Figures of Erasure:
On the Healing Power of Forgetting
in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*

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I.

Good afternoon, thank you all for coming, and thank you, Dr. McQuillan, for the kind introduction. I'm very happy to be here at St. Mary's, and appreciate the occasion to speak with you about one of my favorite all-time films, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, directed by the inimitable Michel Gondry and released in 2004. What I propose to do today is to present you with some structured remarks and then open the floor to a broader discussion of any questions, observations, or concerns you might like to share in response. So without further ado, let's dive in. [Part One]

You may find this hard to believe, but many philosophers have an elitist attitude toward film. What this ultimately means is that they regard film as subservient to philosophy, in the sense that philosophy pursues the highest truths and, at best, film is a tool for teaching philosophical ideas to the uninitiated. The idea that film is a vehicle for teaching philosophical content I call the *Matrix* complex [Matrix complex].

How many of you are familiar with the 1999 film *The Matrix?* The Wachowski siblings who directed it were great readers of Descartes, and deftly worked in the classical Cartesian problem of distinguishing reality from dreams which, expressed in question-form, encompasses (but is not limited to) [red pill/blue pill]: How *do* I know that I am awake rather than dreaming? Isn't the believability of dreams based on our accepting the dream reality as, in fact, real? A nightmare is, after all, only frightening to the extent that I accept the reality of what it presents to me. And, as a consequence, how can I be sure that I'm actually here, and not at home sleeping in my bed, having a nightmare about giving a talk at St. Mary's?

And yet, however much the film works the reality/dream problem, it makes no explicit reference to Descartes, and Descartes of course makes no reference to *The Matrix*. After all, *The Matrix* is not a documentary about Descartes' philosophy. As such, it shows us rather

than tells us, spoon feeds us the philosophical content in the form of an entertaining narrative action film, and if we – the philosopher-teachers – can't (or won't) teach students to *read* Descartes, then we can teach the film and get there in a way that makes philosophy more palatable to students.

In and of itself, the idea of using film to teach philosophy, to get at philosophy by alternative means, is not a bad thing. It becomes troubling when it implies an elitist attitude. This is to say that it is of course possible to use film as a tool for teaching and, in so doing, to bracket a deeper awareness of the filmic medium so as to get at philosophical content through a channel arguably more engaging than simply reading a text. Thus, not all philosophers who employ this pedagogy are inherently elitist. The elitist attitude is implied in this practice, however, when the philosopher-teacher uses film as a tool both because they regard students as *incapable* of reading philosophy, and because they regard their own ability to do so as superior.

This implied elitism plays on tropes or clichés about philosophy as an ivory tower endeavor [ivory tower], that has little or no interest in what happens on the ground in practical affairs since its concern is with vertical abstraction away from the messy stuff of life and toward the purely ideal. As such, this elitist attitude [phl elitist] regards students of philosophy as the uninitiated, at the same time as it regards the philosophical tradition, its history, its wealth of references to that history, and the prohibitively difficult complexity of its ideas, as the obstacles to full initiation to be surmounted by the student. Since the philosopher-teacher had to work their way up through the difficult process of being initiated into the tradition, they regard their students as required to undergo the same ritual hazing, and when they become cynical about teaching – as the elitist philosopher always does – they retreat to the use of tools to regurgitate philosophical content to those students who, on their view, simply lack the talent and the determination to make the climb to the enlightenment they – the philosopher-teachers – already enjoy.

Philosopher Joanne Faulkner, argues that this implied elitism is no coincidence, especially when the tool utilized to regurgitate philosophical content is film. She locates the root of this tendency in a certain reading of cinema through Socrates' allegory of the cave from

Book VII of Plato's *Republic* [cave slide]. Faulkner, for her part, encourages us to recognize how much the prisoners' experience resembles going to the movies [cave cinema]: as in the cave, we sit in the dark, not alone, but with others with whom we share the experience of the film; we watch – on a screen (akin to the cave wall) – flickering light and shadow, which we take to be real – for a little while at least, suspending our disbelief in worlds other than the one we know outside of the theater. Is it any wonder, then, that if the regrettable experience of the prisoners is so like our experience of the cinema some philosophers wouldn't hold it in very high regard?

On Faulkner's reading, this *Republic*-based approach to film therefore grounds the elitist attitude that regards film as belonging among those images containing only a glimmer of truth even as we are tricked into believing they are real. Thus, if the experience of cinema is analogous to that of the prisoner who must be liberated from bondage, then film is, at best, a springboard for commencing the journey that attains to perfect knowledge, for starting the upward climb of the philosopher away from illusory beliefs and toward enlightenment. As that argument goes, film is meant to be used and left behind when we become capable of higher forms of cognition to which correspond the most real (not filmed) realities.

Furthermore, once we recognize that the discipline of philosophy is rife with elitism, that philosophy in the global North is a tradition largely comprised of the canonized contemplations of white men [cliché slide], the majority of whom enjoyed lived lives of leisure with plenty of time to question the veracity of human assumptions about, say, the truth of the senses, the nature of reality, and the moral worth of action, this elitism may seem impossible to escape. Are we bound to this attitude? Is the relationship between philosophy and film doomed to fail?

I would argue it is not.

First, recall the stipulation that the use of film as a tool for teaching philosophy is not inherently elitist, it becomes a problem when the elitist attitude is implied. This may seem impossible to circumvent, however, since the very discipline of philosophy appears to be inevitably elitist. Yet in the question: is the relationship between philosophy and film

doomed to fail? – there is already a clue as to how we might escape the implication of this attitude. The clue lies in the *and*. I would argue that the elitist attitude is an attitude of philosophy *to* film we can and should combat by shifting away from this *Republic*-based posture and toward the possibility of philosophy *and* film. This involves inhabiting the conjunction *and*, which, however strange that may sound, means seeing the contributing discipline on either side of it as a partner in dialogue, thereby on equal footing.

As such, this shift in attitude from the *to* toward the *and* – i.e., from a relation of philosophy *to* film to a relation of philosophy *and* film – is far from inconsequential. On the contrary, it radically alters the possibilities of the film-philosophy enterprise from the top down. I argue that we can number the consequences of the shift in attitude, and follow how the first makes possible the second, the second the third, and the third the fourth. i.e., that the consequences of our shift in attitude are not merely describable, but are scaffolded in relation to one another.

Allow me to explain.

When we shift our attitude away from philosophy *to* film (which all too often implies elitism, as I have endeavored to show) and toward philosophy *and* film [handout]:

> 1) we shift away from an attitude based in assumption and hierarchy and toward an attitude based in listening and recognition. As philosophers participating in a dialogue *with* film, we are required to acknowledge that film as a medium is capable of far more than the regurgitation of philosophical content.
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> 2) Once we listen and recognize the autonomy of film (1), we become attentive to the devices the medium deploys to express itself, to signify or communicate meaning.
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> 3) Attending to these (2), it becomes possible to recognize film as capable of philosophizing (for though all films *think*, only some *philosophize*).
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> 4) And when film philosophizes (3), we become open to the radical potential of cinema to challenge its own conventions, thereby undermining the dominant ideologies of a given society.

Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (Gondry 2004), I argue, philosophizes. As doing more than merely regurgitating philosophical content (1), it communicates *through* the devices unique to the medium (2), *in* a manner we would identify as philosophical (3), *such that* we become open to the radical potential of cinema to challenge convention and dominant ideologies (4). What remains to be seen is precisely how. To demonstrate, I propose to attend to the film by way of each of the four consequences of the shift in attitude enumerated above. For our purposes going forward, I will now refer to those consequences and steps or conditions, to underscore how one makes possible the next and to highlight how they need to be satisfied vis-à-vis *ESSM* in order for the demonstration to be complete. [Part Two]

II.

It may strike us as at first obvious that *ESSM* is a "philosophical" film. After all, we are given a clue as to the philosophical *content* of the film by one of its central characters, Mary (Kirsten Dunst), the receptionist at the offices of a small, one-off company aptly called Lacuna [Mary-Howard reception], which performs a medical procedure "technically brain damage but on par with a night of heavy drinking" that targets the emotional core of memories and deletes them [Erasing You]. She quotes, verbatim, Aphorism 217, from Chapter VII of the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* [Blessed]:

Blessed are the forgetful for they get the better even of their blunders.

Indeed Mary repeats this quotation, once to Stan (her current lover) and once to Howard (the man whom she truly loves and with whom she has forgotten she already had an affair). And though the quotation is from *Beyond Good and Evil*, it speaks more directly to the second of Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations*, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life" (1874), wherein, broadly speaking, Nietzsche's concern is the extent to which what he calls the "historical sense" could overwhelm our vital instincts and do harm potentially fatal to life. Thus, this untimely meditation circles around the question: to what extent can history serve life, be useful for it, transforming sickness into a once more robust health? And the answer? Curiously enough: forgetting.

Without venturing too far afield, in short, Nietzsche claims that the "historical sense" is akin to remembering, to holding knowledge at the ready for retrieval, to being impressed upon by the past such that we cannot (or will not) let it go. He argues that his age (the turn of the twentieth century) is overwhelmed by this historical sense, this compulsion to remember, and has lost sight of how important forgetting is to health. This may strike us inhabitants of the twenty-first century as odd, since we tend to regard forgetting as a bad thing. For example, I want to tell my friend about this great movie I just saw, and when I go to retrieve the name of the lead actor, I can't recall it. Try as I might (and the name is on the tip of my tongue), I can't remember, I've forgotten it. I am frustrated by this, perhaps even angry. In some cases, like those of Alzheimer's, we even regard the loss of memory as a tragedy. The inability of the person affected by Alzheimer's to recognize their own family is explained by recourse to forgetting. They used to remember who their family was, but now – because of the disease – they have forgotten. Forgetting is thus akin to death, a condition of oblivion[1] or decay, and therefore, a negative condition we want to eradicate.

To counter this obsession with history (with remembering the past), Nietzsche argues that forgetting is actually essential to the flourishing of life. All living things require sleep, Nietzsche insists, a darkness in which to gestate. Further equating remembering with daylight wakefulness and forgetting with the darkness of night and sleep (an equation we will see reflected in *ESSM*), Nietzsche reminds us that without sleep, we die. An overexposure to wakefulness, we unfortunately know from studies of the techniques of torture, will kill you. In other words, we cannot do without forgetting. It is necessary to life.

Alternatively, we *can* do without remembering. Human beings, on Nietzsche's interpretation, are unique living creatures in that, unlike their animal counterparts, they are *burdened* by the past. The older we get, in fact, the more heavily the past weighs upon us. We might even venture so far as to say that being introduced to the weight of the past is a condition of our entry into adulthood. Becoming adult means having to deal (even if by evasion) with the *gravitas* of our past decisions, i.e., the burden of knowing we cannot undo them, of reckoning with how much they determine our present moment and foreclose our

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[1] Note for myself for future reference: Diotima makes precisely this point in Plato's *Symposium* in her argument in favor of immortality when she details in what ways we pursue it (even when it looks like we're doing something else entirely).

possibilities for the future. Animals, however, are blissfully unaware of the weight of the past, which is why we regard them with envy. *If only we could forget*, we lament. *If only we didn't have to be haunted by the past…* In summary, from Nietzsche's work two senses of forgetting emerge: negative forgetting, a species of decay analogous to dying (the forgetting we wish to be rid of), and necessary or active forgetting that contributes to the flourishing of life, and about which I shall say more in the conclusion of these remarks.

Returning to the film now, on the premise that we are happiest when able to forget, Mary praises Howard's work – she sees it as providing an important and perhaps even merciful service, in that he makes it possible for people to begin again by enabling them to forget. Lacuna provides its service, on Mary's view (the character whom, we recall, directly quotes Nietzsche) so as to free people from the "mess of sadness and phobias" that seem to inevitably characterize adult life [Joel Zap]. And what could be more a source of sadness and fear than the loss of someone loved in a breakup – a ritual entry into adulthood if ever there was one?

We can see, then, that the film – when we attend to it as a partner in dialogue with philosophy – does far more than merely regurgitate the content of Nietzsche's argument(s). I will say more about this in satisfying the third condition, namely that the film philosophizes rather than merely thinks. Here, we can trace how *ESSM* exceeds the regurgitation of content through its imagining of a world in every way identical to our own (circa 2004) with the one key difference. This world, quite believably, has an agency called Lacuna [Clem erase] that can erase our memories should we choose to be released from our "mess of sadness and phobias," taking us into a space in which we, the spectators, explore the possibility of our *own* potential choices. But I am (again) getting ahead of myself. Let it suffice to say that *ESSM* clearly achieves step one (of the four detailed on your handout).

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Moving on to step two, attending to the devices of the film that communicate meaning, we notice the strange, recursive, temporality of the film. Normally, when stories proceed on a linear timeline, it is easy to locate where we are in them, and we make meaning out of what we see almost instantaneously. This is because when the present moment falls into the past

as a new present arises on its way to the future, time advances in a straight line, consistent with how we measure it in our real lives. The technical term for this kind of plot movement is narrative continuity, the darling of Hollywood film. Through it, the audience identifies a story (with a beginning, a middle, and an end) in which it could lose itself – temporarily suspending disbelief to identify with the character the film highlights as its protagonist.

Though *Eternal Sunshine* begins with a tight shot on the sleeping face of Joel Barish (Jim Carrey) slowly awakening [Joel shot], a shot which eventually cuts to one of the window of his apartment as seen from his point of view, all of which suggests Joel is the protagonist with whom we are meant to identify, our first impressions of him portray an atypical "hero".

Not only do we have no background information with which to judge why he seems so confused and befuddled, but we get the impression that the motive for his actions comes from somewhere other than the seat of his agency. We follow Joel to the train platform [platform] where he waits to head to work, and he makes – by his own admission (through voiceover) – an uncharacteristically impulsive decision to catch a train running in the opposite direction [Train]. This movement acts as a kind of code for the narrative, which is not going forward, but running like the train to Montauk, backward. And, as we come to understand, all trains in *Eternal Sunshine* go back to the beginning: to Joel's 'original' meeting with Clementine (Kate Winslet) in Montauk.

We can further pursue the film's communicative devices when we notice that its title is borrowed from an Alexander Pope poem (also quoted by Mary, though she forgets his name, calls him Pope Alexander, and is gently corrected by Howard). In the poem, *Eloisa to Abelard,* the narrator Eloisa goes back and forth between the choice of oblivion by death as a figure of extreme forgetting (in which the self who would forget is also erased) and the embrace of the painful memories so as to be able to live on in some capacity with her lost love, Abelard. The film, not surprisingly, operates in the tension between these choices, and veers toward a first resolution when Clementine elects to have Lacuna erase her memories of Joel. In the following clip, Joel visits his friends Carrie and Rob to recount how he approached Clementine only to discover she had no idea who he was [First clip].

Several things are of note here: first, as Joel recounts his memory he does not remain in the home of his friends. That is, we don't see him just telling them the story. Gondry (with Kaufman, the screenwriter) instead takes us there, in a way we are, at first, accustomed to. Given the conventions of narrative continuity (facilitated by continuity editing), we are accustomed to someone recounting in the present what happened in the past just as we are accustomed to being *shown* the memory being recounted. But Gondry also defies this convention by transporting us from the landscape of the present to the mindscape of the past. That is, the filmmaker envisages memory not simply as an impression of something that happened to us (one aspect of Lacuna's approach to eradicating it), but as a *place*, like the set of a movie in our heads, complete with characters, scenery, lighting, and mood. Thus, the technicians discuss Joel's having gone off the map when he hides in memories they cannot chart, and when a memory has already been erased and Joel returns to it, we know this is the case through exquisite use of mise-en-scène, like prosthetics to blur and distort faces [obliviate], muffled sound, and dimmed or haloed lighting.

In the clip, as Joel re-enters the present encounter with Rob and Carrie by exiting the bookstore, the lights go out behind him, dramatically, row by row. Recalling that Nietzsche likens forgetting to the darkness in which everything organic gestates and an excess of history to being forcibly deprived of sleep, the use of light and darkness in the film becomes especially provocative [Clem Dark]. In other words, as the lights go out on the bookstore, we are led to deduce that the scene is *already* inside a memory, which by virtue of its association with Clementine, Joel is presently having erased. This provisional conclusion is then confirmed by many further instances in the film when the lights go out on an otherwise illuminated memory, accompanied by sound effects suggesting computer keystroke deletion.

Though there are many more devices, some unique to this film, some signatures of Gondry's style across the body of his work, this sampling serves to show that how he deploys them in *ESSM* communicates a coherent body of meaning that explores the thematics of forgetting, happiness, and healing in its own voice.

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So far, then, we have satisfied the first and second conditions or steps I outlined earlier in these remarks. To advance to the third and the fourth, it is first necessary to indicate how *ESSM* communicates philosophically, i.e., to indicate how it philosophizes (rather than merely thinks). For when it does, we – the spectators – are opened up to the radical potential of cinema to challenge convention and dominant ideology. I'll address these together, as it becomes harder and harder to distinguish these conditions as we approach the end of the list. [Part Three]

III.

One device philosophers often rely on is juxtaposition, i.e., wpointhen we place two (or more) elements under consideration alongside one another so as to argue for a specific kind of relation that obtains between them. Examples include: comparison, when we hold elements side by side to assess whether and how they are similar; contrast, when we do the same to assess difference; analogy, when we juxtapose so as to get at something more subtle – the elements are similar enough to compare, yet not identical, and knowledge of one allows for inference into another (as in Socrates' argument that the sun is analogous to the Good). Describing these philosophical devices to you in words, I am making every effort to be clear, and yet the abstraction involved in the explanation can make it difficult to follow.

Alternatively, consider image juxtaposition. When presented with a single image the possible responses you can have to it are numerous. But when I show you this [juxtaposition], the meaning narrows and we are able to intuit the intention of the juxtaposition almost instantly. As the critic (and arguably philosopher) John Berger observed, the juxtaposed images are presenting us with an *argument* [juxtaposition 2]. Considering how sophisticated an argument one could make by *mobilizing* the juxtaposition through moving pictures, it becomes clear just how philosophical a potential belongs to *montage* – the technical French term for editing to make meaning. Film, after all, does not simply record what is there, uninterrupted, and project the recording onto a screen (though such documentation presents one possibility among many that are used in tandem to express meaning). It *cuts*, placing images into the interstices *between* documented elements, directing our attention thoughtfully and often strategically to insure we know precisely which conclusions to draw.

But this is not all. Stir in a few of the many elements of filmic communication, like shot structure distinguished by distance and angle [Dutch-ECU] that tell us how intimate or removed we are meant to be, or how powerful or disenfranchised is the character on whom we are focused; mise-en-scène [mise-en-scene] (lighting, costume, shot composition [blocking, sets]) that (as we saw in the discussion of filmic devices) convey mood, style, and the believability of place; and sound [sound clip], that enhances the meaning of image or even signifies entirely without it. Stir these into the mix, and we needn't stretch to confirm film as a medium that *thinks*, especially when it is used in a thoughtful way – whether to strategically incite pleasure, as in popular narrative cinema, or to challenge conventional roles and expectations, as in alternative/radical cinema. But how do we get from thinking to philosophizing? Are they synonymous?

Philosopher Stephen Mulhall argues that film philosophizes when it reflects on its own "conditions of possibility" just as philosophy does for everything else that comes into its purview. Some of you are familiar with this technical philosophical language from your work with Dr. McQuillan on Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. As the language of conditions of possibility denotes, Kant seeks to discover what foundationally *makes possible* a judgment of the beautiful, or, put another way, he wants to understand the necessary conditions of that experience.

Mulhall's insistence, then, that film philosophizes when it reflects on its own conditions of possibility means that the contemplative spotlight is turned away from other objects of investigation and turned toward itself, toward reflecting on what makes it possible (for film) to *be* itself. In short, it calls its own existence into question, and – in the case of film – often does so playfully or subtly, by welcoming the spectator to reflect on how the medium works. This can be especially potent when filming takes place within the film and illustrate our inclination to voyeurism, for example, or the ambiguity of surveillance in that it simultaneously protects us from harm and endangers our rights to privacy.

But, I would argue, this reflection on conditions of possibility needn't be quite so explicit. Film philosophizes, in my view, when it plays on the identification of spectator with character, but also with camera (and sometimes with character via camera, as in POV). Our

idealizations are realized in this identification and whether we know it or not (often in popular mainstream film, the point is *not* to realize it's happening) we are implicated, sometimes even made uncomfortable in our complicity, as the theorist Laura Mulvey argues of the films of Alfred Hitchcock. My point is, [point] a film thinks when it makes meaning, but philosophizes when it implicates us by forcing us to *question* how and why we are the way we are. Faulkner underscores this claim – that film philosophizes by implicating us in reflection on *our* conditions of possibility – insofar as the difference in the transmission of thought by the medium of film "allows for the creation of new philosophical insight" (1).

Eternal Sunshine, by use of the filmic devices at its disposal, thereby implicates us in reflections on *our* conditions of possibility by deftly encouraging us, as critical spectators, to explore whether it is ethical to erase our memories, to embrace the deep wish to forget what pains us (even as we acknowledge our societal obsession with remembering). Second, it asks us to question whether this kind of erasure is indeed the active/necessary forgetting Nietzsche prescribes as an antidote to the fever of history that characterizes his age (and arguably ours).   Its difference in transmission, to borrow the phrase from Faulkner, enables us to recognize the new philosophical insight that comes of the hypothetical: what if I could force myself to forget? What then?

To answer this question, we could appeal directly to Nietzsche. The same reason we run from forgetting as oblivion and decay – as a species of death – accounts for the positive role forgetting plays in the process of healing. For Nietzsche, we paradoxically need this sleep akin to a little death in order to *let go* of being wakeful, of remembering something painful, or someone whose loss has wounded us deeply. The strongest, most authentic nature, Nietzsche implies, is the one that can incorporate the painful memory and "turn it into blood," make it into a part of ourselves precisely by forgetting how it – as something/someone other – inflicted pain.

And *ESSM* certainly makes use of Nietzsche. But it also advances *beyond* the philosophical content of Nietzsche's argument by showing – through the mode of communication unique to film – how no intervention on the process of coping/grieving (active, necessary forgetting) can circumvent it.

All efforts to use Lacuna's services to escape the time-bound process of forgetting as a species of or analogous to dying only lead to repetition of the process, compulsively (as Mary and Howard's relationship evince [Mary-Howard]) rather than affirmatively (as in the case of Joel and Clementine, when they choose each other again in spite of knowing how it will all play out) [Ending Clip].

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In conclusion, only the fourth condition remains: that a film that philosophizes opens us to the radical potential of cinema to challenge convention and the dominant ideologies of a given society. We have already explored one such challenge through the time signature of the film. We saw that the temporality of the narrative makes it confusing and alienating (makes *us* feel, in our effort to grasp what is happening, just as Joel feels in attempting to come through the fog of the procedure to a place of lucid resolve). He resolves to try to stop the procedure he no longer wants, from the inside, at precisely the moment the film conveys to us just enough information to become fluent in its symbolic language (note the changes of color in Clementine's hair, for example). We begin to take stock of the recurrence of episodes that already happened, putting the pieces of the story together recursively. As we saw in the discussion of filmic devices deployed by *ESSM* to philosophically communicate, this challenges the convention of narrative continuity, and at the same time challenges our sense that time is linear. It suggests the possibility that our quantifying of time, together with our obsessively endeavoring to prove we are happy each and every second of it (social media), may be unhealthy, if not a social disease.

Moreover, by answering the question of whether we should intervene on the process of forgetting with a resounding no, *Eternal Sunshine* deftly but radically undermines our societal practices of using technology to numb pain, of trying to circumvent the need for time in order to heal from painful losses (by attempting to do away with the necessity of grief), and of affirming life only when we can cleanse it of suffering.

By putting us in a position to identify with two characters who are *not* ideal, who admit their faults and choose each other in spite of how inevitable it seems that they will arrive at the

same tragic end [house crumbling], *ESSM* challenges the conventional love story in a way that implicates us in a reflection on our conditions of possibility when we are forced to consider death (loss) and forgetting as analogues that relate to one another through the conversion of pain into affirmation, and loss into love of life.

Thank you.