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The Paradox of the Unknown Lover: A Reading of *Letter from an Unknown Woman*

Let man fear woman when she loves: then she makes any sacrifice and everything else seems without value to her.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

1

I think I can assume that it long ago became unnecessary to defend the Max Ophuls and Howard Koch film *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (Universal-International, 1948) against the impression that it is merely a well-wrought specimen of some Hollywood genre or other, such as “women’s picture” or melodrama. Robin Wood and George Wilson have shown that though this remarkable work conforms (at least superficially) to certain genre requirements, there is a good deal more to it than that.¹ Stanley Cavell has gone so far as to name a new genre after it.² Still, though the film itself no longer requires defenders, I do see a need to come to the defense of its principal character. If *Letter* were simply a typical “women’s picture,” this would imply that it aims at a very strong sort of audience identification with the character of its protagonist, Lisa Berndle (Joan Fontaine). In the course of arguing for an interpretation of the film as transcending its origins as a genre film, Wilson points out various ways in which the film is actually critical of Lisa’s position. He claims that the point of view of the film is that Lisa’s view of Stefan Brand (Louis Jourdan) is “deluded,” that it is based on “an hallucination of the actual man.” If it is true that Stefan, as the title of the film suggests, does

not know Lisa, it is also true, according to Wilson, that she does not know him. The conception of love embodied in the film, he argues, is Stendhal’s crystallization theory, according to which love by nature attributes nonexistent perfections to the love-object.³ It seems to me that, as marvelously insightful as Wilson’s discussion of *Letter* is in other respects, on this particular point he comes very close to standing the truth on its head. What I will do here is offer an interpretation of the film that is much more favorable to Lisa. In so doing, I will also be arguing that the film comes much closer to fulfilling the above-mentioned genre requirement—audience identification with the female protagonist—but that it is no less interesting for that.

First, I should say a few words about the structure of the film to serve as a frame of reference for what follows. Though early reviews found *Letter*’s flashback structure “a bit difficult to follow at times,” its temporal shape is actually very clear-cut.⁴ It begins and ends with short narrative sequences that take place in the present (that is, circa 1900), in Vienna. I will call these two sequences the Prologue and Epilogue. In the Prologue, a dark carriage draws up to Stefan Brand’s apartment. We learn that Stefan, who is coming home at two in the morning, has an appointment at dawn, a duel with an indignant husband. It is an appointment he has no intention of keeping. He finds that a thick letter has come for him while he was out, a letter from Lisa, whom Stefan does not at first remember. She is, as we eventually find out, the wife of the indignant husband about whom we

have already heard. Stefan begins to read the letter. In the Epilogue, the letter's consequences, at once redemptive and horrible, are revealed to us and the dark carriage pulls out again, bringing the events full circle.

Between these two sequences in the present come several other sequences depicting Lisa's life at various times in the past as Stefan reads about them in her letter. The first, which takes place at least fourteen years ago, depicts some of Lisa's first encounters with Stefan in her childhood and adolescence. This material, together with an episode depicting Lisa after she and her mother have moved from Vienna to Linz, I will call Act I. Act II, set ten years before, depicts Lisa's second encounter with Stefan and its immediate consequences (mainly, the birth of their son) when she was a young model in Vienna. Act III, set at least two days before, when Lisa was a wife and mother (the mother of Stefan's child, though the wife of another man), depicts Lisa's catastrophic encounter with Stefan at the opera, together with antecedent and consequent events. The joints between each of these sequences (including the joint between the episode in Linz and the rest of Act I) are bridged by shots in the present, showing Stefan reading the letter or viewing enclosed photographs. These are essentially elaborate reaction shots, showing Stefan's pity, regret, and horror as he views the world disclosed by Lisa's letter.

In the next two sections of this essay, I will collect various apparently meaning-bearing elements of the film without making a great many elaborate comments (yet) on what they might mean. Then, in Sections IV and V, I will put forth a claim that brings all these elements together into a coherent whole. *Letter*, I will argue, presents an interesting philosophical idea—to the effect that love actually makes a certain sort of knowledge possible—and, surprisingly enough, makes a challenging case for this idea.

II

One thing about the meaning of *Letter from an Unknown Woman* that is announced already in its title is that it is about knowledge and ignorance. More exactly, it is about knowledge and

ignorance of people. This, however, barely conceals a paradox, since the unknown woman, as it soon turns out, was a lover of Brand's: she was his unknown lover. How can a lover be unknown? A paradox, in this sense, is something seemingly contradictory or impossible that is nonetheless asserted as true and known to be true.⁵ The themes of ignorance and of paradox are gently but insistently sounded throughout Lisa's letter, from its very first sentences. She begins with an avowal of knowledge and, at the same time, a confession of ignorance: "By the time you read this letter, I may be dead. I have so much to tell you and perhaps very little time. Will I ever send it? I don't know." The ignorance she confesses, as I will later have cause to emphasize, is about herself. She immediately makes another confession: "as I write it may become clear that what happened to us had its own reason for being beyond our poor understanding." Here, the confession of ignorance is linked to a promise, or a proffered hope, to create knowledge: it may become clear. Clear to whom? we might ask. Her act of writing might create knowledge, and for all we know at present it may be knowledge for her as well as for him. Then comes a paradox: "If this reaches you, you will know how I became yours when you didn't know who I was or even that I existed" (p. 35).⁶ Throughout the letter, she repeatedly warns the reader that he will find what she says difficult to believe or understand. She ends with a series of crashing paradoxes, beginning with the most astonishing of all of her paradoxes: that, after the awful events she has recounted, she still loves him, and seemingly without regrets: "If this letter reaches you, believe this—that I love you now as I have always loved you. My life can be measured by the moments I've had with you and your child. If only you could have shared those moments, if only you could have recognized what was always yours, could have found what was never lost. If only" (p. 135). If only he could have shared—what? The moments she spent with him! If only he could have found—what was not lost in the first place! I will not have space here to resolve all of *Letter's* paradoxes, but I will eventually try to resolve the one on which many of them are based, the paradox of the unknown lover.⁷

Letter is a film that rather obviously has what, for want of a better word, one might call

leitmotifs—elements, often but not always visual ones, that are repeated from one scene to another in ways that are meaningful (despite the fact that they are often, at least initially, mysterious). Most obviously, the film is distinguished by the presence of diegetic *music*—the characters seem to be forever playing music, listening to it, talking about it, or simply going about their business while others play it. There are a number of different *journeys*, especially by train. There are a number of scenes in which *curtains* figure prominently in one way or another. Finally, there is a leitmotif obviously related to one of the meanings that curtains might have—a number of characters, in one way or another, perform the function of stagehands. Again, I will not be able to discuss all these here, but I will say a few words about the last two before setting forth an idea that ties them together.⁸

Curtains. The first curtain, or curtain-like object, occurs early in the middle of Act I. The voice-over narration of Lisa's says, "Then came a great day for me," and we see a dark, blurred image that quickly turns out to be a shot of Lisa beating a very large rug (p. 47). She pulls the rug out of the way, revealing the courtyard behind it, as if parting a curtain to begin a drama.⁹ The courtyard then does become the scene of a little drama, which we understand to be conveyed by Stefan's reading of the letter. In it, Lisa helps Stefan's mute servant John (Art Smith) as a secret stratagem to gain entrance into Stefan's apartment, where she examines his beautiful objects and musical memorabilia. Act II has the most elaborate variations on the curtain motif. It begins in Madame Spitzer's fashion shop with a shot in which the camera peers through curtains into a small booth where a model is being helped by an assistant into a dress (p. 97). It then pans to another booth in which Lisa is framed by curtains. The next shot begins with Lisa entering through curtains into the display area of the shop to model a stunning Travis Banton outfit for appreciative customers. This shot dissolves to another one showing Lisa later in the day bending over a task at a desk in Madame Spitzer's. Hearing a knock at the window above her, she sees two young soldiers smiling

down at her. She immediately reaches up to pull both sides of the window curtain closed, thus ending the little show they were enjoying. This action, like her pulling down the carpet in Act I, reminds us of what the principal function of curtains is. They part to reveal, and they close to conceal. In such cases they control what is seen and, thus, what is known.

Sometimes, curtains are used to frame things, directing our attention or marking something as particularly worthy of it. The next appearance of curtains in Act II is a rather elaborate instance of framing. The first shot of the scene in which Lisa and Stefan dine in an elegant restaurant begins with the couple framed by curtains in a private booth (p. 123). As Stefan chatters charmingly to Lisa about her lobster bib, the camera very slowly tracks toward them until the curtains are no longer visible. Shortly afterward, the waiter (in a rather curious gesture) partly, not fully, closes the same curtains. Then as if it cannot resist viewing what the couple is doing, the camera very, very slowly tracks forward again (p. 128). It is then that Lisa elicits from Stefan what might be his most sincere and authentic act of self-revelation, in which he discusses his development as an artist.

The final elaborate use of curtains is, once again, in Act II and at the beginning of a scene. The scene in the hospital maternity ward begins with a shot of a nun approaching the camera in a dark corridor. The camera follows her into a large dark room, confronting a wall of black curtains. She parts them slightly, peeks discreetly inside, quickly snatches a sheet of paper hanging from one curtain, and moves on. She moves through the curtains and, as we follow her, we see that the room is a sort of dark labyrinth of small spaces closed off by identical black curtains. The nun spots an open curtain, looks inside, and closes it. Eventually, she passes Lisa's space, and we hear a nun asking prying questions about her baby's father, which she is refusing to answer. Here, rather obviously, the curtains serve to conceal things from view, as fits a scene of suffering and shame, though the prying and peeking of the nuns suggest that the curtains' function is a little more complex than this: that they not only close to conceal but part to reveal and expose.

Stagehands. Like “curtains,” the “stagehands” leitmotif appears early. It begins at the beginning, immediately after Lisa’s voice-over narration says, “when you didn’t know who I was or even that I existed.” We see a dark blurred image (p. 11). As the image resolves into the interior of a moving van, we hear, “I think everyone has two birthdays, the day of his physical birth and the beginning of his conscious life” (p. 36).¹⁰ We feel rather as if we were witnessing the beginning of Lisa’s conscious life. We see a man beginning to wrestle a large harp, of the sort played in symphony orchestras, out of the van. Simultaneously, we see Lisa for the first time. Her head and shoulders are intruding into the van through a window on the left edge of the frame, in an attitude in which we will often see her: staring in wonder (Figure 1). In one of Ophuls’s celebrated moving-camera sequences, the camera then tracks and pans to follow Lisa as she moves, still staring, past piles of art objects and leather-bound books, up the twisting staircase, to what will soon be Stefan’s apartment. All around her, the moving men bustle like stagehands—shouting orders, requesting help, complaining—arranging the props and scenery for a drama that is about to begin.¹¹ In the most conspicuous activity, a group of irritable men with a block and tackle are struggling to hoist a grand piano past the narrow stairs to the second floor. The moving men disappear after this scene, but during it we meet two other characters, one at the bottom of the stairs and one at the top, who will carry on the same sort



FIGURE 1. Lisa stares in wonder in *Letter from an Unknown Woman*.

of function, managing props and scenery in a drama in which they know they are not the objects of interest. One is the concierge of the little apartment building who repeatedly greets Stefan as he enters the building. (“Who is it?” “Brand.” “Good evening Mr. Brand.”) The other is Stefan’s ubiquitous, self-effacing (indeed, perfectly silent) butler John, whose sole function is to manage Stefan’s beautiful possessions and—like Fritz, the maitre d’ at the café that Brand frequents—to facilitate his complex comings and goings.¹² The scene with the moving men, presented as it is as the prelude to the drama that follows, carries with it a sense of the contrast between a beautiful drama and the sharply contrasting backstage goings-on without which the drama could not take place. The same is true of the Act II scenes at Madame Spitzer’s, with its contrast between the sewing and fitting rooms in the rear and the elegant display area where Lisa models for admiring customers, and, more obviously, of the faux train ride in the Prater, with the scrolling scenery powered by an old man on a bicycle contraption.

The last elaborate appearance of characters performing the function of stagehands (unless we count the two seconds who, having appeared in the Prologue, return in the Epilogue) is the nun who walks through the maternity ward’s labyrinth of curtains, making mysterious little adjustments. It is noteworthy that the scenes in which curtains appear prominently also tend to be the ones that feature the bustling activities of these theatrical menials. A minor occurrence of the later leitmotif is the out-of-frame voice in the lobby of the opera house, calling out, “Second act! Curtain going up!” The general impression given by these intertwining leitmotifs of curtains and bustling theatrical support staff is to make us aware of the presence of controlled revelation and theatrical display.

Before I discuss how this sense contributes to the meaning of the film as a whole, I will need to say something about the two central characters.

III

Lisa and Stefan are obviously two very different people. However, there is one, somewhat less

obvious, way in which they are alike.¹³ It comes to the surface in the dialogue between them on their evening together in Act II. During their dinner at the restaurant, Stefan comments on the wine he has ordered, saying that it is from the “first vineyard you see when you come down the other side of the Alps. The Italians say it’s such a good wine because the grapes have their roots in the valley and their eyes on the mountains” (p. 78). To some extent, of course, we are supposed to take this comment as charming banter, as a remark that he might well have said to many other women. But it anticipates another comment he makes about climbing mountains—and coming down from them—and this suggests that we should also take it as something more. Later that evening, when an image of the Matterhorn scrolls past the window in their faux train ride in the amusement park, Stefan reveals that he has climbed the real Matterhorn. Lisa asks him: “When you climb up a mountain, what then?” He responds: “Well, you come down again.” When she asks him why he likes to climb mountains, he says, “I suppose because no matter how high you climb there’s always a higher one.” She adds, “and you like to imagine that the other one is even more wonderful.” He agrees (pp. 86–87). As she suggests, this recalls an earlier comment of hers, with which he had also agreed, that the reason he prefers to come to the Prater in the winter is that “if it’s spring, there’s nothing to imagine, nothing to wish for” (p. 82). Now he adds a comment that is much truer than he realizes: “You know far too much about me, and I know almost nothing about you” (p. 87).

These exchanges are subtly revealing about both characters in a number of ways. For the moment, I will comment on only one of these. From the beginning, we have been aware that Lisa is in some sense profoundly *idealistic*. That is, there are certain values that she holds, to which she is devoted. In her case, the values involved are Stefan and the greatness she sees in him.¹⁴ She is, we might say, a seeker. The same is true of Stefan, though in his case the values seem to be multifarious. Lisa touches on an important aspect of Stefan’s idealism when she tells him, “Sometimes I felt when you were playing that... you hadn’t quite found—I don’t know what it is—what you’re looking for.” This is rather a hazardous thing to say to an

accomplished artist. His response—“How long have you been hiding in my piano?”—is expressed with evident sincerity. The remark has hit home. One of the values to which Stefan has been devoted is artistic. Another aspect of Stefan’s idealism appears, ironically, in the scene in which his behavior is arguably the furthest removed from the ideal, in the final encounter in his apartment after the opera. Seeing Lisa looking at a small statue of a bust of a woman on the table, he says: “You remember the Greeks built a statue to a god they didn’t know, but hoped some day would come to them. Well, mine happens to be a goddess... For years, I never woke in the morning but I said to myself, ‘Perhaps today she will come and my life will really begin.’ Sometimes it seemed very near. Well, now I’m older and I know better” (pp. 125–126). I think this remark, like his earlier comments about mountains, has to be taken as a genuine self-disclosure. Like Lisa, he is in a way (or at least once was) intensely committed to values. They differ in what those values are. Stefan’s values are both artistic and erotic, while Lisa is virtually all *eros*.

Another difference, and a critical one, suggested by some of the exchanges I have just quoted, is the staggering asymmetry in what these two characters know about each other. As Stefan says with unwitting penetration, Lisa knows entirely too much about him. Everything she says about him is true, and some of it is *penetratingly* true, while virtually everything he ever says about her is either false or true in a way that he cannot grasp. Lisa is far from being a star-struck fool. The many hours she spent as a girl listening to him practice were not a mere emotional indulgence: she has reflected on them and gained insight. In particular, she clearly sees the point that they have in common. When Stefan, who seems baffled by her insightfulness, suggests that she has been hiding in his piano, he is here, as elsewhere, closer to the truth than he realizes.

Where Lisa is concerned, Stefan is often right by accident, or more right than he knows. The first thing he says to her in Act II, when he finally notices her standing vigil across the street from his apartment, is, “I’ve seen you before” (p. 73). We know that he has seen her many times before, throughout the years that transpired in Act I, but he is only aware of

having seen her a few nights ago, and on this very spot. When he tells her, “You’re a very strange girl,” his ignorance is underscored, not only by the fact that he says it twice, and when saying it the second time does not remember having said it before, but even more obviously by the fact that we know that she is *much* stranger than he realizes (pp. 80, 128). He has no idea wherein her real strangeness consists.

In addition, when Stefan hazards an opinion about Lisa, he is often obviously wrong. When in the carriage ride in Act II he stops to buy roses, and the flower woman asks, “Red roses?” He answers with perfect assurance, “No, red is the wrong color. A single, white rose, that’s perfect!” When he gives Lisa the flower he asks, “Did I guess right? Is it your color?” She pauses and says, “From now on, it will be” (pp. 80–81). Partly because he is so sure that he has guessed right, the audience is aware that he has not. In Act III, when he sees her looking absent-mindedly at the statue of the unknown goddess, he says, “She fascinates you too!” The audience is painfully aware that the statue is not what is on her mind at that moment at all. It is, as always, he that fascinates her, but he is again quite unaware of that.

However, though Stefan’s insight regarding Lisa is pitifully weak, his judgments about himself are impressive. In the exchange in the restaurant, the one that is highlighted by some complicated interplay between the camera and a set of curtains, he says, “Well, the truth is I’ve had rather an easy time of it. People accepted my music very quickly, perhaps too quickly. Sometimes it’s easier to please others than oneself” (p. 79). Years later, in the Act III encounter in his apartment, he explains to Lisa why he no longer gives concerts. It was after a concert he had given, “like all the others, not better, not worse,” he says, “I happened to look in the mirror... The young prodigy was no longer so young, certainly wasn’t prodigious” (p. 127). In the Act II scene in the restaurant he comments on an early review comparing him to the young Mozart, he says “I was—very young. There was that much resemblance” (p. 78). Seen in context, this does not sound like false modesty at all. Throughout the film, his comments on himself have the same sort of insightful objectivity, without the flattering soft focus that human self-appraisals generally have.

This is actually one more way in which Lisa is precisely the reverse of Stefan. I can find only one statement she makes about what sort of person she is, as opposed to reporting specific things she does or feels, and it is stunningly mistaken. In the carriage ride home after encountering Stefan at the opera, she says: “I’ve had no will but his, ever.” Her husband’s comment, “That’s romantic nonsense!” is almost an understatement (p. 113). As George Wilson has said:

If *Letter* has established any one thing it is the iron will of this woman to pursue the love of Stefan Brand and possess it on her own terms. (In her letter, commenting on her refusal to identify Brand as the father of her child, she writes, “I wanted to be the one woman you’ve known who never asked you for anything.”) As emerges shortly, she is determined to give up everything to regain this man.

As Wilson goes on to point out, it is Brand who has no will of his own, not Lisa.¹⁵ This is one of the things that Stefan is coolly objective enough to comment on himself, usually with self-deprecating humor. When, in Act II, he walks up to Lisa across the street from his apartment as he is coming home, he says to her, “Well, I almost never get to the place I start out for anyway” (p. 74). At this point he turns and (now accompanied by Lisa) he walks in (as the audience can clearly see) the direction opposite to his initial one. Within minutes, he and Fritz at the café are concocting excuses for his missing the evening’s rehearsal with the orchestra and a date with another woman: actions once undertaken but now abandoned. In Act III, in front of the opera, when Lisa asks him if he has stopped playing, he says: “Oh, it’s not quite as final as that. I always tell myself I’ll begin again next week, and then when next week comes, it’s this week, so I wait for next week again” (p. 111). His remark about climbing mountains—“well, you come down again”—is in the same vein: the events in his life, one might say, always seem to lack the quality of *finality*. Indeed, the events in the film itself, as Stefan reads the letter, constitute another enterprise taken up and then dropped. Just prior to the beginning of the Prologue, Stefan has gone through the actions that constitute the overture to a duel: accepting a challenge, appointing seconds, agreeing to

meet them at a specific hour. He then almost immediately begins to make arrangements to skip town: another project interrupted. It is at that point that, unexpectedly, he is handed the letter and he begins to read it. Now, for the moment, he has forgotten to leave town. The letter is an interruption of an interruption.

The ways the two principal characters in *Letter* are alike and different are striking and potentially meaningful. They are alike in that they are both idealists: they are both intensely committed to a personal vision of the good. However, there are enormous and potentially critical differences between them. They are different in terms of what they know: Lisa knows Stefan, and Stefan knows himself. They are also different in terms of what they do not know: Stefan does not know Lisa, and Lisa does not know herself. Finally, they are different with respect to action: Lisa possesses a powerful will and is (for better or worse) quite capable of conceiving actions and carrying them through to completion. Stefan seems to lack such capacities. Some of these features of these characters serve an obvious function in making the film work as classical Hollywood narratives are conventionally supposed to work. Stephan's accurate self-understanding prevents us from dismissing him as a self-indulgent swine. This is important because, given that this is a "women's picture," we are supposed to sympathize (not merely empathize) with Lisa, and we cannot do that if we think that she is devoted to an utter scoundrel. The same function of underwriting sympathy for Lisa is served by her insightfulness regarding Stefan. However, some of the features I have just surveyed require us to look beyond the requirements of traditional genres to the deeper human significance of *Letter*. To show this, however, I will need to turn my attention for the moment to other matters.

iv

If someone asks you if you know a certain person—someone, let us suppose, named Fred—what is it that qualifies you to say, "Yes, I do"? Ordinarily, you are satisfied if you can correctly match a name "Fred" with a face, or if you have interacted with Fred at some point in the past. It may be, however, that knowing

someone appears this simple because there are other conditions we can safely ignore, not because they are not necessary but because we can assume they are satisfied. Perhaps the human capacities that enable us to satisfy them are ones that we ordinarily suppose are always quietly at work, humming away somewhere. We can do this without being consciously aware of what these conditions are. In such a case, it might take an unusual set of circumstances to expose such conditions and make us aware of what they are. This, I think, is the possibility that *Letter* raises for us. It is one of the things that make it philosophically interesting.

Suppose that you interacted with Fred on several occasions in the past, but each time did not remember him as the person you met the last time. Obviously, this is the possibility that *Letter* asks us to entertain. In these circumstances, would it be true to say that you know Fred? The criteria we ordinarily apply do not seem to be sufficient to answer this question. What does this film have to tell us about it?

One thing is quite obvious: *Letter* does make it intuitively plausible to say that in such circumstances one does not know the person, regardless of what our ordinary criteria would be. It is hard to imagine someone saying, quite seriously, that the film is mis-titled on the grounds that Stefan did know Lisa. Though in some sense he knew her on three separate occasions, though he indeed "knew" her in what used to be called the biblical sense of the word, he nonetheless did not know her. This, however, seems merely to restate the paradox with which I began, that of the unknown lover. I will return to this problem shortly. Before that, I would like to say a few words about what *Letter* has to say about two other matters: what human capacities are presupposed by knowledge of others and what sort of process can provide this sort of knowledge. By the time I have done this, the paradox will have unraveled.

The film conveys a suggestion about the psychological preconditions of knowledge of other people, and it does so by means of the symmetrical characters of Lisa and Stefan. Once we formulate the nature of Stefan's failure as I just have, the reason for that failure becomes obvious. For the particular failure involved, as we have seen, consists in the failure to relate moments of experience widely separated in

time and refer them to a single object supposed to be the occasion of them all. This would require at least one capacity that seems to be poorly developed in Stefan's case, namely, persistence. His way of life involves gliding from one experience to the next, each being complete in itself. There is a deep truth in the comment we overhear someone making about him at the opera: "Perhaps he has too many talents." Multiplicity is indeed Stefan's problem: his way of life splits experience into an unordered array of self-contained moments. Lisa's way, of course, is just the opposite. Her attention is fastened on a single object with an unshakable grip. The precondition of knowing others that is lacking in Stefan's case is, if anything, overdeveloped in hers. This of course explains her insightfulness about him.

She has exactly what Stefan lacks and needs. What she has, though, is something that can be communicated to him. It can be communicated by means of language, though language of a certain sort. What she needs to do is to recount certain individual experiences he has already had, and which in *some* sense he already knows, in such a way that they are now related to one another as parts of a meaningful whole. The relations, the whole, and the meaning will be what he lacked before. This function of assembling elements drawn from experience in such a way as to give them meaning as a whole is one way to describe what an *artist* does. Again, the sort of recounting she must give—in which a series of events is described in such a way as to exhibit them as being related to one another in ways (by cause and effect, for instance) that can be perceived as meaningful—is precisely what a *narrative* is. To create narrative art is, in a way, exactly what Lisa does. Her letter is such a creation.

The letter communicates to Stefan the knowledge he previously lacked. But it does more than that. This sort of knowledge is not limited to the cognitive aspect of human nature, but is deeply involved with the will and the affections as well. Accordingly, it is appropriate that the letter that communicates this knowledge has some very practical consequences as well. As I have already pointed out, the letter comes to Stefan's attention just as he is in the process of—once again—dropping an enterprise previously taken up. To the two men in Stefan's

carriage who arrive with him in the Prologue, the stop at his apartment is meant to be merely a three-hour rest on the way to the field of honor. The experience of reading the letter has such a powerful effect on him that in the Epilogue he actually completes the journey begun in the Prologue. In effect, the images that begin and end *Letter*, showing the dark carriage arriving at Stefan's apartment and departing from it, represent a single action with the elaborate flashback structure of the letter serving to connect its two halves. What they depict is the only action we ever see Stefan carrying to completion. Regrettably, but inevitably, the completion of this action will be his own death.

I sometimes ask people: Who was the author of the letter from an unknown woman? Since they (in contrast to you) have the disadvantage of being unable to see the absence of italics in my question, they never guess the answer to my trick question. Stefan Zweig? Howard Koch? Max Ophuls? The author was, of course, the unknown woman. My point is that the film presents Lisa as doing, broadly speaking, what these others do. She is an artist. That is one way of explaining the two leitmotifs I described earlier. The fact that in the flashbacks prompted by Stefan's reading of Lisa's letter there are persistent images of curtains parting and closing, and many details suggesting that various characters are in effect theatrical support staff humbly assisting a theatrical presentation in which Lisa and Stefan are the protagonists, underscores the fact that Lisa's letter is an artful reconstruction of events with a purpose of her own.¹⁶

Images of curtains can represent theatricality and artifice. As such, given that what the theater and art do is display false semblances of real things, they might also represent illusion.¹⁷ However, they can also have the virtually opposite meaning of *revelation*, as they might, for instance, when they part to show something that was previously hidden. I think the role they play in *Letter* can best be characterized as revelation through artifice. Her letter constructs a version of events that definitely represents her own intensely personal point of view: the film in fact underscores how alien her point of view is from ours and, by implication, how different her account is from the one that we would give. Nevertheless, precisely because it does represent

her point of view, it supplies Stefan with what he previously lacked: after all, what was previously unknown to him was—Lisa.

v

George Wilson, as I have suggested, has ably defended an interpretation that is sharply divergent from mine. He claims that Lisa is profoundly deluded about what sort of person Stefan is. If Wilson is right about this, it might be very difficult to defend the idea that the letter's effect on Stefan is redemptive in the particular way that I have claimed it is. If Lisa's consciousness is as limited as that, then she will have no knowledge to communicate to Stefan. Her letter would be an instrumentality by which she infects him with her ignorance.¹⁸

Wilson's main argument for this is that she pursues Stefan even though we can see that he is a philanderer who is not capable of settling down with one woman.¹⁹ I could defend my own view against this argument by pointing out that the alleged false belief here is not about what sort of person Stefan is but about how he is related to her. However, I think there is a deeper issue involved here. The assumption behind Wilson's line of reasoning is that what Lisa is embarked on here is a practical sort of undertaking: that she is, in effect, trying to land a husband or a permanent lover. He notes that on at least two occasions she seems to realize that he will not settle down with her: when she is saying goodbye to him when he leaves on the train, and when she says to him, with emphasis on the first person singular, "I won't be the one to disappear." But he interprets these moments as evidence of "the immense oppressive weight" of her "fantasies," that they could actually blot out her conscious awareness that they do not represent reality. These moments could at least as easily be interpreted as evidence that her love is not the sort that is based on the belief that such fantasies are true in the first place. Wilson's argument seems to be based on the assumption that if she ever did fully and lucidly realize that Stefan would never be exclusively hers, she would give up her pursuit of him as pointless. But this does not cohere well with her declaration at the end of her letter, when all is lost: "I love you now as I have always loved

you." This comes close to saying not exactly that she has no regrets but that the point of her pursuit of him was not to settle down with him.

This raises the interesting question: What exactly does Lisa want, anyway? This, I maintain, is not an easy question to answer. Her actions are actually difficult to understand if we insist on seeing them as aimed at the cost-effective realization of some normal human objective. As Robin Wood pointed out long ago, it is actually rather curious that she leaves Stefan's apartment during their final encounter in Act III without confronting him or revealing who she is. In fact, he has just told her that something she said the evening before at the opera keeps going through his mind (p. 128). We never learn what it was.²⁰ This rather startling failure of self-disclosure culminates a rather longish series of such failures that run through Act II. When, upon meeting her in front of his apartment, he offers to introduce himself, she interrupts him: "No, I know who you are," and then, in the moment when we would expect her to tell him who she is, there is simply a silence in which neither speaks (p. 74). In the restaurant, when he says, "I believe you really want to hear about me. Why?" and she does not volunteer an answer, he says, "Oh, never mind why" (pp. 78–79). When he asks her how long she has been hiding in his piano, there is a slight pause in which it might have been fitting for her to confess that she actually had listened to him practicing for many hours when she was an adolescent, but he brings it to an end by saying, "Never mind explaining" (p. 79). Obviously, there is a pattern here. Stefan's inadequate curiosity about Lisa is complemented—tragically, as it turns out—by a weakly developed will to self-display on her part.

This trait of hers, or rather absence of a trait, makes it difficult to attribute any of a wide array of conventional motives to her. In general, her actions do not seem calculated to entice him into forming a lasting relationship with her at all. We probably should not be too quick to rule out the possibility that her conduct is to some extent ineradicably mysterious. Perhaps the best and most truthful way to neutralize this mystery is to realize that, as I said earlier, Lisa is all *eros*. In ordinary life, we only see love together with various other psychological states that tend to obscure its essential features: sexual desire,

vanity, the longing for security and domestic comforts, and the desire to charm and impress others. One of the things that make Lisa a great character is that she is very nearly denuded of all these other trappings. In her, we see pure love, at least according to a certain conception of love. What conception of love is this?

In an essay in which he defends the idea that love is absolutely distinct from any sort of desire, Ortega y Gasset says that “in love we feel united with the object” of our love. But this, he says, “is not merely physical union, or even closeness. Perhaps our friend (friendship must not be forgotten when love is generically considered) lives far away and we do not hear from him. Nevertheless, we are with him in a symbolic union—our soul seems to expand miraculously, to clear the distance, and no matter where he is, we feel that we are in essential communion with him.”²¹ We might add, though Ortega does not do so explicitly, that desire on the other hand makes us painfully conscious of the fact that we do *not* possess the object, and irks us until we do possess it, at which point the desire is extinguished. This suggests a not implausible view of the nature of love, more or less in the spirit of Ortega’s comment. According to it, love has a completely different structure from desire as I have just characterized it. Love is a certain psychological state in which one places supremely high value on something or someone. To the extent that love necessarily involves having desires, they consist for the most part in the desire to contemplate the love-object, either directly or through symbols that represent it.²² Other than that, the only desires that are necessarily involved have to do with acting toward the love-object in the way that is appropriate toward a supreme value: namely, by acting *favorably* toward it, doing things *for* it.²³ The principal symbols through which the love-object is contemplated, and no doubt the ones that Ortega has in mind when he speaks of “symbolic union,” are mental images and other thoughts of the love-object. However, there are other sorts of symbols that can serve the same function. In some ways, the most powerfully satisfying symbol is a child who is the offspring of the loved one.

Lisa’s behavior seems to conform to this conception of love, and this conception seems to offer explanations for some of the oddities of

her behavior. In particular, it can explain why she pursues a man who was not likely to form a lasting relationship with her. On this view, although a long-term relationship is most desirable, because it is the most intense form of “symbolical union,” other sorts are available: it is not a matter of marriage or nothing. In particular, once she becomes pregnant, she has a particularly satisfying sort of symbolic union in her grasp. In her valedictory statement at the end of her letter, Lisa mentions, as if they were the things that have given her life meaning, “the moments I’ve had with you and your child.” She identifies the child, not as hers or theirs, but as his. And surely every viewer notices that the younger Stefan (Leo B. Pessin) uncannily resembles the older one, physically and otherwise. Evidently, young Stefan gave Lisa a sense of closeness to Stefan-*selbst* and for some ten years she was content with this.

Her contentment came crashing down in the encounter in front of the opera house. I think it is possible to identify precisely the reason it did. The one thing he says that makes the strongest impression on her is this: “I can’t explain it, but I feel that you understand what I can’t even say, *that you can help me*” (emphasis added, p. 111). At this point, there is a cut to a closeup of Lisa and we see that those last words have hit home. On the conception of love that I have schematically indicated above, the way to entice someone who loves you is not to offer or promise them anything, but to *ask* them for something. That is just what Stefan, with his usual unwitting penetration, has done.

I have been arguing that we can explain why Lisa acts as she does without assuming she is deeply deluded about what sort of person Stefan is. Having said all this, I am sure I have given some the impression that I have gone too far in defending Lisa. After all, if the film represents her in an entirely positive light, would that fact not constitute a very serious objection to it? My answer is that *Letter* obviously does present Lisa’s action, and her position in the world, as in some way erroneous: the interesting exegetical and philosophical issues have to do with the nature and magnitude of this error. The film presents Lisa as a character in whom love exists pure and unconstrained by any of the quotidian traits that bring it into a (perhaps delicate and unstable) consistency with the requirements of

happiness and elementary decency. In this way, she is depicted as a flawed departure from the normal course of things: as, in a sense, a monster of *eros*. But in her moral deformity there is an element of greatness because the trait that in her is monstrously unconstrained is good in itself. To some extent, I think, a film has a right to take this idea for granted—the idea that love, the most intense experience of value that human beings are capable of, is intrinsically good. But *Letter* goes further than this, since it enables us to see, in the contrast between the characters of Lisa and Stefan, that love provides a basis for the persistence of attention that is needed if the various impressions we have of another person are to be integrated into an object of knowledge.²⁴ It is good, and its absence is bad, in a way that was previously unknown to us.²⁵

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1. George Wilson, *Narration in Light* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), ch. 6. Robin Wood, “*Ewig hin der Liebe Glück*,” reprinted in Virginia Wright Wexman and Karen Hollinger, *Letter from an Unknown Woman: Max Ophuls, Director* (Rutgers University Press, 1986), pp. 220–236.

2. Stanley Cavell, *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* (University of Chicago Press, 1990).

3. Wilson, *Narration in Light*, p. 104. Berys Gaut more or less repeats Wilson’s interpretation, saying that Lisa “is projecting her romantic fantasies onto a figure who does not in the least conform to them,” in his “Identification and Emotion in Narrative Film,” in *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition, and Emotion*, ed. Carl R. Plantinga and Greg M. Smith (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), pp. 213–216. I should mention that, though I will disagree with him on one point, my treatment of *Letter* is heavily indebted to him on others.

4. The quoted remark is from an otherwise very favorable review in *Variety*. See Wexman and Hollinger, *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, p. 215.

5. We might call this “literary paradox.” Philosophical paradox, which might be defined as a set of propositions that are individually plausible but jointly contradictory, is a distinct but related idea. The paradoxes of Zeno are paradigm cases. See Nicolas Rescher, *Paradoxes* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 2001).

6. I will identify details in the film by placing, in parentheses, the page number in the continuity script in Wexman and Hollinger. Even when the detail is visual, and not a passage of dialogue, the continuity script is a useful way to identify it precisely.

7. Another feature of the tone of *Letter*, one that we might suspect is somehow related to its paradoxicality, is its irony. It is remarkable, not merely for the pervasiveness of its irony, but for the multiplicity of the different ways in which it is ironic. One could write an encyclopedia article, “Irony, Varieties of” illustrated entirely by examples from this film. Had I space enough, I would argue that one function of the film’s irony is the same as the one I will later attribute to some of its other meaning-bearing elements: it tends, to some extent, to align the film’s point of view with that of Lisa.

8. I will have to leave for another occasion the question of whether, and to what extent, the other leitmotifs mentioned are related to this idea.

9. Wilson, *Narration in Light*, p. 115.

10. In one of the film’s seemingly countless cross-references, the catastrophe at the opera takes place on Lisa’s birthday, that is, on the anniversary of her physical birth.

11. The shooting script says: “Apparently, the precious objects emerging from the van hold a fascination for [Lisa]. More than house furnishings, they are the romantic props of a fairy-tale world.” Wexman and Hollinger, p. 138.

12. Wilson claims that John, like the Anton Walbrook character in *La Ronde* and the Peter Ustinov character in *Lola Montes*, is a sort of stand-in for the director (*Narration in Light*, p. 125). For my part, I do not think that a mute and self-effacing character would be an appropriate representative for a director, or indeed for any sort of artist. My own view is that, if the filmmaker has a representative in the film, it is Lisa. Wilson’s claim is bound up with his claims about the relation between love and knowledge in *Letter* and, as such, I will return to it later.

13. On this point, my argument is a more elaborate version of that of Wilson in *Narration in Light*, pp. 106–107.

14. For convenience, I am using “values” in an extended sense, in which a value might be a concrete particular, such as an individual human being, as well as an abstract quality.

15. Wilson, *Narration in Light*, p. 117.

16. It is interesting that two of the stagehand-like menials, the seconds who appear in the Prologue, are in effect conscripted into playing this role (that is, in the Epilogue) by the letter itself. But for the letter, Stefan would have decamped during the night, leaving them with no such role to play.

17. I think this is essentially Wilson’s view of what they mean here. See *Narration in Light*, pp. 111–115.

18. This, or something very much like this, seems to be Wilson’s view. He says that as a result of reading the letter, Stefan assimilates the letter’s (in Wilson’s view) “distinctive but somewhat dubious view of their relations” (*Narration in Light*, p. 123). I should add that Wilson maintains that the film’s view of Lisa is on the whole “balanced” between the “redemptive and destructive sides of Lisa’s passion” (p. 121). However, if Lisa is as ignorant as Wilson thinks she is, it is hard to see how the film’s implicit claim, that her letter’s effect is redemptive, could be true. If he is right, the film would seem to be, in this respect, incoherent.

19. This is the argument on which I will focus my attention. Wilson develops another line of argument, which I will comment on here very briefly. Basically, it consists in claiming that the film depicts or suggests that Lisa's consciousness of Stefan arises in epistemically inadequate ways. First, Lisa's love for Stefan is born as she listens to him playing, "without significant contact with the man himself." Second, there is very often a literal physical barrier (such as the glass panes of a window or door) between Lisa and Stefan, which Wilson interprets as representing Lisa's consciousness as being at a distance from its object and, consequently, as constituting an inadequate sort of consciousness. See *Narration in Light*, pp. 108–110. Very briefly, my response to the first point is that, rightly or wrongly, in this film art is presented as revealing the truth (or at least *a* truth) about the artist, as we see in Lisa's insightful comments on Stefan in the Act II restaurant scene. As to the second point, I would interpret these same images in a way nearly the opposite of Wilson's. They show Lisa observing Stefan from various hiding places but they do depict her as observing. Her position relative to Stefan is that of one who knows him from a position of secrecy and, thus, of noninteractivity: she is related to him as a *pure observer*.

20. Robin Wood, "Ewig hin der Liebe Glück," in Wexman and Hollinger, p. 234.

21. José Ortega y Gasset, *On Love: Aspects of a Single Theme* [*Estudios Sobre el Amor*], trans. Toby Talbot (New York: World Publishing, 1957), p. 16.

22. I say "it" because, as Plato would insist, the love-object need not be a person. It can, for instance, be music or physics—or, indeed, beauty or truth.

23. Many would wish to say that one *serves* or *makes sacrifices* for the love-object. But "serving" carries with it connotations of self-abasement, and "sacrifices" suggests that things done for the love-object are detrimental to the interests of the person who does them. As such, these additions would represent stronger statements than I am making here. I have no need to commit myself here concerning the truth or falsity of these stronger statements.

24. It would be interesting to pursue the hypothesis that love, perhaps in some extended sense of the word, is actually a *necessary condition* for knowledge of others. That would, of course, be a much stronger claim than I am making here.

25. I would like to thank Claudia Card, William B. Macomber, Dan McCall, the editors of this special issue of *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, and participants in the University of Wisconsin Film Studies Colloquium for comments on earlier drafts of this essay.