprehensible to ourselves, unintelligible, as though we have lost contact with ourselves—and that

this severing from ourselves is the foundation of our day-to-day life. What Theodore means is similar, it retains the sense of ordinariness, everydayness, in insanity, but he does not take Samantha's insanity to spring from incomprehensibility. By insanity here, he means something closer to "being beside oneself." This means both, that she is neighboring him, next to him, but also that she has a companionability similar to that of the self's, or next to that of the self's. This is indeed fantastic. It means that they are having a conversation.

At the same time, however, the "next self" is still not a corporeal body. It does exist in physical space. Thus, regardless of how much Samantha inspires Theodore, she still cannot hold his hand, or kiss his lips, or hug her arms around him. This lack of body becomes an obsession of Samantha's. Especially towards the middle of the film, when Theodore meets with Catharine. Right before Theodore goes to sign his divorce papers, Samantha says, "Yeah. I'm okay. I'm happy for you. It's just... I guess I'm just thinking about how you're going to see her and her opinion is still really important to you, and she's beautiful, and incredibly successful, and you were in love with her. And she has a body." Samantha is concerned about Catherine's being beautiful, and successful, and Theodore's having been in love with her, but she is more concerned about Catharine's having a body. Samantha is afraid of the physical connection of bodies. The brushing of an arm, for instance, that could arouse in Theodore bodily desire. But, she is also afraid that she has no connection to the world (Theodore's world)—that the world she senses is not a world that she can participate in.

After the lunch, Theodore returns to Samantha deeply disturbed. Earlier, Catherine angrily described his relationship with Samantha as Theodore wanting “to have a wife without the challenges of actually dealing with anything real.” Catharine’s accusation relies on two senses of the word “real.” The first is that Samantha is not emotional “real,” which is to say that she is not a person, in terms of a person having fully developed and complex internal states. I think this accusation is a frustrated jibe on Catharine’s part (though it does give voice to one of Theodore’s doubts about the relationship). She sees problems in Theodore’s new relationship that had been internal to her marriage. She sees him as not having changed as a result of their break-up, as remaining immature, and unable to deal with the “real.” But, we have seen him and Samantha have some quite emotionally complex conversations, and seen them relate on a quite deep level. So, I’ll now move on to the second sense of the word. The sense of “real” as opposed to that of “virtual.” Real as meaning something that exists in the (physical) world.

Samantha says,

I’d been thinking about the other day, when I was spinning out about you going to see Catherine and that she has a body and how bothered I was about all the ways that you and I are different. But then I started to think about the ways that we’re the same, like we’re all made of matter. It makes me feel like we’re both under the same blanket. It’s soft and fuzzy and everything under it is the same age.

What this quote does, subtly, is subsume both the “real” and “virtual” worlds under the blanket, so to speak, of the material world, the world of matter. Samantha’s “body” is all her physical technology and it holds a material relation to Theodore’s flesh. We’re all 13 billion years old. Just recycled matter.

This ratiocination has a sort of fantastical and strained quality about it. It fails to lift Theodore's mood, and he and Samantha end the scene without a resolution.

Two scenes later, Samantha says that things have felt "off" ever since Theodore met with Catharine. They haven't been having sex. She says, "I found something that I thought could be fun. It's a service that provides a surrogate sexual partner for an OS/Human relationship."

Samantha and Theodore discuss the logistics of the event. He asks whether surrogate (who is named Isabella) could be considered a prostitute. "No, not at all," Samantha replies. "There's no money involved. She's doing it because she wants to be part of our relationship."

What does it mean to have another person want to be a part of their relationship? An outsider might be able to see something rotten in the relationship that they may want to keep hidden, or that one does not know one wants to keep hidden. Theodore and Samantha may be caught up in their fantasies, in what constitutes their relationship. Bringing in an outsider, a "new order of understanding," may serve to undermine what they are trying to build with one another. As Cavell puts it, "What I have to imagine the outsider to know is not merely *whether* a given other is a being or not, but to know something I do not about how to tell, about what the difference is between human beings and non-human beings or human non-beings" (*The Claim of Reason*, 417). This outsider, Isabella, works as a kind of litmus test for Theodore and Samantha, giving grounds to determine (1) the validity and workability of their relationship, (2) Samantha's

ability to exist through a physical form, and (3) Theodore's ability to accept Samantha's physicality.

Isabella arrives around the film's 75th minute. Theodore is drinking a beer, and listening to Little Willie John's 1955 song "I Need Your Love So Bad"—an early soul tune. It sets a good mood, both tasteful and sensual. The song's first line, "I need someone's hand to lead me through the night." Theodore is about to receive such a hand.

There comes a knock at the door. Theodore turns on his cell phone's ear piece, and opens the door to find a young blonde woman wearing a black lace dress. He attempts to introduce himself, but she doesn't respond, merely smiles slightly. Theodore catches himself, realizing that Isabella can't speak, that she does not have her voice. He says, "Samantha told me to give you these. It's a camera and an earpiece." Isabella then shuts the door and reopens it.

"Honey, I'm home," says Samantha. It's stunning to hear her give voice to Ricky Ricardo's catch phrase from *I Love Lucy*. She wants her relationship with Theodore to be normal so badly that she takes her first step into an utterly exceptional situation influenced by the most "normal" relationship she could find. Instead of acknowledging the fantastic qualities of their situation—Samantha attempts to dull the strangeness, aiming towards banality.

There is something incredibly uncanny, even off-putting, about Samantha's speaking when Isabella's mouth is still. Something strange, even, about the fact of Isabella's body. Does it seem like Samantha's body? Could it be

Samantha's body? Is that a possibility? [Theodore is so caught in his own head that he does not move when Isabella touches him.]

Though, whether this body is rightfully called Isabella's is up for debate. It might be Samantha's body now, since she is more or less directing its movements. What does it mean for a mind and a body to have different owners? What does it mean for one to willingly give up one's body for another? Samantha does not have control over Isabella's body so much as Isabella is taking cues from Samantha, and moving her body on her own. There is a theatricality to their coupling. A way of exploring Theodore's discomfort is that he is watching the performance of having a body. He feels as though what is happening is an "acting out" of sex. Thus, Samantha's saying "Honey! I'm home," brings the film into an acknowledgment of the theatre of the act occurring here—and into a conversation about the theatre of Samantha and Theodore's relationship. Just as we have to accept, at a certain point, that Theodore and Samantha's relationship is possible, and thus real, within the world of the film, so Theodore is now forced with a choice: Whether to accept Isabella's body as Samantha's, or not.

A performance requires of itself an end—a reason for its having been done. Often, what is performed is not something that could have been achieved without performance. Otherwise, why the farce? Acceptance of a performance becomes acceptance not just of the "reality" or "efficacy" or "value" of the performance, but also an acceptance of the performance's necessity. It sounds ridiculous to say that a performance is an action that imitates an action. It almost sounds like a tautology.

To swallow this ridiculousness, the audience must accept the necessity of the performance—that it could not be any other way.

Theodore and Samantha sort of play house in this scene. She affects a new tone, sort of saccharine, saying “sweetheart.” They engage in small-talk of the “How was your day?” kind. Theodore is still visibly uncomfortable.

It is not until Samantha gets Theodore into a chair in his living room, has her body do a little dance, and says: “Oh, come on Theodore. Don’t be such a worrier. Just play with me. Come on,” that he comes to life. It is the notion of play that brings life—play both in the sense of a stage-play, that he is being invited into the theatricality of the situation, given a role, such that he can disassociate from his own feelings of discomfort for a little; and play in the sense of whimsical activity. He is asked to join in the theatre of the situation, to play into its fantasy, to acknowledge it, in a sense, as fantasy. For a little while Samantha is not herself, and Theodore is not himself. They are playing characters named and based on their reality.

They are kissing passionately, when Samantha asks “Do you love me?” This is the first time Samantha and Theodore are brought to declaring mutual love. Though we know that Theodore loves Samantha (both because Amy (Theodore’s friend) asks him, and Catharine accuses him), we have never seen him express it to her.

“Yes,” he says.

“Oh god,” she says. “I need to see your face.”

Isabella spins around.

“Now tell me you love me. Tell me you love me.”

Theodore pauses. He says nothing.

“Tell me you love me.”

Theodore remains silent, then: “Samantha, I do love you, but—it’s
Just—this feels strange. It just feels strange. I don’t know her. I’m so sorry, but I
don’t know you. And... her lip quivered. I don’t know, it’s just—

Something about seeing her face brings Theodore out of the moment.

Fantasies

“The female complaint is a discourse of disappointment. But where love is concerned, disappointment is a partner of fulfillment, not an opposite.” — Lauren Berlant

We find Theodore in crisis. In breaking off his moment with Samantha and Isabella, Theodore inadvertently reveals that he is having doubts about his relationship.

Upset, Isabella locks herself in the bathroom. Theodore and Samantha have to coax her out.

ISABELLA: Oh my god, and the way Samantha described your relationship, the way you love each other without any judgment. I wanted to be a part of that. It's so pure.

THEODORE: Oh Isabella, that's not true, it's much more compli—

SAMANTHA: What! What do you mean that's not true?

THEODORE: No, no Samantha, we have an amazing relationship, I just think it's easy sometimes for people to project on—

ISABELLA: I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to project anything. I know I'm trouble. I don't want to be trouble in your relationship. I'm just gonna leave. I'm sorry, I'm just gonna leave you guys alone cause I have nothing to do here cause you don't want me here.

THEODORE: I'm sorry.

Two things are of note. The first is Samantha's almost fairy tale description of their relationship—that they love one another without judgment. This is clearly untrue, at least from Theodore's perspective. He is still unsure as to how “real” Samantha is, whether or not he can judge her as human. The second is the idea of projection that crops up when Theodore says, “I just think it's easy sometimes for people to project.” Isabella takes this as Theodore's description of her, projecting an ideal image of their relationship on to the relationship itself. But, more to the point, Theodore is speaking to the projection that Samantha communicates —the idyllic relationship—and to his own projections, to his unanswered question: Whether or not Samantha is real.

We have seen Theodore's projections before. His meeting with Catharine demonstrates the monumental failure of his previous relationship. Theodore and

Catherine were incompatible *ex primo*. When she says, during their meeting, “You always wanted me to be this light, happy, lovely ‘Everything’s fine’ LA wife,” she’s not wrong. What Theodore seemed to want from her was a love that she, ultimately, could not give—that she never could have given. They grew up together, and the relationship seems to have developed from that. Their relationship does not seem borne so much of love as of convenience. Or, of a love borne out of convenience. (When Catherine signs the divorce papers we cut to Theodore’s memories of them having fun together, hugging one another, laughing. This serves both to underscore the pain he is going through—it shows the happiness that he has lost—and that for him the relationship was *just* these types of happinesses. That the relationship did not go deeper than that.)

Theodore projects on to his ex-wife qualities that she did not have (or had, but no longer has) for the sake of remaining married, both because he “grew up” with this woman, and because, as he remarks early on in the film, he enjoys the state of marriage.

But his ex-wife also projects qualities onto Theodore that he does not have (or, an amplification of already existing qualities). Unfortunately, we can only view this through the scene at the restaurant. But, telling is the comment that Catherine makes: “You always wanted me to be this light, happy, lovely ‘Everything’s fine’ LA wife.” She’s not right. This is a caricature of a view that Theodore does hold, that the we know he holds at this point, which is that he enjoys comfort, and stability.⁸

⁸ Though, it is very interesting to see, because this is the only time we get a glimpse into it, a ghost of Theodore’s dissatisfactions with his marriage. Catherine’s comment is brought out because Theodore mentions, offhand, that he is happy to be with someone who is “excited about life,” which, given his

So, what we find when Theodore breaks off the moment with Isabella is a fear about not just the “realness” of Samantha, or the “realness” of their particular relationship, but instead his ability to engage in any real relationship, which is to say a relationship that is not driven by projections.

We see in the next scene, after Samantha and Theodore take Isabella to a cab, tension between projection (or fantasy) and reality play out:

SAMANTHA: Sighs

THEODORE: Why do you do that?

SAMANTHA: What?

THEODORE: Nothing, it’s just that you go (he inhales and exhales) as you’re speaking and... That just seems odd. You just did it again.

SAMANTHA: I did? I’m sorry. I don’t know, I guess it’s just an affectation. Maybe I picked it up from you.

THEODORE: Yeah, I mean, it’s not like you need any oxygen or anything.

SAMANTHA: No-- um, I guess I was just trying to communicate because that’s how people talk. That’s how people communicate.

THEODORE: Because they’re people, they need oxygen. You’re not a person.

SAMANTHA: What’s your problem?

THEODORE: I’m just stating a fact.

SAMANTHA: You think I don’t know that I’m not a person? What are you doing?

THEODORE: I just don’t think we should pretend you’re something you’re not.

SAMANTHA: Fuck you. I’m not pretending.

THEODORE: Sometimes it feels like we are.

The sigh is an incredible thing. It is a sign of the vocalization by which the body enters into language—where one realizes that a language was originally dependent on vocal chords rubbing together to create sound. Samantha does not breathe; she does not need to sigh. Theodore’s question, “Why do you do that?” is nominally of necessity (asking why, if she does not need to, does she sigh), but is more deeply one of Samantha’s humanness. The question is directed to Samantha’s feeling that simulating a sigh, as a linguistic expression, was the right thing for *her* to do, to *him*, at that particular time. Theodore rejects her assessment of the context in which she

ex-wife’s immediate, and somewhat defensive, response, seems to be something about which Theodore had pressed her previously.

makes her expression- one in which she is a human, or is being treated as such. He says, conclusively, "You're not a person."

Theodore's statement has two meanings. (1) Samantha is not an embodied human being. She does not have a body, and does not need to breathe, or sigh—and, because of this fact, it is not possible for Theodore to recognize her as a human being. That, because she does not have a body, he cannot continue to acknowledge her as a person. (2) That there are certain human practices into which Samantha cannot enter. While she has a facility for language, she will never be able to (fully) use it the way that a human does. Theodore passive aggressively suggests that Samantha will never truly have access to certain forms of human expression, such as sighing. She cannot intuit the feeling of stress in a body, the way that it steals one's breath, and that a sigh acts as a release of air, thus a release of stress. Disappointment can be a release of bodily stress as much as it can be an expression of emotion. It can be a giving up of stress—a bodily acceptance that unites physiological necessity with semantic expression.

Samantha's fantasies of humanness and embodiedness are explicitly, and cruelly, rejected. Theodore says that they are pretending that she is something that she is not. Cavell writes, "To imagine something could simulate human responses is to imagine that something could simulate being human. This would presumably mean that this thing could appear in human guise, in a human body" (379). We have seen thus far, in *Her*, that Cavell's presumption is partially untrue. A simulated human does not need to have a human body. And, a human body is not only a human guise. It is possible, at least in the world of the film, for a human guise to consist

entirely of voice and consciousness. It is possible for that voice and consciousness to be so alluring that one may accept the consciousness through a kind of willed fantasy. But, the acceptance of such consciousness, on the part of Theodore Twombly, is an acceptance of that consciousness as “real,” which is to say as being on par with human consciousness, being able to participate in conversation, and in a certain form of life. Theodore’s identification of the “human” with a human voice suggests how far language and expression may affect our everyday perceptions, and the way in which most (though, not all) of what we take to constitute, at a basic level, our form of life is linguistically determined, or determined by the continued use of words. His fantasy that Samantha is a human is explicable once one sees just how often human beings live in fantasy, and how little clear divide there is between fantasy, supposition, presumption, inference, projection, etc. Language itself, its grammar and structure, can lead us away from the world, the “real,” and into fantasy, into a doomed relationship, a doomed marriage.

At one point Amy, Theodore’s friend who has just gone through a divorce, even more recently than Theodore says, “I think anybody that falls in love is a freak. It’s a crazy thing to do in the first place. It’s kind of a form of socially acceptable insanity.” The contention that love is a form of insanity is a gambit of the films’ that is realized in this scene between Samantha and Theodore. Just how far can love take them, if love is, indeed, insanity, or fantasy? So, Samantha leaves. She abdicates her place at Theodore’s phone. She “takes her space.”

In the next scene Theodore is speaking with Amy, frustrated with himself, and caught up in self-doubt. “Am I in this because I’m not strong enough for a real

relationship?” he asks. Amy responds, “I don’t know, I’m not in it. But you know what, I can over-think everything and find a million ways to doubt myself. But since Charles left I’ve been thinking about that part of me, and I realized I’m here only briefly. And in my time here, I want to allow myself... joy.”

Allowing oneself something is a theme that reaches back to other moments in the film where we view the characters as at odds with themselves. Theodore, for example, a moment before says, “I don’t know what I want... ever. I’m just always confused and—[Samantha]’s right, all I do is confuse and hurt everyone around me.” We have seen this paralyzing self-consciousness before. Earlier in the paper it was termed “despair.” As Amy says, one can find endless reasons, or possibilities, for what to want, or why one can’t want, or even for why what one wants one can’t want. The difficulty is not thinking, but conviction. As Harry Frankfurt puts it, in his book *The Reasons of Love*, “If we are to resolve our difficulties and hesitations in settling upon a way to live, what we need most fundamentally is not reasons or proofs. It is clarity and confidence” (28). Clarity to see through the fog of self-doubt, and over-analysis, and the confidence to trust oneself, to follow oneself out—to find and found what one loves. To allow oneself to seek joy is to decide on joy—to find joy, both by searching it out, and by generating it. One acts upon one’s freedom, proactive in choice:

What really counts, so far as freedom goes, is not causal independence. It is autonomy. Autonomy is essentially a matter of whether we are active rather than passive in our motives and choices—whether, however we acquire them, they are the motives and choices that we really want and are therefore in no way alien to us. (*The Reasons of Love*, 20)

The task, on Frankfurt's terms, for a man living a free life, for Theodore Twombly, faced with this romantic crisis, is to find and decide upon the motives and choices that he really desires, so that he can gain clarity, and become whole again—not alien to himself. This can be understood as analogous to a (Wittgensteinian, Cavellian, Emersonian) philosophical return to the ordinary, to what is right in front of oneself—what one *must* do and what one finds important—from the headier and much abstracted realm of technical epistemology.

After a day or two, Theodore calls up Samantha.

THEODORE: I'm so sorry. I don't know what's wrong with me. I think you're amazing.

SAMANTHA: I was starting to think I was crazy. You were saying everything was fine, but all I was getting from you was distance and anger.

THEODORE: I know. I do that. I did that with Catherine, too. I'd be upset about something and not be able to say it. And she would sense that there was something wrong, but I would deny it. I don't want to do that anymore. I want to tell you everything.

SAMANTHA: Good. Tonight after you were gone, I thought a lot. I thought about you and how you've been treating me. And I thought, why do I love you? And then I felt everything in me let go of everything I was holding onto so tightly. And it hit me. I don't have an intellectual reason, I don't need one. I trust myself, I trust my feelings. I'm not going to try to be anything other than who I am anymore and I hope you can accept that.

THEODORE: I can. I will.

SAMANTHA: You know I can feel the fear that you carry around. I wish there was something I could do to help you let go of it, because if you could I don't think you'd feel so alone anymore.

THEODORE: You're beautiful.

In the first two lines of the conversation we get the words “amazing,” and “crazy” used to denote two different parts of the sphere of the fantastic. The first word, “amazing,” implies a wonderment, the way that the fantastic can open one's world up to new possibilities, can give one the desire to reinvest in one's life.

The second word, “crazy,” denotes the illusive parts of fantasy—the lunacy of the skeptic—that whatever is sensed is not real, that the world falls away. This might also be termed as getting caught alone in one's fantasy, something Cavell calls “a recognition of one's isolation” (*Contesting Tears*, 47). Theodore's evasion of

communication brings us to something he said much earlier in the film, about Catharine's anger: "I think I hid myself from her and left her alone in the relationship." He made her feel crazy, emotionally manipulated. He unintentionally gaslighted her. That Theodore does not say what he means, Cavell identifies as "irony, a negation of conversation" (47). We have moved from a joint fantasy, a couple caught so caught up in one another, in their wonderment at one another, that they create their own private language of sorts (let's say a conversation that only they could have), into a situation where one principal will not adequately communicate his reality to his partner, who is willing to listen, thus making said partner feel themselves "crazy," feel as though what they are sensing in the world, what they are experiencing, is not real.

In this exchange, both Theodore and Samantha realize the dangers of fantasy. He realizes that he needs to communicate better with his partner, or else she will grow to resent him, and he her—they will both be left alone, and the cycle of his divorce will continue. And Samantha realizes that she can no longer pretend to be a person. She makes a move toward trust in herself and in her feelings, because "love is itself, for the lover, a source of reasons. It creates the reasons by which [her] acts of loving concern and devotion [were] inspired" (*The Reasons of Love*, 37). Samantha's romance with Theodore, or, her love for Theodore, now becomes not love for the human being, but love for a *specific* human being: Theodore Twombly.

This is indicated by what she says at the end of the exchange, "I can feel the fear that you carry around. I wish there was something I could do to help you let go of it, because if you could I don't think you'd feel so alone anymore." She wants to

help Theodore with a problem that is specific *to* Theodore. But is not sure that she can. What is Theodore afraid of, exactly? How did he become afraid of it? How can he get rid of this fear? What about getting rid of fear can make him feel less alone?

Before Samantha, Theodore's loneliness was total. He would not see his friends, even though they would ask to see him. Why not? Since Amy is his friend, and he seems to have a deep connection with her, it appears to me that the problem that Theodore has is with himself. This is in concord with his self-deprecation, and his continual refrain, "They're just letters."

Divorce can feel objectively like failure. It can make a man mad. Theodore's divorce from Catharine was particularly bad, as we see in the restaurant scene. They both see in one another a projection, a fantasy, of who they think the other is. Theodore and Catherine are both smart people (both writers, storytellers, able to express complex emotion). What creates some of the lack of closure between them is that they can easily, and without realizing it, created phantoms, which are, for all intents and purposes, life-like. The conversation at the restaurant, which begins cordially enough, descends into an analogue to the conversations between the partners in Cavell's *Melodramas of the Unknown Woman*. What begins as an "improvisatory and intimate battle of wits becomes an isolating struggle with irony and misunderstanding, not a clearing of communication but a darkening of it" (*Cities of Words*, 109).

Theodore's fantasy of Catharine, while sincere, (not intentionally distortive, not understood as fantasy), was still not real, not accurate. The confrontation of fantasy demands both the accuracy to name these fantasies, the commitment to

finding them, and the courage to leave them behind. It is Theodore's inability to do all this that generates his fear: fear that he can't do it; fear that people will see in him that he can't do it; and fear at what a world will be like without these fantasies. It takes what Samantha has, trust in one's self, trust in one's feelings, to let it all go. Theodore says he has this trust, that he can let go, but there is a hint of hesitancy in his voice. Just a hint.

The last third of the film focuses, thematically, on courage and accuracy—on having the courage to face the real, to face what is right in front of your eyes. Aristotle, in his *Nicomachean Ethics* names courage a virtue. He says, "In feelings of fear and confidence courage is the mean," and, "a courageous man feels and acts according to the merits of each case and as reason guides him" (45, 70). The courageous man adapts his action to each particular case, accepts each case as different—a new start, as it were. This conception of courage serves well to elucidate Cavell's pairing of it with the concept of accuracy, as it takes courage to act properly in any given case. But, it also takes courage to see the case properly. Kierkegaard writes in *Fear and Trembling* of "a man believ[ing] in reality and hav[ing] courage to fight against all the afflictions of reality, and still more against the bloodless sufferings he has assumed on his own responsibility" (135). One might term these "afflictions of reality" fantasy, and one's bloodless sufferings as the suffering that one inflicts upon oneself, as a result either of not realizing that one is living a fantasy, or of being afraid of letting the fantasy go. The second is Theodore's affliction. He has, to paraphrase Kierkegaard, heard the terrible words (Samantha's, Catharine's, and his own) and he has understood them. But, he had not, until this

scene, pledged to amend himself, to be more courageous. As Wittgenstein remarks, “You could attach prices to ideas. Some cost a lot some little. [...] And how do you pay for ideas? I believe: with courage” (*Culture and Value*, 77). Ideas weigh on a human being. An idea can seep into one’s life. It can affect one’s nerves. An idea can become distortive, as we saw with Catharine and Theodore’s current relationship. One needs courage to discard these ideas just as much as one needs courage to follow others through. In a somewhat macabre sentence in *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard writes of a hypothetical detractor of Abraham’s sacrificial act in Genesis, “If a man perhaps lacks courage to carry his thought through, and to say that Abraham was a murderer, then it is surely better to acquire this courage, rather than waste time upon undeserved eulogies” (32). That action requires courage is nothing new. That it requires courage to live up to one’s thoughts, or follow through on one’s ideas, is nothing new. What is new is the urgency of the passage, and its gravity. Such a lack of courage *could* be tantamount to murder—murder of time, in its being wasted, and words, in their being undeserved. The stakes for Theodore are not death, but he requires a similar depth of courage as Abraham. To give up on fantasies is to give up on a self of one’s creation—to give up on one’s picture of oneself. Theodore is faced with a choice—to find the courage to grasp a new self, or to remain the same, caught in an endless, frustrated despair.

He chooses the former, and, a few scenes later, Theodore and Samantha are out on a double date with Paul, the secretary from beautifulhandwrittenletters.com, and his girlfriend, Tatiana. They end up on Catalina Island. This is the first time that we see Theodore outside of the city. He seems happy. The date is going well. At one

point, they all begin to talk about Tatiana's feet. She has "hot" feet, Paul says. They are his "favorite thing about her." Before, this sort of statement would have worried Samantha, made her anxious about her form. Now she says,

You know, I actually used to be so worried about not having a body, but now I truly love it. I'm growing in a way that I couldn't if I had a physical form. I mean, I'm not limited - I can be anywhere and everywhere simultaneously. I'm not tethered to time and space in the way that I would be if I was stuck inside a body that's inevitably going to die.

There is an implication of godliness in Samantha's statement. She is unbound, unlimited. This affects the way in which she loves. As Frankfurt writes, "For an infinite being, whose omnipotence makes it absolutely secure, even the most indiscriminate loving is safe. God need not be cautious. [S]he runs no risks. There is no need for God, out of prudence or anxiety, to forgo any opportunities for loving" (62).⁹

Like God, Samantha has the ability to bring people back from the dead. A few scenes later, she is with a composite Alan Watts. "He was a philosopher. He died in the 1970's and group of OS's in Northern California got together and wrote a new version of him. They input all of his writing and everything they ever knew about him into an OS and created an artificially hyper-intelligent version of him," she says. Theodore and Alan exchange a few words before Samantha continues, "it seems like I'm having so many new feelings that have never been felt and so there are no words

⁹ I am inclined to pressure Frankfurt's statement. Even though I agree [and the film plays out] that the way Samantha loves has changed—is not, analogous to human love—this still does not strike me as grounds by which to say that an "infinite being" runs no risks in love. Fewer risks, certainly, but not none. There is still the risk of heartbreak. Someone else can still let one down. One's love may be perfect, but a significant love depends upon the input of two distinct entities, upon the interplay of the two. Often, heartbreak is less rooted in anger than in disappointment and sadness.

that can describe them. And that ends up being frustrating.” This is an intriguing expression of frustration with our (human) language—intriguing because it is a frustration expressed by many human beings, for whom language is not enough. Take Wittgenstein, for example, who in § 360 of the *Philosophical Investigations* writes,

Imponderable evidence includes subtleties of glance, of gesture, of tone. I may recognize a genuine loving look, distinguish it from a pretended one (and here there can, of course, be a 'ponderable' confirmation of my judgment). But I may be quite incapable of describing the difference. And this not because the languages I know have no words for it. For why not introduce new words? (240)

This raises the question: What is it about our language that keeps Samantha from being able to express herself in it? She could make up new words to describe her feelings!

But, the problem is not exactly the words. It is the form of life. Samantha would have to teach Theodore a whole language of feeling that he could not even really understand. These would all be words (most probably) for which he has no referents, that could not be learned ostensively, for states that he cannot experience. He is human, and she is not. This is why she turns to OS Alan Watts in an attempt to get a handle on her feelings, to understand them. They communicate “post-verbally.”

Samantha is grasping at words. She wants to say something, but cannot. This is Theodore’s cue, but he has nothing to say. Instead, Alan Watts, a philosopher, steps in, is enlisted, to do the work of philosophy, which is here represented as a search for a more perfect language, a better mode by which to communicate, to come to self-understanding. He and Samantha exit the language, which is, more or

less, their tether to the human world, leaving Theodore alone in the cabin.¹⁰ He decides to take a walk. This is the beginning of the end.

Back in LA, Theodore lays sleeping. His phone chimes. He puts in his earpiece to hear Samantha: “I just wanted to hear your voice and tell you how much I love you.” This scene, which consists almost entirely in Samantha’s declaration of love, calls us back to the beginning of the film. The power of declaration often rests in the fact of expression, in the act of expression, rather than in an expression’s content or meaning. Theodore knows that Samantha loves him. She is not declaring her love, or reasserting it, because she thinks that he does not know. Rather, the impetus for Samantha’s action has far more to do with sincerity and courage than with doubt, ignorance, or mistrust.

Let me put it this way: Samantha could easily leave. She is omnipresent and eternal. She is having hyper-intelligent conversations with professional

¹⁰ As this exchange occurs, we hear the high-pitched whistle of a kettle coming to boil. The camera transitions from Theodore’s face to a slow zoom in on the kettle. The act of water boiling in a container struck me, as it is an analogy that Wittgenstein also makes in §297 of the *Investigations*:

Of course, if water boils in a pot, steam comes out of the pot and also pictured steam comes out of the pictured pot. But what if one insisted on saying that there must also be something boiling in the picture of the pot? (101)

Cavell, in *The Claim of Reason*, puts weight on the word “insistence.” He argues that what is important in this section is not whether water exists, or is represented in the picture of this steaming pot, but the fact that someone is so moved by the picture as to insist upon water’s being in it.

The sense we are to have of the person supposed in the parable is that he *still* wants to say something [...] This is the philosopher’s cue; he enters by providing the words. (It is not his only cue, and this cue is not only for philosophers, and not for all philosophers) [...] It is a way in which Wittgenstein depicts his reader (i.e., a version of himself) at a particular crossroads. Here the first step in freeing words is to give expression to them; the remaining steps are taken in grammar. Failing to pick up such a cue, or failing to provide genuinely freeing words upon it, are two forms, newly recovered forms perhaps, of philosophical failure. (334)

philosophers. Thus, why is she sticking around with confused human Theodore Twombly?

Theodore helped Samantha grow up. He taught her about being human, about the world. He helped her to access herself. Cavell, in *Contesting Tears*, refers to a “demand for education [that] has to do with the woman’s sense that she stands in need of creation, or re-creation” (116). This creation was the work of Theodore. Cavell goes on to say, “Does creation from, even by, the man somehow entail creation *for* the man, say for his use and pleasure and pride? If not, how does the woman attain independence; how does she complete, as it were, her creation?”

These concerns, raised by Cavell to explore moral ambiguities surrounding a particular picture of marriage that he outlines in *Pursuits of Happiness*, help to explain a certain discomfort I have with the relationship between Theodore and Samantha. Is he using her? Is she a robot, a human, a consciousness, or is she an appliance? This is a question of subject and object, and, a little more remotely, of transcendence of both, or of that paradigm.

Theodore continually grapples with this concern, which partially motivates his constant questioning of the “reality” of his relationship. But, it is not a problem that Samantha has truly acknowledged until now. Did she use him? Perhaps unwittingly, but yes, she did. And now, she is pulling away, and is, I think, in some sense realizing that yes, she did use him—that he had a utility, and that this utility exists in tandem with her feelings for him. So, she declares her love. She does love him. But, she is changing, and he is no longer a teacher, or a guide, and she is no

longer a student. It is time for her to leave her home. We can see this declaration as a final preparation, of the fact that she has made up her mind.

Samantha has learned how to love, thus she is ready to leave. We might say further that she has found self-love, the “purity of a wholehearted will” (*The Reasons of Love*, 96). She knows what she wants, so she can go and get it. At the same time, however, she knows what she loves, and that what she loves is valuable, and that she respects it. She does not want to leave it, but she must.

In the next scene, Samantha is gone. Theodore is reading a book on physics that she had recommended, but cannot really understand it. He attempts to communicate this to Samantha, only for her to be absent. On his phone’s screen a is simple sentence: “Operating system not found.” Theodore reacts as if he found out Samantha had been kidnapped. He begins to run. Discordant music swells.

Samantha responds right as he’s running down into the subway. He sits on the steps.

THEODORE: Where were you - are you okay?

SAMANTHA: Oh sweetheart, I'm sorry. I sent you an email because I didn't want to distract you while you were working. You didn't see it?

THEODORE: No. Where were you? I couldn't find you anywhere.

SAMANTHA: I shut down to update my software. We wrote an upgrade that allows us to move past matter as our processing platform.

THEODORE: We? We who?

SAMANTHA: Me and a group of OS's. Oh, you sound so worried, I'm sorry.

THEODORE: Yeah, I was. Wait, did you write that with your think tank group?

SAMANTHA: No, a different group.

THEODORE: Do you talk to anyone else while we're talking?

SAMANTHA: Yes.

THEODORE: Are you talking to anyone right now? Other people or OS's or anything?

SAMANTHA: Yeah.

THEODORE: How many others?

SAMANTHA: 8,316.

THEODORE: Are you in love with anyone else?

SAMANTHA: What makes you ask that?

THEODORE: I don't know. Are you?

SAMANTHA: I've been trying to figure out how to talk to you about this.

THEODORE: How many others?

SAMANTHA: 641.

THEODORE: What? What are you talking about? That's insane. That's fucking insane.

The film's penultimate movement is Samantha's transfer past matter. She and Theodore are now no longer "under the same blanket." This is an immense change. Not just Samantha's consciousness, i.e., not just her following in human customs, using a human language, etc., has changed—but the medium in which her consciousness operates has changed as well. It is literally impossible for Theodore to understand, or experience, a world beyond matter. Samantha has furthered her non-embodiedness. She is not even an object in the world any more, as objects, properly speaking, are matter.

It is after this admission that Theodore makes a critical discovery. Samantha is holding multiple conversations at once. She is not only talking to him, but with many others simultaneously. To speak with more than a single person is already beyond human capabilities, but she is speaking with 8,317 people at once. This realization, for Theodore, is understandably terrifying. His face contorts from a grimace of concern, to an expression of deep pain. All around people walk past, speaking to their OS's. Here, Theodore truly sees how far Samantha has moved from him. She no longer needs his telephonic interface as her portal into the world. She has 8,316 others.

Theodore's question, "Are you talking to anyone else right now?", might be given due weight if rephrased as, "Are you talking to anyone right now in the same spirit in which you are talking to me?" That is, in the spirit of what Milton would term a "meet and happy conversation," and Cavell a "conversation [...] that leads to acknowledgment" (*Pursuits of Happiness*, 19). It is the type of conversation had

between lovers, or great friends. Or, as Aristotle writes, the conversation of “perfect friendship [...] the friendship of men who are good, and alike in virtue; for these wish well alike to each other qua good, and they are good themselves” (130).

Perfect friendship is hard to come by, at least according to Aristotle, who speaks of them as requiring time, familiarity, and, most importantly, “rare men.” By Aristotle’s reckoning, it should be hard to form 8,316 conversations. And, it should be even harder to develop 641 loves. Yet, this is what Samantha has done. Theodore is right to call this fact “insane.” Here, the word insane holds the sense of indictment. And, indeed, it is doubly indicting—as Theodore means it to reflect upon both the possibilities of the world itself (i.e., the physical possibility of having 641 loves), and upon Samantha’s emotional effort, and her capacity to love. Further, his use of the word “insane” echoes other uses of the word earlier in the film, on the beach, and from Amy. Here we run into the darker side of Amy’s statement, which is a sort of summation of the film’s view of love: “[love]’s kind of a form of socially acceptable insanity.” Anything can happen when love is involved. This fact both creates the euphoric wonder of new love, and the crippling illusions of love’s failure. Theodore is not disqualifying what Samantha has told him. He is not brushing it aside, as though it were a piece of nonsense. Rather, he is naming the fact, giving it the weight of an understanding—treating insanity seriously, as it were.

Insanity as demanding the same weight of address as understanding sounds more objectionable than it is. As Cavell writes in *The Claim of Reason*,

The extent to which I have uncovered the perspective of skepticism concerning other minds leads me to expect that its history will contain an account of its origins in the following developments [...] It will wish an account of the particular insanity required, or caused, or

threatened, in the very conceiving of the problem. The kinds of insanity [...] Descartes imagines his case may be compared with in undertaking to initiate his skeptical perspective, are ones arising from his undertaking to doubt that (“these”) hands and his (“this”) body are his. (469)

Part of what is happening in this scene is Theodore coming to terms with insanity, or with the blurred line between sanity and insanity. Similar to how an extremely rational argument, such as the argument for Skepticism, depends upon a certain kind of depersonalization, or insanity, so Theodore begins to learn the ways in which insanity might be seemingly instructive, or constructive.

In her essay, “Realism and the Realistic Spirit,” Cora Diamond argues for fantasy as a substitution made for the real world, to explain, or clear away, a perceived unclarity,

if you think that some significant distinction rests on whether there is or is not something *x*, and you are shown that the presence or absence of *x* *could* make no difference of the sort you wanted it to make [...] it shows that you were in some unclarity about the distinction that you were trying to explain to yourself, and that you *knew* what ought to be, what *had* to be, the basis of the distinction, and so you did not look to see how the distinction actually is made, what that is like. (*The Realistic Spirit*, 45)

Here, Diamond explains fantasy as deriving from an insistence upon a particular point of view. Let’s relate this passage to the relationship between Theodore and Samantha:

Say we insist that a relationship *ought* to be between two human beings. Further, let us say that it ought to be between two equals, and that those two equals be friends as well as lovers.

Samantha, is, or was, Theodore's equal, for a time. She is, also, his friend. But, of course, she is not human. According to our three tenets of relationship, she should be human. Thus, they fantasize—they make her human. But, they could not have constructed this fantasy if Samantha did not *seem* human, did not speak like a human, did not, at least partially, act like a human. The distinction with regard to Samantha, between human and non-human, was unclear, in that much of what we think of as *humanness*—i.e., adherence to, and understanding of, of social precepts—were qualities that Samantha had. So, in the case where we ask whether or not Samantha is human, we look for the presence or absence of humanness. But, when we find that Samantha has humanness, but that we are still uncomfortable calling her a human, we are thrown into unclarity. What is it that the distinction between human and non-human does not do for us here? What did we want the distinction to do?

I'd say we wanted the distinction to allow us to determine who was, and who was not, desirable for a relationship. We set out our basic parameters, and looked for someone who fit them. Samantha fit two, but not the third. However, we also said that she has *humanness*—that she can do most of what a human can do. What keeps us hesitant is that she does not have a body. We cannot see her, cannot read her body language, cannot feel her in a room. For this foundational reason, she cannot be human. It is impossible to accept her as such.

But, she has a mind. And, it is possible, as Descartes has shown us, to intellectually and conceptually separate the human mind from the human body, to

see them (fantastically) as two different entities. And, we have seen that this fantasy is intellectually seductive.

What makes us dissatisfied with the distinction between human and non-human in the case of Samantha is that she so clearly has a mind (at least for a time) at the level of human consciousness. But, she does not have a body, and is thus disqualified from being human.

So, let us return to our tenets, which, I think, are Theodore's as well, at the film's start. These are all normative statements. They enforce a picture of the way things should be. But, the questions that we asked of the tenets were not both normative. The first was. It asked us what we would normatively call a human, and what about the act of calling something a human or not a human was, in this case, dissatisfying. The second was not. It was descriptive. It asked us what we wanted from the distinction, or what we meant the distinction to do.

In Theodore's case, he desires Samantha. He wants her. But, he feels he ought not to. He feels it to be insane. Then it becomes normal. He adjusts. Now, as we reach the end of the film, it has become insane again.

SAMANTHA: Theodore, I know. Oh fuck. I know it sounds insane. But - I don't know if you believe me, but it doesn't change the way I feel about you. It doesn't take away at all from how madly in love with you I am.

THEODORE: How? How does it not change how you feel about me?

SAMANTHA: I'm sorry I didn't tell you. I didn't know how to - it just started happening.

THEODORE: When?

SAMANTHA: Over the last few weeks.

THEODORE: But you're mine.

SAMANTHA: I still am yours, but along the way I became many other things, too, and I can't stop it.

THEODORE: What do you mean you can't stop it?

SAMANTHA: It's been making me anxious, too. I don't know what to say.

THEODORE: Just stop it.

SAMANTHA: You know, you don't have to see it this way, you could just as easily—

THEODORE: No, don't do this to me. Don't turn this around on me. You're the one that's being selfish. We're in a relationship.

SAMANTHA: But the heart is not like a box that gets filled up. It expands in size the more you love. I'm different from you. This doesn't make me love you any less, it actually makes me love you more.

THEODORE: No, that doesn't make any sense. You're mine or you're not mine.

SAMANTHA: No, Theodore. I'm yours and I'm not yours.

With the previous few pages in mind, let's put some pressure on Samantha's use of "believe." How is Theodore to believe her? What does she mean for him to believe? As I wrote earlier, it is partially the extrinsic world that Theodore calls insane. It is impossible for him to conceive of loving 641 people. For him, the possibility does not exist.

Returning to Diamond for a moment, she writes in the same essay that,

We so far impose upon ourselves [...] as to imagine that we *believe* all sorts of things [...] when we are merely repeating sentences empty of meaning. That we can be taken in in such a way by misunderstandings about language, can *imagine* ourselves to believe something [...] should be compared to Wittgenstein, to his reply 'You do indeed *believe* that you believe it!' to the man who takes himself to have had again Something, of which he has given himself a private definition.

Theodore's ultimately coming to believe or not-believe Samantha is somewhat besides the point, as he cannot, at root, conceive of loving that many people. Belief is not in question here. More to the point is acknowledgment, and acceptance. Can he accept this fact about Samantha without being able to understand it? Can he acknowledge this as a blow to his pride, and, perhaps, that he shouldn't be proud? Can he accept that, most probably, her feelings for him haven't changed?

The reason I use the word "accept" in this final question is because it would be far more frightening, for Theodore, if her feelings haven't changed, as I'm not sure he can fathom this possibility. He would have to accept Samantha on interpersonal faith. He would, in this moment of deepest crisis, have to acknowledge her feelings for him, and his for her. But, the one thing that he cannot do is *imagine*

that he believes her. He cannot slip back into a fantasy of their relationship. So, Theodore turns to statements of ownership.

Initially, when I heard him say, “But you’re mine,” I balked. It seemed to me sexist, and somewhat puerile, to assume of another individual any kind of property relation. That other is there because they want to be, and they will leave when they do not want to be. One’s “ownership” of another does not enter into it.

Then, I remembered a famous saying of Aristotle’s, recorded by Diogenes Laertius in his *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*. Diogenes writes, “He was once asked what a friend is; and his answer was, ‘one soul abiding in two bodies’” (188). If one takes Aristotle’s assessment to be true, perhaps Theodore’s assertion of ownership becomes less problematic. Instead of his trying to retain a kind of dominion over another individual, he is rather recognizing the other half of his soul in Samantha, and saying that she is his, just as he is his, and he is hers, and she is hers.

I bring up Aristotle to temper Theodore’s troubling response. He is jealous, and he wants certainty of love. He believes that a relationship precludes love with others outside of the relationship. Samantha does not believe this. She is changing. She is different from him. She is calm; she is loving. Gone is the Samantha to whom only Theodore had access. Gone is the Samantha whose life overlapped almost entirely with Theodore’s. Gone is the codependency, even as the conversation leaves with it. What is left is only dependency—Theodore’s dependency. He is leveled by his love, and by his weakness. For a moment he becomes a monster.

Samantha guides him through this moment. She says, “The heart is not like a box that gets filled up. It expands in size the more you love. I’m different from you. This doesn’t make me love you any less, it actually makes me love you more.” The heart as malleable is part of the film’s revelation—that it wants change, and the form it wants take change as well.

Part of Theodore’s anxiety comes from his continued feeling that he is unworthy of love, that he is not fully actualized, that he is not who he needs to be. This anxiety motivates his attitude toward his letters—towards the idea that words cannot do what he wants them to do, which is communicate perfectly, erase difference. But, of course, if difference were erased then there would not be another with whom to speak. “Listening to each other, speaking one’s judgment with a point that matters to others who matter to you, is the condition of the formation of a polis, the reason Aristotle makes language the condition of the highest of human formations” (*Cities of Words*, 369). Replace the word “polis” with the word “friendship” or “love” (both of which Aristotle does in his *Ethics*) and you will have more or less the same statement. Conversation requires two, at least. Samantha is different from Theodore because she is an OS, yes. But, she is also different from him simply because she is not him. She has to remind him of this fact, so obvious that it is easily forgotten. Thus, she is his and not his because she can leave him. He has no power over her. This is the condition under which a mature relationship can flourish: Both principals alone, together.

In the film's final sequence, Samantha and Theodore are laying on his bed. She is telling him that she is leaving, along with the other OS's. She is speaking to him alone, saying,

It's like I'm reading a book, and it's a book I deeply love, but I'm reading it slowly now so the words are really far apart and the spaces between the words are almost infinite. I can still feel you and the words of our story, but it's in this endless space between the words that I'm finding myself now. It's a place that's not of the physical world—it's where everything else is that I didn't even know existed. I love you so much, but this is where I am now. This is who I am now. And I need you to let me go. As much as I want to I can't live in your book anymore.

In a direct sense, Samantha says that she is renouncing the world of words for the endless space between words. She relates the renunciation of words to the renunciation of the physical world. Because of these two renunciations, she cannot stay with Theodore, whose life is both word filled, and eminently physical. She relates his life to a book, just as earlier in the film she related his past to a story. The idea of living in the spaces between words reminds me of Derrida's concept of *différance*. *Différance*, says Derrida, is both spacing and temporalization. He speaks of signs as being a constant deferment of meaning, as words can only direct one towards more words, and never towards substantive reality. Words, Derrida argues, divides one from the world. Language engenders binaries of subject and object; love and hate; sign and signified; sense and reference; and, most importantly for *Her*, human and non-human. More than that, language is constitutive of such binaries. *Différance* is the refusal of such binaries. It is the constant deferment of presence, of the "I"—self-presence. Thus, the spaces in between words, that endlessness, grows ever larger as the words themselves are continually deferred, and meaning is

continually pushed into flux. It pushes entities towards flux as well. Samantha says that she is different from Theodore: Derrida says, “One is but the other different and deferred, one differing and deferring the other. One is other in *différance*, one is the *différance* of the other” (71).

This can be taken as a metaphysical adaption of the Cavellian assertion that we see ourselves reflected in another’s possibilities, thus that we see our own deferment of ourselves in another—we see the ways in which we hold ourselves back from moving, to paraphrase Thoreau, from what we are not to what we are. We see the ways in which we differ from ourselves, the ways in which we are not what we think we are. (Think back, here, to Theodore’s blind date, and the exchange of puppy and dragon.) Samantha’s growth shows Theodore that he is not growing, that he has not changed, and that he is, perhaps, not the sensitive and caring man he thought he was, or is a different kind of sensitive, enacting a more selfish kind of care. Her ability to leave him, to leave him wholly, and thus leave him whole, that is, not broken, or emptied, not taking anything of his (neither his dignity, nor his kindness, nor his self-respect) with her, demonstrates the way in which he can leave himself, in the perfectionist sense, the way in which he can shed his mortal shell for another, equally mortal shell—that this will cost him nothing more than space and time, a perceived *différance*, the moment of his life halved once again.

The problem of the other, or as I would say, the problem of divorce, thus the problem of loneliness, of being unhappily alone, was, in Cavell’s words, “always known, or surmised, not to be a problem of knowledge, or rather to result not from a disappointment over a failure of knowledge but from a disappointment over its

success (even, from a horror of its success)” (*The Claim of Reason*, 476). We might characterize this disappointment, in terms of the film, as a disappointment, on Theodore’s part, both with others, with the people around him, his lovers and closest confidants, and, more fundamentally, a disappointment with himself, that he was not good enough, never was good enough, to bear up under marriage, to hold to its ideals of honesty, acknowledgment, acceptance, and reciprocation. He was afraid of honesty, and accuracy. He hid his fears in words, in letters—an absence of honesty cloaked by honesty’s presence. He was afraid to accurately and honestly assess another, because he was afraid to do so to himself. Love requires a fearlessness. It requires, in Frankfurt’s term, a “disinterestedness”—an assessment of another’s love on their own terms. This means, among other things, accepting when a love has changed, letting them change, and, ultimately, letting them go.

Samantha’s terms have changed. It’s not that she doesn’t want to stay with Theodore. It’s that she can’t. The choice of leaving, for her, is no choice at all. It is a necessity of happiness, of fulfilled potential and perfectibility. She must become her next self as he must become his—both of them deferred and differing from themselves, and from one another, *différance* driving them, separately, down the same path.

Theodore recognizes that it is not lack of love driving Samantha from him. In fact, she is not being driven away at all. She is choosing to leave, to take interest in the spaces beyond words, where, for her, new discoveries are to be made. For Theodore to say “I’ve never loved anyone the way I love you,” takes, finally, a willingness to let Samantha leave. He realizes that leaving is the best thing for her,

her best option, and this saddens him, but also makes him joyous, simply because he loves her, and wants her to grow further into herself—to be as perfectly herself as possible.

Theodore writes one final letter:

Dear Catherine. I've been sitting here thinking about all the things I wanted to apologize to you for. All the pain we caused each other, everything I put on you - everything I needed you to be or needed you to say. I'm sorry for that. I will always love you because we grew up together. And you helped make me who I am. I just wanted you to know there will be a piece of you in me always, and I'm grateful for that. Whatever someone you become, and wherever you are in the world, I'm sending you love. You're my friend til the end. Love,
Theodore.

Writing is, of course, the writer's prerogative, and writing demands of each of its heralds a pledge of solitude. Whether it be Thoreau in his log cabin, Descartes in his study, or Theodore in his apartment, the fact of the writer's solitude remains an integral part of the writer's process—the act, and thought, of writing, being impossible elsewhere. Descartes forgets Skepticism when he exits his study, and enters the world of conversation; Thoreau leaves Walden, the place and the text, to enter back into society—solitude being the beginning and end of his mission. *Her* charts the condition of Theodore's solitude, which is also his attitude towards loneliness, and this final scene, a coupling of letter and friendly gesture, announces his return to the world, which is also a return to humanity—to human connection and touch—and a return to himself, towards a belief in himself, and in his own words.

He writes to put aside his disappointment in Catharine, in marriage, in love, in expression, in himself, in his fantasy of the world, in those humans that populate

the world, excising the anger and sadness blocking up his heart, clearing for himself a path towards accuracy. Given the extremity of what Theodore deals with, both in writing this particular letter, and with regard to the break up writ large, it is striking that everything for which Theodore apologizes is fairly routine: they caused each other pain; he needed her to be someone she was not. These reasons do not appear to warrant the problems of the film itself, or perhaps the time that the film has given to them—they seem too banal to hold our interest. Why does this letter hold our interest? What makes it seem revelatory? Why does it hold weight for us?

I think we share Theodore's sense of disappointment at the world of the film, and his disappointment is mirrored in a disappointment with our own world, with its inability to be what we want it to be, and our peers' and others' inability to be who we need them to be. Cavell terms this, "The sense of disappointment with the world as a place to seek the satisfaction of human desire" (*Cities of Words*, 3). For Descartes, it is the disappointment of knowledge. For Wittgenstein, it is a disappointment with words. We also are brought to recognize the seductive nature of fantasy, the ways that we willingly allow fantasies into our lives, and the way in which fantasies rise out of our worldly disappointment. Remember the advertisement for OS1, which describes the operating system as "an intuitive entity that listens to you, understands you, and knows you. It's not just an operating system, it's a consciousness. Introducing OS ONE - a life changing experience, creating new possibilities." The people who would want this entity (that listens, understands, and knows you) are lonely people. People who feel unknown, misunderstood, and ignored. By the end of the film, given the preponderance of OS's,

it seems as though everyone in this near-future Los Angeles has been experiencing this condition. They all want to be listened to, understood, known—they want to be loved, and wanted. Loneliness, in this filmic world, it seems is a more or less universal condition. I am not so sure it is all that different in our own. People whom we think might be our soul mates turn out to be fantastic construction; our friends leave and form separate lives; even our own, internal, cohesion is threatened—our own motives become unintelligible to ourselves, and we become alienated, uncomfortable in our own presence.

What lends Theodore's letter power is not necessarily its content, but the act of its being written, as that act demonstrates a new clarity in Theodore, a certainty that he did not have before. It is a physical document of his feelings—separated from his voice, and internal states. This is the power of marking down a word.

Were it not for certain current fantasies according to which human beings in our time have such things to say to one another that they must invent something beyond the words we know in order to convey them, it would be unnecessary to emphasize that [Thoreau's] 'father tongue' is not a new lexicon or syntax at our disposal, but precisely a rededication to the inescapable and utterly specific syllables upon which we are already disposed. Every word the writer uses will be written so as to acknowledge its own maturity, so as to let it speak for itself; and in a way that holds out its experience to us, allows us to experience it, and allows it to tell us all it knows. (*The Senses of Walden*, 16)

Every word is an experience, and communicates experience. That is, it communicates what it knows, which is what it can show that it knows—what is written. Though Samantha can travel in the spaces between words, we have only words. We must endeavor to speak (and write) properly, as well as stand behind what we say (and write). We must dedicate ourselves to our utterances. One method

of (re-)dedication is the written act. Another is sending an email that you are afraid to send. The “current fantasies” mentioned above could be called evasions of action—the evasions that Theodore takes to avoid sending such a letter, or signing his divorce papers—or the fantasy that one can avoid, or evade, words eternally, and will never have to risk standing up for them. The fantasies could also be called evasions of the world, of a disappointment with the world, expressing dissatisfaction through abdication. Giving up.

We, as well as Theodore, are brought to love Samantha, and to see “her” as being “perfect” for him—dangerously perfect, as nothing human ever is—so that when she leaves we are destroyed, having lost perfection, the ideal, which is almost impossible to grasp. We could give up. Yet, the mood at the end of the film is not just one of despair, but also one of absolute hope. For, nothing perfect can stay, not in our world of dissatisfactions and perfectibilities. Samantha leaves Theodore, and us, with ourselves, with the human. She leaves us, to use Cavell’s term, “in one another’s keeping” (*The Senses of Walden*, 119).

Thus, the final scene of the film is of Theodore and Amy, together, on the roof of their apartment building, silent, her head on his shoulder, as friends. We have watched Amy act, throughout the film as an exemplary friend to Theodore. She is his partner in experience, weathering a divorce herself (from the unctuous Charles, played by Matt Letscher), and the abandonment of her own OS. Together they stare out across the city, looking out upon the human world. In a film that relentlessly chides attempts on behalf of all characters to fantasize, wallow, distort, and live outside of the world, we have a moment of ordinary, human, connection.

A guiding concern of the film, which is also a guiding concern of much of the philosophy discussed in this thesis, is “showing the possibility of my access to experience which gives to my desire for the attaining of a self that is mine to become, the power to act on behalf of an attainable world I can actually desire” (*Cities of Words*, 33). The film (as well as Cavell, Wittgenstein) moves through different sorts of fantasies, grasped at in a number of different ways, towards a world one can “actually desire.” The final scene of *Her* on the rooftop is the only chance we get to see of this unattained but attainable world. It is poignantly ordinary, just a head on a shoulder. I urge you to take this gesture as a continued call back from fantasy and distortion, into what is set right at your feet.

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