

Self-identity in Love: The Problem of Self in Zweig's Letter from an Unknown Woman

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The interests of writing this paper stemmed from the reflection on the romantic love. The context of this reflection is not to describe the romantic love in the western world, when it appearing and how it developing, but to demonstrate the idea of love in modern world. In other word, Love seems to be a title, under which, the almost vital ideas, such as the conception of self, in the modern society, links each other closely, and forms to be a picture. In this picture, Love is our starting-point but not our end. I hope that, by analyzing the title love, we could get more sense of these code conceptions which influencing upon our daily life and everyday understanding profoundly. Indeed, the paper here is the tiny fraction of this work, or the first step of this program.

Before making an outline of the paper, it needs to underline that, as the first step, this paper is not a literature critique, though a famous text playing a main role here. By analyzing Zweig's novel, *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, it is to describe how the problem of Self interweaving with the conception of Love. It is the story conceiving a particular situation that preserves the experience in Love without too much abstract analysis. Admittedly, in the sense of analysis, it always leads to a kind of abstraction, if here, we mean not to handle with the priority of subject but to deal with the experience, which means that the rethink to the conception of Love or Self is not to make the ideas to be the moderate-sized specimens of dry goods or the thin concepts, but to be the thick ones.

In this novel, Zweig described a woman who loved the novelist R. and never told him who she is. To R, she is a stranger, an unknown one. And this strangeness is guaranteed on three aspects:

1. This woman always hope R to notice and recognize that she is the girl of thirteen.
2. The novelist R did not do so from the first to last.
3. When R received the letter, the woman had died.

To the aspect 1, the question is why the woman always hope R to recognize her as the girl in thirteen years old? Zweig wrote, "it was then the world began for me"---what does the world here mean? In my opinion, Zweig here took over the tradition of initiation themes from the romantic literature. But the peculiarity of Zweig is that the program of the growth is not from the imperfect personality to the perfect one, but the process from the separation to collision until the conciliation between children's world and the adults' world. The symbol of separation between the two worlds is Love, the secret of the adults, and it was strange to the children. This is also see in the other novels, *Burning Secret*(1913), *Spring in the Prater*(1900), and so on, even in his autobiography, *the world of yesterday*(1942). In case that Zweig presented the growth as a child asking the strange world to recognize the existence of herself, the story of Love were not just an event but an incident that occur with self and others. In one word, under the context of the sentence "I Love you", recognition of the self in thirteen is reasonable, the reason is that it is the requirement for the certainty of my existence.

This requirement started from the grasp of Zweig to Europe before the First World War, converting optimism to the suspicion that human could establish everything without any others but himself. And this novel, *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, is the representative work for this period. In this work, Zweig rethinks to the subjectivity of Self, the romanticism holding in esteem, and to the possibility of the spirit completing within itself. The classic comparison is the philosophy of Fichte. He has claimed that the foundation for Knowledge is the certainty of Self. And the other one could go back to Spinoza, he has asserted that the self should be the one that could not depend on any others but itself, because the word “self” signifies self-content, in other word, if the Existenz wanted to have his absolute certainty for his being, it would be the one that identical for itself. This view has developing by Goethe to the slogan of Romantic Love—If I love you, what business is that of yours? However, here, Zweig disagrees with this idea. With the story of this unknown woman, he claims that if I love you, it will be some business with you. This is the reason why the woman eager the novelist R. to recognize her and give her the certainty of her existence. Only within the articulation between the love and her beloved, the Identity of herself would be assured.

But as the aspect 2, why the novelist R does not recognize her? This strangeness is not only for R. but also for the unknown woman herself, since she has lived in the suspension of the meaning to the existence of herself from first to last. even though she has participated in the community, the persons else could not be the other who could be the meaning-giver, only the beloved could be her someone while she could be his someone. The relationship with you and me, due to “I love you”, is reasonable. But R does not recognize her, so, which means the relationship is suspicious and they are strange—she is the unknown one to R—and which might cause that the more her requirement for his recognition, the more her anxiety to the indentity of herself. Now we could ask, why she would not to tell him who she is? Zweig gives the reason, the youthful pride, which implies the dilemma that,

- A. The strange world, the adult’s world, has opened to the girl when she fell in love with R and she has found she is living in the community and she is not alone, so she wants to the meaning of her existence though the other’s recognition.
- B. Her self demands a kind of sufficiency, in sense, which means a kind of privacy.

In this point, not only the woman faces with this dilemma of self-Identity, but the novelist R also does. It is why the woman says they are the same, having “the secret of your existence, this profound cleavage of your two lives.” The double character of R represent that in one hand, he is light-hearted and in the other hand, he has a keen sense of responsibility. it is from the characteristic of R that the girl of thirteen identified herself and fell in love with him.

Then, what does the double mean? This is the way that the novelist R might deal with the dilemma of Self. In this way, he divides himself into two parts: a spirit one and a

physical one. The spirit one keeps the self-sufficiency while the physical one holds the relationship of the other persons, especially with other women. So, he never reflected the past and always lives in the moment, and sometimes he says he feels strange to himself. So, how could this man recognize the other one, the girl of thirteen? He keeps his self-independence by estrange everyone, even himself. By comparison, the tragicness of the woman is that, in fact, she has approached to isolating the self with two parts, as what R has done, selling herself to be others' inamorata while remaining free as the girl of thirteen, but she does not satisfied with this. Her constant requirement for R's recognition reveals her real intention that she would fall over herself to the integration.

Therefore, the third aspect originated from the problem that if the woman told R who she was, she would not remain her pride, but if she did not, they were forever strange. The temporary solution is the child—"our boy"—"...by the birth of this other you, who was truly my own." The woman seems to be healed. The boy, the other you as the other me, brings off the natural relationship with the two strangers, in other word, they have got the self-evident certainty and the solution to the dilemma of self that maintains both integration and dependence. But the boy is dead. With his gone, the dilemma comes back, after all, the existence of "our boy" is given the solution on surface, not intrinsic.

What is the ultimate solution to the dilemma of self? The unknown woman chooses the death. On death, the self-sufficient and living-with-others is satisfied simultaneously with the abolishing the significance of self. That is to say, death gives the ultimate heal while bring the eventual failure. So, Zweig just show the dilemma and never give any effective solution. This is the attitude of Zweig to Romantic Love, not positive but critical. He is not like Goethe, the death of Young Werther is the success of self-will. So, the view of Zweig implies that once we using the idea of romantic love and the romantic conception of self, we might never resolve this problem. In Plato's *Symposium*, Aristophanes describes a picture of Man and woman that is one of two sides of a filleted fish, one half of an original whole, all continually searching for other half. And the desire and pursuit of the whole is called love. But in the same book, Socrates tells a story of the birth of Love, the son not only of Poros(Resource) but also of Penia (Poverty), so the nature of love is between mortal and immortal. He is always in dilemma. In the end of the story, Zweig wrote, "An intimation of death came to him, and an intimation of deathless love". It is not so much to say that the love is deathless as to say that the problem of self-Identity arouse in the situation of love is immortal.