

## Chapter 8

### BEYOND SOCIALITY: RESPONSIBILITY AND THE FEMININE

#### 1 Introduction

The first descriptive analysis of "the feminine" in Levinas' work comes in Time and the Other, the series of lectures given in 1946-47 at Jean Wahl's Collège Philosophique which, in the spirit of openness after the Liberation, as Levinas points out in the 1979 Preface to the unedited republication of these lectures, encouraged "'intellectual experimentation' and risky prospection."<sup>1</sup> In this text the otherness of the Other is associated directly with the feminine ("...the feminine: essentially other...") as that which cannot be reduced to the sameness of conception, a position based on phenomenological analyses of voluptuosity, the caress, modesty, fecundity and paternity.<sup>2</sup>

But Levinas was intent on doing more than describing exteriority in this text. On the one hand, he was trying to understand the diachrony of time through the incomprehensible equivocation of the feminine, and thus to establish a transcendent contact with alterity without the obliteration of separation in this contact. On the other hand, he was interested in understanding sexual difference itself from the perspective of this transcendence.<sup>3</sup>

Regarding this analysis of relation with the Other as the feminine — voluptuousness, sexuality, fecundity — Levinas says in the same

Preface that these theses "have not all been taken up later in their first form, that since then may have been revealed as inseparable from more complex and older problems, and as demanding a less improvised expression and especially a different thought."<sup>4</sup> We would like to try to understand this difference for our own purposes in the present study, but also to contribute to the secondary literature where, perhaps because of the seemingly inextricable convolutions surrounding it, the notion of the feminine has been either avoided or poorly grasped by commentators.

The direct association of the feminine with the otherness of the Other in Time and the Other led to a critique of Levinas' construal by Simone de Beauvoir, charging him with sexism. To associate the feminine with the Other — understood as passive, vulnerable, responsive — was interpreted as a prejudicial put-down to women, a rendering of them as second-class citizens. Although Levinas never explicitly says so, it was perhaps because of this critique that the analysis of the feminine in Totality and Infinity is somewhat different.

The feminine is encountered in two areas of Totality and Infinity. First, the feminine is understood in a rather abstract manner as the 'structure' of the home and the primary principle of individuation. Although Levinas distinguishes this notion of the feminine from any particular female, the relation with the feminine which structures the home in intimacy, welcome, and receptivity, is clearly understood as a relation of equality, unlike that of the face to face. This welcome of the home, as a respite from labor (and making this possible) is what will now be understood to bring about the separation of the existent and thus make possible the face to face relation of sociality. In the context of the feminine orientation of the individuating role played by the home, separation takes on a more positive aspect in Totality and Infinity than

it had in Existence and Existents or Time and the Other.

A second place where the feminine will be encountered in Totality and Infinity will be in the erotic relationship. An ambiguity of the feminine will be revealed here. On the one hand, contact with the feminine in the context of love will revert to mere animal need; on the other hand, the feminine will lead to a transcendence beyond the face to face relation of sociality in fecundity. The resolution of this ambiguity will issue in the birth of the child.

In its dual role as both the structure of the home and the other of the erotic relation, as well as the ambiguous situation of the feminine within the erotic relation itself, the otherness of the feminine will be revealed as both more and less than the alterity of the face to face relation. As the structure of the home and the principle of individuation, the feminine is the prelude to sociality; as the erotic other, relation with the feminine is at once beneath sociality insofar as eros is a need, like hunger, subject to repetition and recommencement, and beyond sociality insofar as the erotic is a movement toward the infinite futurity of fecundity in the production of the child.<sup>5</sup> For the most part, the direct association of the feminine with exteriority is conspicuously dropped in Totality and Infinity. Thus, whereas Time and the Other approached exteriority from the vantage points of time, death, facing, and eros, Totality and Infinity will begin to view exteriority primarily from the perspective of language (as expression and signification), a theme which will become the focus of Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence and which we will take up directly in the following chapter.

## 2 The Feminine: Before, As, and Beyond Exteriority

### 2.1 The Question of Sexism

Prior to the masculine logic of identity and non-contradiction,<sup>6</sup> prior to the grasp of the hand which conquers and dominates in its enjoyment of the elemental,<sup>7</sup> prior to the reduction of saying to the economy of the said, prior to comprehension, knowledge, and power...is the undoing of the feminine.<sup>8</sup> To reduce the feminine to that which can be inscribed in the coherence of a thought is already to have missed the feminine and simultaneously to have become the victim of that loss in the affliction of forgetfulness by which the thought would assay itself. What can be said about the feminine, through the apophantic dissimulation of Levinas' philosophical-poetic method, is precisely what the feminine "is" not. The feminine discreetly escapes every predication that would make the feminine present because the feminine can only be 'given' in a way which infinitely surpasses any manner in which the feminine would be taken: "The feminine," Levinas says, "is the face in which trouble surrounds and already invades clarity."<sup>9</sup> The feminine is given in the withdrawal of the feminine; the presence of the feminine is made conspicuous as an absence, a formula for signifying exteriority with which we are now familiar.

In Levinas' view, the space of this withdrawal, where intimacy first becomes possible and not possible, is the interiority of the home. It is the pre-linguistic, pre-cognitive feminine orientation of dwelling which subtends and makes possible the ethical relation with the Other as language and teaching. The self-dispossession required within the interrogative approach of the Other, the giving of my world to the Other in non-calculating expression of myself, in hospitality and welcome, what

Levinas calls in Otherwise than Being the "vulnerability, exposure to outrage, to wounding, passivity more passive than all patience,"<sup>10</sup> the giving of "one's own mouthful of bread" — this already presupposes the primordial relationship with the feminine.<sup>11</sup> But before going further with our analysis, let us address the question of whether there is an unsuspected sexism operating behind the back of Levinas' construal of the feminine, as Simone de Beauvoir charged.<sup>12</sup>

In Ethics and Infinity, a late commentary by Levinas on the general sweep of his thought, he remarks that "the feminine is other for a masculine being...."<sup>13</sup> But will this mild disclaimer suffice? Feminists are sensitive to any construal of a general category of the feminine represented as excessively passive, merely responsive to the active, masculine principle, what, in de Beauvoir's view, undoubtedly inspired by Sartre's ontology of the power relations governing sexual difference, is understood as "second." Is Levinas' disclaimer sufficient to rebuke the sexist critique?

What Levinas says is that for a man the woman is the equivocal par excellence. This is more of an unabashedly sexualist proposition than a sexist one. Would Simone de Beauvoir forget that she is a woman approaching the question of gender? Furthermore, Levinas claims that he does not intend to identify women with the feminine and men with the masculine, although an equivocation between the ontic and the ontological predication of the term 'feminine' seems to come into play here as it does with other of Levinas' concepts. By way of an androgynous addendum to his disclaimer, in the spirit of the myth of Aristophanes in Plato's Symposium and the Yin/Yang principle of Taoism, in Ethics and Infinity Levinas says that "all these allusions to the ontological differences between the masculine and the feminine would appear less archaic if,

instead of dividing humanity into two species ... they would signify that the participation in the masculine and in the feminine were the attribute of every human being."<sup>14</sup>.

Whether this double disclaimer is sufficient to rebuff the feminist critique remains to be seen. But for our purposes here what is important is to see how Levinas' understanding of the feminine structures the possibility of separation in the context of the home, the transcendence of the face to face relation, and the move "beyond the face" through the fecundity of the erotic relationship. In general, we should keep in mind that Levinas' phenomenological analysis of the feminine, as with death, time, and the face to face relation, is geared toward the establishment of exteriority as the ground of transcendence. We wish to see whether this 'evidence' is sufficient, whether it could be since Levinas himself admits that it is approached from outside the structures of formal logic and thus "is 'otherwise' than the knowledge which expresses it."<sup>15</sup>

## 2.2 The Feminine, the Home, and Separation

In order to understand the evidential importance of the feminine in Levinas' ethical metaphysics, it must be situated within the economy of enjoyment in the context of the home and the disruption of sociality which animates the ethical relation of responsibility between the Same and the Other.

Totality and Infinity begins with the notion of a "metaphysical desire" which "desires beyond everything that can simply complete it," a characteristic which, in Levinas' view, distinguishes desire from mere need.<sup>16</sup> Such desire can arise only in separate beings, beings who occupy "a site" as existents standing out from the anonymity of existence,

beings whose being constitutes "a way of being" ("une manière d'être") which Levinas calls the "psychism" or "inner life."<sup>17</sup> This interiority of the existent which subtends separation "institutes an order different from historical time in which totality is constituted, an order where everything is pending,"<sup>18</sup> not yet, where the notion of possibility surpasses every idea of the possible so that, as we saw that Levinas says in Existence and Existents, every instant of "the present is the beginning of a being," a break from the anonymous nocturnal horror of being in general, the il y a.<sup>19</sup> The feminine subtends separation.

Created beings are separate beings, separate from their creator unto atheism. "One can call atheism this separation so complete," Levinas says, "that the separated being maintains itself in existence all by itself, without participating in the Being from which it is separated...outside of God, at home with itself."<sup>20</sup> Separated being, the being of enjoyment of the elemental world, is a being which inhabits, a being which is at home with itself. "The dwelling, inhabitation, belongs to the essence — to the egoism — of the I. Against the anonymous there is, horror, trembling, and vertigo, perturbation of the I that does not coincide with itself, the happiness of enjoyment affirms the I at home with itself."<sup>21</sup>

To exist as an existent which stands out from the horror of sheer existence, an existent which stands on its own, stands up and bears a name, is not merely to be thrown willy-nilly into existence in the manner of Heidegger's Geworfenheit.<sup>22</sup> Rather, to be human is to inhabit. Levinas says that "to dwell is not the simple fact of the anonymous reality of a being cast into existence as a stone one casts behind oneself; it is recollection, a coming to oneself, a retreat home with oneself as in a land of refuge, which answers to a hospitality, an

expectancy, a human welcome."<sup>23</sup> Yet this "retreat home" to this "refuge," which is correlative to the economy of the elemental and the world of labor, and which makes these possible in making possible their suspension, is not a solipsistic retreat, as it appeared to be in Levinas' early works, but an interiority permeated by the intimacy of the familiar, and this "intimacy which familiarity already presupposes is an intimacy with someone. The interiority of recollection is a solitude in a world already human."<sup>24</sup> The home makes possible a withdrawal from the world of work and labor — what might be thought of as the negative moments of separation. The home is the positive moment of peaceful respite from the effort and work of individuation, like what the Sabbath is to the rest of the week.<sup>25</sup> In Totality and Infinity, it is through happiness and enjoyment, rather than suffering and struggle, that separation is accomplished. I become myself not so much in my work as in the enjoyment of the fruits of my work, in leisure: "The interiority of enjoyment is separation in itself," Levinas says.<sup>26</sup> And interiority is being at home with oneself. And the home is structured by the welcome of the feminine: "the other whose presence is discreetly an absence, with which is accomplished the primary hospitable welcome which describes the field of intimacy, is the Woman."<sup>27</sup>

Thus, as an interiority that opens up the possibility of contact with exteriority, the notion of "home" for Levinas does not indicate a place of inactive withdrawal, a sedantary dwelling. It is a sojourning, a movement of wandering, a being at home with one's homelessness:

The chosen home is the very opposite of a root. It indicates a disengagement, a wandering (errance) which has made it possible, which is not a less with respect to installation, but the surplus<sup>28</sup> of the relationship with the Other, metaphysics.

Of course there is always the possibility of being closed up within one's

home, within one's primitive egoism, of shutting out the Other from the supposed safety of one's separateness. In fact it is exactly because this is possible that transcendence toward the infinite opened by the Other is also possible since "the possibility for the home to open to the Other is as essential to the essence of the home as closed doors and windows."<sup>29</sup> The home is the "place" from which relation with the other is both possible and not possible. The home is already the concrete anticipation of the social dimension of the monadic existent. Openness to the Other, the welcoming of the Other into my home — hospitality — is accomplished, Levinas argues, as language, as "contact across a distance, relation with the non-touchable, across a void," in saying. We will pursue this linguistic angle to the question of responsibility in greater detail in the following chapter, giving here only the outlines of it as are necessary for our present discussion.

My expression of myself without calculation is an offering of my world to the Other, a placing of my being at home with myself in the position of disposal and vulnerability, a giving of what I own, a dis-possession which takes the form of a "giving of signs, giving a sign of this giving of signs, expressing oneself."<sup>30</sup> The possibility of this contact across the distance of separation is first made possible by the feminine as the "essential interiority" of the home, a feminine interiority, prior to the presence or absence of any female person. The feminine, in the posture of unconditional surrender and welcome, is "the inhabitant that inhabits (the home) before every inhabitant."<sup>31</sup>

Because of this primordial habitation of the feminine within the intimacy and familiarity which structures being-at-home, Levinas says that "the feminine has been encountered in this analysis as one of the cardinal points of the horizon in which the inner life takes place,"

i.e., in which separation occurs.<sup>32</sup> The notion of the feminine must not be confused here with "the human being of 'feminine sex,'" as was pointed out above. For even in a home where no woman is present, Levinas says, "the dimension of femininity...remains open there, as the very welcome of the dwelling."<sup>33</sup> Levinas' understanding of the home here must also be distinguished from what is merely a house. It is the act of being lived in that transforms a house into a home. One invests oneself into one's home, decorates it with one's possessions, takes on the home as an extension of oneself, or, more properly, as a contraction of oneself into the interiority of a sheltering so that the exteriority of the abode marks an interior dwelling. The emphasis here is not so much on building, as in Heidegger, but on inhabiting. To be in the world as human is to inhabit.

The difference between a house and a home is the welcome made possible by the feminine, the respite and solace the home provides from the cares of the world, the possibility of offering hospitality. The interiority of the separated being which places the elemental at a workable distance is coextensive with "habitation in a dwelling or a Home," a habitation which makes familiarity with the world possible.<sup>34</sup> This intimacy of the home is produced as a withdrawal of a presence which opens or makes room for the recollection of intimacy. The feminine presence in the home is "discreetly an absence," a withdrawal which in withdrawing makes the welcome of the home possible. "The woman is the condition for recollection, the interiority of the Home, and inhabitation."<sup>35</sup> In the context of the home, then, relation with the feminine is a relation of equality, like Buber's "I/Thou" relation.<sup>36</sup>

As Levinas will later describe it, the relation/non-relation with the feminine — in the context of eros — is profanation and

voluptuosity, "an experience which does not pass into any concept," a relation that is "irreducible to intentionality, which is objectifying even in praxis."<sup>37</sup> Here the feminine is prior to every intentionality. Where intimacy with the feminine in the context of the structure of the home issues in the possibility of the dis-possession of welcome in openness to the Other, later, in the context of the erotic, relation with the feminine will resolve itself in the transcendence of fecundity and the more radical self-transformation or "trans-substantiation" of the engendering of the child.<sup>38</sup> In fact, these two "moments" of the feminine are inseparable in terms of the larger notion of responsibility. To be responsible is to give myself or speak myself to my neighbor, to substitute myself for her in her suffering, to take that suffering on as my expression — mine only as it is for her. Likewise, in paternity, this giving of myself to a future beyond myself, this sacrifice without reserve, is maintained as insatiable desire, infinite desire engendering further desire, accomplishing goodness, the very "goal" of responsibility.<sup>39</sup>

In the context of the home, relation with the feminine is pre-linguistic, "a language without teaching," Levinas says, "a silent language, an understanding without words, an expression in secret."<sup>40</sup> The dwelling of the feminine permits a respite from the world of labor and the possession of things, from the living-from of enjoyment which defines the separated being. This respite accomplished in consort with the feminine, however, is not a mere withdrawal from the world. Rather, withdrawing from the elemental world "implies a new event" where I am in relation to what I live with: "this event is the relation with the Other who welcomes me in the Home, the discreet presence of the Feminine."<sup>41</sup> It is from this intimacy of the feminine that welcome of "the absolutely

other" is possible. If the home is founded on labor and possession in the context of the feminine, as the place where I can withdraw from the world in recollection and intimacy, it is necessary — if I am to go beyond the life of labor and possession — to learn how to give away what I possess, a giving away which institutes my relation with the absolutely Other who comes to me from a height and who establishes the ethical in language and teaching:

But in order that I be able to free myself from the very possession that the welcome of the Home establishes, in order that I be able to see things in themselves, that is, represent to myself, refuse both enjoyment and possession, I must know how to give what I possess....I welcome the Other<sup>42</sup> who presents himself in my home by opening my home to him.

In welcoming the Other into the openness of my home, I am called into question by him, a calling into question which, Levinas says, is "coextensive" with the manifestation of the face to face as language: "The calling in question of the I, coextensive with the manifestation of the Other in the face, we call language." Language is a welcoming of the Other which, because the Other approaches from a height, calls me into question. The Other approaches first and foremost as a teacher whose "first teaching teaches this very height, tantamount to its exteriority, the ethical."<sup>43</sup> But in coming from this height the Other does not dominate and conquer; the Other questions the self-possession of my identity and 'teaches' the response-ability at the heart of alterity. As Levinas puts it, "teaching is not a species of a genus called domination, a hegemony at work within a totality, but is the presence of infinity breaking the closed circle of totality."<sup>44</sup>

A tripartite movement toward alterity is revealed here: (1) enjoyment, as the immediate consumption of the fruits of the earth, made possible by (2) the welcome of the feminine in the intimacy and

familiarity of the home, and (3) the approach of the Other from a height which is possible only by virtue of the first two movements:

The simple living from...the spontaneous agreeableness of the elements is not yet habitation. But habitation is not yet the transcendence of language. The Other who welcomes in intimacy is not the you (vous) of the face that reveals itself in a dimension of height, but precisely the thou (tu) of familiarity: a language without teaching, a silent language, an understanding without words, an expression in secret.

Contact with the feminine can thus be understood as the sine qua non of openness to the Other, an openness which, because of the feminine, can never achieve the absolute fullness of closure. It persists as a perpetual openness and overflowing of every idea of closing. The closure of pure language, of an absolute relation between the Same and the Other — conceivable only at the end of history where there would no longer be a position from which such a conception would be possible — is forever undone by the dissimulation of the feminine.

### 2.3 Eros and Exteriority: Pure Future

The face to face relationship worked out in Totality and Infinity has established for Levinas a new understanding of the subjectivity of the existent. The subjectivity of hypostasis, it will be remembered, was described as a mastering of the raw forces of Being. It was a subjection of the world to the "for-me" of the hypostatic individual. In this subjectivity, understood as a subjection to me of what is other than me, the freedom of spontaneity is established. The freedom and consciousness that defines this egoistic subjectivity, however, bring with it a solitude that is the correlate of an inwardness or interiority which is the ground of the possibility for this freedom and consciousness. The solitude of this individualistic subjectivity, Levinas argues, is

'overcome' by the invisible and pre-conscious sociality of the face to face relation. This resulted in a new understanding of subjectivity. Here, to be a subject, was shown to be a sensitivity to the Other, a being subjected by the approach of the Other, an approach whose very nature is a re-approach to the freedom of spontaneity and the sovereignty of consciousness.

Insofar as sociality is pre-objective and pre-thematic, it is ontologically more fundamental than the subjectivity of consciousness. The subjectivity of sociality is also temporally prior to the subjectivity of consciousness insofar as the temporality of the face to face relation is, in Levinas' view, the ground and foundation of historical time. The freedom of spontaneity is subsequent to the freedom of beginning and the freedom of responsibility which, as we saw above, hearken back to an immemorial past and point toward a pure future. It is exactly in this that Levinas' notion of responsibility differs from that of Kant and Heidegger. It is neither from a duty based on a rational imperative nor from a concern grounded in a comprehension of Being that responsibility arises. At least these are not the most fundamental levels. More fundamental than the law, and justifying the law, more fundamental than care for self and neighbor is the response-ability to the invisibility of the Other which is the 'law' of love. Ontological response-ability here becomes ethical responsibility. This pre-conscious response to the Other does not do away with the moral responsibility attendant upon our freedom of spontaneity. We still must render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's. But this rational exercise of freedom is politics, not ethics. It is morality rather than fundamental ethics; it is not what Heidegger called "ursprungliche" ethics.

Nevertheless, in situating the ground of ethics in an extreme

passivity, is not Levinas removing some of the impact of the responsibility that devolves upon the rational being insofar as rationality defines the freedom of action? Levinas is not denouncing the importance of morality. He wants to show that prescriptive morality is already a thematizing of a more fundamental relationship with the Other, an ethical responding, that is, a response of love prior to thought. Morality is grounded in sociality, not freedom. This is the point. It is prior to the whole dimension of activity/passivity, already a cognitive formulation within the moral responsibility of consciousness.<sup>46</sup> That is why Levinas says that ethical responsibility is "a passivity more passive than all passivity."<sup>47</sup> Like the exteriority of the face, the passivity of the subject is also infinite. It does not yet have any prescriptive force in terms of action. It does not yet say you should do this particular thing or not that. As we will see in connection with the relation between language and responsibility, one does not know about one's response-ability except through retrospective and speculative analysis. The only force of an imperative is that one must not believe that the infinite dimension of the Other could be reduced, without essential violence, to a representation. The force of Levinas' imperative is wholly critical or skeptical; this is its positive content. This paradoxical presence of an absence is the very definition of the ethical dimension of the subject.

It is not that the subject first appears as a subject and then relates to the Other in a way that both maintains and surpasses this subjectivity, although the seemingly historical analysis of the genesis of the subject in hypostasis could give this impression. It would seem as if we have been progressing along a linear path from the il y a, to hypostasis, to sociality, to the beyond. But this would be a

misinterpretation of the metaphysical context of what Levinas is doing. In the linear, spatial view, there would be the introduction of a temporality into hypostasis prior to the establishment of time in sociality. But the existent, qua response-ability, does not really exist prior to the relationship with the Other. In Otherwise than Being, Levinas will turn from the approach of the Other to the establishment and explication of how it is that subjectivity is to be understood as responsibility.

The face to face relationship is the basis of the existent's historical being. It is in the face to face relationship with the Other, prior to consciousness that my being in truth is constituted. This constitution is produced in the very dynamics of facing, that is, in language understood as apology to the Other who approaches from a height. Thus, insofar as I am in the face to face relationship I am in my being as truth and freedom. But this freedom "is neither the arbitrariness of an isolated being nor the conformity of an isolated being with a rational and universal law incumbent upon all."<sup>48</sup> It is the freedom of the face to face relation, beneath the freedom of spontaneity. This can be understood as a freedom to speak for myself, to give myself to the Other in language: "My being is produced in producing itself before the others in discourse; it is what it reveals of itself to the others, but while participating in, attending, its revelation."<sup>49</sup> We will focus on this understanding of responsibility as language in the following chapter.

But what about after my death? "Will the violence death introduces into this being make truth impossible?"<sup>50</sup> If this is not to be so, there must be some way of transcending death which also thus goes beyond the face to face relation of sociality and to which this relation

points. Prior to death, and yet as a kind of death which subjectivity takes on, voluntarily, there must be a way to transcend the face to face relation. Otherwise, after my death and the end of my possibility for possibility, the face to face relation, which is a break out of, an escape from the "tyrrany of reason" would result in an ultimate reduction of the alterity of the face to face relation to the sameness of history. This would be so, Levinas says,

— Unless, revolted by the violence of reason that reduces the apology to silence, the subjectivity could not only accept to be silent, but could renounce itself by itself, renounce itself without violence, cease the apology for itself. This would not be a suicide nor a resignation, but would be love. The submission to tyrrany, the resignation to a universal law, though it be rational, which stops the apology, compromises the truth of my being.<sup>51</sup>

What Levinas is saying here is that at every level, even the most benign, reason — representational intentionality — brings an end to the diachrony of the face to face relationship; whether this is while one is alive or after death, there would arise the whole problematic of reason which sociality undermines. The infinity that is revealed in the face to face relation, according to Levinas, points toward a time after my death, and calls for a free renunciation of the hold on the world which death threatens. This being-for-a-time-after-my-death is contrary to Heidegger's notion that Dasein's essence is being-toward-death. But how is the existence of the existent able to transcend death? And what does it mean to exist for such a "beyond"? What does this 'say' about the 'nature' of one's existing?

The way that Levinas sees that this transcendence beyond the approach of the Other, 'through' the Other, so to speak, is achieved is in the erotic relationship. It is through the erotic relationship and its attendant fecundity that the existent is able to transcend death, to

overcome the total obliteration that death brings. The outcome of the face to face relationship, conceived as love, is the child. The alterity of the child marks the continuation of the existent — albeit through a by now all too familiar tango with equivocation — beyond death. Later, in "La Trace de l'autre," in fuller accordance with the Platonic formulation of immortality, Levinas will also include the genuine Work at this point. We are reminded of Nietzsche's motherly love for his philosophical texts.

In both Time and the Other and Totality and Infinity it is important to note that Levinas' examination of the love relationship comes after his analysis of the face to face relationship. The face to face relationship with the Other already has given Levinas the kind of exteriority which allows the existent to escape from its solitude without losing the integrity of separation, except for the fact of death. The erotic relationship is that which will take the existent beyond death and beyond the face.

At one level, what Levinas is attempting to do here, in a reversion to themes announced in Time and the Other, is to understand phenomenologically the ontological nature of sexual difference. The fact of gender is not merely a logical, specific difference within the Parmenidean unity of Being.<sup>52</sup> Neither is it merely a contradiction in terms, nor a simple complementarity presupposing a previously existing whole, as in Aristophanes' understanding of sexual difference in Plato's Symposium.<sup>53</sup> For Levinas the love relationship does take place between two separate individuals, but at the same time it is also that which allows these individuals to be individuals such that it both presupposes and transcends the face to face relation.<sup>54</sup> By the erotic relationship Levinas means the love relationship or the concrete form of the love

relationship. Certainly, this can be understood in the profane sense where the other is reduced to a mere object of pleasure. This is the need aspect of love. But the desire of the love relationship also points beyond the object of desire. Thus, there is an ambivalence about the love relationship, an ambiguity where there is a "simultaneity of need and desire, of concupiscence and transcendence, tangency of the avowable and the unavowable," which "constitutes the originality of the erotic" as "the equivocal par excellence."<sup>55</sup>

But it is not only the ambiguity inherent in erotic love that causes confusion in Levinas' analysis. It is also the fact that, particularly in Time and the Other, the voluptuousness of erotic desire is employed by Levinas in an attempt to establish the exteriority of the Other. Voluptuousness, manifested in the caress, involves an insatiable desire. Levinas wanted to distinguish this insatiable desire from satiable need. In Totality and Infinity, however, the erotic relation is given a new twist. It is now argued that voluptuousness occurs within a relationship that does not involve sociality at all. It is rather a "dual solitude."<sup>56</sup> That is, the love relationship, in a profane sense, is a closed society, and yet an equivocal identity between two where "the other is me and separated from me."<sup>57</sup> What is loved in the voluptuousness of eros is not the Other, but the love the other bears me. As a "dual egoism" it is not in loving that the voluptuousness of love, as need, will be satisfied. This will always involve a return to self. But insofar as voluptuousness also involves a move toward an infinite future, its proper outcome is the engendering of the child.<sup>58</sup>

Fecundity involves a transcendence of the parents in their offspring. It "continues history without producing old age."<sup>59</sup> My child is somehow me while at the same time being wholly his or her own person.

Here is a transcendence of my being beyond my death. We find immortality in our authentic works and our children. In our children there occurs a transubstantiation of our own flesh. Our relation with our children involves a special kind of exteriority. Our child is us but not us. At eighteen months my daughter already is an individual. Yet she is also my survival, my re-naissance. Fecundity and the voluptuousness of the caress, aim beyond the face. Beyond the face is the dimension of the infinite. Situated in this beyond, is the ultimate foundation of responsibility. This dimension is approached in Otherwise Than Being in an analysis of the relationship between language and responsibility, in the tropes of proximity, substitution, and the genuine work, which will be taken up in the following chapter.

### 3 Conclusion

It is difficult to read Levinas' reflections on the feminine structure of the home and its importance in the accomplishment of individuation without hearing a certain moralizing tone beneath the abstractness of his language — something Heidegger felt a keen need to avoid in his hermeneutic phenomenology of Dasein. Heidegger believed that existentiell considerations must be kept separate from the existential analysis in order to remain squarely within the realm of thought. In his description of "falling," for example, Heidegger warns the reader of Being and Time that his "interpretation is purely ontological in its aims, and is far removed from any moralizing critique of everyday Dasein."<sup>60</sup> Again, in his analysis of death he says that "it is not as if norms and rules for comporting oneself towards death were to be proposed

for 'edification'."<sup>61</sup> Given his critique of the priority of thought, Levinas is clearly less concerned to maintain this distinction. Consequently, the "is" in his work blurs into the "ought," although to our knowledge Levinas does not admit this blurring outright.

Levinas is critical of the priority of the knowledge orientation of Heidegger's ontology and its neutering of the question of being, but in his own approach through sensible analysis, philosophical themes flirt openly with moralizing critique and edification. This in itself is not meant to be a critique of Levinas, however, since we are in agreement with the conviction that the pretensions of "pure philosophy" conceal an arrogance on the part of ratiocination to dominate and control what is other, reminiscent of Aristotle's contention that it will be best when wonder is put to rest, a desire which suggests perhaps an inferiority complex lurking beneath the pure aspirations of knowledge, a fear of otherness as if identity would be insecure until all otherness were conquered. To apply Levinas' critique of ('masculine') knowledge in favor of the passive receptivity of ('feminine') responsibility to the social/political relations between men and women is to find oneself at the heart of Simone de Beauvoir's feminist critique in The Second Sex.

To the extent that Levinas is critical of the 'masculine' attempt of consciousness and knowledge to dominate and control the other, he fits in with the feminist critique; but to the extent he is suggesting that the proper place of the woman is in the home, he is running against the tide of sentiment mounting in 1949 toward the flood of the Women's Liberation movement, since much of this revolved around the role of the woman as mother and homemaker. Now that the days of bra-burning have passed, however, some women are finding themselves in the double-bind of trying to live up to the career expectations that 'liberation' made

possible while at the same time desiring the fulfillment of motherhood, a situation which has left many men out in the cold. This has undoubtedly had an impact on the stability of the home in our day. This is not the place to explore the meaning of these sociological developments, and we would reiterate Levinas' point that the feminine structure of the home remains, even if a woman is not present there. But what about the masculine presence in the home, and the masculine in general? A critique of the priority of consciousness without the suggestion of a replacement model is insufficient. Like de Beauvoir's critique, does Levinas' critique of the primacy of consciousness throw out the baby with the bathwater? To what extent Levinas' philosophy could offer the foundation for a new understanding of masculinity and femininity in our day remains to be seen; the critical need for such an understanding is already clear.

In Levinas' philosophy, the analysis of the erotic relationship, and the definition of the feminine, are employed to show a third escape in the ontological adventure of the existent, the escape from the sociality of the face to face relation, beyond death, in relation to the exteriority of the child. In this analysis there is a call for the fulfillment of transcendence in a non-erotic parental love which is given over to a time after its time, a pure future; a love that is perhaps the most concrete expression of what Levinas means by ethical responsibility. This will become clearer in our analysis of subjectivity in the context of language where the approach of the Other can be understood from the perspective of the existent to be tantamount to the advice of Jesus to the young man who would fulfill his heart's desire: give up all that you possess and follow me. For those dazzled by the light of consciousness and the possession of knowledge and power this

makes possible, responsibility is no easy task. Because the young man was very rich, he turned away.

But in his analysis of erotic love and the self-sacrifice to which it leads, does Levinas not pass all too quickly from the caress, which never gets what it wants, to the birth of the child? Is there not something missing here? We have already pointed out the sexualism of Levinas' analysis, a movement from voluptuousness to fecundity in defense of the charge of sexism. The hope against all hope for the transcendence of immortality is embodied in the child. Between the foreplay and the afterbirth, however, there is a large gap in Levinas' analysis, a decency which is not overcome in the presuppositions regarding the nature or purpose of sexuality underlying the description of profanation and the consignment of sexual pleasure to the realm of reciprocating need, a "dual egoism," "taking its place among all the other pleasures and joys of life."<sup>62</sup> Is not the break-up of love into egoistic need and metaphysical desire embodied in the child, a false dichotomy? Does this not presume a logos derivative of the biological analysis of animals that Levinas' interpretation would avoid? Without the production of the child or even this intention, is there nothing left to sexuality but profanation? We cannot pursue these questions here, but they demand further study. Lust and love need not be the only alternatives for understanding sexual difference.

In general, the analysis of the feminine and the place it finds in Levinas' philosophy can be understood as the counterpart to his critique of the priority of consciousness and knowledge. The relations between the receptivity and fecundity of the feminine, and the virility and heroism of masculine consciousness — not to be identified with woman and man, and yet not divorced from these either — are complex and highly

charged notions about which there is little agreement. One must be cautious not to oversimplify matters. It is perhaps some measure of the difficulty of dealing with these questions that they have no significant place in Levinas' work after Totality and Infinity, although we are in agreement with Alphonso Lingis that the analyses of subjectivity in Otherwise than Being are worked out in the context of the "beyond the face" introduced in the investigation of the erotic in the last section of Totality and Infinity.<sup>63</sup>

In order to accomplish the radical responsibility described in Otherwise than Being, it would be necessary to have experienced a home in which the feminine nurtured the possibility of sociality, and where sociality culminated in the movement through the dynamics of erotic femininity to the fecund transcendence of the child. The importance of these issues can be viewed in their disruption. If there is a lack of the kind of radical responsibility in our day that is called for by Levinas' analyses, can it not be traced back to the breakdown in the stability of the home and an errancy of the erotic which threaten the future of human life as much if not more so than the threat of nuclear holocaust?

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1. TO, 1979 Preface, pp. 33-34 / pp. 11-12.
  2. TO, p. 86 / p. 78.
  3. EI, pp. 65-66 / pp. 57-58.
  4. TO, 1979 Preface, p. 35 / p. 13.
  5. TI, pp. 264-265 / pp. 242-243.
  6. Levinas does not explicitly identify the totalitarian propensity of representation with "masculinity," but this follows as the natural counterpart of the "feminine" understood as exteriority.
  7. "Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity," in CPP, p. 50; cf. TI, pp. 161 ff. / pp. 135ff.
  8. TI, pp. 154ff. / pp. 127ff.; cf. TI, p. 264 / pp. 241-242.
  9. TI, p. 262 / p. 240.
  10. OB, p. 15 / p. 18.
  11. OB, p. 74 / pp. 93-94.
  12. Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex, trans. H. Parshley (New York: Bantam Books, 1970), p. xvi, n. 3; cf. TO, p. 85, n. 69.
  13. EI, p. 65 / p. 57; emphasis added.
  14. EI, p. 68 / p. 60
  15. Autrement que savoir, p. 90.
  16. TI, p. 34 / p. 4.
  17. TI, p. 54 / p. 24.
  18. TI, p. 55 / p. 26.
  19. EE, p. 98 / p. 169.
  20. TI, p. 58 / p. 29.
  21. TI, p. 143 / p. 117.
  22. TI, p. 164 / p. 138.
  23. TI, p. 156 / p. 129.
  24. TI, p. 155 / p. 128.
  25. Transcendance et intelligibilité, p. 45.

26. TI, p. 147 / p. 121.
27. TI, p. 155 / p. 128.
28. TI, p. 172 / p. 147.
29. TI, p. 173 / p. 148.
30. OB, pp. 14-15 / pp. 17-18.
31. TI, p. 157 / p. 131.
32. TI, p. 158 / p. 131.
33. Ibid.
34. TI, p. 150 / p. 124.
35. TI, p. 155 / p. 128.
36. TI, p. 155 / pp. 128-129.
37. TI, p. 260 / p. 238.
38. TI, p. 266 / p. 244.
39. TI, p. 269 / 247; p. 272 / p. 250.
40. TI, p. 155 / p. 129.
41. TI, p. 170 / p. 145.
42. TI, p. 171 / pp. 145-146.
43. Ibid.
44. TI, p. 171 / p. 146.
45. TI, p. 155 / pp. 128-129.
46. OB, p. 110 / p. 140.
47. OB, p. 15 / p. 18.
48. TI, p. 252 / p. 230.
49. TI, p. 253 / p. 231.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid.
52. Ibid.
53. TI, p. 254 / p. 232.
54. TI, p. 253 / p. 231.

55. TI, p. 255 / p. 233.
56. TI, p. 265 / p. 242.
57. Ibid.
58. TI, p. 266 / p. 244.
59. TI, p. 268 / p. 246.
60. Martin Heidegger, Being and Time, p. 211 / p. 222.
61. Ibid, p. 292 / p. 329.
62. TI, p. 266 / p. 244; p. 271 / p. 249.
63. Alphonso Lingis, Trans. Intro., OB, pp. xvii-xviii.