

Love Letters

Michael Larivière

“ – the one thing one can do that is somewhat serious, the love letter.”

Jacques Lacan

“There is life, writing, love. Or: love is born of the written life.”

Philippe Sollers

It is simply not true that the other side of the picture can be unveiled. That is why we spend life looking for words calibrated for the circumstances that ornament it. We must accept the restless wandering, the uncertainty. We often just stand idle, stupidly, staring at the open space awaiting us. We look to find balance somewhere, a point of reference in the heavy swell, we hope new perspectives will open as others close. What are we to do with the constant antagonism: moving/staying put? We look for a place far removed from the confusions and pains passed down by those who preceded us. We dream of gardens of desire, and of simplicity. It is important that we consider the story we come from. We must shed the weight of generations dead. If possible lift our heads off the soft pillows of ignorance on which we sleep. Avoid the mistakes of infatuation. And we must find an address – i.e. someone. Someone who would know what it is we need even as we ourselves ignore it, who could give us what we need when we don't even know how to ask. Or even that asking is possible, and necessary. Someone who could reconcile us with ourselves. Love.

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Lovers write to one another day after day, year after year. In these times of SMSs, those awkward, primitive haikus, letters have become an endangered species. I mean *real* letters, those that risk an internal voice reaching far beyond their addressees, those whose writing reaches not only the imagined other, out there, reading them, but that open the way towards the new, thrilling, terrifying possibility of living at once with and at a distance from oneself. Let us imagine reading such letters.

One would read them as one wished, or could. For example, as simple invitations to varied walks; as reflections at times learned, at other times naïve, on the risks of corresponding (in every sense of the term); as a worried interrogation on, at once, addressing, archiving, and safekeeping (as well as, therefore, on screening and sorting); as long cryptograms; as erotic devices, or systems; as the unwrapping of very beautiful, very pure offerings. As one wished – including, why not? as real love letters.

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Why do we read such correspondences? Perhaps for the distance, or the rapprochement, they make possible. For a correspondence, however “sincere” – whatever that means – is undoubtedly always a machination of writings that concerns all those who have a keen interest in people’s most private – i.e. family, love and sexual – lives. But we must be cautious, for we can never be sure that such letters don’t confuse or cloud issues, representations and understanding. Some correspondences, after all, might very well be nothing but ironic devices using all the ruses and illusions of identification and empathy to bring the reader to put himself in the place of the signatory or the addressee, to observe himself reading, dreaming, desiring, loving *as if he weren’t himself*. “I could have been that man, that woman”, the reader will sometimes inevitably think, and without necessarily

recognizing himself in the character of his own gender. Each reader will therefore need to adapt to the idiomatic code of the love being invented before his very eyes.

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Some of these correspondences are published anonymously, others under pseudonyms. Inevitably, we then wonder who writes and to whom. But the question, I dare say, is not there. The identity of the signatory or of the addressee is of no importance with regards to the veracity of the love committed to paper. And here is a question, that of the veracity, of the trustworthiness of love, one that is far harder to grapple with.

As one keeps up with what is silently exchanged in the writing that at times follows and at other times either replaces or deputizes for the spoken word, one can hear resonating, amongst others, questions relating to issues such as pleading and asking, promising and giving, refusing and taking back, welcoming and keeping. What do we say, or invoke, or ask for, or promise, or give when we say, “I love you”? And what might we be refusing as well, what is it that we might perhaps inevitably wish to take back no sooner has it been proffered? What is it that we welcome? That we keep to and for ourselves even when we seem to be giving all? And who for, this keeping? Does love ever let itself be named, defined, known? Can it ever be given once and for all? Is it ever, as we say perhaps too naively, *made*? What does it mean, to *make* love? What is it that we hope for in such a “making”, assuming that we do in fact hope for anything at all? What unique experience do we have, what risk do we run, in “making” love? And are what is said and what is done in the name of love the same? Is there, in matters of love, anything like what linguists refer to as a *performative*? Is love ever “performed”? Could a letter, for example, ever be its proper performance? Or sex? More importantly, what happens when we must add doing to saying (and vice versa)? Does the doing ever *accomplish*

the saying? And what if it were that love could never either be spoken or made? What would it then be that we say, or do, as we strive to put love into words or acts? Might we, for example, strive to make way, or room, for that foreign body we refer to as our own?

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Those correspondences that we read, are they exchanges or offerings? Are exchanges and offerings antinomic? Is love itself an exchange or an offering? All love letters, it would seem to me, ask that question – but I am not sure they ever answer it. For they tell, all of them, wittingly or not, of an absolute secret. They re-enact, through the more or less fictitious repetition of a kind of “This is my love”, as well as through a series of reflections on the fraught nature of both promises and expectations, the experience in which desire appears, dreams are deciphered, pleasure catches us out, and what is unattainable in the other revealed. They tell us that transcendence is close at hand. And that sex, yes, finds its way through everything.

Whoever writes not only takes on a commitment to (as well as thanks to) the other, becomes pure understanding of the other, but ventures on many unknown territories, risks true exiles, pushes back the limits of the feasible as far as they will go – sometimes to the point of losing himself. This is what is known as not selling out on one’s desire. Or: taking responsibility for it.

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The writers of such letters try as they might to answer for the strangeness the surprise of love confronts them with. They strive, in other words, to create a language out of that strangeness, so as to parry the distress that inevitably comes

with desire. For desire is intrusive, threatening, inexplicable, incomprehensible, always too violent, and its stakes remain unknown. All writers of such letters wonder what the other wants from them, they need to be clear as to what they are ready to give, what they are willing to do in the hope of coping with the *reality* of love, i.e. with its inability to take them away from the incomprehensible solitude in which they are forced to live in spite of it all: in spite of what the other wants from them, in spite of the fact that they are wanted by the other. Desire is what words always miss, and it is the forgetting of that inevitability. It welcomes the unthinkable. It is an experience in that which cannot be appropriated in the body, whether it be one's own or that of the other.

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“What is honestly given cannot be taken back”, writes Plato. Can one ever without hesitation offer one's flesh with such honesty? He who writes of his love strives, by way of his words, to give to himself what he has always longed for. He speaks of his alarm, of his shock, hoping he will find hospitality while far exceeding the limits of what his addressees can contain, or hold. The whole of his being goes into his letters, swallowed by the vital energy that picks up there and forces him into being once again as intensely alive as he had been when engaged in the making of the love through which he never ceases to be regenerated. Those letters, telling of the love that wanted to be made, are a fight for truth, they want truth just as the bodies that couldn't lie had wanted it. Such letters struggle to remain at one with their addressees in the hope of pushing them to a point as of which it will be impossible to retract. But they also tell of love's inexhaustible resistance to the narrative as well as to the act, to the saying as well as to the making. The rhetoric of love is constantly at risk of being undone by what takes place within it and which it can neither contain nor master, yet which it cannot renounce. It binds itself to that

part of desire where it is confronted with the terror of dismemberment – and overcomes it.

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What all lovers hope for is that the inordinate, the indecency of the naked truth, the joy of pleasure, the intelligence of desire be welcome.

The naked truth.

Truth as nakedness.

The nakedness of truth.

What is nakedness? A dream perhaps. It has often been suggested that the essence of nakedness lies in the sense of decency. I don't know. Someone once wrote that when two lovers make love each seeks the other's nakedness beyond the surface of his skin, wherefrom desire surges, where dreams are understood, where the other's name names love, where pleasure itself is silenced.

The uniqueness of it all lies in language. It is here the advent of love occurs and disappears, is veiled and unveiled, revealed and dissimulated, exposed and disguised in an act of writing that has little to do with certifiable truth. Such letters in turn take on the task of revealing the truth of love, try doing justice to that which can never be once and for all said or accomplished.

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There is the secret of love. There is the secret of desire.

Love letters contain a secret that must and must not, that wants and doesn't want to be disclosed. They seek to keep the secret secret. But they also seek, and this may not be contradictory, to let this be known, to make it so that the secret's

secret doesn't remain unknown. And they seek at the same to avoid that very divulgence.

Lastly, in these letters the nakedness of love is often mistaken with that of sex or desire. These letters are the arena of the most fiery love, a place where secrecy is welcome, where no judgment is passed, they are a sealed, protected, respected space. In them hospitality is given to thought, desire, silence, waiting, misunderstandings and revolt. Solutions and ways out are examined long before, and again long after, sex has been enjoyed.

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I am told by my patients that love, as well as the desire it carries, is half miracle, half terror. I am told that those who are tempted by this perspective must remember that circumstances, sometimes brutal, over which they have no control, can always render its enjoyment difficult, or even dash all its hopes. Letters written in the name of love tell of the wonderful possibility of that risk. Wonderful and terrifying. We sometimes feel quite stupid in the face of that great thing we call love. It sometimes happens that we try to laugh it off or to strike a provocative pose. We look for leafy parks, waterfronts, we hope for sudden sunny spells and secret, shady, sealed off corners where to find reassurance. We write to keep (an air of) composure, to keep a distance between ourselves and our loves. For love can be painful. It can bring a pain we can say nothing about. So we respond to it with our naked flesh. Or we write. In the hope of discovering the frightening text we unwittingly answer to.

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For the same reasons, one reads the letters lovers write to one another, in the hope of finding some hidden relation between what is and one's representation of it. Of living at once with and away from oneself. Love letters are sidetracks leading to the sacred forest. In them we look for a coherent explanation, a plausible version of what had happened, or is happening, to us and before which we are dumbfounded. We seek to find the meaning the jealous gods refused to reveal to us. We search for a way of reconciling, of *holding together* life and its meaning.

Strasbourg, 5-23 January 2011.