

Danielle Cohen-Levinas and Jean-Luc Nancy

Eros, Once Again: Danielle Cohen-Levinas in Conversation with Jean-Luc Nancy

Danielle Cohen-Levinas: Where should we begin, I am tempted to ask? For nothing is more singular than this literary experience in the heart of captivity, and at the same time nothing is more illuminating than the manner in which Levinas from the outset divided his work into three registers: philosophical, literary, and critical – and this already in 1942. I will begin by evoking our visit at IMEC in September 2006. It was the first time that you had discovered the Emmanuel Levinas “deposit.” On the computer screen, we went through the digitalised files of the *Carnets de captivité*, and I remember your reaction when faced with the pages of the novel, the one supposedly called *Eros*. We read its pages aloud, not without joy and astonishment, and the more we read the more it became patently clear to you that this proximity of literature and philosophy, far from cancelling or contradicting the specificity of one or the other, already bore the very movement of a thought and of writing that recognises itself in the sharing of singularities. One could even ask if, very early on, the young Emmanuel Levinas, after breaking off from his reading of poetry and Russian literature, from his studies of biblical verse and its narrative wisdom, from his admiration with regard to French literature, which his friend Maurice Blanchot had introduced to him during the Strasbourg years, did not live and undergo the experience of literature as a completely separate experience of thought, as a locus where exigencies and questions are concentrated that can no longer really pass through the philosophical mode or, at any rate, which carry out a displacement that philosophy alone perhaps would not have been able to initiate. Did literature, in the midst of the war, in the midst of captivity, come to work in Levinas against inoperativeness?

Jean-Luc Nancy: I don’t know whether I can use these terms. There is a risk of confusing “inoperativeness” with the meaning it has in Blanchot. I don’t think this preoccupation was present between 1940 and 1945 or even a little later, either for the one or for the other. If you mean by “inoperativeness” the state of relative inoperativeness of Levinas as a prisoner, then what he did to “occupy” himself – in the midst of a thousand tasks and preoccupations – was related to his “work” to the extent that he was already a man with the task of work. Like

Note: Paris-Strasbourg, October 2010.

Translation: Translated, from the French, by Ashraf Noor

other prisoners (Sartre, Ricoeur, and many others), he certainly had the great desire to remain in contact with his projects, with his world of thought. The absence of a habitual context of his work – books, conversations, and encounters – made the desire more acute, that is, he had a fear of feeling himself dulled or blurred. Once again, he shares this with others. However, not every – let's say professional – philosopher felt the desire to write a novel during his time of captivity. This desire is evidently prior to captivity. It must have been nourished by his association with Blanchot, as you say, and with others. But also by the example of Sartre: *La nausée* dates from 1938. It was not only a philosopher's novel but, by the work and by what was said about it, one knew that this fiction issued from a desire to make something of the phenomenological experience sensible. I cannot enter into the theoretical and historical analysis that would be necessary. I do not know whether this question has been studied: how and why philosophy was carried out then and in this literary manner. Sartre had felt the impact of Céline and Kafka, which was to say that literature had made itself philosophical, in a more evident way, I should say, than at the time of Flaubert or Mallarmé. Perhaps already Proust. And Gide. And Thomas Mann and Musil. And Malraux. Without a doubt, the question of literature had haunted philosophy since the beginning of Romanticism (without going back still further). Schelling, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard bear witness to this. But it was never a question of the novel, always rather poetry. In the years we are speaking of here, Heidegger does not think for a moment of the novel, only of Hölderlin, Trakl, George.

In the encounter between a philosophical tendency in literature (which also remained mostly narrative, stories, dramas, and passions) and a literary tendency in philosophy (which also remained mostly the exercise of a concept) there is certainly a phenomenon that reveals something about the time. One could observe that *Sein und Zeit* lent itself well to a denunciation of the novel and of prose under the title of “inauthenticity” (to retain the questionable translation of *Eigentlichkeit*) while this kind of judgement could not be found in Husserl or in his other disciples. There are no doubt lessons to be learned from this contrast between an emphasis placed on the poem and an appeal to the novel, which would offer, rather, a naked truth, bared, even rude.

In any case, it is certain that Levinas, on the eve of the war, is a spirit very largely nourished by literature – all the names that you bring up, all those that one finds in the *Carnets* – which is to say that he is also a philosophical spirit for whom philosophy from the outset overflows the theoretical and academic discipline. He is not alone; it is a movement of the period. Camus, too, makes his debut, between essay and narrative, in the years immediately following the war. I think there was the quest for thought that was concrete, vital, active. One has to consider that this was also the time of great disappointment with regard

to philosophical representations. It is really the time, when, in a reprisal (then unconscious) of Nietzsche, one distanced everything one called “metaphysics,” a term that had already received so much disapproval in Valéry.

DC-L: One of the questions that poses itself from the outset when reading Levinas's novel is: why did he call it *Eros*, if that indeed is the title? There is still a hesitation. The novel is called *Eros* or it's called *Triste opulence*. The pages of the manuscript of this novel were found in a folder Levinas had marked *Eros*, but there is nothing to say that this folder had not also contained other preparatory work on the question, above all with regard to *Totalité et infini*. The invocation of the erotic motif is, here again, at the heart of Levinas's philosophy. In addition, before you had a photocopy of the manuscript of the novel, you were able to consult some preparatory drafts for his reflection on love, eros, the caress, fecundity, and filiation, which is present in *Le Temps et l'Autre* and in *Totalité et Infini*. You even said to me: “But these pages can't be for a novel!” Don't you find it surprising that Levinas attaches himself to this motif as to an idiom, to the point of displacing it in a narrative frame as the central figure of a world in complete inoperativeness and disorientation? All the more since the erotic question is an old preoccupation, which the history of philosophy has not failed to contest, discuss, avoid or, on the contrary, exalt. If one adds the biblical referent to the philosophical referent, we have a very particular constellation, because in the Jewish tradition there is indeed the trace of a primordial divine *eros* of which one can say that it is incarnated in the biblical text. It is this idea that there is a primordial – divine or human or both, it does not matter – *eros* in the work of Levinas that I would like to discuss with you. *Eros* would refer to an objective order of language from which philosophy and literature would not be able to escape. It is a question of a certain exposition to the “mystery,” a question that is essential for Levinas but equally for you. If the word “mystery” imposes itself here, it is because it marks the relation of Levinas to literature, whether it be his relation to Proust, to Léon Bloy, of whom one is a bit surprised to learn that Levinas read him assiduously in the time of his captivity, or to Shakespeare or to the Russian authors. It is also the case for the relation to the other, which remains, however it occurs, an incommensurable and unattainable mystery. It is the case, to take up a motif again that is dear to you, with the “literary absolute.”

J-L N: In the philosophical-literary impulse I have just spoken about, I don't know whether anything remains or not of the “literary absolute” in the sense that it could constitute for early German Romanticism an ideal for the realisation of thought that would be adequate to an infinite ground, a real actualising of the infinite. It seems to me that what derives from Romanticism is

rather what turns to poetry. This is thought as the true act of the word, the offering of the word itself . . . I do not deny that a trace of this temptation can remain in narrative, prosaic desire. In any case, we then broach discreetly another immense debate, which will afterwards become overt, concerning poetry (hatred of it in Bataille, vituperation of it in Artauld; in general a distrust of its “gooey temptation” – another of Bataille’s expressions – will be set to work later).

I imagine that for Levinas the prose of narration would be a sort of poetry in the sense in which it could aim towards the possibility of presenting “the thing” or “the truth”: this humble truth of a rough, harsh existence, one that is indeed disenchanted yet enchanting itself precisely in its very narration. I imagine, but I do not know. It is impossible for me to conclude this on the basis of the notes we have. Yes, he wants, he would like, to enter into mobile, supple, agile speech that would render experience, its banality, its weight, and its fears and desires. His drafts of dialogues, his images of glimpsed scenes (these young girls, these women).

At the same time, he is guided by a project or by a theoretical plan. This is testified by the notes on the motif of *eros*, which are like the double of the novel (and which, for Levinas, could very well bear this title – we cannot divide them) or of which the novel is rather a double – a double, though, that is slighter and in turn traversed by theoretical remarks. In the lecture in which I presented this text, I expressly rejected reading these notes except for some that really “adhere” to the tissue of the narrative. I wanted to show the movement of the text alone, as unfinished as it is. But one cannot deny the effort, the magnetising, the desire to go towards the development of a thought of what he calls *Eros*.

It is certainly not fortuitous if the form of the novel seeks to impose itself upon him in order to speak of this motif. *Eros* is sensible, it has to be sensible, to let itself be felt. When the figure called Jules finds himself in a shelter next to a schoolgirl, one feels (yes, one feels precisely) that the writer wants us to feel tested by the desire that the situation and the shadow elicit. The text says it: “everything is permitted.” One finds oneself thinking that Levinas is using an ellipse in the erotic scene. A major question is perhaps connected to this: is it an ellipse? Or does Levinas not dare? Or does it not happen?

The stakes are very high – all the more so if one recalls this note on the obscene that almost completes this notebook. Because at stake is the question of what one can say, show, of the erotic act, or, put differently, to know if it can speak or show itself. In two senses: whether someone can “say it” (and what does that mean?) or whether the act itself can speak. It is at the same time a reality and a symbol or a metonymy of what is at stake in literature (in literary

desire and anxiety): saying “it.” It is a question of pornography, a word that appears in the text. It is a question of the obscene: if, as Levinas says, the obscene is others making love, that means it is only “pure,” dignified, noble (purity haunts the text of the narrative, just as that of the notes) when I make love, when we make love, when we make love to each other. And perhaps this cannot be said. Not because it is “our” making love but because as soon as it is said, posed, presented, it becomes that of others. Literature would be condemned to being an obscenity – or an ellipse.

Some time later these questions will be agitated, they will agitate the literary scene. Bataille (who had published *Story of the Eye* and *Madame Edwarda* under a pseudonym before the war – what did Blanchot and Levinas know of this at the time? That’s a question . . .) or Klossowski, or later Guyotat, and the lifting of censorship on Sade or on Miller (the latter had published *Tropic of Cancer* in 1934; Cendrars, among others, had applauded it . . .). There is here a hive of difficult questions concerning the emergence of *eros* in what I would call public consciousness and thought. And there was also Freud. As I note in my chapter, Freud was not to Levinas’s liking when he read him shortly after the war.

What is remarkable, though, with the word or with the title – *Eros* – is that Levinas in effect prepares what will, on the one hand, become a central element of his description of the relation to the other and, on the other hand – amplified, enlarged, and transformed, the very motif of the “other” and of his precedence. From the beginning, it is only a matter of this: the concern is to go out of oneself in order to become oneself, and “self” only comes in relation to the other, to the other *tout court*. This other is, above all, woman, it is the feminine. More precisely, it is the feminine inasmuch as this opens all the virtualities present throughout the other forms of relation – comradeship, fraternity, companionship, friendship (not to forget the animal warmth of a dog). All these notions are analysed in the notes, and the narrative renders sensible how much the war, the mobilisation, and captivity at least contributed to etching them in Levinas’s mind.

In fact, something very simple can be said: war and captivity were at the same time the collapse of a social and cultural order (the whole beginning of the text speaks of this) and the experience of other relations: friends cultivated, women desired (glimpsed, brushed against; other women, the women of others). All the proximities one knew became distant, others came to the fore, promiscuity too. But in the end it was, on one hand, the revelation of the camps, and, on the other hand, the return to a life in which it was as difficult to prolong what had just ended as it was to retrieve what was prior to the war. The relation to literature could not but be affected by this also. It is difficult to

say more about this, even if it seems that for Levinas the temptation or the literary endeavours continued for some time.

DC-L: How should one speak of mystery in literature? Or, rather, is literature the mystery? Is it literature that no knowledge can claim to master? Do you think that in the highest and purest manifestation of the mystery there could reside a kind of narrative law from which narrative and the novel would flow?

J-LN: What is certain is that for Levinas the novel bears or shelters the mystery. I think he charges this word with that which is subtracted from the concept. I am not sure that I am able to decide whether the mystery itself is narrative, as you suggest. It is highly possible. This is clear enough in the Greek mysteries. I am trying to think of the great Christian mysteries. One can say each of them implies a story; including that of the Trinity, which would be less evident. Narrative would be inherent in the truth of what shows itself (for me, it is the definition of mystery) as distinguished from the truth that demonstrates itself, establishes itself, verifies itself. But one would need to take the time to go more into that . . .

DC-L: Is this question of mystery also constitutive of philosophy as the love of wisdom? Levinas turned the idiom around, turning it into a movement of recurrence, and said of philosophy that it was also the “wisdom of love.”

J-LN: Philosophy thinks that it dissipates mystery in the sense of mystical obscurity. But it always ends up finding a narrative again . . . the ascent outside the cavern or the life of the spirit.

DC-L: I would like to return for a moment to this double conjunction very particular to Levinas. Narrative eros and theoretical eros. According to you, is this configuration present in the narrative, several passages of which you have commented on? Is there a trace of the theoretical Eros in the narrative Eros? I am asking you this question because the erotic dimension in Levinas's narrative is bordered by the presence of the pornographic, by visions with an erotic tonality, like that of the young girl at the piano, and these visions give birth to a relation to desire and a search for corporeal pleasure, where the body of a woman is precisely seen as a desired and desirable body, and which will later disappear in Levinas's work or which Levinas displaces onto another problematic by carrying out a sort of detachment in the very interior of the word Eros.

J-LN: This will disappear, you say? Is this completely certain? It would be interesting to go further into it? But there was transformation, that is certain. Transformation and/but continuity. I sense there is extremely delicate work to

be done on this transformation. Perhaps it is infinite because it is not at all certain that there's a conclusion to be drawn. The end of captivity and of the war certainly displaced the given circumstances that were Levinas's point of departure between mobilisation and liberation. And there is also the reading of Freud I evoked. This is perhaps the reason for the fear of desire, and *eros* in general being reduced *a priori* to need and impulse (itself understood as a mechanical force . . .). In general, one can follow in Levinas an evolution or an oscillation with respect to the subject of desire: does it open itself to infinity or does it close itself around a sensual pleasure understood as possession? This hesitation is not unique to him. He receives it, rather, from a whole *doxa*. And with respect to this he is somewhat audacious: he attributes or attributed more to desire, up to a certain moment. Here again one broaches a domain that has still to be explored, not only for the history of this thought but for our own thought. I think that we have not yet recognised desire enough. If, indeed, it is "recognisable," identifiable.

DC-L: I would like us to return to the genesis of your reading of Levinas's novel, if I can say this, once you held it in your hands. What were your initial impressions? Could you say that in Levinas the writer you find the trace or the mark or the signature of Levinas the philosopher? And if that is the case, how is the passage from one register to the other carried out? I'm asking you this question because Levinas often explained that literature represented for him what he called pre-philosophical experiences, as if an antechamber of philosophy properly speaking existed that would not be philosophy itself, philosophy complete and whole – systematic, if you prefer – but would be the condition of possibility for this, an exteriority of language and of expression that would come to inspire the exercise of philosophy with another breath, another respiration.

J-LN: Yes, the "pre-philosophical" is also "another breath," it is not very easy to understand this. I believe the determination "pre-philosophical" also derives from a *doxa* to which Levinas submitted in spite of himself. To this – afterwards – another dimension was added, that of a distrust of art and of the sensible. (As you know, there is also much one could say about this). On the other hand, one could think another breath is what Levinas wanted to find for his own thought. This is a character that is not "literary" properly speaking but altered with respect to discourse and the concept. At the same time, he conceptualises and tells a story, an intrigue, as he says. It would be necessary to return to the relation of a whole period to philosophical writing (speech). Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Deleuze, Derrida: each seeks in his own way to inflect discourse, that is, to displace it or transform it, to tamper with the assurance of

the concept, if I can say this in a tone already slightly dated. It is now more semantic (Deleuze), now more syntactic (Derrida), now more poetic, now more narrative, and Levinas participates a little in all of this: he needs his own words and his words are also the operators of sequences that are almost narrative.

But I think at the same time of something very simple: of all those no one is a writer. All are “writing,” all are alerted by an unease with respect to discourse (argument, demonstration, consequence, etc.), but no one takes his point of departure in literature such as a Proust, a Joyce, a Beckett, a Brecht, a Melville, a Genet, a Jabès, a Celan – to take some figures who roam in his surroundings. A philosopher constructs (even if he deconstructs), a writer walks, moves, roams (even if he also manufactures). These are neither heterogeneous fields nor overlapping regimes. They are irreducible allures, allures in thought, in feeling, in taste. Certainly, there are points of proximity, that is, of promiscuity, and sometimes crossing, hybridisation. But, profoundly, there is scission. Philosophy announces, opens paths, marks trails, indicates perspectives tentatively. Literature does not announce but gives, offers, lets something be touched, presents, and withdraws . . .

DC-L: In your chapter in this volume you indicate a turn that takes place in Levinas after the war, after captivity, and which would be marked by abandoning, or at least by not pursuing further, his vital interest in literary writing. And at the same time you say clearly that Levinas marked a neuralgic point in the relation between philosophy and literature. It is true, I think, one can underline it, that this is also a characteristic of the period. Sartre’s case is completely evident but he is not the only one; one could also cite Merleau-Ponty, who has not received the literary recognition that Sartre has. How do you yourself experience this relation today and do you feel that you belong to a constellation of philosophers – such as Deleuze, Foucault, Derrida, Lacoue-Labarthe, with whom you have worked and shared so much – for whom literature, but also poetry, remain this experience irreducible to the intimacy of thought?

J-LN: I think I have already answered this, more or less. I did not mention Lacoue-Labarthe, but I thought of him. It was important to him to maintain the rigour of philosophy but in all his being – in all his heart – he desired the poem (with respect to which he could be ferocious). He desired a prose that makes waste of poetic prettiness and which would be “thoughtful.” For he knew that thought does not live solely of rigour. But he also knew that the writer exposes himself to that which, in him or outside him, still cannot be exposed. Without dramatising excessively (he sometimes did, it’s true), he knew something of a life played in writing: that is, as a relation to the impossible. Perhaps one could say that philosophy is always in the possible, even creates possible things.

Literature opens up directly and immediately to the impossible: that is, to what one will never be able to deduce from the given, to take up again this thought of Bergson's that the possible is never other than the real turned back before itself. But that which is not given, that which is not really in front of us but which is coming, which approaches otherwise than "in front of" (behind, within, very far away . . .) is the impossible in the sense that one will not derive it from its own conditions.

DC-L: If I allow myself to open here a door to your intimacy of thought, to your own experience, do you accept my advancing in saying that behind or in front of you – there is no attributable direction – there is a Jean-Luc Nancy who is a writer, right next to, very close to, completely opposed to, or engaged with, the Jean-Luc Nancy who is a philosopher?

J-LN: I don't know who you are speaking about, nor what he is. Seriously!

