

Levinas's prison notebooks

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In June 1940 the French 10th Army was surrounded by invading German forces at Rennes. Among those captured was Emmanuel Levinas, mobilized as an officer/interpreter in 1939 and now imprisoned as an enemy combatant under the terms of the Geneva Conventions. Levinas passed five years in captivity, first at Frontstalags in Rennes and Laval, then at Vesoul, and from June 1942 until May 1945 at Stalag 11B at Fallingbomel near Magdeburg in Germany. He joined many other unwilling participants in the experience of mass internment during the Second World War, which was to have an enormous impact on postwar culture. Levinas's 1947 *Existence and Existents* may be placed alongside other works created in the Stalag system such as Braudel's *The Mediterranean* and Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time*. All of these works bear the marks of an intensified experience of time – at once compressed and distended, intense and empty; but in the case of Levinas this experience is both intensified and made into a theme or point of departure for philosophizing.

In his published work Levinas frequently refers to his experience of captivity. The articles 'A Religion for Adults' (1957) and 'The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights' (1975) among those collected in *Difficult Freedom* refer to events that took place during his detention.¹ In the former he refers to the 'long months of fraternal detention spent in a Frontstalag in Brittany with the North African prisoners' and to his feelings 'when, over the grave of a Jewish comrade whom the Nazis had wanted to bury like a dog, a Catholic priest Father Chesnet, recited prayers which were, in the absolute sense of the term, Semitic'; while in the latter he relates how the 'last Kantian in Nazi Germany' – the dog Bobby – enthusiastically greeted the Jewish prisoners as they returned from forced labour and in doing so recognized their humanity. The experience of the camp was also acknowledged, not without irony at the expense of Sartre and others, in the Preface to *Existence and Existents* where Levinas presents his book as the result of research 'begun before the war'

and then 'pursued and to a large extent written up in captivity'.

The Stalag is not evoked here as a guarantee of profundity nor as a right to indulgence, but as an explication of the absence of any position-taking with respect to those philosophical works published with much acclaim, between 1940 and 1945.

Yet until now, with the publication of Levinas's notebooks from his captivity, it had been impossible fully to assess the impact of the Stalag on Levinas's thinking and thus the degree of continuity between his pre- and postwar work.

The publication of the first volume of the Levinas *Œuvres** not only allows such an assessment to begin, but also revives the embers of the debate around the sense and overall significance of Levinas's work. The delay to the publication of his drafts, notebooks and correspondence was the regrettable result of the extended litigation between Levinas's children Michael Levinas and Simone Hansel over the inheritance of the 'moral right' to Levinas's authorship. This was settled in the French courts in June 2009, allowing Bernard Grasset/IMEC to publish this first volume of *inédits* in the autumn. The complex motivations and the rights and wrongs of the litigation are not entirely clear and in the end probably not of great public interest, but the delay in publishing the full extent of Levinas's authorship certainly limited the range and depth of exegesis and discussion. As Olivier Corpet, the director of IMEC, aptly commented 'The injunction on the publication of these writings deprived us of knowing the reaction to them of those who knew Levinas such as Blanchot, Derrida and Paul Ricoeur.'²

The now published first volume of the *Œuvres* is a rich source of material, notes and drafts from 1937 until the early 1960s, filling out some of the tantalizing allusions in the published work and introducing dimensions of Levinas's work which are sure to surprise many of his readers. The overall effect of the volume is to increase the density of Levinas's work, pointing to a level of political reflection and an engagement with literature

* Emmanuel Levinas, *Carnets de captivité et autres inédits*, ed., Rodolphe Calin and Catherine Chalier, *Œuvres I*, Bernard Grasset/IMEC, Paris, 2009. 499 pp., €25.00, 978 2 246 72721 7. Numbers in parentheses in the text refer to the pages of this volume.

otherwise only hinted at in the published writings. It is the first of three planned volumes of *inédits*; volume 2 will be dedicated to unpublished conference papers and volume 3 to *Autres inédits*. Even so, Rodolphe Calin, the textual editor of the *inédits*, emphasizes that the published material constitutes but a partial selection of the archival material at IMEC. The first volume, edited by Calin and Catherine Chalier, contains the *Carnets de captivité (1940–1945)*, *Écrits sur la captivité* and *Hommage à Bergson*, and the *Notes philosophiques diverses* from the mid-1940s to the early 1960s.

The notebooks from the 1940s and 1950s permit access to the existential and intellectual sources of Levinas's thought, confirming the significance of the prison camp experience for his rethinking of the axioms of Western philosophy. They underline the extent to which he saw his philosophy as constitutively anti-fascist, confirm the role of Judaism in his ethics, and emphasize, perhaps surprisingly to some readers, his perception of own work as the elaboration of a philosophy of socialism rooted in *jouissance* rather than work. Indeed, the experience of forced labour in the Stalag, accompanied by a critical reading of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* in the prison camp reading room, led Levinas to an extreme degree of scepticism about the liberatory potential of work, an unusual posture in the socialist tradition within which he explicitly situates his work. The notebooks also confirm the importance of Bergson for Levinas, as well as documenting the sustained criticism of Heidegger, carried through from the prison notebooks into the notes of the 1950s.

The experience of the Stalag

The seven notebooks that make up the *Carnets de captivité* do not adopt the form of a diary, but served Levinas as a space or interval for private reflection, thought and fantasy. These reflections on the reading and often the memory of literature and philosophy, punctuated by fragmentary episodes and characters from his planned novels, are nevertheless woven into oblique references to the daily sorrows and deprivations of captivity. The omnipresence of censorship, however, meant that references to the everyday life of forced labour in the Stalag had to be indirect or allusive. Levinas recorded a fuller picture of life in the Stalag soon after the Liberation in 1945 when he composed a group of writings (one of them a radio broadcast) on the captivity, and specifically on the Jewish experience of captivity. For while Levinas was detained as an officer of the French Army he was identified as Jewish, and as a Jew was set to work in

a 'Forestry Commando Unit' specifically assembled for Jewish POWs. This meant that his experience of the camp was even more insecure and traumatic than that of his fellow non-Jewish POWs and intensified his response to it in his writing.

In the three meditations on the captivity written immediately after his liberation, Levinas provides a pendant to his last major philosophical essay from the prewar period, 'De l'évasion'. He begins the short text 'Captivity' by evoking in a word image the predicament of the prisoner: 'the grey of the barbed wire enclosure and, in the Commandos, the foggy mornings when one left for work. Abandon. Damp. Cold. The mocking of the spring sun. The lost count of days past and days to come' (201). The experience of abandon, cold and the suspension of time and history (noted also by Braudel, a detainee in a severe Stalag for political prisoners in Northern Germany) nevertheless had its alleviations, although Levinas was punctilious in refusing to indulge in any romantic nostalgia for the camps: 'even though the prisoners had not known the horrors of Buchenwald, there was great suffering in the stalags and oflags' (201). Yet over five years the inhabitants of the camps organized themselves, and amid the inevitable conflicts there was preserved 'a kind of fraternity' among the detainees. With all due care and scruple Levinas describes the paradoxical emergence of 'an unsuspected liberty' under the eye of the guards.

Levinas distinguishes the 'unsuspected liberty' of the camps from the liberty of the bourgeois, one who is 'in place', whose 'daily life is the true reality' (202). In spite of appearances, Levinas is not mobilizing a quasi-Heideggerian appeal to the authenticity of camps against the daily routine of the bourgeois life. While the prisoner does indeed live ecstatically, 'lives in the beyond', living always on the point of departure, 'his real destiny, his real salvation is being accomplished elsewhere. In the communiqué.' The sense that one's own well-being depended on the movement of fronts, battles and the courage and endurance of others outside, and beyond one's control – also prominent in Braudel's experience of history taking place elsewhere while in the Stalag – was joined to material privation in which the prisoner possessed few belongings, but was not mastered by property. Levinas ends his witness to captivity by evoking 'a new rhythm of life', the air of another planet that accompanied the suffering, despair and mourning. This experience of solidarity remained in view throughout Levinas's subsequent writing, but it was immediately qualified in his reflections on the specific experience of the Jewish POWs.

In the text of the broadcast *L'expérience juive du prisonnier*, dated 25 September 1945, Levinas meditates upon the specific torments that captivity brought to Jewish POWs. He begins with the scruple that the experience of Jewish POWs was in a sense peripheral to the wider history of European Judaism during World War 2: 'They did not live in the death camps' (209). They were spared this horror by the French army uniform, which placed them under the protection of the Geneva Conventions, but while sharing the privations of their fellow soldiers, Levinas explains that they lived a further dimension of horror that was specific to their Judaism. Levinas reports that the news of the persecutions and the mass exterminations (*l'extermination en masse* in the radio broadcast; *chambres à gaz et des fours crématoires* in the written version) reached the camps very early on in the war, and this knowledge made the postal formula stamped on a returned letter – *parti sans laisser d'adresse* – into a death sentence. The day the Red Cross brought the post to the camps was a day of anguish for the Jewish prisoners, racked with anxiety about the fate of friends and families.

The Jewish prisoners of war were also painfully aware of the frailty of the protection offered by the Geneva Conventions: 'In the face of a systematic will to extermination, what could be the value in the last instance of the Geneva convention, that leaf of paper' (210). The sense of vulnerability afflicted the very grain and temporality of everyday life, with a sense of a deferred violent death continually shadowing the works and days of the Jewish prisoners. Even the Jewish *Sonderkommando* or labour brigade which was sent to work deep in the forest each day became loaded with sinister but not unrealistic intimations – 'they found themselves separated at once from other prisoners and the civilian population. All this took place as if something was being prepared for them, but always deferred' (210).

In the radio broadcast, Levinas moves from the sense of menace and helplessness faced by the Jewish prisoner of war to his experience of solitude before God. He is very careful to distinguish between the prisoner's and the deportee's experience of such dereliction. For the deportee, death 'martyrdom' is immediate, but for the prisoner there is an interval 'which permits the taking up of an attitude to pain before being seized and torn by it' (211). The theme of the interval as a space for 'meditation' both spiritual and philosophical becomes central to Levinas's thinking in and after the Stalag. He later described the captivity itself in terms of an interval between the intimations of National Socialism in the 1930s and the mourning

of its murderous course after the war. The interval is a space of horror and anguish, but it also sustains the frail possibility of escape or survival.

In the broadcast Levinas describes how the daily experience of this interval – the deferred death sentence – led many Jewish POWs, including himself, to an intensified understanding of Jewish liturgy and the central ideas of Judaism such as exile, persecution, justice and election. In the version written for *Le Magazine de France* but only partially published in 1945, Levinas spells out in more detail the different experience of the interval of captivity undergone by Jewish and other prisoners. While the others would speak of 'reform, relief, liberation' the Jewish prisoner knew himself 'to be in a hard world, without tenderness, without paternity. He existed without any human aid. He assumed alone all the weight of his existence' (207). Without diminishing the material deprivation and suffering of the other prisoners, Levinas nevertheless maintained that the Jewish prisoner could not experience captivity as 'an adventure' that would finally end 'with the "liberation of prisoners" serenely foreseen by the Geneva Convention' (207). For the Jewish prisoner, 'no illusions in the case of a German victory' and in the case of defeat, the fear of becoming the victim of a despairing vengeance. With death close, but always somehow deferred, the interval became a 'crossroads of life and nothingness. The Jewish prisoner moved with his torments and secret wisdom by the side of his non-Jewish comrades who perhaps did not even suspect the landscapes he carried within him' (207).

The notebooks testify to life in this interval, but more than this they also make the interval itself into a philosophical theme and locate its suffering at the outset of philosophizing. While they occasionally draw on specific events, the landscapes they describe are refracted through the memories and the reading of literature and philosophy as well as through the characters and scenes of Levinas's fictions. The Jewish POW's life in the interval of a suspended death sentence brought with it an intensified appreciation of Jewish belief and practice, and above all the daily experience of persecution. This is clearest in the stark second notebook, from 1942 to 1943, where the prisoner's sense of dereliction and abandon is at its most extreme. After the first notebook, with its memories of a continuity with prewar life and its concerns woven into episodes from the life of the field prisons, the second notebook desperately tries to hold together a philosophical and literary memory against the onslaughts of sustained and indifferent persecution.

One of the ways in which Levinas attempted to maintain his thought was to rethink his relationship to philosophy and in particular to Heidegger and Bergson. In the second notebook, as the autumn of 1942 moved towards winter, Levinas frames the question of where to begin philosophizing against Heidegger: 'To depart from *Dasein* or to depart from J.' Departing from Judaism in these circumstances meant philosophizing out of ruin and hopelessness. The theme is picked up again in the postwar notes, where the difference is developed in a series of terse phrases:

Heidegger has the works of great philosophers play the role that religions attribute to scripture/Creation is to be opposed to Heideggerian *liegen*: the idea of foundation is to be reversed – the beginning is not a foundation, but a word/With Heidegger B and Time world of work and objects [*Zuhandenes*] in the later works. The landscape – the <mountain>, the forest, the sea

and finally

It is in this that I differ from Heidegger: it is not a matter of exiting from the everyday towards authentic experience, but of following the everyday man in his <suffering> <same>. (328–9)

Calling philosophy to bear testimony to suffering gradually emerges as a theme in the notebooks, linked with analyses of bodily states such as fatigue, cold, insomnia indebted to the early Bergson. The importance of Bergson to Levinas's thought, suspected by many readers, is confirmed by the notebooks and by the elegant elegy of his 1946 'Homage to Bergson' also included in this edition. Yet the debt to the phenomenological method is also respected, with the notebooks recording a material reduction, the removal of the comforts and alleviations of civilization and the literal entry into a winter landscape devoid of colour.

The landscape of persecution

The movement from the temporary field camps to Stalag 11B and the Jewish work Kommando is punctuated by thoughts on the literature available in the camp 'library' or made available by the Red Cross. In the Laval camp Levinas read (or recalled) Racine, Ariosto, Barbey d'Aurevilly, Poe, Dostoevsky (*Notes from Underground*); at Vesoul, Claudel and Vigny. But the notes begin to splinter with the transfer to Germany and the onset of forced labour: fragments from his planned novels combine with memories of film and a palpable chill passing through it all as the winter landscape, labour and fatigue begin to prevail over memory and fantasy. This is recorded in a stark

sequence of notes spanning little more than four pages announced by the recollection of the scene from the Book of Samuel in which the prophet is called, but does not know who is calling.

Levinas enters the sequence by describing an experience of extreme detachment that struck him under conditions of severe physical deprivation while working with the Kommando:

Drunkness is not only the effect of wine. There is a stage of detachment, of the exit from life which one can know in every kind of excitement. With the Kommando Sunday evening. The effortlessness of everything because one is detached from everything. (83)

The bleak ecstasy provoked by the winter forest, a very different experience of the forest from the pastoral strolls of Heidegger, becomes a landscape without history or future, without colour or tone:

Winter landscape – more abstract. White-black.

Drawing rather than painting. Perhaps more moving for that reason. Simplified, one sees in it large lines. Drawing. Above all the foot of the trees, straight, black with a white line of snow, with a background of snow. (83)

The veins of the trees black against the snow inscribed in their turn by a line of snow prompts a series of evocations of land and seascapes in which it is unclear what is foreground and what is background. Just as the line of the tree becomes an interval between the snow surrounding it and the snow on it, so Levinas imagines other intervals or states of detachment from the surroundings, ecstatic states that do not transcend but are rather states of suspension.

Immediately following the play between black and white of the snow-covered trees in the snow, Levinas summons an image of the sea and the earth. Yet the recollection seems to reverse the characteristics of the two elements: 'The sea and the earth – it seems that the earth appears as an immense flicker' (83). The scintillation of the earth abruptly entering and leaving the field of appearances describes the land viewed from the sea, but also the intervallic condition of the earth itself. In the following note Levinas extends his reverie by evoking the

Restful lassitude of the boat. Is it the sea or on the contrary the detachment from the earth. The insular character of existence. Paradise is a boat or an island. The paradisiacal moment is in Charon's boat. (83–4)

The experience of frozen detachment during the Sunday work detail with the Kommando is here carried over to

existence itself, in the boat and the island, neither land nor sea, but more tellingly in Charon's boat passing from life to death.

The description of the state of suspension or parenthesis between life and death as paradisiacal returns Levinas to one of the most insistent themes of the notebooks – work here allied with thoughts on animality. It is hard not to see the experience of direct forced and often futile labour informing Levinas's ambivalence concerning the liberatory potential of work in the notebooks and his published writings. The moment of passage from life to death, where there is no more work to be done, is paradise. Levinas's ambivalence with respect to work inclines towards hostility regarding work as fatigue and its traces – buildings, products, everything ready to hand – as erasing the costs of fatigue and violence involved in producing them. Yet Levinas's next note brings together struggle



and work, first in the definition of the human as the one 'who does not fight for life. At least Christianity in Tolstoy's interpretation of it. The notion of work replaces that of struggle. "The idea struggle or work" Animals do not work.' The animal will soon return in this series of notes from the last days of 1942 and the beginning of 1943, but for now, having posed the terms of the distinction between struggle and work, Levinas returns in his last thought of 1942 to other classical philosophical themes.

Evoking once more the snowscape, he notes 'In the white black vision – being the black. The absence of light <xxx> being' (84). The severing of being from its association with light and then coupling it with black as the absence of light, with the trace made in light, is carried further by the reintroduction of the animal

into the scenario. The animal remains at war, pursued by an adversary, but is placed by Levinas in the same snowscape that figures light and darkness as being and non-being: 'Like the animal which in flight leaves precisely on the immaculate snow the traces that allow it to be found.' The tracks of the escaping animal left in the snow betray it; the trace or 'being' here associated with deadly betrayal and part of an economy of struggle and war. The next note situates Levinas on the winter *Holzweg* or forest path contemplating the tracks of an escaping animal; the scenario is one of the captured human being force-marched to work in the forest contemplating the traces of a fleeing animal: 'The march on a path where there is no trace of a human, only the trace of a deer' (85). The snow obliterated the path, the trace of the work of the human, and left it to the trace of the fleeing animal. For the author of 'De l'évasion' the winter of captivity confirmed 'being' as the betrayal of flight.

The deduction of the past presence of an animal by the trace left in the snow is framed by two short meditations on politics and philosophy. The testimony to the tracks of the animal is followed by a brief note on representative democracy – 'That way of counting men without seeing them' (83). This evocation of the political trace picks up on a note from very early in 1943 on the nature of politics as the expression of a 'mystical knowledge' as opposed to an art or a science. Neither the object of science nor the expression of a general will:

'The voice of the people is the voice of God.' From this the essential thing in the election are the imponderables and not its clear moments. Number = statistical mystery. All the 'absences' in the individual decision. Truly a mystical operation.

Levinas's comments on the expression of the voice of the people links not only to the notion of the trace but also to the beginning of the winter sequence in the voice of God. The collective decision – the voice of people – exceeds in its effect the sum of individual decisions; this notion of excess begins to insist itself, in the comment on the philosophy of number – that 'number is always reflection on at least the "two"' (84) but more pertinently with the allusive definition of philosophy with which, after the short fantasy of a celebratory party, Levinas began in 1943.

Dated precisely 1 January, Levinas wrote: 'Philosophy – real in as much as work. The role of work in the economy of being. Work rather than prophesy.' The ambiguous statement of relation between philosophy, work and prophesy anticipates Levinas's later introduction of prophetic excess into philosophy, in the context of infinity versus the totality of being, the face and the trace. The suspension between life and death, the frozen crossroads of being and nothing with which Levinas ended 1942 begins to thaw with the thought of excess, in particular prophetic excess. Later in the notebook Levinas will announce the advent of spring – 'Light without warmth, clarity without being. And already like a caress, Spring.' This contrasts with the last evocation of the winter some lines before: 'The sense of nightmare. Immobile reality – absolute strangeness. Night in full day' and his return to the question of Judaism, but this time not as dereliction but as salvation: 'Is as category: where the salvation of the individual becomes collective, can only have a collective form. The "I" in the "we"' (86). Taking up Hegel's formula for the 'spiritual daylight of the present' in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* – 'The I that is a we and the we that is an I' – Levinas will later situate this community within the prophetic future as a thought of excess, *jouissance*, the future in the present. Emerging here from a complex matrix of thought, this line of reflection brings forward one of the very rare allusions to Zionism in the notebooks and postwar notes. After a discussion of nostalgia and return Levinas tersely notes: 'Palestine for us, re-entry' (87). This brief allusion remains undeveloped, even in the postwar notes, one of the surprises or disappointments of the *inédits*; the understanding of Levinas's relationship to Zionism and later the State of Israel is not greatly enhanced by this first volume.

This reading of little more than four pages of the notebooks goes some way to showing the extraordinary conceptual and figural density of Levinas's notes and their working through of themes that would become prominent in his postwar writing. But it is selective in so far as even in these few pages there are reflections on literature, fictional episodes along with reflections on Eros woven into the philosophical analyses that would need to be brought into a full account of Levinas's thinking at this moment. These pages also represent the worst moment or the moment of the fullest despair in the notebooks, and even so they contain hints of exits from the predicament of captivity. They mark the point of extreme material reduction that Levinas would later evoke in a postwar note on the cold that seems to return to the Sunday

afternoon work detail of late 1942 – cold is the state of 'being exposed', of 'detachment from all sources of life'. With it there is no return: the danger of the cold is 'its irreversibility, the death of the past, the nothingness of the past, the purity of the present' (304). Yet even at this point of extreme deprivation there remains a possibility of escape and thus future. This realization becomes clearer in the following notebooks where Levinas begins the elaboration of what after the war he called his attempt to formulate an 'anti-fascist or anti-totalitarian philosophy', inseparable for him from a rethinking of socialism.

Anti-fascist philosophy, socialist jouissance

The winter of 1942–43 marks a point of transition in Levinas's captivity, even if it seemed at the time to be a point of arrest and near despair. Earlier in the notebook, just before his transfer to Germany, Levinas drew up the balance of 'All of this captivity' to date, and could still look forward to future work and projects. The enforced leisure, 'the readings one would otherwise have never made, like a period of College' led to the discovery 'that one had many superfluous things – in relations, in food, in pastimes. Normal life could itself be organized differently. The crisis of our prewar life appears in this simplicity' (70). There is indeed a sense of catharsis informing Levinas's understanding of his captivity, a liberation from a prewar condition that he will see as proto-fascist, and with this the opening to another form of life. This liberation first took the form of future projects. On arrival in Germany in the autumn of 1942, Levinas presented himself with a list of work to be done, divided into three sections: philosophical works, literary and critical. In the first Levinas lists 'Being and Nothingness', 'Time', 'Rosenzweig' and 'Rosenberg'. In the second section he lists his two projected novels 'Sad Opulence' and 'Irreality and Love', and in the third a critical study of Proust. Apart from testifying to the diversity of the work Levinas set before himself, the list also shows the focus of his philosophical inquiries on the themes of Being, nothingness and time. The references to Franz Rosenzweig and Alfred Rosenberg point to his researches in the contrast of Jewish and National Socialist philosophy. The renewal of Jewish philosophy in the 1920s represented by Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption* is effectively opposed to the National Socialist philosophy of *The Myth of the Twentieth Century*. Levinas saw himself at this stage as continuing the critical engagement with National Socialist philosophy that he had begun in the 'Some Reflections on Hitlerism' of 1934.

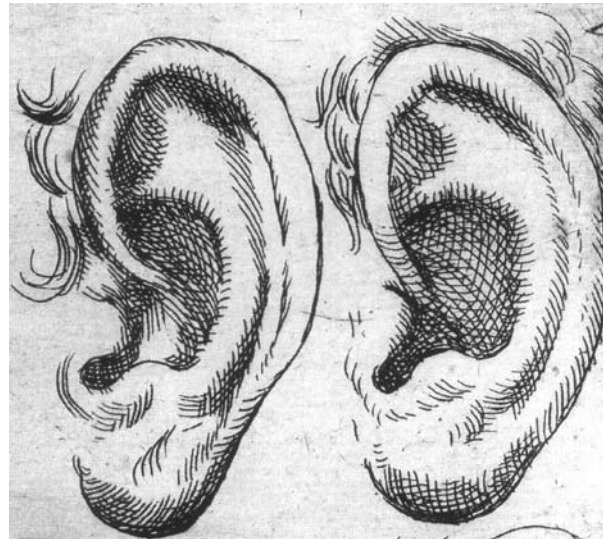
The obligation to criticize fascist philosophy was purged by the events of the war. In the third notebook, a reference to the Russians and the date 25 July 1943 announce the end of the fascist masquerade ‘Good became good, evil–evil’ (106). With this Levinas announced the end of a prewar, fascist intellectual and cultural climate. With the same phrase a year later with the imminent military defeat of National Socialism, Levinas can allow himself to hope that ‘the last judgement is suddenly reality’ but also to ask ‘we see the dawn, but will we see the sun?’ (139). Yet the dawn was enough to dispel the phantasms of fascist philosophy that had haunted Levinas during the prewar period. The sense of relief at being finally liberated from the mediocre fascist philosophers of the 1930s, from having to breathe the air of a fascist climate, from having critically to engage with racist theory, is palpable. Time and again, Levinas returns almost with wonder to the sense of a burden suddenly lifted, the military defeat of Nazism bringing with it the dissolution of the fabric of ideas with which it cloaked itself. In the 1945 broadcast, to take just one example, the sense of relief is almost physical:

After so many years when good and evil changed place and one had begun to get used to it, after the years of Wagnerism, of Nietzscheanism, of Gobinism, which had penetrated even ourselves, the return to the truth of these six years, sight confirmed by world events, that took the breath away, that took you by the throat. Good became good again, evil, evil. The lugubrious masquerade was over. (214)

The liberation from the obligation to confront Nazism at the level of philosophy brought with it the new obligation to introduce positive aspects of the experience of captivity into philosophy and politics. The reconstructive ambition becomes most clear in the fourth notebook, written when Levinas was certain of the military defeat of Nazism, if not of his own individual fate. What is striking in this notebook is the conjunction, suspected by some readers of *Totality and Infinity*, between the ethical recasting of philosophy and the rethinking of the possibilities of socialism. In a sense it is at this point that Levinas’s fiction and his philosophy come into close proximity, expressed in Levinas’s attempt to build a theory of need on the basis of Eros. At the core of his project is an attempt to imagine a socialism based on *jouissance* rather than possession and material need.

The projected theory of need that Levinas worked on in 1944 and elaborated after the war is complex and multivalent, encompassing a theory of being, subjectivity and the interval. It departs from a attempt

to broaden the concept of appetite, asking ‘is it the appetite of things or of *jouissance*?’ (118). Levinas answers with a distinction that he will subsequently develop at length: ‘Appetite of things – capitalism. It is why one may possess without enjoying’ (118). Levinas proceeds to sketch out a critique of property and of work on the basis of *jouissance* – the realization that ‘appetite is another way of mastering being’ is, he says, ‘my central idea’. It was experienced almost ecstatically, with the bleak detached ecstasy of the winter of 1942 changing into a soaring experience of



the freedom of the interval. This recurs in many forms, first of all as the experience of a threshold between dream and waking:

On the frontier between dream and waking. Sense of being equally distant from the one or the other with the freedom to plunge into sleep or to rise towards waking. Total freedom and joy of this freedom with respect to the world. Summit – vision – embracing a vast horizon. Depth – source of nourishment – abyss. Existential mystery – opposed to the light of vision. (119–20)

The bleak insight of the winter that paradise lay in the passage from life to death – Charon’s boat – is now inverted as the interval between death and life becomes the place of Eros and *jouissance*: ‘that which distinguishes need from Eros – is that need is the overcoming of an interval where duality is overcome. Assimilation of the exterior world by the subject.’ The relegation of need in favour of Eros, and with it of work as a relationship to exteriority and the dialectical structures of need and satisfaction, is directly addressed to Hegel and to the forced labour of the slave in the master–slave dialectic. In Eros, on the other hand, ‘the duality is *jouissance* itself. The interval is not simply overcome, it is always to be overcome’ (120). This opens the prospect of non-dialectical thought and

experience, one that privileges the *avenir*: 'Time is always to come' (120).

Levinas states explicitly that his philosophical project is a rethinking of socialism, or rather of the conceptual assumptions of some strands of the socialist tradition that emphasize the liberatory vocation of the interaction with nature that is work. He states programmatically, 'I oppose to the lack of the classical conception [of need] a *jouissance* that is socialist liberation' (118). This is framed, once again, as a critique of the master-slave dialectic. The exteriority of need arises 'from the fact that something is lacking in my being'. Referring then to the Platonic source of the need as 'lack', Levinas brings his reflection into a Hegelian register: 'I am subjected to that which I do not have, which is my master?' The struggle for recognition becomes a struggle with lack, for Levinas a 'capitalist conception' at the basis of the concepts of struggle and property. In its place Levinas imagines an interval, one that is not experienced as lack, and where it is possible to enjoy 'a future in the present' (118).

Levinas includes Heidegger in this critique of possession, singling out the *Zuhandenheit* of *Being and Time* for critique as a theory of possession. His often detailed critiques of Heidegger in the notebooks and in the postwar notes foreground one of the main motivations of his thought that is evident throughout his published writings. What is not so explicit is the way in which this critique emerges as part of Levinas's rethinking of socialism on the basis of *jouissance*. This is clear throughout the notebooks and postwar notes, as on the occasion when Levinas claims in the fifth notebook from 1944 that 'An essential element of my philosophy – that by which it differs from the philo. of Heidegger – is the importance of the Other. Eros as its central moment' (134). The specific critique of Heidegger is developed at length in the postwar notes, where, for example, Levinas develops his objections to *Dasein* communicated telegraphically in the notebooks. This consists in a defence of a material immanence against the transcendence of the *Da* of *Dasein*. In taking up again the theory of need after the Liberation, Levinas insists,

My existence does not float in the air. The ensemble of objects offered to my *jouissance* are for me, for my *jouissance*. Except for the earth on which I find myself. To be on the earth precedes all relationship to an object. (244)

Levinas describes this state of *Je suis ici* in physiological terms such as effort, fatigue and enjoyment derived from the early Bergson, and draws the conclusion that

It is immanence – the fact of staying here that is the event itself of the for-self, condition of *jouissance*.

Transcendental philosophy in the strong sense: the earth is the condition par excellence. (244–5)

From these premisses Levinas moves to distinguish his immanence from Heidegger's *Dasein*: '*Ici et Da*. *Da* transcendence, *Ici* = on the earth = immanence par excellence. Heidegger never knew the idea of *jouissance*, its for self.' Yet Levinas is under no illusions of the scale of the task that he is undertaking, nor of the still underdeveloped character of his concept of *jouissance*.

The transition from a philosophical understanding of *jouissance* and the critique of Heidegger to a rethinking of socialism as a political project based on *jouissance* was by no means obvious and never effectively accomplished by Levinas. But the notebooks and postwar notes are striking for the evidence they give of Levinas's efforts to make the transition. As an idea born and nurtured in the conditions of extreme material and moral deprivation of the camps, it was never conceived as a utopian fantasy but as a political and existential project. The critique of Heidegger just mentioned, for example, modulates into a contrast between *puissance* and *jouissance*. For Levinas, the immanence of *jouissance* is not 'paradisiacal' but of this world; it is no stranger to suffering, finding itself in 'the necessity of working and the same impossibility of working – unemployment – the proletarian condition is always possible' (246). *Puissance* is work and appropriation – oriented not towards the future but to the exterior, its future is the present. Its organ 'is the hand' and it is used 'to appropriate, to shape, to cut, to manufacture' (247). Yet even if the temporal mode of *puissance* is the reduction of future to present, it also possesses a strong orientation to the past: 'My *puissance* is never alone – the tool pre-exists me. The work of others. Capital' (248). In the train of argument that follows, *jouissance* is reduced to the consumption of commodities and *puissance* transforms itself into money. While the steps of the argument are far from clear, what is striking about it is the ambition to pursue the basic philosophical intuition concerning *jouissance* into the beginnings of a discussion of concepts specific to political and economic theory.

Levinas arrived at his philosophy of *jouissance* from a number of diverse directions. It is indebted to Platonic meditations on Eros, but these as refracted through Levinas's fictional writing; to the critique of Heidegger; to the constant presence of Rabelais and most importantly to Judaism. The choice of departing from 'Dasein or J.' posed in the third notebook

is answered in the arguments for *jouissance* against Heidegger. This is stated programmatically in a note from 1946 where Levinas states one of the results of his inquiry during captivity and its source: 'My philosophy – is a philosophy of the face-to-face. Relation to the other, without intermediary. It is that of Judaism' (186). This is a Judaism that is also understood (and this is elaborated in Levinas's later published writings on the theme) as the source for the theory of human rights and justice that entered into the Western tradition, and, for Levinas above all, constituted one of the inspirations of the socialist tradition.

The editors of the *inédits* are to be thanked for bringing Levinas's notebooks to the public discussion of his work. The edition is helpfully introduced and the notes infallibly helpful, with Levinas's necessarily telegraphic references filled out and the phrases in Russian and usually individual words in Hebrew identified and translated. The notebooks serve as a reminder of the gravity of Levinas's thought, its emergence under extreme conditions and its stubborn fidelity *de profundis* to philosophy and Judaism. They reveal clearly some of the unexpected motivations of Levinas's thought, confirming known sources such as Heidegger and Bergson and revealing others – the

critique of the 'grand error' of Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in the seventh notebook for example – that were unexpected. They are invaluable for disclosing the conceptual valencies of Levinas's thought, showing the emergence of the complex links between concepts such the *il y a*, the subject and *jouissance* and others. The edition also serves to fill out allusions in published work, such as the importance of Shakespeare for Levinas's philosophizing – above all Hamlet and Macbeth. In short it gives us a far more complex and interesting Levinas than hitherto, disrupting many of the assumptions about the development of his thought. The publication of these and the other *inédits* should serve as a salutary shock to a reception of Levinas's thought that was in danger of lapsing into complacency.

Notes

1. Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Séan Hand, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore MD, 1997, pp. 12 and 152–3.
2. *Le Figaro*, 25 June 2009. The same article identifies one of the salient points of the litigation to have been the destination of Levinas's archive: Michael Levinas wishing to deposit it with l'Institut Mémoires de l'Édition Contemporaine (IMEC), Simone Hansel with the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BNF).

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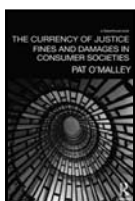
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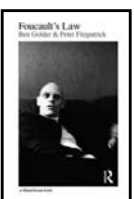
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