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Eros, Emmanuel Levinas's Novel?

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Among Levinas's unpublished manuscripts from the period of his captivity, there is a partially developed draft project for a novel. It is contained in a notebook of approximately one hundred pages, the cover of which bears the name *Eros*. This notebook consists essentially of the sketch of a narrative, echoed in other notebooks of the same period that are theoretical notes placed under the sign of *Eros*. There are thus two parts, to read and work on separately. I shall refer solely to the first, the sketch of this novel.

One day when we were in the Levinas archive with Michael and Danielle,[1] we discovered this thoroughly fascinating project for a novel. I propose to carry out an initial exploration of this project, cognisant that the pages of this notebook contain many deletions and are not always legible.

I shall take my point of departure from a single theoretical principal: one should attribute to this sketch the full status of literature and should leave theory aside. Levinas wanted to write a narrative. In a note to the *Carnets de captivité*, he sees the future of his work as a triptych: literature, philosophy, and critical writing. Literature is there. Levinas is undoubtedly a philosopher, but he wants to write a narrative. In the *Carnets*, one can refer to the notes (Levinas 2009, 126, 147) that provide the key: the novel is the locus of mystery. At this moment, Levinas felt that to write a narrative, a fiction, was to allow

1 This visit to IMEC in the Abbey of Ardennes near Caen took place in September 2006. Gérard Bensussan was also present when we consulted the computerised files of the *Carnets de captivité*. It was following this visit, after reading the *Carnets* carefully, that the idea of a publication emerged. The project was submitted for the approval of the academic committee of Levinas's *Complete Works*, presided over by Jean-Luc Marion.

Note: This presentation took place on the basis of notes. The painstaking transcription makes more apparent the occasionally abrupt or summary character of a discourse that has not yet mobilised all the means of analysis. This was my choice: not to claim to penetrate either Levinas's text or its singular situation more than an initial, still rough reading allowed. The lecture by Jean-Luc Nancy was transcribed by Laetitia Meyzen. The final text was prepared and annotated by Danielle Cohen-Levinas. We thank Michael Levinas for authorising the publication of extracts from the unpublished novel by Emmanuel Levinas and we thank IMEC for having provided Jean-Luc Nancy with a photocopy of the manuscript of this novel.
Translation: Translated, from the French, by Ashraf Noor.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110668926-002

"mystery," a key word in this draft of the novel, to be welcomed, to grant it a complete place of its own, which is not without consequences.

Why did Levinas not continue? Why did he not continue to write literature? One can perhaps say of this draft that it is clumsy. Indeed, Levinas does not really manage to sustain a narrative; he does not manage to fix upon a particular figure, nor even find a fixed name for it. This could, of course, be understood as the path chosen by the author. In this narrative he is undoubtedly too much of a prisoner, if one can say such a thing, of his own experience, which, moreover, he relates. For this novel is, indeed, autobiographical: as another passage in the *Carnets* indicates, autobiography, when it is not autobiographical, consists precisely in not saying Me but He, as in fiction. In saying He, one has already modified the personal position of subjectivity. This assemblage of thought under the sign of *eros* is definitely nothing other than exit from oneself and access to the other.

Afterwards, post captivity, Levinas will write no further literary experiments, because his thought undergoes a turn following the war. This is a complex and delicate aspect of his work. In the series of unpublished *Lectures*[2] that are included in the second volume of the *Complete Works*, one already sees certain very fine inflections consisting of a movement in which desire and pleasure are pushed towards the side of that which does not transcend enough. Pleasure will bear the tone that it takes on later in *Totalité et infini* (1961), the tone of pleasure as possession.

In the period of this manuscript, if one considers the theoretical notes, Levinas writes that voluptuousness is nothing other than seeking even more voluptuousness. He writes that the supreme moment is the extinction of this infinite desire of voluptuousness. In this period, then, with the novelistic attempt to involve the register of reflection on *eros*, Levinas still thinks of desire as infinite. Then, at a given moment, it seems to him that he can no longer grant to desire the "benefit" of infinity – this is indeed very apparent in *De l'évasion*.[3] In the condition of the prisoner, there is something that opens up, something which is in part imaginary, phantasmal. After the war, there will be a return to reality and above all there will be the discovery of what happened during the war, the discovery of something Levinas had not known about. At the end of the novel, there is, however, an evocation of the camps. There is thus a sort of turn in his work and in his reflection. A displacement takes place, a displacement that also

2 See Levinas, *Oeuvres*, 2: *Parole et Silence et autres conférences inédites au Collège Philosophique*, *Oeuvres* II (2011).

3 This text was written in 1935 and published in 1982 by the publishing house Fata Morgana, with an introduction and notes by Jacques Rolland.

goes from the others to the Other. This considerable deepening occurs precisely through the displacement.

What is the novel about? It is above all about others. In his theoretical notes, Levinas envisages something that he does not really do in his subsequent work, or at least he envisages it in another way. It is above all a question of all the possible figures and modalities that the relation to others assumes: conviviality, companionship, friendship, and finally love. Much could be learned from a serious study, both theoretical and historical, of what really happens for Levinas in this period.

In a lecture of 1950, "Les enseignements" (The Teachings), which takes up again the theme of voluptuousness that always tends infinitely to more voluptuousness, Levinas says that one may not reduce the other to the experience of pleasure. A few lines earlier, he speaks of Freud in order to reject him, to say that Freud reduces sex to seeking pleasure, without any inkling of the ontological dimension of sex. Levinas feels obliged to modify his view perhaps not only because of Freud, but perhaps more because of the whole atmosphere of the period, in which he feels the danger of falling into seduction and reduction, into seeking pleasure.

There is therefore this displacement of which I just spoke, this deviation, and at the same time, in the same lecture, Levinas writes: "And the caress takes place, however, as a double-headed sensation felt without confusion by two beings." This sentence is clearly not Freudian yet neither is it really that of the later Levinas. In the balancing of this "however," there is a sort of suspension, an extremely interesting hesitation, which I would associate with other slightly later or contemporary hesitations concerning the complexity of the relation to art, which Levinas always maintained in an ambiguous manner. It is particularly noticeable in the text "Reality and Its Shadow,"[4] written in 1948, which Danielle Cohen-Levinas introduced to me.

Let us return to this sketch for a novel.

The whole work is apparently entitled *Eros*. Let us maintain this hypothesis for the moment. The word "novel" is not written there, but everything has the appearance of a narrative. The first page of this narrative bears the title "Rondeau," which is the first name attributed to the principal character or to one of the characters, because other names appear afterwards. One does not know clearly whether they are other characters or whether it is always the same one. It is a fictitious character whom we will follow at the beginning of the war.

4 This text was first published as "La réalité et son ombre," *Les Temps Modernes* 38 (1948): 771–789. It was republished in Levinas's *Les Imprévus de l'histoire*, (1994, 123–148).

The work begins with several pages on the significance of the beginning of the war and its relation to France in particular. One has to hear the tone of these first pages. It is completely nationalist, that of a Frenchman who loves France viscerally, with all his strength, and who is unhappy about the war. More than a Frenchman, he is an *ultra-Frenchman*. As Michael Levinas said to me in a private conversation this summer, it is the little Lithuanian who has arrived and for whom France is everything.

> The ancient earth of France had become moving sands. The foot could not find a purchase anywhere. The enemy was infiltrating through invisible fissures in the soil. He did not come from one direction in order to go in another while crossing the spaces in between. (Levinas 2009, 37)

And France, the France that is thus affected, wounded by the war, what is it? He says what it is. Listen carefully.

> What is France? Immense stability. All the forms of life reaching their fullness, like eternally ripe fruit in a miraculous orchard. The perfection of a sedentary people, purified of all its memories of nomadic existence. (Levinas, 2009, 38)

One believes one is dreaming! One asks oneself what nomadic existence he is speaking about. And following this, there is an elegy to France that is almost like Hugo!

> Where one laughs like Rabelais, where one smiles like Montaigne, or one is noble as in the Cid, torn apart as in Phèdre, fooled like Georges Dandin, all the events of the plot foreseen. The great, the terrible book of destiny circulates in a school edition. Children comment upon it by learning their classics.

I do not know what great book, what terrible book of destiny, he is speaking of here. It is not a question of the Bible, that is certain.

The war is taken as the free point of departure for an incredible rupture within an order or harmony. And this order and harmony were also – this is the beginning of both the narrative and the theoretical motifs – the order of feelings.

> Feelings and the course of passions that have flowed despite the iridescence of their nuances, despite their refinement or their subtlety or their unexpectedness in a form that has waited for them for centuries, a form that is forever. O country where no catastrophe will prevent its civil servants from drawing their pension, where civilised life comes to be self-possessed in such a way that it seems as eternal, as immutable as nature. (Levinas 2009, 38)

This passage is very important. It seems to me that one can say that all the force of the narrative he undertakes is there. A magnificent nature, which is culture itself completely stabilised, has been struck point-blank and destabilised by war. In this nature, passions had flowed and had been in some way stabilised. It is perhaps

not far from this to say that they had been deprived of passion. Levinas does not want to say that to himself, but perhaps he nonetheless desires to go in that direction when he writes this, for the rest of the narrative will be the possibility of wakefulness or of awaking once war has been engaged then lost and once the hero has been taken prisoner. The narrative probes the dimensions of feeling, erratic ones, which can no longer be related to this great French culture. It seems as if war proposed or offered the possibility of a sort of return to the lived experience of passion, of desire, beneath all the forms of relation to others. Thus, what is initially disastrous proves itself at the same time to be a possibility that the narrative will enact. War, then, is inadmissible, yet at the same time, at least initially – and here Levinas translates the sentiment shared by many in this period – it liberates unexpected emotions.

> And when it was there, it continued to appear to us as an immense exercise, like manoeuvres where despite the severity of what is enacted one only fires blank cartridges.
> (Levinas 2009, 39)

This is what was called "the phoney war."[5] And here, in Levinas's narrative, this "phoney war" will progressively reveal itself as being other than something staged. At a precise moment in the narrative, it will denude beings and place them in this experience of wakefulness or of awaking of which I spoke. It is here (after several pages) that we meet Rondeau again, whom Levinas now depicts more closely:

> After the 10th of May, Rondeau sensed chaos. He was not one of those, however, who admitted this easily. He belonged to that magnificent lineage, to that masterpiece of creation that one calls the common Frenchman. It was not a matter of intelligence but of reason. Rondeau was the son of a minor civil servant, now retired, who had enriched his spare time with research into Descartes' birthplace, and had not climbed a further step on the social ladder. He was a travelling salesman in silk and, having like everyone once received a travel grant, he had in his youth lived for some time in South America. (Levinas 2009, 39–40)

Rondeau is thus a common Frenchman who has returned to France because he loves France above everything. He is also, by the way, an interpreter. We arrive at the decisive moment that precedes the capitulation. I shall read one of the rare passages with dialogue, where Levinas ventures still further into literary writing. Rondeau goes to the train station, the train station in Paris:

> – The train for Crève Coeur le Grand?
> The railway employee makes a vague gesture.
> – Here is the train to Creil.

5 The period between the declaration of war on September 3, 1939, and the invasion of France on May 10, 1940 – tr.

– And after that?
– You'll see. (Levinas 2009, 40–41)

Rondeau understands. After Creil there is indeterminate land or perhaps even a country to explore, thirty kilometres from Paris.

The enemy is so close that Rondeau understands everything is finished. He thus takes the train, knowing that it is the end and that he is not actually leaving for a front that is capable of holding fast. He leaves amidst the general disarray. Indeed, one is no longer able to say where one is going at thirty kilometres from Paris. Rondeau sees a stationmaster, and Levinas writes:

> In a short time, near a charming train station, he will return to a small house with a garden with white curtains at the windows, one of those houses that one sees through the window and that gives the traveller who may bear troubles or sorrow the impression that all France is on holiday and all France is happy. Perhaps through the open windows one will see a young girl at the piano? (Levinas 2009, 41)

A young girl at the piano: the first, fugitive appearance – there are very few – of an erotic figure. No doubt that is much to say of a young girl at the piano; let us say that it is the first appearance of a figure that evokes charm, amorous charm. Afterwards there will be at least one other young girl.

This is the beginning of a very short series of comments concerned with the gaze. There is Rondeau's gaze in the train; the gaze at the young girl at the piano; the gaze at a quiet house of a still happy France; but, further on, there is also the gaze at complete catastrophe. This is critically important because many, many things are traversed by the gaze. Indeed, the gaze is desire. Perhaps one could continue a little in this direction: vision is desire. It is perhaps in this way that the face becomes invisible. It is at the same time a desiring gaze that also sees what is invisible. One will see this further on.

In Levinas's narrative, we are now at the continuation of this journey leading he knows not where:

> [...] in this train one boarded without a ticket and where an inspector did not come, which perhaps ran without a driver, like something absurd, by the abstract chance of the rails. Rondeau murmured:
>
> – I am alone.
> And he added, without knowing why:
> – Alone with God. (Levinas 2009, 42)

Levinas has drawn a line under this last phrase. It should be understood, I think, as the end of the chapter.

Thus: the ruptures of war, the somewhat perplexed gaze at the world that is in the midst of changing completely, and the experience of solitude. On the following page, suddenly, Levinas begins anew:

> Alone with God? Will one be able to find some character who will support this solitude without letting himself be tempted? (Levinas 2009, 42)

At this juncture, strangely, Levinas uses the word "character" (personnage). It is as though he asked himself, as the author: will I be able to find a character? And, at the same time, a character means a person here; it means "someone."

> There was an instant of total void between the disappearance of France and the reappearance of France, an instant of defeat in which nothing recreated itself – a vertiginous void, an interregnum, a hiatus, the absolute interval. (Levinas 2009, 42)

Basically, I think that everything Levinas wanted to narrate in what follows takes place here, in this absolute interval. An order is dismantled, another order has not been reconstituted. It is at the same time a kind of loss, an immense privation, and an opening up of possibilities.

One page further on:

> The sky is empty. It was absolutely evident and one had to think and decide for oneself [...]. (Levinas 2009, 43)

There is a void of culture, of France, of the supports. And there is the void of the sky. Just now, "Alone with God," and now, "The sky is empty."

> No France any longer. She left in a night, like an immense circus tent, leaving a clearing with some scattered debris. (Levinas 2009, 43)

And again, some lines further on:

> Everything is permitted. (Levinas 2009, 44)

An isolated sentence, which we, of course, find difficult not to relate to Dostoyevsky. It is known that Levinas read Dostoyevsky often. Certainly, he read Proust, but he also read Dostoyevsky. Thus, suddenly, everything is permitted.

A new alert. The hero has changed. It is now Jules who makes his entrance and no longer Rondeau. We have returned to town.

> Jules descended into the shelter when some aeroplanes appeared that were purportedly hostile – (to what?). He was next to a schoolgirl, from a Lycée, in a lost corner of the trench [the shelter becomes a trench], and with joy he felt desire without ambiguity, without pathos being born again within himself, as simple as purity. (Levinas 2009, 44)

The second young girl, this time a pupil of a Lycée. Levinas will say nothing more about what takes place between Jules and the schoolgirl, but everything has been said. Everything is said in this tension of the meeting, by chance, in a proximity that is not promiscuity, everything is said of the shelter, of a desire that is like purity. Many reflections file past, and actions in the real sense are always very brief. Levinas does not really follow up on any of them at all. Jules is close to the Lycée pupil and in a sense one does not really know if it is an ellipse. Afterwards, in the following narrative, there are some reflections on the state in which one finds oneself:

> And from now on we shall find in personal happiness the consolation for the unhappiness of our fatherland. (Levinas 2009, 44)

There is ruin, collapse, not only in what was the order but also in what was happiness, affective positivity, in the order of the fatherland. Levinas reverses this state into personal happiness, which thus echoes the desire that has just been mentioned.

> For the first time following a thousand years of the French state, the French all belonged to themselves. (Levinas 2009, 44)

The ruin of order also sends each one back to himself.

> Nothing separated them any more from themselves – none of these obligations that for a thousand years had come regularly to disturb the lives of the inner man – taxes, military service, all these lies that had done so much harm to them, all this universality imposed from without. (Levinas 2009, 44–45)

Naturally, the disappearance of all the beautiful French order – this time not as a cultural order but as one of the state, as universality imposed from without – turns these people back upon themselves. Turned back upon themselves, they are also turned towards the possibility, indeed towards the necessity, of going outside themselves, of opening themselves to their own desires.

A little further on this time (we are not present when they are captured by the Germans), Rondeau or Jules, we do not know which, has been captured, taken prisoner, and is being transported to the camp where he will be imprisoned. He passes through a village.

> At the end of the village the most probable [but without doubt the most improbable] spectacle of History was taking.
>
> A sentimental and patriotic barber cries out to everyone that nothing was of value any longer, that money was of no significance beside the love that one had to feel for France and for its little defeated soldiers. With his two apprentices – interrupting their infernal work with rounds of beer in the bistro – the barber was giving free shaves.

It is the first scene in which Levinas devotes himself to such a description. It is a scene that was seen and heard. It is certainly also a memory, but this terminates strangely with a quip, a sort of French private joke: "Oh, you know, they're giving free shaves tomorrow!"[6] Here, however, the barber is shaving for free on that very day and because of his love for France.

The prisoners march together. They are directed towards a camp that is being built at the end of a village or small town.

> The person marching next to him, completely intoxicated by the end of all the individual passions in the Great Passion that he was preparing himself to live – suggested to Asselin that he carry his heavy, folded great-coat. "Take upon yourself suffering of others" – this captivity will be magnificent, constituted by these noble sentiments. (Levinas 2009, 46)

It is the beginning of captivity as the experience of the other, as the experience of a new relation to the other, which begins simply by offering to carry the other's coat.

One should remind oneself of what a military overcoat of the time was. It could indeed be extremely heavy. There follow a certain number of reflections on the possibility of attaining a new consciousness, a new sense of passion that is at once individual, relation to others, and at the same time becomes in some way mediated by what France had been, the fatherland, and beyond this, destiny itself.

And here is the second desiring vision and without a doubt one of the most important in the narrative:

> In the meantime, one entered into Ostenholz. In the streets, the women were passing by. (Levinas 2009, 49)

The context allows one to know that the captive soldiers are in a lorry. Yet this does not seem to be of much importance.

> It was evident that this was an extraordinary spectacle. Each of their gestures was like the rendering evident of their lascivious substance. The women walking were there solely to show how their bodies could walk. (Levinas 2009, 49–50)

There is something in this distinction of the function of the body, as lasciviousness, as an immediately perceived presence, that will also provide the rhythm of the following scene. From a general point of view, throughout this essay, one can see without a doubt that a crucially important role accrues to defunctionalisation. Everything that is seen and that is interesting, everything that awakens desire, begins by being marked as having been subtracted from what is

6 A reference to the guillotine – tr.

functional, practical, useful. There are thus all the functionalities of society, of the State, etc., and also the functionalities of ordinary life, reaching as far as the market itself. These women no longer walk for the prisoners. That is why the gaze is important. They walk only to show how a female body walks, how it sets "their lascivious substance" into motion.

And then, a little further on, the convoy of prisoners advances. One sees the little boys and little girls who are playing. At this moment (one does not really know whether it is the narrator, the hero, or whether it is still Rondeau who is speaking), one reads this reflection:

> And then one day this little girl will withdraw from this community of children, which amounts to the meaningful world – the masculine world – in order to enter into her mystery. She will draw herself around herself and will glide there while continuing to fulfil the function that falls on her in the meaningful world – carrying the net bag, typing, combing the children's hair.
>
> Body on leave of absence, on holiday. Each of their gestures, the succession of poses that they struck in order to carry their net bag or their umbrella, was pornographic.
>
> (Levinas 2009, 49–50)

Levinas thus insists: when a woman detaches, disconnects herself from this role of the social function, she is no longer merely lascivious, but truly pornographic, and at the same time she has entered into her own mystery. In this sketch, in very few words, because there are not many texts to bear witness to this, Levinas establishes a great proximity between the mystery – that is to say, also the alterity, therefore the feminine – and lasciviousness, obscenity (the word will appear later), and desire. It is extremely interesting. Throughout this narrative, we learn nothing other than this: there is a sort of trembling of eroticism, understood in the most carnal, the least transcendent manner, to rejoin what Daniel Cohen-Levinas says elsewhere in this volume. With respect to this point precisely, there is a modification, a difference of accent, in Levinas's following works. The little girls of whom Levinas speaks will later find themselves in this situation of being in possession of their mystery yet completely immersed in their interiority, only showing the functional aspect, while at the same time revealing to the eyes of desire, the essence, the substance, the truly pornographic reality of this substance.

A little later, another important scene takes place, and now it is the flesh that is at issue.

> [...] when passing the brothel, the prisoners jostled among themselves on the lorry in order to admire a pullover that was drying in the wind and sometimes a pair of stockings. (Levinas 2009, 50)

The stockings are to some extent the high point of the narrative.

> But the day when through an open window one saw a young girl combing her long hair, one had the impression of something indecent or of a dream, acerbic, wrenching poetry of destructive beauty. Stronger than the Lorelei but not higher. The mixture of great beauty and of great baseness. These useful things, the comb to disentangle the tousled hair, as necessary as a hammer is to insert a nail or a knife to cut a knob of bread, these stockings that keep the wearer warm or that prevent shoes from irritating and injuring the skin and that one wields in everyday life with the precision and the sobriety of a doctor, no longer had anything of their chaste essence as utensils. Another essence pervaded them, repossessed them, that which placed them in the cannibalistic world of eroticism.
>
> (Levinas 2009, 50–51)

At the time, during the war, when there was a shortage of silk stockings, before the Americans introduced nylon ones, women simulated wearing stockings by tracing in ink a seam behind their legs. For one had to have stockings. There is something extremely powerful in this. The stocking, carefully described in its function of providing warmth or of protecting the foot, finds itself offered as a spectacle to the passing prisoners, once it is hung out. The "stocking" becomes in some way the essence of eroticism, which Levinas defines on the following page in this way:

> [. . .] for the whole human anatomy, which is so admirably adjusted to its biological purpose, returns in eroticism to its massiveness as flesh, almost like the animal for the butcher – the hand, the foot, the abdomen – everything that has another substance outside the so pure and chaste system of the organism and of sport, where the leg serves to run, the muscle to make an effort. Here [in eroticism] everything is as if it should be eaten in the indistinctness of its massive agglomeration of elemental skin. (Levinas 2009, 51)

There is a strong and heavy insistence on the massiveness of the flesh, the block, the lascivious, pornographic weight. This insistence is found continually in the text. The heaviness is the place where it declares itself, announces itself, indicates itself as what has been called the mystery and, even more specifically, the mystery of woman. Later in the text, the moment arrives when the scene in the prison camp unfolds, and here Levinas shows himself more attentive to the relations of the prisoners amongst themselves. He describes them as relations in which one finds oneself with people whom one does not know, with whom one has not chosen to be, and who at the same time represent the privileged essence of alterity.

> [...] the mobilisation often puts you by chance in contact with people whom you have not had the opportunity to come to know in the world and to whom, with a bit of nonchalance, one can say *tu* under the flag. All that is required is a little discernment in order not to suffer from the promiscuity and to come to know men of value [...]

There is evidently this accent on discernment, on choice between people of value and those without value. At the same time, however, there is now this

real experience of a relation between the other men. In these theoretical notebooks, a bit like a respondent to the narrative, one finds long analyses on comradeship, on companionship. On the basis of this experience one already envisages what the return to society will be.

> He was to become a member of society again. There were already thousands of invisible threads tying themselves around him. He became united, responsible. (Levinas 2009, 55)

It seems to me that this is the first time that the word "responsible" appears in this context. And at the same time, immediately, quite strikingly, one perceives a beginning of the critique of the society to which one will return, which already bears the stigma of consumerism. Essentially, at issue are advertising pages:

> [. . .] a few leagues away from the concentration camps and the crematory ovens [of which nothing has been said hitherto, so it is really a liberated prisoner speaking, who knows what has happened], the advertising pages of *Illustration*, arriving imperturbably from Paris, teaching the virtues of a new brand of oven. Madam went out . . . baby there . . . dinner cooked by itself . . . when Monsieur returns, the roast will be just right . . . I shall only regret one thing in my life, which is to not have come to know the Universal School earlier. "To commit suicide with our revolver is a pleasure." (Levinas 2009, 56)

We are approaching the end of the narrative, which is also, at the same time, the end of the war. The society of France, so harmonious at the beginning, will be followed by a terrible one: that of the creation of false needs. Between the two there was a sort of fleeting flash of the liberation of desire, as in in the scene of the shelter, or rather of the liberation of the possibility of thinking desire, of representing desire as something other than a need, as something other than what is ranged in, channelled into the order. Two episodes are presented as the end of the narrative; they are not very clear but their significance is quite explicit. On the one hand, there is an episode, to which mention is made elsewhere in the *Carnets de captivité*, which takes place in a château, no doubt occupied by French or American liberation troops. These troops tear down the draperies. The heavy fall of the draperies is like the laying bare of what is behind them: worn stones, a number of destroyed, broken things, remnants of the war. On the other hand, there is an even more mysterious scene, in which Jules returns and causes a scandal during a public lecture by slapping the lecturer. One does not know why exactly he does this, but one can guess and therefore also understand it. If one examines the text closely, one becomes aware that the lecturer is someone who only relates things that are too simple, too comforting, and not very credible after the war. Jules, however, represents someone who knows that, whatever happens, an unquiet will remain from now on. The lady in whose house the lecture is held dies of a heart attack after the violent incident Jules brings about.

We arrive at the end of these pages, at the end of this painting – of which we cannot manage to decide whether it is merely ironic or simply ambiguous – a future world, which will be one where all the houses will be built of glass because we shall have nothing to hide:

> Would we have, by chance, anything to hide? Glass would become the only material permitted in the city, the only substance that is at the same time resistant, exhibiting all the qualities of a thing, and which, however, [is transparent]. (Levinas 2009, 58)

This rather strange interlude on glass is itself followed by a somewhat long "Interlude" (given this title by Levinas), in which all sorts of developments with respect to Faust and Margarete occur. One knows neither where this comes from nor what it is connected to, except that, as we know, Faust and Margarete comprise a love relation.

After this, the following pages do not really still belong to the narrative. I cannot tell, for example, whether this sentence, written on another page, belongs to the narrative or not:

> Obscene – the way others make love. (Levinas 2009, 59)

I think this lapidary formulation, which comes from we know not exactly where, says an enormous amount. It says that obscenity, all that which is more or less seen as pornography, lasciviousness, etc., is what unfolds under the gaze of another who is a stranger to what happens for others. However, that which is the case for a spectacle one should not have actually seen, a spectacle not meant for exteriority, is evidently not the case when it is not a private spectacle, when it is we who are making love.

This note is followed by another. I shall not even try to say whether it is related to what precedes, though it is indeed on the same page:

> He is dead – that means – he will never be my enemy. (Levinas 2009, 59)

2 Conclusion

I have found, perhaps drawing on chance pages, the end of this whole narrative, the end – in the sense of "in the end" but also of "beyond" or "after" – like an intrusion of theoretical notes, a series of pages where, indeed, if I have properly understood the order of the copies, Levinas writes theoretical notes on the left while continuing his narrative on the right, which itself is interlaced with many reflections. They are more reflections than descriptions, narration, or dialogues.

In the final analysis, this sentence "Obscene – the way others make love" says fundamentally something very simple: the love we make is not obscene.

Now, love, *eros*, let us say, has been, in a very veiled manner in the novel, and, in a very clear manner in the theoretical fragments, the only path possible for the self to venture outside the self. Thus, I shall state, in conformity with what is said about *eros* in the, let us say, theoretical, philosophical *Carnets*, this formula:

> The embrace – transubstantiation of myself. (Levinas 2009, 196)

There is, I believe, in the moment of this attempt at writing on Levinas's part, the attempt to touch, in some way, the mystery through literature, rather than to make a sort of literary shutter onto what one would otherwise view through a philosophical shutter, even if this attempt fails because Levinas is not really a writer of fiction. What attracted him, however, and this is certain, is the possibility of touching the mystery through narration and not of illustrating a theory. Precisely because of this, perhaps, narration, this impoverished little narration, which does not narrate much, still touches the mystery. It does so by approaching it with the obscene, with the pornographic, with desire, with this motif of desire as vision – which is not exactly Levinas's theme – something towards which his work in this period and later will be inclined in order to understand what has happened. When I speak of vision, in the sketch of the novel, I am also referring to the passages where there is marked insistence on what he "opposes" to vision, to the "sound" that penetrates and does not keep things at a distance.

There is therefore a very great hesitation, a great uncertainty in Levinas himself. In these pages, this uncertainty falls both on the side of eroticism and on the side of literary writing. The two are intimately linked. After 1947, there will be no further attempts at literature. There will also not be the temptation of literature. I shall not say that there will be no further erotic temptations, but this temptation will no longer have the same accent. The tone will have been modified, changed a little. This is why I consider that these pages in Levinas – and this is what, for me, constitutes their great interest, one's fascination in reading them – are not merely a prefiguration of what he does afterwards, though in many respects they indeed are. Yet there is something else. Because clearly he never again continued along this path. Far be it from me to say that he regressed. This is clearly not the point.

Afterwards, rather, Levinas marked, without knowing it, an extremely discreet moment, for he never published anything about it and we never knew anything of it (and now we find ourselves confronted with these pages). It is a moment prolonged by others and still not exhausted today. He marked the difficult relation of philosophy to literature with respect to the sensible mystery:

that which is connected to *eros*. Or rather, he marked the sensible mystery in general, or the mystery as sensible, or the sensible as mystery.

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