Traces of War

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Levinas the Novelist

Comment admettre la guerre?

(Levinas, Œuvres 3, p. 39)

The previous chapter discussed how the Second World War and the Holocaust echo through Levinas’s post-war writing even though he mentions them only sparingly. ‘Levinas’s philosophy is one of the cinders of the Holocaust’, as Eaglestone puts it (The Holocaust and the Postmodern, p. 255). Levinas’s texts do not theorize or seek to explain the Holocaust, but they bear its terrible imprint. This chapter brings together two issues in the understanding of Levinas’s work: his reticence about the Second World War, and his much-discussed hostility to art. These issues come together because his posthumous archive gave unexpected evidence that he aspired to be a novelist even while condemning the mystifications of art; and, moreover, that the novels he attempted to write were concerned, precisely, with the experience of war.

In a nutshell, Emmanuel Levinas, perhaps the greatest philosopher of ethics in twentieth-century France, wanted to be a novelist. The publication of the third volume of his Œuvres in 2013 reveals that he drafted substantial fragments of two novels, both concerned with the experience of the Second World War, entitled (perhaps) Éros and La Dame de chez Wepler.¹ A number of questions immediately spring to mind. Why did he begin these novels, and why did he abandon them?

¹ The title Levinas intended to give to the longest of the two fragments is unclear. For discussion, see Calin and Chalier, ‘Préface’, in Levinas, Carnets de captivité et autres inédits, in Œuvres 1, p. 15. For simplicity, I refer to the fragment throughout this chapter simply as Éros.
And why, to those of us who have been concerned with Levinas’s work, is this so surprising?

There are a number of reasons why it should not be surprising. Literature played an important part in Levinas’s education and intellectual development. Studying the dark metaphysical investigations contained in Dostoevsky’s novels as a child in his native Lithuania initially awoke his interest in philosophy. Moreover, Levinas’s early work on phenomenology suggested at least the possibility of a link between philosophy and literature. Levinas was instrumental in introducing Husserlian phenomenology into France, first with his thesis *Théorie de l’intuition dans la phénoménologie de Husserl* (1930) and then with his translation of Husserl’s *Cartesian Meditations* (1931), undertaken with Gabrielle Peiffer. Phenomenology, with its interest in the sensory experience of the material world, readily lends itself to fictional exploration, as Sartre had magnificently demonstrated in his novel *La Nausée* (1938). So the phenomenologist and the novelist are predisposed to be close allies. Levinas certainly entertained literary ambitions in his early years. After his death in 1995 it was discovered that he had carefully preserved a large body of poetry which he had written in Russian as an adolescent and young adult. His mature philosophical work abounds with literary allusions; and his *Carnets de captivité*, published in the first volume of his *Œuvres complètes*, show that, during his five years as a prisoner of War between 1940 and 1945 – years which were crucial to his personal and intellectual development – literature was constantly on his mind. His *Carnets* quote from, discuss or refer to, among others, Claudel, Ariosto, Dostoevsky, Proust, Balzac, Vigny, Rabelais, Tolstoy, Ibsen, Giraudoux, Baudelaire, Gide, Zola, Hugo, Céline, Montherlant, Conan Doyle, Dickens, Nerval, Goethe, Lamartine, Mallarmé, Bloy, Corneille, Racine, Poe, Lawrence and Shakespeare.

Literature, then, was Levinas’s natural habitat; and for French-language philosophers of his generation, there was no necessary opposition between philosophy and literature. The philosopher Henri Bergson had won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1927; and even before the publication of *L’Étre et le néant* in 1943, Sartre had already established himself as an enviable model of the philosopher-novelist who could navigate with ease between literary and philosophical worlds. Levinas saw himself in similar terms. In an entry in his *Carnets de captivité*, he anticipates three strands to his future work:

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This indicates that, for Levinas the POW, there is no inevitable choice to be made between literature and philosophy. The Carnets refer to Triste opulence (the alternative title to Éros) and La Dame de chez Wepler, suggesting that both novels were already on his mind during his captivity. The third volume of his Œuvres gives both versions continues and versions génétiques of the surviving fragments of the two novels, which were found among Levinas's papers after his death. The longest text, that of Éros, focuses on a character named Paul Rondeau, beginning during the phoney war, and progressing through the defeat of France, captivity and liberation. Different names are used, and it is unclear whether the author was undecided over what name to give his protagonist or whether different characters are involved. In the shorter fragment, La Dame de chez Wepler, a character named Simon (or Roland) Riberat spends an evening in Paris before being sent to the front in May 1940. The manuscripts of both fragments are heavily corrected, leaving multiple inconsistencies, ambiguities, illegible passages and unexplained elements. There is no precise indication as to when these drafts were written or revised. Significantly, though, there is evidence that Levinas continued working on Éros at least until the early 1960s, during the period when he was finalizing what would become one of his most important philosophical works, and perhaps his defining book, Totalité et infini (1961).³

There is, then, plenty of scope for future research here. A number of important questions have hardly begun to be addressed:⁴

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³ This dating is possible because Levinas recycled printed paper which sometimes referred to forthcoming meetings. See Éros, littérature et philosophie, p. 62.

⁴ Initial work on Levinas’s wartime and war-related inédits was begun at a
First, there is a series of chronological and biographical questions. The evidence here is thin. Éros ends with the return of a POW to Paris after five years’ imprisonment; there is reason to believe that Levinas was still working on the novel until the late 1950s and early 1960s. So on a minimal estimation, his work on the novel began during the 1940s and lasted at least until 1960. When did he begin, and when and why did he stop? Further investigation of Levinas’s unpublished archive may shed more light on these matters.

Second, there is the question of the relation between these literary fragments and Levinas’s philosophical trajectory. It is well known that Levinas published little original philosophical work from the late 1940s until 1961. Even so, during this period he lectured regularly at Jean Wahl’s Collège philosophique; and he was developing the ideas which would culminate in Totalité et infini while also, in all likelihood, continuing to envisage a literary strand to his future career. The ideas on sex and love in the two novel fragments do not simply repeat material from Le Temps et l’autre (1947) and Totalité et infini (1961), but nor are they separate from them.

Third, what is the status of literary fiction in Levinas’s œuvre and his self-understanding? What are the differences and the intersections which join and separate a literary project from a philosophical one? In the passage from the Carnets de captivité quoted above, Levinas suggests that philosophy, literature and criticism were distinct but intertwined aspects of the same career plan. In his mature writing, there is still an element of criticism, but overt literary aspirations would disappear altogether, and all else would be overwhelmed by Levinas’s growing, unstoppable momentum as a philosopher.

It is the third of these questions with which I am primarily concerned here. The publication of Levinas’s novel fragments was so surprising because to associate Levinas with fiction now seems absurd. It is true that many of us have pondered over what a Levinasian approach to literature might be; but we have done this in the knowledge that it had to be attempted, to some extent at least, despite what Levinas said about literature rather than because of it. In the words of Jill Robbins, ‘Levinas speaks very rarely about the literary, and when he does it is almost always


5 Levinas’s unpublished lectures at the Collège philosophique are now available in Parole et silence et autres conférences inédites, in Œuvres 2.
in dismissive terms’ (*Altered Reading*, p. 39). The stumbling block for literary scholars inspired by Levinas and aspiring to be Levinasian is the article he published in *Les Temps modernes* in 1948, ‘La Réalité et son ombre’. The article attacks the mystification propagated by art; yet it was written – it now appears – during a period when Levinas still had ambitions to be an author of fiction.

**Fiction as mystification**

The author of ‘La Réalité et son ombre’ has a low view of art. *Les Temps modernes*, founded in 1945, became one of the principal outlets of Sartre and Beauvoir’s conception of the committed artist and intellectual. But Levinas’s article pays no lip service to the artist’s witting or unwitting commitment; nor is there a Heideggerian celebration of the world-revealing capability of the prestigious art work. Art is depicted, on the contrary, as ignorant, irresponsible and immoral. It creates a shadow world which bewitches and confuses. Only the critic can redeem this mad, boundless, borderless world by restoring it to the intelligible order of the self-possessed mind:

> La critique, en interprétant, choisira et limitera. Mais si, comme choix, elle demeure en deçà du monde qui s’est fixé dans l’art, elle l’aura réintroduit dans le monde intelligible où elle se tient et qui est la vraie patrie de l’esprit. [...] L’interprétation de la critique parle en pleine possession de soi, franchement, par le concept qui est comme le muscle de l’esprit. (‘La Réalité et son ombre’, in *Les Imprévus de l’histoire*, pp. 147–48)

The critic does not enter fully and recklessly into the enigmatic, equivocal world of the art work, but chooses instead to interpret, limit and restrict so that order and intelligibility are reinstated. The problem for Levinasian-minded critics is that, in this account, the art work absolutely does not provide the occasion for a (good) encounter with alterity. A number of strategies have been adopted in order to argue that, in one way or another, Levinas did not mean what he says here. Levinas may have said it, but his work as a whole does not endorse it. His later philosophical texts are full of literary references, suggesting

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that his hostility to art was not as extreme as he presents it in ‘La Réalité et son ombre’; or other essays, for example on Proust, Agnon, Celan or Jabès, are much more sympathetic to art and its ethical potential.\(^7\) In *Le Temps et l’autre*, Levinas even suggests at one point that the whole of philosophy may be contained in the works of Shakespeare (p. 60). One way or another, a Levinasian art criticism is made possible by following the spirit of his work as a whole rather than the letter of ‘La Réalité et son ombre’.

Another way of neutralizing the force of Levinas’s essay is to suggest that its attack is on art rather than literature in particular.\(^8\) This is not the case. Although Levinas refers through much of the essay to art, some passages refer specifically to literary fiction. He describes, for example, how characters in novels become ‘êtres enfermés, prisonniers’ (p. 140). They are seen from the outside, denied freedom, bound to the endless repetition of the same gestures. It may be no coincidence that Levinas refers here to Proust’s *La Prisonnière*, the volume of *À la recherche du temps perdu* in which Marcel effectively imprisons Albertine in order to control her actions and proclivities more effectively; and, with the memory of his own five years of captivity no doubt still in his mind, the passage may invite a link between the prisoner of war and the character in Proust’s novel. Both are subjects without freedom, their inherent otherness suppressed. Levinas’s essay implicitly distinguishes between two forms of limitation, or indeed simplification: one good, and one bad. The bad limitation is what happens in fiction, which locks the free subject into a fixed destiny; the good limitation is achieved in philosophical criticism, which cuts through the equivocations of art to reassert the authority of the self-possessed mind over material which resists it. The false order of the novel is bad; the schematizing order of the intellect is good.

Levinas does make one concession to literature when, in the final paragraph of his essay, he describes a trend in modern writing:

> La littérature moderne, décriée pour son intellectualisme et qui remonte d’ailleurs à Shakespeare, au Molière du *Don Juan* [sic], à Goethe, à Dostoïevski – manifeste certainement une conscience de plus en plus nette de cette insuffisance foncière de l’idolâtrie artistique. Par cet intellectualisme l’artiste refuse d’être artiste seulement: non pas parce qu’il veut

\(^7\) See the essays collected in Levinas’s *Noms propres*.

This concession is at best double-edged, however. Modern literature may show signs of breaking from idolatry, but it does so precisely insofar as the artist ceases to be (just) an artist: ‘l’artiste refuse d’être artiste seulement’. In other words, to become a good novelist, you should stop being (just) a novelist and start interpreting your own stories, lifting them out of the morass of the equivocal into the light of the concept. The good novelist is good to the extent that s/he is no longer a novelist.

No one (so far as I know) agrees with or is persuaded by Levinas’s argument in ‘La Réalité et son ombre’ (which is far from clear in any case). So why do we remain concerned by it? If Levinas had sunk into honourable obscurity after 1948, we would certainly not be bothering with the essay now. But because he became such a major figure in post-war ethics, his condemnation of art stands as a conundrum worth confronting, particularly when many of us are involved with considering what ethical criticism (and especially Levinasian ethical criticism) might entail. In the present context, Levinas’s essay becomes even more problematic when we bear in mind that, during the precise period when he was condemning the mystificatory simplifications of fiction – its collusion with the imprisonment of the subject – we now know that Levinas himself was considering and actively working towards a career as a novelist. Levinas implicitly condemns his own literary ambitions. There is, he tells us, ‘quelque chose de méchant et d’égoïste et de lâche dans la jouissance artistique. Il y a des époques où l’on peut en avoir honte, comme de festoyer en pleine peste’ (‘La Réalité et son ombre’, p. 146). Artists and their audiences should be ashamed of themselves and recognize their social unacceptability. In Levinas’s words, ‘Le poète s’exile lui-même de la cité’ (‘La Réalité et son ombre’, p. 146). There is no need for the poet to be banished from the city, as in Plato’s Republic; if s/he has any moral conscience or sense of civic responsibility, s/he will leave of his or her own accord. The year 1948 is not the moment, Levinas suggests, to waste one’s time irresponsibly in composing literature. So what kind of novels was Levinas planning to write at this most unpropitious moment?
Towards a practice of fiction

_Éros_ can be divided into three distinct parts. In the first, a character named Rondeau is called up to active service and then taken prisoner in the German offensive of June 1940. The second section, beginning in spring 1942, describes scenes from captivity, involving a character named Tromel, or later Tramuel. In the third section, a character named Jean-Paul arrives back in Paris after five years’ absence, presumably because he has been a prisoner of war. There is no indication of whether Rondeau, Tromel, Tramuel and Jean-Paul are meant to be the same person, their author being provisionally undecided about his name, or whether they are supposed to be quite separate characters. _La Dame de chez Wepler_ is more focused. In May 1940, Simon (or perhaps Roland) Riberat has been called to the front, three weeks after the internment of his wife on grounds of mental health. Spending an evening in Paris, he recalls an occasion some years earlier when he was attracted to a high-class prostitute but did not consummate his desire for her. His search for sex is curtailed when he unexpectedly encounters a junior employee from his office and spends time discussing work matters with him and his family.

Both these sketches share relatively precise dating which situates them in relation to the Second World War. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, one might risk the suggestion that there is something about the war which both provokes Levinas’s experiment in fiction and stands in the way of its completion. One of the most interesting features of _Éros_ and _La Dame de chez Wepler_ is that they reflect on war, on the experience of war and on the inability to experience it, the impossibility of assimilating it to the subject’s familiar world. ‘Comment admettre la guerre?’, asks the narrator of _Éros_ (Œuvres 3, p. 39). This goes beyond suggesting that the war was unnecessary and avoidable; it also implies that it threatens fundamental world views. The use of _nous_ in the following lines is particularly significant. It draws both the narrator and the reader into the situation; and, at a biographical level, we might recall that Levinas had been a naturalized Frenchman since 1931, and that, at the time of his capture in June 1940, he was defending his adopted homeland in French uniform.  

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9 As discussed in the previous chapter, serving in the army at the time of the French defeat probably saved Levinas’s life. He spent the rest of the war as a POW whereas, as a civilian, he risked being stripped of his citizenship, arrested, deported and murdered like other naturalized French Jews.
Nous ne manquions pas seulement de chars, d’avions et de plans d’état-major. Malgré la proximité de la guerre de 14 qui avait tué des millions d’hommes mais pas une habitude, il nous manquait la perception même de la guerre. Celle de 14 devait être la dernière guerre, même les plus réalistes, les plus hostiles aux rêveries pacifistes, le croyaient inconsciemment. (Œuvres 3, p. 39)

The Great War of 1914–1918 led to innumerable deaths, but it did not destroy ‘une habitude’. In other words, France survived, diminished but intact in its beliefs and its way of life. The war to end all wars killed individuals, but not the world to which they belonged and in which they believed. The opening pages of Éros contain a hymn of praise to a stable, immutable France capable of surviving anything that might befall it: ‘Qu’est-ce que la France? Une immense stabilité. Toutes les formes de la vie arrivées à leur plénitude comme des fruits éternellement mûrs dans un verger miraculeux. Perfection d’un peuple sédentaire purifiée de tout souvenir de l’existence nomade’ (Œuvres 3, p. 38).

No less a figure than Jean-Luc Nancy has suspected these and following lines of embodying a Hugolian fantasy of a France that was fixed in time, belief and ideology.10 They might also remind us of De Gaulle’s invention, in his speech of 25 August 1944 marking the liberation of Paris, of the myth of ‘la France éternelle’: a timeless, unchanging entity unified in its struggle against Nazism. Crucially, though, what Levinas’s fragment narrates is the collapse of this myth: it turns out to be illusory, as the war shatters the deep conviction in an unchanging, unchangeable idea of France. The opening line of Éros declares that ‘En somme le front se stabilise’ (Œuvres 3, p. 37); but this turns out to be disastrously untrue: ‘Depuis trois semaines le front ne se stabilisait pas. La vieille terre de France est devenue du sable mouvant. Le pied n’arrivait à trouver nulle part un point d’appui. L’ennemi s’infiltrait à travers les crevasses invisibles du sol’ (p. 37). Continuity and order are falling apart in what is called ‘ce bouleversement du cadre même de la réalité’ (p. 37). What is occurring here is more than a military defeat. It is the collapse of the framework though which the world could be known and experienced. Rondeau’s exposure to the fog of war and captivity illustrates this. He is a successful, respectable married man with three children, ‘ce chef-d’œuvre de la création que l’on appelle

10 See Nancy, ‘Éros, le roman d’Emmanuel Levinas?’, p. 111. Nancy also provides an introduction to Levinas’s literary work in ‘Préface: “L’intrigue littéraire de Levinas”’. 
le Français moyen’ (p. 39), whose life makes perfect sense: ‘Jusqu’à présent il trouvait des casiers pour ranger les choses qu’il voyait et des mots qu’il entendait’ (p. 42). But, ‘Depuis le 10 mai, Rondeau flairait le chaos’ (p. 39). All of a sudden, the world he knew no longer exists: ‘il a eu pour la première fois l’impression que la France sur laquelle reposait toute son humanité toute sa dignité, cette France dans laquelle la réalité s’ordonnait et se tenait que la France se défaisait’ (p. 42).

What is at stake in this war and in this text is the epistemological, experiential, ontological and moral status of reality itself. The war threatens not only lives, but also every framework within which those lives can be lived and understood. What, though, has actually changed? At the end of Éros, Jean-Paul returns to Paris after five years’ absence and finds it pretty much as he left it: ‘Jean-Paul avait l’impression d’avoir rouvert un vieux volume de son enfance. […] Les choses se dessinaient dans leur stabilité impassible’ (p. 54). Everything has changed; nothing has changed. The war is an **event**, not just an occurrence, because it affects everything while allowing the appearance that everything remains just as it was.

*La Dame de chez Wepler* revolves around the same tension between order and disorder, freedom and (welcome) constraint. Soon to be sent to the front, Riberat spends an evening in Paris. He recalls an occasion three years earlier when he glimpsed and desired a woman he presumed to be a high-class prostitute, but did nothing about it for sensible financial reasons. Now, though, he feels a sense of liberation. Twice alluding to Dostoevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov*, he feels that ‘tout est permis’ (pp. 122, 123). Normal rules and normal considerations are suspended. Desire has been let out of the bag. To put it crudely, Riberat sets out in search of sex on the eve of his call-up which, he knows, may lead to his death. So he can now seek pleasure without conscience and without consequences: ‘Riberat se sentit une jeunesse immorale, le pouvoir d’agir sans souffrir des contrecoups, le don des plaisirs sans mauvaise conscience’ (p. 122). In the event, though, (perhaps unsurprisingly) the prostitute he glimpsed three years previously is no longer to be found at the same location. As desire flows freely, let loose in the streets of pre-Occupation Paris, Riberat is called back to order when he is addressed by a junior employee from the office where he works. He abruptly returns to a familiar, safer world:

On a parlé affaires de bureau, collègues mobilisés, progrès accomplis par l’œuvre. […] Le chaos où Riberat se sentait jusqu’alors se dissiper s’évanouit. Une forme solide le revêtit de nouveau. […] Maintenant, il
pourra rentrer, se coucher, lire au lit avant de s’endormir un poème de Leconte de Lisle. [...] Une douce tristesse l’envahit. Il pensa à sa femme, à la France, à lui-même si joliment détaché des choses, mais ayant tout de même une modeste fonction sociale et militaire à son petit poste. Ah qu’il était doux de se sentir encadré et intégré, aller quelque part. (pp. 126–27)

Riberat might die at the front; but this now seems to be a small price to pay if his death makes sense. Order has won out over chaos. Riberat can return to his habits, play his modest role in his little post and die if necessary. It is all worthwhile, he feels, if the ‘cadre’ has been restored (‘il était doux de se sentir encadré et intégré’), giving him back a sense of belonging and direction.

As in Éros, war represents a radical, catastrophic disruption of an ordered, familiar, intelligible world. La Dame de chez Wepler adds to this an association with madness. The first sentence of the text states abruptly that ‘La femme de Simon était folle’ (p. 117). Before she was diagnosed as insane, Riberat had endeavoured to maintain his wife’s secure place in a world which made sense to him. The second paragraph opposes his wife’s ‘extravagances’, ‘idées bizarres’ or ‘excentricités’ with his own faltering ‘raisonnement’; there should be a ‘frontière’ separating sanity from madness; and even though the wife is ‘bouleversée’, she is provisionally contained within ‘le cadre de la maison familiale’; the couple are still engaged in ‘un jeu où il existe des règles, porteur de toute la dignité d’une Madame Simon’ (p. 117). The problem with madness is that it crosses frontiers, breaks frameworks and ignores rules. The quick transition from Madame Simon’s madness to the context of war in Levinas’s fragment suggests a link between them. Both pose the problem of an existence in which the norms of the familiar world no longer apply, with all the accompanying terror and exhilaration. Amidst all this, Riberat’s freedom is double-edged: it is both a freedom from the constraints which he has accepted in the peacetime, conjugal world, but also a freedom to return to the familiar, known and knowable world from which the proximity to insanity had estranged him: ‘Voici que de nouveau un arbre devenait un arbre sans équivoque, sans parenté avec ce qui n’est pas un arbre, le pain simplement comestible, le soleil brûlant, les femmes désirables …’ (p. 118). At last, a tree is just a tree again. Compared to the insanity of his wife, the madness of war seems intelligible and appealing: ‘[la guerre] faisait désormais partie des choses définies’ (p. 118).

Both Éros and La Dame de chez Wepler contrast an ordered, intelligible world with an alluring, disturbing chaos in which ‘tout est
permis’. The allusion to Dostoevsky is important here. The possibility that, in a valueless world, everything is permitted worries Levinas just as it worried Camus during the same period.\textsuperscript{11} If there is no moral order, no divine or rational sense to the world, then how do we tell right from wrong? Camus would try to deal with this problem by evoking the values of revolt and solidarity; Levinas would resist it with his insistence on the subject’s limitless responsibility to the Other. What is fascinating about fiction, for Levinas at least, is that it gives licence to explore the dizzying, terrifying moment when ‘tout est permis’: the moral rules and intellectual frameworks have vanished. In Éros, war entails not only the anecdotal ‘malheurs des êtres’ but, much more significantly, ‘ce bouleversement du cadre même de la réalité’ (p. 37). In La Dame de chez Wepler the madness of Riberat’s wife confronts him with ‘un vide peuplé de fantômes, de mots, de semblants de pensée’ (p. 117). Philosophically speaking, the issue here is epistemological and ontological: the world of peace and sanity is stable and assured, knowable because it bows to concepts which constitute its sense. Madness and war force the subject to glimpse an incompatible (dis)order in which there are no fixed points.

The terms in which Levinas’s two novel fragments conceive madness and (the madness of) war irresistibly evoke the characterization of art in ‘La Réalité et son ombre’. In his article Levinas condemns art because it creates a shadow world which stands outside the order of knowledge, and which mimics and undermines the world we recognize. Only the critic can redeem art by limiting it and making it once more intelligible. The different roles assigned in ‘La Réalité et son ombre’ to the critic and the artist are replicated in the fragments by the opposition between the breakdown of order and the desire for its restitution. The crucial difference is that Éros and La Dame de chez Wepler know that the limiting schemas applied by the Levinasian critic are false, and even violently so, because they tell a lie about the real, preferring bourgeois bad faith to an encounter with radical mystery.

I would risk the suggestion here that Levinas’s experiments in fiction were curtailed in part because they embody an insight which the Levinas of ‘La Réalité et son ombre’ was anxiously resisting, namely the suspicion that the disorder envisaged by the literary author may be more true, more fundamental and more compelling than the limiting

\textsuperscript{11} See for example, Camus, \textit{Le Mythe de Sisyphe} (1942), in \textit{Œuvres complètes I}, p. 266, where Camus famously insists that ‘Tout est permis ne signifie pas que rien n’est défendu’.
order found by the critic. At the same time, Levinas may have found a way of resolving this tension by incorporating the novelist’s exploration of chaotic otherness into the texture of philosophy itself. It is likely that Levinas finally gave up his literary ambitions in the 1960s, perhaps because his astonishing first philosophical masterpiece, *Totalité et infini*, began to find means of overcoming the choice between the shadow-world of art and the conceptual clarity expected of philosophy.

**Philosophy and/at war**

*Totalité et infini* was the culmination of Levinas’s philosophical work during the 1940s and 1950s. My suggestion here is that it is also the culmination of his literary work undertaken during the same period. His two attempts at fiction both revolve around the war and the difficulty of making sense of it as it throws into doubt the subject’s understanding of its own experience. This is an issue for both fiction and philosophy; accordingly, it is not long before war makes its appearance in *Totalité et infini*. The previous chapter attempted to show that war appears in the opening words of *Totalité et infini* as a key reference point which throws everything else into turmoil, including fixed ethical positions and even the philosophical subject’s ability to formulate any proposition with confidence and clarity. War destabilizes everything, semantically and ethically; it is both a signifier of damage and a damaged signifier, unsettled and unsettling. As soon as it is mentioned, the authorial subject is scattered, no longer knowing how to formulate its contradictory, self-contesting insights.

Another way of putting this is to say that war condemns writing to the status of fiction. It disturbs the hegemony of reason and the distinction between art and philosophy. When Levinas states that war ‘projette d’avance son ombre sur les actes des hommes’ (*Totalité et infini*, p. 5), the use of the word *ombre* evokes ‘La Réalité et son ombre’ and its condemnation of art. In that essay, art is described as ‘l’événement même de l’obscurcissement, une tombée de la nuit, un envahissement de l’ombre’ (p. 126). Art suspends knowledge and belongs to an ontological order quite separate from the reign of reason. *Éros, La Dame de chez Wepler* and finally *Totalité et infini* suggest that the same can be said of war, and perhaps also of ethics. Art creates and inhabits a shadow world; war sheds darkness on the meaning of human acts; and now philosophy too must inhabit the obscure, ambiguous places where knowledge no longer
holds sway. If fiction is for Levinas, as Jean-Luc Nancy insists, a relation with mystery, then from now on, philosophy will also occupy the place of fiction as a space of encounter with the unknown.

Levinas has become, perhaps, a little too familiar. Terms such as le visage, the face-to-face, the il y a and the ethical encounter with alterity have been made into useable concepts which roll off the tongue, separated now from the strange textual universe in which they originated. With so many introductions available, you don’t need to read Levinas to know what he thinks. The great gain brought by the publication of Levinas’s two novel fragments is that they restore an unfamiliar Levinas, one whose thought and writing have not yet been settled, simplified and assimilated. In the century before Levinas began work on his novels, Nietzsche expressed astonishment that Socrates, his great philosophical opponent, had turned to music at the end of his life (see The Birth of Tragedy, pp. 79–80). How could Socrates, who had banished the poets from the ideal city, himself aspire to be an artist? Perhaps – he nearly concedes – Nietzsche has not yet fully understood his implacable enemy. And Socrates the musician is akin to Levinas the novelist. The author of ‘La Réalité et son ombre’ condemned fiction because it turned living human beings into mere prisoners. In Levinas’s fiction, meanwhile, characters prefer forms of imprisonment to the radical unknowability to which war, and madness, and the madness of war, expose them. If Levinas gave up on the project of writing fiction in the narrowest sense, his later writing endlessly endeavoured to explore the most unsettling, darkest places of human pain and aspiration which are also the domains of the novel.

The reference to war, and to the Second World War in particular, is vital and intensely problematic in Levinas’s post-war practice. He attempts to show that peace is primary, that war is not the true meaning of the encounter between self and Other, that murder and a fortiori genocide always fail, ethically, in their aim to eradicate alterity. Yet his texts are also grounded in the terrible knowledge that murder is an everyday occurrence, and that the ethical failure of genocide does not outweigh its all-too-literal reality. It is, then, particularly striking that he envisaged writing about war in what was for him the self-censored medium of literary fiction. Fiction becomes for him a strange space, one which he publicly repudiated but privately pursued, as he worked on texts that would be unfinished, perhaps unfinishable, and certainly

unpublished in his lifetime. Fiction is perhaps for him the ultimate trace of war because it is the only place where unspeakable things can finally be said.