

## Chapter 2

# FROM ZWEIG'S "UNKNOWN WOMAN" TO LEVINAS' "OTHER": LOVE AS A POSSIBILITY OF TRANSCENDENCE

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### INTRODUCTION

In 1922, when Emmanuel Levinas was just 16 years old and before he had ever written about ethics, responsibility and face, there appeared a new story about love. Certainly, *Letter from an Unknown Woman* is not the first literary work to come to mind when considering either Stefan Zweig or love. Moreover, at first glance it may not even seem to be related to Levinas. However, exposing the love of an unknown woman for a man of whom we only know his initial, this story goes far beyond an ordinary love story. Yet, in the love shown by Zweig's nameless woman, transcendence and otherness find their voices through the scream of a never-known face.

Despite their significant transformation throughout Levinas' philosophy, transcendence and the relationship with the Other as its possibility have always been a major concern of his (Bernasconi, 2010a, 53). While Levinas speaks of transcendence throughout his entire oeuvre, he initially constructs the possibility of such transcendence on the love<sup>2</sup> that is encountered with the sudden appearance of the Other. In the later periods of his philosophy, however, this relationship turns into another face-to-face relationship, namely an ethical one which is built on the responsibility felt towards the Other. Even though transcendence is one of the central concerns of Levinas' thought, he claims that its possibility can only completely take place in an ethical relationship, and salvation confronted in consequence of a relationship established through eros would not mean any real transcendence.

Although Levinas' approach to the structure of the relationship with the Other has changed, displaying his archetypal relationship seems essential in terms of

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<sup>2</sup> Although there are different views and yet no agreement on what "love" refers to in Levinas' philosophy, in this article it is used as equivalent of "eros," signifying corporeality.

has never called him to account or demanded anything from him, although she had many opportunities. Although she is fully aware of the asymmetry of love, she still acts in accordance with Levinas' account of love by being willing to tell R. everything. Due to the love she feels for a non-existent love she cannot stop herself from writing, though she deprives the writer of any respondent whom he could reply to, become angry with or apologize to.

Throughout his questioning of Being, Levinas retains the idea that existence is a weight, and seeks to demonstrate that ontology is not first philosophy. As Levinas develops the prototype of salvation from the burden of existence ending with the positioning of ethics as the basis, he also states that love heralds goodness and morality by the emergence of being a hostage by making the I "for" the Other (Levinas, 1979, 261). The fact that the ethical relationship is based on an inexhaustible and unilateral call of responsibility coming from the face of the Other and the birth of a prophet-like ethical subject surely leads to the questioning of the possibility of such a subject and relationship. This shows why an analysis of love is essential in order to understand ethics. After all, the key to understanding an ethical subject more responsible than all the other lies on understanding the claim that the loving one loves the loved one more than anyone else.

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