

**Letters as Tricksters: Writing Oneself Back Into the World**  
**On *The Invitation*, Jacques Derrida, Stanley Cavell and Epistolary Romanticism**

Course: Research Seminar in Cultural Analysis  
Assignment: End of term paper  
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## Dear Addressee

Between December 2007 and last May I received a series of six letters and two postcards by postal delivery. Taken off guard by their unannounced appearance and their impersonal, sober features, such as the machined printing of my name on the envelope, I was heavily confused by the intimate tone of these writings. Interestingly, this sense of agitation is already anticipated in the very first postcard: 'These [letters] are not meant to frighten you, though they might touch you and, who knows, even make you cry.' Yet the second postcard, interposed between two sequences of three letters, apologizes for this possible disturbing effect: 'It may be the case that we didn't have the right to draw you into such questions without your permission.' What, then, are the troubling questions into which we are involuntarily drawn here?

Conjointly these letters compose *The Invitation*, a project by The Faculty of Invisibility. By means of the two postcards this small institution, consisting of an artist, a graphic designer and a theorist, presents itself and sets forth its aims: 'The Faculty of Invisibility is a self-generating institution traversing formats of social organization and publicness.' The range of this statement of purpose is, however, of such broadness that it does not quite temper the aforementioned confusion and puzzlement. Contrarily, instead of explicating and answering the questions raised by this mailing, it adds just another dilemma to the pile of uncertainties of the addressee. None of the terms of this statement provides us with straightforward guidance in our search for understanding.

The notion of 'publicness,' for instance, is not only completely undetermined, but also doubly contested in the very same paragraph. Firstly, this occurs through its opposition to the name of the Faculty. Whereas the dictionary defines 'public' as 'open to the view of all' this Faculty denominates itself as 'Invisible.' Secondly, the postcard continues to declare that 'The faculty does not appear publicly.' This suggests that the investigation into formats of publicness includes an exploration of its antipode, a retreat from the public. The suspicion that 'social organization and publicness' cannot be approached independently of the individual and personal, nor disconnected from the field of tension between these oppositional terms, is heightened by the strong concern displayed in these letters with notions of isolation, solitude, non-participation, silence and invisibility.

A similar involvement can be found in the work of philosopher Stanley Cavell, where these topics are identified as *romantic*. This shared preoccupation inspires me to forward the letters that were sent to me once more to Stanley Cavell's post-box. In this

essay, I want to ‘invite’ his concept of romanticism to engage with *The Invitation*, in order to explore how the latter can enrich our understanding of the former and, simultaneously, how the former can stimulate our reflections upon the latter. My consignment has, however, an ocean to cross. Not only owing to the fact that Cavell is a transatlantic philosopher<sup>1</sup> but also because the affinity between these two enterprises might not be evident at first sight. In order to take the necessary intermediate steps, at times I employ Jacques Derrida as a postman, using his study *The Postcard* (1987) as means of shipment from one shore to another.

By confronting *The Invitation* with the thought of Stanley Cavell and Jacques Derrida, I hope to gain a better understanding of this project’s preoccupations with the relation between the individual and the social, the personal and the public, the subject and the world, in order to find out where its proclaimed ‘traverse’ leads. Hence I propose myself to be attentive to the call of this correspondence, in a reciprocal gesture to the second letter of *The Invitation*, which declares: ‘I draw pleasure from our correspondence inasmuch as I try to follow its call.’

### **Missing Missives**

An echo of the idea that this correspondence carries out a certain call can be heard in the title of this epistolary artwork. In analogy with the term ‘call,’ ‘invitation’ also implies that an appeal is being made here. Yet, the active definition of ‘invitation’ afforded by the dictionary, as ‘a spoken or written request for someone’s presence or participation’ cannot be easily reconciled with the passivity to which the addressee is summoned in *The Invitation*: its first postcard bids its reader ‘not [to] reply to them, but await instead many more of those letters to come.’ If not to having a share in this exchange, to *what* are we invited then?

With the arrival of the second letter this uncertainty is put in company with the question *who* the object of invitation is. This note holds the suggestion that the receiver of the texts is not the person invited; their sender is. It speaks of the writings as a response to a previous invitation on behalf of the reader: ‘I will try to respond. I feel that I have been invited to do so more than once. I would like to say that I have and always will welcome your invitations and the demands they make of me.’ Since the addressee (presumably) has no recollection of making such a request, he feels disconcerted. He

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, this feature plays a very prominent role in the writings of Stanley Cavell. Nevertheless, I will leave his ponderings upon America and his quest for an ‘American philosophy’ unattended in this essay.

starts to wonder if he missed or failed to perceive something. Apparently, the correspondence consists of more than these eight pieces of paper only. Next to the content, the form of the letters enhances the intuition that *The Invitation* provides us with mere fragments of a larger whole: the usual place and date of writing are not mentioned; the letters are left unsigned and without heading; they seem to start, so to speak, *in medias res* and conclude abruptly. Furthermore, this sense of incompleteness is affirmed by the statement on both postcards that ‘the Faculty [...] issues its communication as in this case *with passages from* the correspondence of *The Invitation*’ (first emphasis added).

This fragmentation reminds of the way in which Derrida suggests his readers should approach the profusion of letters that make up his “Envois,” the first part of *The Postcard*: ‘You might consider them, if you really wish to, as the remainders of a recently destroyed correspondence’ (3). Accordingly, Derrida emphasizes the ‘leftover structure’ that is inherent to the letter: ‘The leftover structure of the letter means that [...] a letter can always not arrive at its destination. Its “materiality,” its “topology” imply the permanent possibility of its divisibility, of its partition. It can be ripped up and lost forever’ (472). Once a letter has been posted it leaves the sender’s range of control. In spite of the attempt to regulate the document’s itinerary by a readable writing of the address or the selection of a reliable postal service, its line of travel and point of arrival can never be guaranteed. *The Invitation* proves to be conscious of this continuously lurking danger: ‘We had to realize that some letters have gone lost with the post’<sup>2</sup> (postcard #2).

Hence, the letter is stained by *excess*; in part it escapes our grasp unceasingly, slips through our fingers. In over five hundred pages, *The Postcard* explores the implications of this excessive nature of the letter. Derrida observes that not only the physical side of the letter is threatened by loss, but so is its meaning. Even if mischievous hands do not preclude the proper arrival of the letter, it is still not certain that its message will come through in the manner intended. This is due to the fact that one of the principle components of the letter, language, is not univocal. According to Derrida’s renowned conception, a linguistic system does not function through *reference* but by *difference*: words do not gain meaning by referring to an extra-textual reality, but

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<sup>2</sup> The ungrammaticality of this sentence could be an interesting object of analysis. However, besides from the English version from which I quote in this paper, the letters of *The Invitation* were distributed in Dutch, French and German too. Since in these translations the ungrammaticality is absent, I leave it unattended.

by differing from other words. In consequence, meaning is *deferred*; it is a strolling troubadour who never takes up residence but rambles endlessly, from one word to another. Hence, whatever accuracy and precision are applied in its formulation, no singular signification can be chained to the letter.

Since language is not preceded by an external referent, it functions as a self-referential, auto-productive system. It never sets foot outside its own labyrinthine passageways, through which it moves without cessation. As a postal consequence of the fact that language has no primordial ground or origin, Derrida states that the first letter has always already been written (66). Similarly, Cavell considers the system of speech an agreement with which we did not know we accorded (*In Quest of the Ordinary* (1988) 40). When speaking, he states, we find ourselves all of a sudden in the middle of an event that had already started without us.

As said before, the fragmentary appearance of *The Invitation* evokes exactly this sensation: the impression prevails that these letters are incomplete and moreover preceded by others unknown. Interestingly, the self-referential character of language, which Derrida and Cavell hold responsible for this feeling, resounds in the formula through which the institutors of this project characterize themselves: ‘The Faculty of Invisibility is a self-generating institution’ (postcard #1, #2). Hence, it declares to function without external input. If we apply this proclamation to *The Invitation*, the *auto-sufficiency* of this correspondence implies that they do not need an external response. This understanding of *The Invitation* as a self-enclosed system is reinforced by its aforementioned request to leave these letters unanswered. Yet another proof to this hypothesis can be found in the references to a supposed invitation of the sender by the addressee. Since the latter does not recall any form of active participation in this correspondence, he starts to think that somebody else has been writing letters on his behalf. No inquisition is needed though, since *The Invitation* itself pleads guilty to this suspicion: ‘I find myself entangled within my very own words, trying to unravel them in such a way that they may contain your response’ (letter #3). Whereas ‘correspondence,’ the word by which these writings are designated repeatedly, usually stands for a *dialogue*, this correspondence is *monologic*. The addressee is impeded from speaking back: ‘Maybe, in reading these letters, you start hearing your voice growing faint’ (letter #3). The sender talks for him instead, administering both sides of the exchange.

Derrida seems to foresee this occurrence. *The Postcard* speaks of ‘the possible identifications of the emitters and the receivers’ (64). The self-sufficient nature of

language – or, in terms of *The Invitation*, the letter’s ‘self-entanglement in its very own words’ – comes with the notion of excess. Since language or letters never attach themselves definitively to a reading or reader, there is an excess of address and an excess of meaning. As a consequence, every position is transitory, open for substitution. ‘At the very instant when from its address it interpellates, you, uniquely you, instead of reaching you it divides you or sets you aside, occasionally overlooks you,’ Derrida writes on the back cover of his book. Likewise, the receiver of *The Invitation* is included in a project that concurrently excludes him. His excessive structure is here materialized. Though, before the awareness that he is now *factually* superfluous can come to afflict him, this sensation is anticipated<sup>3</sup> in the second letter, which displays a similar feeling: ‘I can never be anything but a guest. [...] I had to learn about a replaceability that is inherent in the place at your table I have been invited to take. This could easily make me sad.’

### **The Desperate Message**

Yet another instance of self-consciousness is reflected in the third letter of *The Invitation*: ‘I am thinking of my letters as tricksters. As messengers in great ignorance of what the message contains.’ Here, the epistolary artwork concedes to the idea that the potential for meaning always surpasses the anticipations of the message’s author. Out of the very same awareness, David Will speaks in “Post/Card/Match/Book/”Envois”/Derrida” (1984), a study of Derrida’s “Envois,” of ‘the very desperate message’ so as to indicate ‘the inevitability of their [the letters] going off the rails, being lost, losing themselves’ (22). Here, the word ‘desperate’ is employed in the quite uncommon sense of ‘extreme,’ ‘excessive’ or ‘irretrievable.’ The message of the letter is desperate because of the disparate meaning of its content and its potentially widespread address. The letter can be read by many eyes in many ways.

The meaning of ‘desperate’ is, however, not exhausted by this rewording of the term. Apart from a condition of *excess* it indicates a state of *despair*. Although Derrida seems to understand the dispersion of meaning mostly as enabling and playful -- a play in which he participates fervently through inventive word games and tongue twists -- close scrutiny of *The Postcard* also lays bare instances in which the message is conceived as ‘desperate’ in the woeful sense of the word. Especially in “Envois” some

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<sup>3</sup> In the last sections of this essay I will explore the significance of such an anticipation.

sad moans and outcries of desperation can be found, such as: ‘Would like to address myself, in a straight line, directly, without *courier*, only to you, but I do not arrive, and that is the worst of it. A *tragedy*, my love, of destination’ (23, second emphasis added).

Here, Derrida speaks of the desire for immediacy. He longs for the ‘straight line,’ wishes to touch directly upon, perhaps even to merge with the addressee of his writing. The letter and its consequent postal procedures, however, always interpose themselves between him and his loved one. Both ‘destination’ and determination are ruled out: neither can the letter’s destiny be assured, nor can its interpretation be fixed.

Yet, if this lack of immediacy were confined strictly to the realm of the epistolary, would it suppose a real *tragedy*? For Derrida, the hardship consists in the fact that the features of the letter are emblematic for the functioning of language as a whole. In analogy to the excessive nature of the letter, which jams the communication between sender and receiver, the aforementioned constitution of language interferes in the relation of the subject to the world. Since language has no straightforward translation from referent to reference to offer, it distorts. This distortion, which finds its most palpable form in the figure of the letter, is what Derrida conceives of as tragic.

Where *The Postcard* speaks of lost letters, Stanley Cavell’s *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* talks about ‘an intimacy with existence, an intimacy *lost*’ (4, emphasis added). Where the former displays a desperate message, the latter discloses ‘skepticism’s *despair* of the world’ (4, emphasis added). As this citation and the title of his book already announce, Cavell is very much concerned with skeptic epistemology, the branch of philosophy which calls into doubt the possibility to achieve knowledge of the world. In *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism* (1989), a comparative study of Cavell’s thought and deconstruction, Michael Fischer argues that on account of his conception of language, a thinker like Derrida can be considered nearly an exponent of skepticism: ‘the deconstructionist works at the same “giddy limit” as the skeptic, suspending all that we take for granted about language, experience and the ‘normal’ possibilities of human communication’ (8). Sharing hence Cavell’s preoccupation with skepticism, Derrida hints already at some of the consequences of this suspension. With Cavell these subtle hints are stretched out into a thorough examination of the existential consequences of such epistemology. Derrida confesses that he too would like to present the letter not only as metonymy of language, but of ‘Being’ too. Fearful of erecting a ‘metaphysics of postality’ (65), he does not do so. Cavell is less reluctant to say that *letters, language* and *life* share a series of complex



problems. Therefore, the sense of tragedy to which Derrida alludes only sporadically, finds extensive elaboration in the work of Cavell.

Skepticism is all but a homogeneous philosophical school. Still, its different, sometimes antagonistic expressions do coincide in their overall conclusion: no matter with how much perseverance we purchase understanding, something always breaks out of our grasp. An everlasting excess, an unconceivable, inarticulate remainder attests that direct knowledge, perception and experience of the world are somehow hindered, be it by language (as for Derrida); be it by physiology; be it by mental categories; be it by interest. The subject's very own impediments keep it within insurmountable walls, which screen him from his surroundings.

The first letter of *The Invitation*, which consists of only one phrase, seems to point at this abyss between the subject and its outside, between word and world: 'Now that I start writing to you, I have to admit that to recognize you always already means to *miss* you' (letter #1 emphasis added). *Missing* implies distance. Since skepticism declares that no approximation can be absolute, a certain degree of distance lasts. The resultant sensation of permanent missing resounds in *The Postcard* too:

the letter is immediately dispersed and multiplied, a divided echo of itself, it is lost for the addressee at the very second when it is inscribed, its destination is immediately multiple, anonymous, and the sender, as they say, and the addressee, yourself, my beloved angel; and yet how I *miss* you, you, you alone now, I cry over you and smile at you, here, now, right here. (79, emphasis added)

Whereas Derrida merely mentions this sense of missing, Cavell examines its problematic consequences. The skeptic stance erodes our 'trust in the world' (*The World Viewed* (1971) 22), the conviction that we are somehow able to relate to something outside ourselves. This erosion is, according to Cavell, utterly destructive: '[...] the skeptic's knowledge, should we feel its power, is devastating: he is not challenging a particular belief or set of beliefs [...]; he is challenging the ground of our beliefs altogether, our power to believe at all' ("Knowing and Acknowledging" (1969) 240). Skepticism undermines our confidence in the possibility of engagement and interaction with the world and therefore demoralizes or even paralyzes. Someone pervaded by skepticism sees no reason to get up in the morning. Skepticism comes with the menace of nihilism.

Derrida is clearly intimidated by this threat. The relation between skepticism and his conception of language goes beyond mere coquetry, since it does not leave him untouched. Ostensibly doubting the effectiveness of the epistle, nearly every page of “Envois” names the desire to destroy his correspondence; to burn his letters; to stop writing. ‘Yes, this “correspondence,” you’re right, immediately got beyond us, which is why it should all have been burned’ (7). This temptation entails capitulation before skepticism and surrender to tragedy:

a letter can always not arrive at its destination, and [...] therefore it never arrives. And this is really how it is, it is not a misfortune, that’s life, living life, beaten down, tragedy, by the still surviving life. For this, for life I must lose you, for life, and make myself illegible for you.

*J’accepte. (The Postcard 33-34)*

*Acceptance* is, however, not the only way in which skepticism can be accounted for. The section of *The Invitation* that I just cited bears an alternative proposal: ‘Now that I start writing to you, I have to admit that to recognize you always already means to miss you’ (letter #1, emphasis added). *The Postcard* and *The Invitation* coincide in the idea that writing goes along with missing. Yet, whereas in this passage Derrida *accepts* this find, it is *admitted* by The Faculty of Invisibility. At first glance, the dissimilarity of these terms might not be salient. With the aid of Stanley Cavell this apparently dim distinction can be illuminated.

Cavell speaks of the history of modern philosophy as a continuous strife against skepticism. This battle is comprehensible, given the devastating effects of the latter, but senseless too. He points to the impossibility to refute the skeptic argument. In “Knowing in Acknowledging” Cavell shows, by means of a complex analysis of various philosophical viewpoints, that the disbelief in the attainability of knowledge of the world can simply not be logically contested. In consequence, we should no longer try to counter this ‘unreasonable’ reasoning and start to *acknowledge* its strength. Only after the acknowledgment of skepticism can the quest for a remedy against its harmful effects be undertaken.

Skepticism has a certain truth in store for us, of which we must not be neglectful. Cavell’s notion of the ‘truth of skepticism’ (*In Quest of the Ordinary* 5) resounds in Derrida’s figure of ‘the postman of the truth.’ His ‘facteur de la vérité’ reports ‘lettre[s] en souffrance,’ which by a beautiful eventuality of the French language

expresses both ‘a letter that has not been delivered’ (*The Postcard* 437) and the suffering caused by such an announcement: ‘To tell the truth is not only disagreeable, it places you in relation, without discretion, to tragedy’ (5).

As Derrida’s incessant wish to incinerate his mailings attests, these instances<sup>4</sup> of ‘acceptance’ of this tragic truth bear the marks of *resignation*. Contrarily, like the acknowledgement of skepticism advocated by Cavell, which clears the path for an anti-skeptical gesture, the act of ‘admitting’ in *The Invitation* insinuates by no means docile compliance with this woeful wisdom. In the following section I will unfold the desirous response that it implies instead.

### **The Promiscuity of the World**

The privilege of involvement in the artistic enterprise of *The Invitation* does not raise feelings of enthusiasm and joy only. The keen contrast between the utterly personal address of these letters and the intimacy of its tone on the one hand, and its wide distribution and impersonal, machined appearance on the other, awakens a sentiment very close to *jealousy*.

In the previous sections I argued that the letter is doubly excessive: it is characterized by an excess of address and an excess of meaning. Since the letter is open to many hands and interpretations, David Wills speaks of ‘the promiscuity implied by the open letter’ (24). With Derrida the promiscuity of the letter appears chiefly as a structure, a latent *potential*. In *The Invitation* this potential is cultivated and brought to fruition: here, the letters emerge as *actually* promiscuous. The misfortune of the addressee which commonly abides on the level of fearful threat has here already been accomplished. The addressee realizes that he is not the exclusive object of these confidential declarations; that these letters experience similar moments of intimacy with others too. What he thought of as personal treasure unveils itself as a public good. In this context, the aforementioned statement ‘I am thinking of my letters as tricksters’ (letter #3) gains yet another meaning. The realization of its multiple address turns these letters into promiscuous libertines who deceive by trickery. In analogy with the licentious lover or mistress, whose embrace can be enjoyed just occasionally (after which (s)he takes flight into the night again, preferably out the window) Derrida writes:

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<sup>4</sup> I speak of ‘instances’ so as to emphasize that the gesture of renunciation in *The Postcard* is not continuous. If it had been, we would find nothing but a heap of ashes on the shelf where we now keep Derrida’s book.

‘There is a holding, but not an appropriation of the letter. The letter is never possessed, either by its sender or by its addressee. [...] This letter, apparently, has no proprietor. It is apparently the property of no one’ (422-423).

Leaping from the realm of the letter to life, Cavell states that this impossibility of possession incites the zealous longing to ‘possess it [the world] again’ (*The World Viewed* 22). In *In Quest of the Ordinary* this desire is rephrased once more in amatory terms: ‘we want unappeasably to be lawfully wedded to the world and at the same time illicitly intimate with it’ (32). Pained by our inability to get a grip on the world we aspire to total control so as to reverse our powerless condition completely. After the horror stories of separation and loneliness that the skeptic tells us, we long to hear a fairy tale of togetherness. If the world is incorrigibly promiscuous, we simply want to be both its acknowledged spouse *and* its secret lover or mistress so as to receive both those letters that were written to the former and those to the latter. We want to be unrivaled. We want to be the only addressee.

By staging this desire within a scene of love and adultery, my aim is to emphasize its utterly *romantic* character. The locus of the letter as presented in this section as, in terms of Derrida, the site of the boudoir or the bed (‘if I look at this card [...] after having opened the box and unsealed the envelope [...] it becomes our bed, the bed [*le lit*] like an opened letter’ (34)) encourages us to recognize the romanticism of epistolary writing. The work of Cavell shows us, however, that the desire aroused by and manifested in *The Invitation* is not just romantic in the banal, everyday sense of ‘amorous’ or ‘passionate.’ It is romantic too in the philosophical understanding of the word, as it took shape from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards.

Like skepticism, which I described as a heterogeneous body of thought, romanticism is very far from a uniform, coherent movement. Nevertheless, in *Romantic Desire in (post)modern Art and Philosophy* (1990) Jos de Mul succeeds in discerning a feature that is shared by all different exponents of romantic thought. He finds romanticists to coincide in a state of mind that is twofold. On the one hand it consists in the longing for reconciliation between the domain of the personal and the sphere of the public, in the wish to bridge the abyss of silence and solitude shoveled by skepticism. Simultaneously, it includes recognition of the vanity of this hope to overcome the impossibility to know, verbalize or experience the world as such.

The romanticism recaptured in the work of Stanley Cavell has to be understood within this tension. His concept of acknowledgment equals De Mul’s discernment of

‘the tragic consciousness of the final unachievability of this desire’ (xvii). Inversely, De Mul’s notion of ‘romantic desire’ resembles the ‘romantic gesture’ that Cavell proposes in response to skepticism.

The romantic gesture consists in the commitment to a quest for balance between expectancy and disappointment (*In Quest of the Ordinary* 5), between hope and despair (36). It is a continuous oscillation between the two implications of the skeptic notion of excess, by which we are both *empowered* and *rendered powerless*. The excessive nature of language, knowledge, and experience stains our words, concepts and feelings with a blind spot; something escapes the count; we are unable to touch upon the external world. Yet next to imprisonment, the unavoidable excess facilitates liberation. The notion of excess results from the idea that worldly phenomena are not founded upon a primordial ground. Hence, thought remains forever incomplete; no discovery of an ultimate essence can bring it to a standstill. The existential responsibility brought about by this absence of a structuring principle does not only inflict anxiety, but enables creation too.

In the previous section I foreshadowed these two different implications of skepticism, by taking notice of Derrida’s contradictory attitude towards his own conception of language. In *The Postcard* the detachment of language from an external referent inspires both frolicsome play and a sense of tragedy. The very same ambivalence, which Jos de Mul associates with the romantic tropes of irony and nostalgia, characterizes *The Invitation*: the project is full of promises that are simultaneously reneged on. Whereas the second letter announces a ‘try to respond,’ the fourth one speaks of the impossibility to answer. One message declares to set foot on inaccessible territory: ‘I can only enter through writing. [...] I have already entered more than once’ (letter #4). The very next instant this access is called into doubt through allusion to an ‘inner threshold [...] that has been left without being attended’ (letter #5). In defiance of the lofty pretences of this project to ‘traverse formats of social organization and publicness,’ the penultimate letter concludes humbly: ‘I would like to apologize. I have been pointing at nothing, really nothing that could possibly be disclosed, nothing that could be *redeemed*’ (letter #5, emphasis added).

According to Cavell such redemption is exactly what the romantic gesture aims for. He speaks of ‘a romantic demand for, or promise of, *redemption*, say self-recovery [...] a recovery from skepsis’ (*In Quest of the Ordinary* 26, emphasis added). Yet in analogy with *The Invitation*, where the claim to redeem is immediately disclaimed,

Cavell stresses the need to maintain this redemption on the level of promise and demand. His ambitious program for the restoration of our 'trust in the world' operates via the romantic oscillation between acknowledgement and desire. Only through a quest for equilibrium between hope and despair can we explore what degrees of freedom are left within the confinements of the human condition. This quest is without end; it requires continuous repositioning. The idea of its fulfilment, a final surrender to either despair or hope, supposes violent negligence: of the enabling potential of creation and play (in case we give in to paralyzing nihilism); or of our innate limitations (in case we imagine the chasm between the subject and the world to be solidly bridged).

Returning once more to the metaphor of love and lust, the erosive effect of scepticism on our belief in the possibility of engagement with the world can be compared with the lost faith in the promiscuous partner. In answer to this heart-wrenching disillusion we can decide to retreat from the amorous arena. Adverse to this option, which verges dangerously on the nihilistic withdrawal from life, is the resolve of *seductive* counterattack.

In *The Postcard* too the writing of letters is presented as an act of seduction. The addressee is 'chosen and seduced,' Derrida writes (144). 'I still put everything into seducing you' (6). Through seduction we try to entice the promiscuous libertine towards our bed, the ungraspable world to our embrace. In concordance with Cavell's romantic gesture this allurements is a process without completion. Once the eye of the beloved one is seized, the seducer cannot rest his case. The attention must be conquered continuously. It is a laborious quest which swings us to and fro between desperate frustration and hopeful joy.

The act of corresponding is rarely exclusive. Since we are usually engaged in more than one correspondence we probably receive mail from various emitters. Hence the promiscuity of which I accused *The Faculty of Invisibility* can be attributed to the addressee of its letters too. That might explain why *The Invitation* also bears the signs of a seductive hunt. Its writing is presented as a riposte made to the sad learning of a 'replaceability that is inherent in the place at your table I have been invited to take': 'I guess, I should have known to relate this replaceability to my habit of writing' (letter #2).

The recipient of *The Invitation* is, however, deprived of the possibility to relate his jealous temper to epistolary writing. The disallowance to reply to the letters makes us wonder how the addressee of *The Invitation* can translate his romantic desire into a

romantic gesture. Yet before I am able to determine what means are left to the reader to instigate a seductive counterattack, some preliminary explorations have to be undertaken.

### **Instances of Insistence: Department of Haunting**

Similar to the insistence with which Cavell's romantic gesture is made, the third letter of *The Invitation* declares: 'You understand that I will not let you go.' This seductive insistence is furthermore reflected in the manner in which the two postcards sketch the departmental organization of The Faculty of Invisibility. Next to a Department of Practice and a Department of Reading it is said to consist of a *Department of Haunting*. A similar figure of speech appears in *The World Viewed*, where Cavell speaks of 'my haunting of the world' (160), evoking hence the picture of something like a 'knight errant' in search for dragons, driven by the romantic desire to cage the uncageable. In a comparable fashion, the title of The Department of Haunting calls forth the image of a stoke-hole full of charcoal where the romantic longing for contact and communication is fuelled. This department might be the place where the process of emission is continuously instigated, where the whereabouts of the project's addressees are traced and from where postmen are urged to quicken their delivery. Both Cavell and The Faculty of Invisibility seem to employ the notion of 'haunting' so as to indicate the persecution of the aforementioned 'excess,' the remainder that is left unattended by address, unsaid by speech, unseen by sight and unthought-of by thought.

This shared imagery provides the occasion to demonstrate clearly that 'haunting' is no unilateral movement. When I speak of 'the haunting of the excess,' the grammatical structure of this sentence already insinuates that 'the excess' can be both object and subject of the haunt. In *Specters of Marx* (1993) Derrida examines this double direction extensively. With the 'specter' to which his book confers all protagonism Derrida found a more ornate, imaginative and stimulating concept to indicate what I presented in this essay mostly by the sterile and cold denomination of the 'excess.' In analogy to the excess, the specter exceeds our limits of mastery: we do not know how to conceive of something that is neither dead nor alive, that belongs neither to the present nor to the past; the specter always escapes the grasp of both our hand and head. Yet the specter haunts us. Every now and then it stirs us up from our pleasurable ignorance and reminds us of the hiatuses of our thought. It is only this

haunting that brings us to a reciprocal haunt. It is the sight of the decoy that incites us to hunt.

With the aid of William Desmond a similar consciousness can be discerned in the work of Cavell. In “A Second Primavera: Cavell, German Philosophy, and Romanticism” (2003), Desmond shows that Cavell’s aforementioned ‘haunting of the world’ cannot be separated from its inversion, the world’s haunting:

Any ruminative thought must return again and again to what it believed it had digested or exhausted, only to find reserves hidden there still, perhaps reserves that hint finally at an exhaustibility that will never be done with, that will always *haunt* all final claims on it. For these reserves claim us. (148, emphasis added)

Cavell’s plead for an ‘acknowledgement of scepticism’ springs from this observation. The endless confrontation with the residue of our thinking processes compels us to an awareness of our innate limitations. Yet the very same ‘excessive haunt’ inspires Cavell’s ‘romantic gesture’: by calling attention to their existence these indigestible rests invigorate the wish to improve our digestive system.

Whereas ‘reserves’ or ‘specters’ might still be too abstract or too fantastic to be imagined in the role of claimants, a letter *factually* comes to our door, slips through the letter drop, forces its way into our house. Without asking for permission, as the second postcard admits, *The Invitation* ‘draw[s] and draw[s] off your attention’ (letter #3), directing our gaze towards unseen but pressing questions.

Moreover, the two-sidedness of this movement of haunting becomes tangible in *The Invitation*. All previous chapters of this essay are marked by *perspectival inconsistency*. Inexplicitly, the angle of focus shifted: sometimes I spoke on behalf of the recipient of *The Invitation*; yet other times I argued from the viewpoint of the letters. I alternated continuously between the joy or suffering *aroused by* these writings, and the play or tragedy *manifested in* these mailings. I described, for instance, how these letters inflict a sad sense of superfluity on the addressee, and simultaneously express an equivalent sadness. I argued that the jealousy of the recipient of *The Invitation* resulting from the fact that he has to share these letters with multiple others inspires the desire for a recapture through seduction. At the same time I tracked traces of such a romantic desire within *The Invitation*. By these possibly confusing switches I hoped to prefigure the two-sidedness that I explicated only now: the addressee of *The Invitation* persists



steadfastly in opening the envelopes that The Faculty of Invisibility continues to send with equal insistence.

Yet before delving into the implications of the mutuality of this haunt, I would like to remark that in analogy with Cavell and Derrida the haunting ('insisting') of *The Invitation* is described as excessive too: 'what insists cannot be measured in the registers of identity' (letter #4). Once more we are said to (be) persecute(d) by something that is irreducible to our mental, sensual, visual or auditory frameworks.

In the fourth section of this essay I already stated that the excess renders powerless and is empowering at the same time. In consequence, the haunt of the excess implies both tragedy and play, oscillates between despair and hope. At this point of my argument I would like to further elaborate upon the latter notion. The manner in which *The Invitation* carries out the bilaterality of haunting enables me to add an extra dimension to the concept of 'hope' or 'promise.' As said, the hoping, cheerful approach to the excessive structure of knowledge, language or experience identifies the inherent incompleteness of these systems with their unbounded potential for expansion. *The Invitation*, however, offers solace in yet another way.

Earlier, I indicated my intent to foreshadow the bilateral movement of haunting by shifts of perspective as 'possibly confusing.' Such confusion is generated by the fact that this rhetorical device presents two presumed antipodes momentarily as a congenial couple. By juxtaposing the sentiments *aroused by* and those *expressed in* the letters of *The Invitation* their similarity becomes manifest. The promiscuous libertine and the jealous lover appear to share a series of frustrations, uncertainties and cravings. The receiver recognizes himself in some of the wordings of sender. These letters make him cry and cry over him. They are tormented tormentors.

These coincidences of affect contain a certain promise. *The Invitation* reflects the sceptic conception of the human condition as marked by solitude. Yet through these instances of coincidence it shows the state of solitude to be *shared*. Although this observation does not grant a direct solution to our lonely isolation, it affords consolation: shared solitude is no absolute solitude. In search for similar comfort, Cavell writes: 'I am filled with this feeling – of our separateness, let us say – and I want you to have it too' ("Knowing and Acknowledging" 263). The contradictory perception of a junction through disjunction inspires the belief in the possibility to create other points of intersection. The idea that we somehow converge in our divergence vaguely insinuates

that the abyss between the subject and object can be bridged, feeding hence our ‘trust in the world.’ In one single stroke, *The Invitation* awakens and alleviates immense grief.

### **The Faculty of Invisibility (and Silence)**

In the third section of this essay I mentioned Cavell’s conviction that such alleviation from grief is necessary in order to live. As the subtitle of *In Quest of the Ordinary* attests, he proposes to interweave ‘lines of scepticism and romanticism,’ since the paralyzing effect of its grievous conclusions causes the pure, unmingled sceptic stance to be *unpractical*. Here, Cavell’s pragmatist background comes to the surface. Averse to the recurrent philosophical entanglement in complex questions that by no means can be extended beyond the merely mental domain, pragmatism proclaims that the act of philosophising can only be legitimated by its *practical* relevancy. Correspondingly, Cavell places philosophy in function of the everyday. He counters the figure of philosophy as ‘mind game’ with the model of ‘education’ or ‘edification’ (20), according to which philosophy imparts concrete skills and prepares for ordinary life. Influenced by analytic language philosophy, which stresses the communitarian constitution of language, Cavell conceives of the everyday in terms of sociality and intersubjectivity. For that reason he prefers to think of the philosopher as a mundane philanthropist, rather than an autistic hermit.

In spite of his zealous intents to make thought operative, Cavell himself is often accused of founding his entire philosophy upon a problem that is only intellectually pertinent: the problem of scepticism. In “Cavell’s “Romanticism” and Cavell’s Romanticism” (2005), Simon Critchley expounds that the most repeated reprimand against Cavell is that he bases a theory of the common upon an experience that is not commonly experienced. By his very strolling through streets, ‘the normal man in the street’ proves not to suffer too much from the sceptic ‘experience of separation from others’ (Cavell, “Knowing and Acknowledging” 260), from the ‘anxiety about our human capacities as knowers’ (*In Quest of the Ordinary* 4); only a small minority is bedridden by the paralysis against which Cavell recommends the panacea of a romantic gesture.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> This criticism cannot be refuted by the suggestion that Cavell’s romantic cure might be already generally accomplished, since Cavell himself sees the impossibility of completion as part and parcel of this gesture. Moreover, according to Cavell scepticism should not be *replaced* but *accompanied* by romanticism. Without the acknowledgment of scepticism one cannot speak of a romantic leap of faith.

Besides his point of departure, the trajectory of Cavell's philosophical voyages is also accused of a lack of practicality. Both the problem that he wishes to solve and his proposed solution remain rigidly within the sphere of philosophy. Cavell's advocacy of a sceptic-romantic attitude presupposes continuous active reflection, the feasibility of which is seriously questioned by Critchley. In practice, Critchley states, we are only sporadically capable of such reflectiveness (48). Hence, Cavell's 'practical philosophy' is said to be hardly practicable.

In *The Invitation*, I would like to argue, this lack of urgency and practicality is overcome. Interestingly, the name of the project's point of provenance, The Faculty of Invisibility, has the same educational connotation that Cavell wishes his own thinking to invoke. Cavell's 'edification' consists in the recapture of a historical set of ideas: romanticism. The Faculty of Invisibility operates through retrieval of a means of communication that is, although not outmoded, antiquated<sup>6</sup>: the letter. Despite their shared old age, acquaintance with the romantic movement cannot be fairly presupposed, while the format of the letter is familiar to anyone. Consequently, whereas Cavell's 'school' is said to be appealing to philosophers only, the scope of *The Invitation* is more far-reaching.

Nevertheless, so as to articulate the educational undertone of this institutional title, closer scrutiny of the components 'Faculty' and 'Invisibility' is needed. In this essay I have spoken of the notion of excess by means of the figures of the specter and the promiscuous lover, who both escape our grasp. Through their prominent concern with the notions of *silence* and *invisibility*, the letters of *The Invitation* afford two more emblems of excess. Whereas silence challenges auditory frameworks, the invisible extracts itself from schemes of vision. As a result of the aforementioned 'bilateral movement of excessive haunting' silence implies that we are (partially) mute and deaf (we are simultaneously unable to hear and to be heard); the concept of invisibility then entails that we are both blind and unseen.

On several occasions, the letters of *The Invitation* affirm that 'to have no face, to have no voice' (letter #3) is a lamentable condition. At the same time, the third message mentions 'the gaps and silences that I write as *passageways*' (emphasis added). Here, the dead spots of eye and ear are conceived of as promising openings towards otherwise inaccessible sites. In the work of Cavell a similar bifurcation is pronounced in the

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<sup>6</sup> This archaism is emphasized in *The Invitation* by the election of a font that simulates the letters to be typewritten.

opposition between ‘the pain of silence (*The World Viewed* 152) and the potential of ‘inviting questions by silence’ (*In Quest of the Ordinary* 22).

Without notice of these antagonistic implications of the excess (or: the invisible), the designation ‘The Faculty of Invisibility’ cannot be apprehended. Furthermore, this apprehension demands attention to the fact that ‘faculty’ bears a double meaning too, referring to both an institution of teaching and to a skill or ability. The Faculty of Invisibility seems to aim for the enhancement of our faculty of invisibility. To possess a well-developed faculty of invisibility would mean to be conscious of the hiatuses of thought, the limitations of mankind. Simultaneously, the aspiration to improvement of a faculty of invisibility testifies to a desire to sharpen our sight, to seize a glimpse of the invisible, to augment understanding. The paradox of this educational program (which reminds of the tension between Cavell’s acknowledgment of scepticism and his romantic gesture) is nicely put to words in the second and the fourth letter of *The Invitation*, which speak of ‘the need of preparation for being unprepared.’

By dedicating the previous sections of this essay to an examination of the forceful feelings of hope and despair that the letters of *The Invitation* inflict upon their addressee, I tried to show that this epistolary artwork does in fact stir up a certain awareness that usually slumbers comfortably in the warm shelter of more dominant organs and instincts. The reason that *The Invitation* seems to have more success than Cavell’s enterprise did in teaching us to be perceptive of the invisible, is that the format of the letter complies with Critchley’s observation that such perception can never be continuous, but fragmentary only. Since, as I argued, fragmentation marks *The Invitation*, it is able to trigger perception. Their unannounced and irregular appearance enables these letters to catch us off guard and hence to seduce us to follow the call of the correspondence (letter #2), like sea sirens or, as the letters themselves declare, *tricksters* do.

In my introduction I stated that the questions into which these letters draw us involuntarily (postcard #2) aspire to traverse formats of social organisation and publicness. I foreshadowed that a study of publicness could not be disconnected from its antipode, the isolated sphere of the individual. The ‘format’ under scrutiny in *The Invitation*, epistolary writing, shows the spheres of the personal and the public to be radically separated and simultaneously strives for their reconciliation. Hence, these letters are engaged in an activity that they declare to be in vain: they speak of their

failure of speaking; they visualize their own invisibility; they address someone whom they declare to be beyond reach.

Perhaps, the only way in which the addressee can ‘follow the call of the correspondence’ and comply with ‘the invitation of *The Invitation*’ is to act in a similar fashion and do exactly what these letters renounce. In analogy with the romanticist, who makes his gesture *in spite of* his acknowledgment of scepticism, maybe the recipient of *The Invitation* should, *in spite of* the request not to reply, answer these letters; maybe he should feel invited to do so, although these letters claim explicitly that he is not the object of invitation; maybe he should try to improve his understanding of the mysterious writings that tell him that his power of comprehension is awfully and inevitably limited.

This essay might then be conceived of as an initial apprehensive attempt; as a cautious expression of the hope to enhance my faculty of invisibility; as a first letter of response. Thenceforth, participation in the epistolary correspondence of *The Invitation* only demands two more courageous gestures: the surmounting of my shy reluctance and the purchase of envelopes and stamps.

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