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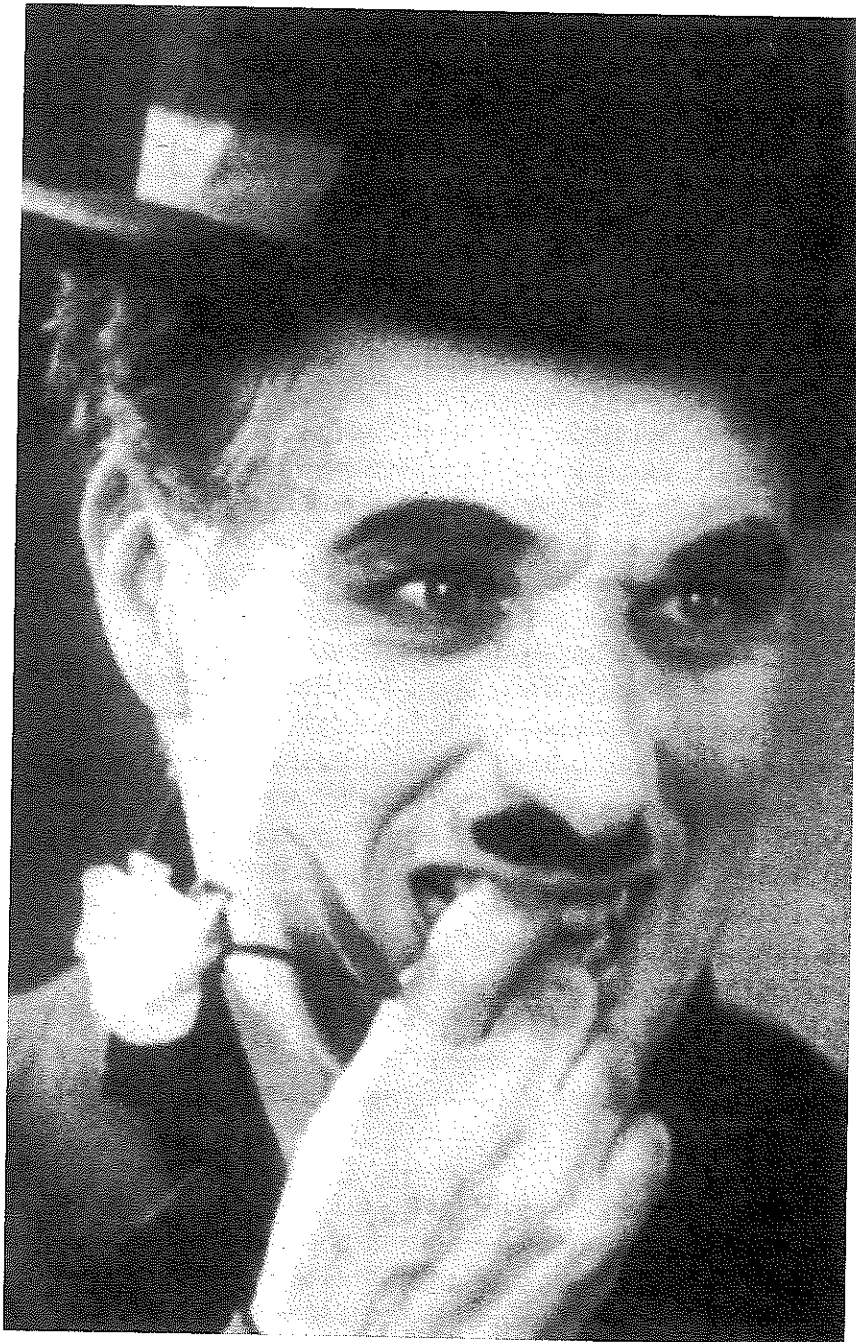
Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out

With a new preface by the author



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1

WHY DOES A *LETTER* ALWAYS ARRIVE AT ITS DESTINATION?

1.1 DEATH AND SUBLIMATION: THE FINAL SCENE OF *CITY LIGHTS*

The trauma of the voice

It may seem peculiar, even absurd, to set Chaplin under the sign of “death and sublimation”: is not the universe of Chaplin’s films, a universe bursting with nonsublime vitality, vulgarity even, the very opposite of a damp romantic obsession with death and sublimation? This may be so, but things get complicated at a particular point: the point of the intrusion of the voice. It is the voice which corrupts the innocence of the silent burlesque, of this pre-Oedipal, oral-anal paradise of unbridled devouring and destroying, ignorant of death and guilt: “Neither death nor crime exist in the polymorphous world of the burlesque where everybody gives and receives blows at will, where cream cakes fly and where, in the midst of the general laughter, buildings fall down. In this world of pure gesticularity, which is also the world of cartoons (a substitute for lost slapstick), the protagonists are generally immortal . . . violence is universal and without consequences, there is no guilt.”¹

The voice introduces a fissure into this pre-Oedipal universe of immortal continuity: it functions as a strange body which smears the innocent surface of the picture, a ghost-like apparition which can never be pinned to a definite visual object; and this changes the whole economy of desire, the innocent vulgar vitality of the silent movie is lost, we enter the realm of double sense, hidden meaning, repressed desire—the very presence of the voice changes the visual surface into something delusive, into a lure: “Film was joyous, innocent and dirty. It will become obsessive, fetishistic and ice-cold.”² In other words: film was Chaplinesque, it will become Hitchcockian.

It is therefore no accident that the advent of the voice, of the talking film, introduces a certain duality into Chaplin’s universe: an uncanny split of the figure of the tramp. Remember the three great Chaplin talking films: *The Great Dictator*, *Monsieur Verdoux*, *Limelight*, distinguished by the same melancholic, painful humor. All of them turn on the same structural problem: that of an indefinable line of demarcation, of a certain feature, difficult to specify at the level of positive properties, the presence or the absence of which changes radically the symbolic status of the object:

Between the small Jewish barber and the dictator, the difference is as negligible as that between their respective moustaches. Yet it results in two situations as infinitely remote, as far opposed as those of victim and executioner. Likewise, in *Monsieur Verdoux*, the difference between the two aspects or demeanours of the same man, the lady-assassin and the loving husband of a paralysed wife, is so thin that all his wife’s intuition is required for the premonition that somehow he “changed.” . . . the burning question of *Limelight* is: what is that “nothing,” that sign of age, that small difference of triteness, on account of which the funny clown’s number changes into a tedious spectacle?³

This differential feature which cannot be pinned to some positive quality is what Lacan calls *le trait unaire*, the unary feature: a point of symbolic identification to which clings the real of the subject. As long as the subject is attached to this feature, we are faced with a charismatic, fascinating figure; as soon as this attachment is broken, all that remains is dreary remnants. The crucial point, however, not to be

missed is how this split is conditioned by the arrival of the voice, i.e., by the very fact that the figure of the tramp is forced to speak: in *The Great Dictator*, Hinkel speaks, while the Jewish barber remains closer to the mute tramp; in *Limelight*, the clown on the stage is mute, while the resigned old man behind the stage speaks . . .

Chaplin’s well-known aversion to sound is thus not to be dismissed as a simple nostalgic commitment to a silent paradise; it reveals a far deeper than usual knowledge (or at least presentiment) of the disruptive power of the voice, of the fact that the voice functions as a foreign body, as a kind of parasite introducing a radical split: the advent of the Word throws the human animal off balance and makes of him a ridiculous, impotent figure, gesticulating and striving desperately for a lost balance. Nowhere is this disruptive force of the voice made clearer than in *City Lights*, in this paradox of a silent movie with a sound track: a sound track without words, just music and a few typified noises of the objects. It is precisely here that death and the sublime erupt with full force.

The tramp’s interposition

In the whole history of cinema, *City Lights* is perhaps the purest case of a film which, so to speak, stakes everything on its final scene—the entire film serves ultimately only to prepare for the final, concluding moment, and when this moment arrives, when (to use the final phrase of Lacan’s “Seminar On ‘The Purloined Letter’”) “the letter arrives at its destination,”⁴ the film can end at once. The film is thus structured in a strictly “teleological” manner, all its elements point toward the final moment, the long-awaited culmination; which is why we could also use it to question the usual procedure of the deconstruction of teleology: perhaps it announces a kind of movement toward the final denouement which escapes the teleological economy as depicted (one is even tempted to say: reconstructed) in deconstructionist readings.⁵

City Lights is a story about a tramp’s love for a blind girl selling flowers on a busy street who mistakes him for a rich man. Through a series of adventures with an eccentric millionaire who, when drunk, treats the tramp extremely kindly, but when sober fails even to recognize him (was it here that Brecht found the idea for his *Pantalla and his*

Servant Matti?), the tramp gets his hands on the money needed for an operation to restore the poor girl's sight; whereupon he is arrested for theft and sentenced to prison. After he has done his time, he wanders around the city, alone and desolate; suddenly, he comes across a florist's shop where he sees the girl. The operation was successful and she now runs a thriving business, but still awaits the Prince Charming of her dreams, whose chivalrous gift enabled her sight to be restored. Every time a handsome young customer enters her shop, she is filled with hope; and time and again disappointed on hearing the voice. The tramp immediately recognizes her, whereas she doesn't recognize him, because all she knows of him is his voice and the touch of his hand: all she sees through the window (separating them like a screen) is the ridiculous figure of a tramp, a social outcast. Upon seeing him lose his rose (a souvenir of her), she nevertheless takes pity on him, his passionate and desperate gaze stirs her compassion; so, not knowing who or what awaits her, still in a cheerful and ironic mood (she comments to her mother in the store: "I've made a conquest!"), she steps out on the pavement, gives him a new rose and presses a coin into his hand. At this precise moment, as their hands meet, she finally recognizes him by his touch. She is immediately sobered and asks him: "You?" The tramp nods and, pointing to her eyes, asks her: "You can see now?" The girl answers: "Yes, I can see now"; the film then cuts to a medium close-up of the tramp, his eyes filled with dread and hope, smiling shyly, uncertain what the girl's reaction will be, satisfied and at the same time insecure at being so totally exposed to her—and this is the end of the movie.

On the most elementary level, the poetic effect of this scene is based on the double meaning of the final exchange: "I can see now" refers to the restored physical sight as well as to the fact that the girl sees now her Prince Charming for what he really is, a miserable tramp.⁶ This second meaning sets us at the very heart of the Lacanian problem: it concerns the relation between symbolic identification and the leftover, the remainder, the object-excrement that escapes it. We could say that the film stages what Lacan, in his *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, calls "separation," namely the separation between I and a, between the Ego Ideal, the subject's symbolic identification, and the object: the falling out, the segregation of the object from the symbolic order.⁷

As Michel Chion pointed out in his brilliant interpretation of *City Lights*,⁸ the fundamental feature of the figure of the tramp is his interposition: he is always interposed between a gaze and its "proper" object, fixating upon himself a gaze destined for another, ideal point or object—a stain which disturbs "direct" communication between the gaze and its "proper" object, leading the straight gaze astray, changing it into a kind of squint. Chaplin's comic strategy consists in variations of this fundamental motif: the tramp accidentally occupies a place which is not his own, which is not destined for him—he is mistaken for a rich man or for a distinguished guest; on the run from his pursuers, he finds himself on a stage, all of a sudden the center of the attention of numerous gazes . . . In Chaplin's films, we even find a kind of wild theory of the origins of comedy from the blindness of the audience, i.e., from such a split caused by the mistaken gaze: in *The Circus*, for example, the tramp, on the run from the police, finds himself on a rope at the top of the circus tent; he starts to gesticulate wildly, trying to keep his balance, while the audience laughs and applauds, mistaking his desperate struggle for survival for a comedian's virtuosity—the origin of comedy is to be sought precisely in such cruel blindness, unawareness of the tragic reality of a situation.⁹

In the very first scene of *City Lights*, the tramp assumes such a role of stain in the picture: in front of a large audience, the mayor of the city unveils a new monument; when he pulls off the white cover, the surprised audience discovers the tramp, sleeping calmly in the lap of the gigantic statue; awakened by the noise, aware that he is the unexpected focus of attention of thousands of eyes, the tramp attempts to descend the statue as quickly as possible, his bumbling efforts triggering bursts of laughter . . . The tramp is thus an object of a gaze aimed at something or somebody else: he is mistaken for somebody else and accepted as such, or else—as soon as the audience becomes aware of the mistake—he turns into a disturbing stain one tries to get rid of as quickly as possible. His basic aspiration (which serves as a clue also for the final scene of *City Lights*) is thus finally to be accepted as "himself," not as another's substitute—and, as we shall see, the moment when the tramp exposes himself to the gaze of the other, offering himself without any support in ideal identification, reduced to his bare existence of objectal remainder, is far more ambiguous and risky than it may appear.

The accident in *City Lights* that triggers the mistaken identification occurs shortly after the beginning. Running from the police, the tramp crosses the street by passing through cars that are blocking it in a traffic jam; when he steps out of the last car and slams its rear door, the girl automatically associates this sound—the slam—with him; this and the rich payment—his last coins—that the tramp gives to her for a rose, generate in her the image of a benevolent and rich owner of a luxury car. Here, a homology with the no-less-famous initial misunderstanding in Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* offers itself automatically, i.e., the scene where, because of a contingent coincidence, Roger O. Thornhill is mistakenly identified as the mysterious American agent George Kaplan (he makes a gesture toward the hotel clerk exactly as the clerk enters the saloon and cries out: "Phone call for Mr. Kaplan!"): here also, the subject accidentally finds himself occupying a certain place in the symbolic network. However, the parallel goes even further: as is well known, the basic paradox of the plot in *North by Northwest* is that Thornhill is not simply mistaken for another person; he is mistaken for *somebody who doesn't exist at all*, for a fictitious agent concocted by the CIA to divert attention from its real agent; in other words, Thornhill finds himself occupying, filling out, a certain empty place in the structure. And this was also the problem which caused so many delays when Chaplin was shooting the scene of the mistaken identification: the shooting dragged on for months and months. The result didn't satisfy Chaplin's demands as long as Chaplin insisted on depicting the rich man for whom the tramp is mistaken as a "real person," as another subject in the film's diegetic reality; the solution came about when Chaplin realized, in a sudden insight, that the rich man didn't have to exist at all, that it was enough for him to be the poor girl's fantasy formation, i.e., that in reality, one person (the tramp) was enough. This is also one of the elementary insights of psychoanalysis. In the network of intersubjective relations, every one of us is identified with, pinned down to, a certain fantasy place in the other's symbolic structure. Psychoanalysis sustains here the exact opposite of the usual, commonsense opinion according to which fantasy figures are nothing but distorted, combined, or otherwise concocted figures of their "real" models, of people of flesh and blood that we've met in our experience. We can relate to these "people of flesh and blood" only insofar as we are able to identify

them with a certain place in our symbolic fantasy space, or, to put it in a more pathetic way, only insofar as they fill out a place preestablished in our dream—we fall in love with a woman insofar as her features coincide with our fantasy figure of a Woman, the "real father" is a miserable individual obliged to sustain the burden of the Name of the Father, never fully adequate to his symbolic mandate, and so forth.¹⁰

The function of the tramp is thus literally that of an intercessor, middleman, purveyor: a kind of go-between, love messenger, intermediary between himself (i.e., his own ideal figure: the fantasy figure of the rich Prince Charming in the girl's imagination) and the girl. Or, insofar as this rich man is ironically embodied in the eccentric millionaire, the tramp mediates between him and the girl—his function is ultimately to transfer the money from the millionaire to the girl (which is why it is necessary, from the point of view of the structure, that the millionaire and the girl never meet). As Chion showed, this intermediary function of the tramp can be detected through the metaphoric interconnection between two consecutive scenes which have nothing in common on the diegetic level. The first takes place in the restaurant where the tramp is treated by the millionaire: he eats spaghetti in his own way, and when a coil of confetti falls on his plate, he mistakes it for spaghetti and swallows it continuously, rising up, standing on his toes (the confetti hangs from the ceiling like a kind of heavenly manna), until the millionaire cuts it off; an elementary Oedipal scenario is thus staged—the confetti band is a metaphorical umbilical cord linking the tramp to the maternal body, and the millionaire acts as a substitute father, cutting his links with the mother. In the next scene, we see the tramp at the girl's place, where she asks him to hold the wool for her to coil into a ball; in her blindness, she accidentally grabs the tip of his woollen underwear which projects from his jacket and starts to unfold it by pulling the thread and rolling it up. The connection between the two scenes is thus clear: what he received from the millionaire, the swallowed food, the endless spaghetti band, he now secretes from his belly and gives to the girl.

And—herein consists our thesis—for that reason, in *City Lights*, the letter twice arrives at its destination, or, to put it another way, the postman rings twice: first, when the tramp succeeds in handing over to the girl the rich man's money, i.e., when he successfully accomplishes

his mission as the go-between; and second, when the girl recognizes in his ridiculous figure the benefactor who rendered possible her operation. The letter definitely arrives at its destination when we are no longer able to legitimize ourselves as mere mediators, purveyors of the messages of the big Other, when we cease to fill out the place of the Ego Ideal in the other's fantasy space, when a separation is achieved between the point of ideal identification and the massive weight of our presence outside symbolic representation, when we cease to act like placeholders of the Ideal for the other's gaze—in short, when the other is confronted with the remainder left over after we have lost our symbolic support. The letter arrives at its destination when we are no longer “fillers” of the empty places in another's fantasy structure, i.e., when the other finally “opens his eyes” and realizes that the real letter is not the message we are supposed to carry but our being itself, the object in us that resists symbolization. And it is precisely this separation that takes place in the final scene of *City Lights*.

The separation

Up to the end of the film, the tramp is confined to the role of mediator, circulating between the two figures who, put together, would form an ideal couple (the rich man and the poor girl) and thus enabling communication between them but at the same time being an obstacle to their immediate communication, the stain preventing their immediate contact, the intruder who is never in his own place. With the final scene, however, this game is over: the tramp finally exposes himself in his presence, here he is, representing nothing, holding the place of nobody, we must accept him or refuse him. And the genius of Chaplin is attested by the fact that he decided to end the movie in such a brusque, unexpected way, at the very moment of the tramp's exposure: the film does not answer the question “Will the girl accept him or not?”—The idea that she will and that the two of them will live happily ever after has no foundation whatsoever in the film. That is to say, for the usual happy ending, we would need an additional countershot to that of the tramp looking with hope and tremor at the girl: a shot of the girl returning a sign of acceptance, for example, and then, perhaps, a shot of the two of them embracing. We find nothing of the sort in the

film: it is over at the moment of absolute uncertainty and openness when the girl—and, together with her, we the spectators—is confronted directly with the question of the “love for her neighbor”. Is this ridiculous, clumsy creature whose massive presence strikes us all of a sudden with an almost unbearable proximity really worthy of her love? Will she be able to accept, to take upon herself this social outcast that she has got in answer to her ardent desire? And—as was pointed out by William Rothman¹¹—the same question has to be asked also in the opposite direction: not only “is there a place in her dreams for this ragged creature?” but also “is there still a place in his dreams for her, who is now a normal, healthy girl running a successful business?”—in other words, didn't the tramp feel such a compassionate love for her precisely because she was blind, poor, and utterly helpless, needing his protective care? Will he still be prepared to accept her now when she has every reason to patronize him? When in his *L'éthique de la psychanalyse*,¹² Lacan emphasizes Freud's restraint toward the Christian “love for one's neighbor,” he has in mind precisely such embarrassing dilemmas: it is easy to love the idealized figure of a poor, helpless neighbor, the starving African or Indian, for example; in other words, it is easy to love one's neighbor as long as he stays far enough from us, as long as there is a proper distance separating us. The problem arises at the moment when he comes too near us, when we start to feel his suffocating proximity—at this moment when the neighbor exposes himself to us too much, love can suddenly turn into hatred.¹³

City Lights ends at the very moment of this absolute undecidability when, confronted with the other's proximity as an object, we are forced to answer the question “Is he worthy of our love?” or, to use the Lacanian formulation, “Is there in him something more than himself, objet petit a, a hidden treasure?” We can see here how far we are, at this moment when “the letter arrives at its destination,” from the usual notion of teleology: far from realizing a predestined telos, this moment marks the intrusion of a radical openness in which every ideal support of our existence is suspended. This moment is the moment of death and sublimation: when the subject's presence is exposed outside the symbolic support, he “dies” as a member of the symbolic community, his being is no longer determined by a place in the symbolic network, it materializes the pure Nothingness of the hole, the void in the Other

(the symbolic order), the void designated, in Lacan, by the German word *das Ding*, the Thing, the pure substance of enjoyment resisting symbolization. The Lacanian definition of the sublime object is precisely "an object elevated to the dignity of the Thing."¹⁴

When the letter arrives at its destination, the stain spoiling the picture is not abolished, effaced: what we are forced to grasp is, on the contrary, the fact that the real "message," the real letter awaiting us is the stain itself. We should perhaps reread Lacan's "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'" from this aspect: is not the letter itself ultimately such a stain—not a signifier but rather an object resisting symbolization, a surplus, a material leftover circulating among the subjects and staining its momentary possessor?

Now, to conclude, we can return to the introductory scene of *City Lights* where the tramp figures as the spot disturbing the picture, as a kind of blot on the white marble surface of the statue: in the Lacanian perspective, the subject is strictly correlative to this stain on the picture. The only proof we have that the picture we are looking at is subjectified is not meaningful signs in it but rather the presence of some meaningless stain disturbing its harmony. Let us recall what is a kind of counterpart to the first scene of *City Lights*, the final scene of Chaplin's *Limelight*, another scene in which Chaplin's body is covered by a white cloth. This scene is unique insofar as it marks the point at which Chaplin and Hitchcock, two authors whose artistic universes appear wholly incompatible at the level of both form and content, finally meet. That is to say, it seems as if Chaplin in *Limelight* finally discovered the Hitchcockian tracking shot: the very first shot of the film is a long tracking shot progressing from the establishing shot of an idyllic London street to a closed apartment door which leaks deadly gas (signaling the attempted suicide of the young girl who lives in the apartment), whereas the last scene of the film contains a magnificent backward tracking shot from the close-up of the dead clown Calvero behind the stage to the establishing shot of the entire stage where the same young girl, now a successful ballerina and his great love, is performing. Just before this scene, the dying Calvero expresses to the attending doctor his desire to see his love dancing; the doctor taps him gently on the shoulders and comforts him: "You shall see her!" Thereupon Calvero dies, his body is covered by a white sheet, and the

camera withdraws so that it embraces the dancing girl on the stage, while Calvero is reduced to a tiny, barely visible white stain in the background. What is here of special significance is the way the ballerina enters the frame: from behind the camera, like the birds in the famous "God's-view" shot of Bodega Bay in Hitchcock's *Birds*—yet another white stain which materializes out of the mysterious intermediate space separating the spectator from the diegetic reality on the screen . . . We encounter here the function of the gaze qua object-stain at its purest: the doctor's forecast is fulfilled, precisely insofar as he is dead, i.e., insofar as he cannot see her anymore, Calvero looks at her. For that reason, the logic of this backward tracking shot is thoroughly Hitchcockian: by way of it, a piece of reality is transformed into an amorphous stain (a white blot in the background), yet a stain around which the entire field of vision turns, a stain which "smears over" the entire field (as in the backward tracking shot in *Frenzy*)—the ballerina is dancing for it, for that stain.¹⁵

1.2 IMAGINARY, SYMBOLIC, REAL

So why does the letter always arrive at its destination? Why could it not—sometimes, at least—also fail to reach it?¹⁶ Far from attesting to a refined theoretical sensitivity, this Derridean reaction to the famous closing statement of Lacan's "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'"¹⁷ rather exhibits what we could call a primordial response of common sense: what if a letter does not reach its destination? Isn't it always possible for a letter to go astray?¹⁸ If, however, the Lacanian theory insists categorically that a letter does always arrive at its destination, it is not because of an unshakable belief in teleology, in the power of a message to reach its preordained goal: Lacan's exposition of the way a letter arrives at its destination lays bare the very mechanism of teleological illusion. In other words, the very reproach that "a letter can also miss its destination" misses its own destination: it misreads the Lacanian thesis, reducing it to the traditional teleological circular movement, i.e., to what is precisely called in question and subverted by Lacan. A letter always arrives at its destination—especially when we have the limit case of a letter without addressee, of what is called in German *Flaschenpost*, a message in a bottle thrown into the sea from an island after shipwreck.

to that final point which is nothing more than something strictly identical to a striking down, a tearing apart, a laceration of himself—he is no longer, no longer anything, at all. And it is at that moment that he says the phrase I evoked last time—*Am I made man in the hour when I cease to be?*³⁸

The unpaid symbolic debt is therefore in a way constitutive of our existence: our very symbolic existence is a “compromise formation,” the delaying of an encounter. In Max Ophüls’s melodrama *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, this link connecting the symbolic circuit with the encounter of the Real is perfectly exemplified. At the very beginning of the film “a letter arrives at its destination,” confronting the hero with the disavowed truth: what was for him a series of unconnected, ephemeral love affairs that he only vaguely remembered destroyed a woman’s life. He assumes responsibility for this by means of a suicidal gesture: by deciding not to escape and to attend the duel he is certain to lose.

However, as is indicated in Lacan’s above-quoted reading of the dream of Irma’s injection, the Real is not only death but also life: not only the pale, frozen, lifeless immobility but also ‘the flesh from which everything exudes,’ the life substance in its mucous palpitation. In other words, the Freudian duality of life and death drives is not a symbolic opposition but a tension, and antagonism, inherent to the presymbolic Real. As Lacan points out again and again, the very notion of life is alien to the symbolic order. And the name of this life substance that proves a traumatic shock for the symbolic universe is of course *enjoyment*. The ultimate variation on the theme of a letter that always arrives at its destination reads therefore: “you can never get rid of the stain of enjoyment”—the very gesture of renouncing enjoyment produces inevitably a surplus enjoyment that Lacan writes down as the “object small a.” Examples offer themselves in abundance, from the ascetic who can never be sure he does not repudiate all worldly goods because of the ostentatious and vain satisfaction procured by this very act of sacrifice, to the “sense of fulfillment” that overwhelms us when we submit to the totalitarian appeal: “Enough of decadent enjoyment! It’s time for sacrifice and renunciation!” This dialectic of enjoyment and surplus enjoyment—i.e., the fact that there is no “substantial”

enjoyment preceding the excess of surplus enjoyment, that enjoyment itself is a kind of surplus produced by renunciation—is perhaps what gives a clue to so-called “primal masochism.”³⁹

Such a reading, however, leads beyond Lacan’s “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter,’ ” which stays within the confines of the “structuralist” problematic of a senseless, “mechanical” symbolic order regulating the subject’s innermost self-experience. From the perspective of the last years of Lacan’s teaching, the letter which circulates among the subjects in Poe’s story, determining their position in the intersubjective network, is no longer the materialized agency of the signifier but rather an *object* in the strict sense of materialized enjoyment—the stain, the uncanny excess that the subjects snatch away from each other, forgetful of how its very possession will mark them with a passive, “feminine” stance that bears witness to the confrontation with the object-cause of desire. What ultimately interrupts the continuous flow of words, what hinders the smooth running of the symbolic circuit, is the traumatic presence of the Real: when the words suddenly stay out, we have to look not for imaginary resistances but for the object that came too close.

NOTES

- 1 Pascal Bonitzer, *Le Champ aveugle*, (Paris: Cahiers du Cinéma/Gallimard, 1982), pp. 49–50.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 49.
- 3 Gilles Deleuze, *L’Image-mouvement* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1983), pp. 234, 236.
- 4 Cf. Jacques Lacan, “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter,’ ” in John P. Muller and William J. Richardson, eds., *The Purloined Poe* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), p. 53.
- 5 Among the more recent films which are centered on the efficacy of the final scene, mention should be made of Peter Weir’s *Dead Poet’s Society*: is the whole story not a kind of buildup to the final pathetic crescendo when the pupils defy the school authorities and express their solidarity with the fired teacher by standing on their benches?
- 6 The fact that this final dialogue takes place in complete silence—we read the words in interposed titles as in silent movies—confers on it an additional intensity: it is as if silence itself has begun to speak. An intrusion of the voice at

this point would ruin the whole effect, more precisely: it would ruin its sublime dimension. This scene alone more than justifies Chaplin's "eccentric" decision to produce a silent movie in the era of sound, because the whole efficacy of the sequence is due to the fact that we—the spectators—know that movies already talk and thus experience this silence as the absence of the voice.

- 7 Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1977), chapters 17 and 20.
- 8 Michel Chion, *Les Lumières de la ville* (Paris: Nathan, 1989).
- 9 It should be noted that *City Lights* itself germinated from a similar idea. It was originally to be the story of a father who lost his sight in an accident; to avoid the psychic traumatism that knowledge of his blindness would cause his small daughter, he pretends that the clumsy acts which result from his blindness (his overturning a chair, his numerous false steps, etc.) are comical imitations of a clown, meant to amuse her; unsuspecting of the true state, the girl accepts this explanation and laughs heartily at her father's misadventures.
- 10 This split between the ideal figure of the rich man and the tramp as the ideal figure's objective support enables us also to locate the paradox of self-destructive female curiosity, at work from Richard Wagner to contemporary mass culture. That is to say, the plot of Wagner's *Lohengrin* turns on Elsa's curiosity: a nameless hero saves her and marries her, but enjoins her not to ask him who he is or what is his name (the famous air "Nie solst du mich befragen" from act 1)—as soon as she does so, he will be obliged to leave her . . . Elsa cannot stand it and asks him the fateful question; so, in an even more famous air ("In fernem Land," act 3), Lohengrin tells her that he is a knight of the Grail, the son of Parsifal from the castle of Montsalvat, and then departs on a swan, while the unfortunate Elsa collapses dead. How not to recall here Superman or Batman where we find the same logic? In both of these cases, the main female character has a presentiment that her partner (the confused journalist in *Superman*, the eccentric millionaire in *Batman*) is really the mysterious public hero, but the partner puts off as long as possible the moment of revelation. What we have here is a kind of forced choice attesting to the dimension of castration: man is split, divided into the weak everyday fellow with whom sexual relation is possible and the bearer of the symbolic mandate, the public hero (knight of the Grail, Superman, Batman); we are thus obliged to choose: as soon as we force the sexual partner to reveal his symbolic identity, we are bound to lose him.

So when Lacan says that the "secret of psychoanalysis" consists in the fact that "there is no sexual act, whereas there is sexuality," the act is to be conceived precisely as the performative assumption, by the subject, of his symbolic mandate, as in the passage in *Hamlet*, where the moment when, finally—too late—Hamlet is able to act is signaled by his expression "I, Hamlet the Dane"; this is what is not possible in the order of sexuality, i.e., as soon as the man proclaims his mandate, saying "I . . . Lohengrin, Batman, Superman," he excludes himself from the domain of sexuality.

- 11 William Rothman, "The ending of 'City Lights,'" in *The "I" of the Camera* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 59.
- 12 Cf. Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre VII: L'Éthique de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1986).
- 13 Or, to mention an example from western movies: it is easy to love Indians portrayed as helpless, brutalized victims, as in *The Broken Arrow* or *Soldier Blue*, but the situation is far more ambiguous in John Ford's *Fort Apache* where they are portrayed as victorious, militarily superior, overrunning the US cavalry like a blast of wind.
- 14 Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre VII, p. 133*.
- 15 It would be interesting to read *Limelight* as a film which is complementary to *City Lights*: at the end of *City Lights*, the tramp "begins to live" (is recognized in his true being), whereas at the end of *Limelight*, he dies; the first film begins with his uncovering (the Mayor unveils the monument), the second ends with the veiling of his body; in the first film, he becomes at the end the full object of another's gaze (and is thereby recognized as a subject), whereas in the second film he himself turns into a pure gaze; in the first film, the mutilation of the girl, his love, refers to her eyes (blindness), in the second to her feet (paralysis: the original title of the film was *Foot-lights*); etc. The two films have thus to be approached in a Lévi-Straussian manner, as two versions of the same myth.
- 16 Cf. Jacques Derrida, "The Purveyor of Truth," in *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
- 17 Cf. Jacques Lacan, "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter,'" p. 53.
- 18 Since this recourse to common sense takes place more often than one might suspect, *systematically* even, within the "deconstruction," one is tempted to put forward the thesis that the very fundamental gesture of "deconstruction" is in a radical sense *commonsensical*. There is namely an unmistakable ring of common sense in the "deconstructionist" insistence upon the impossibility of establishing a clear cut difference between empirical and transcendental, outside and inside, representation and presence, writing and voice; in its compulsive demonstration of how the outside always already smears over the inside, of how writing is constitutive of voice, etc. etc.—as if "deconstructionism" is ultimately wrapping up commonsensical insights into an intricate jargon. Therein consists perhaps one of the hitherto over-looked reasons for its unforeseen success in the USA, the land of common sense *par excellence*.
- 19 What is crucial here is the difference between the letter's symbolic circuit and its itinerary in what we call "reality": a letter always arrives at its destination on the symbolic level, whereas in reality, it can of course fail to reach it. This difference is strictly homologous to that established by Lacan apropos of the two possible readings of the phrase "You are the one that will follow me" (Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre III: Les Psychoses* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1981), pp. 315–19):
 - 1) read as a statement ascertaining a positive state of things, it can of course be falsified if it proves inaccurate, i.e., if you do *not* follow me;