

Review

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Pierre Klossowski. *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*. Trans. Daniel W. Smith. London: Athlone Press, 1999. 0 485 11440 2. £12.99 hbk.

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Thirty years after its publication in France, Klossowski's *Vicious Circle* has been published in English in a highly readable translation by Daniel W. Smith. Klossowski's text is often compared in stature to such eventful readings as Martin Heidegger's two-volume study and Gilles Deleuze's *Nietzsche and Philosophy*. Such comparisons, however, miss the essential *incomparable* character of Klossowski's text. It may well be the most extraordinary text on Nietzsche ever composed, as well as one of the most disconcerting and disquieting. It has a certain communion with Bataille's writings, including his own text on Nietzsche, but on account of its trenchant insights, exacting rigour, and exquisite precision, it goes far beyond anything in Bataille's reading. It is not a book that one can readily recommend as an essential text that anyone concerned with Nietzsche must read, simply because it is a quite terrifying reading of Nietzsche. At the end of it, the reader, or should I say this reader, experiences utter vertigo.

Klossowski is a truly great writer and reader. His knowledge of Nietzsche's texts, including the *Nachlass* fragments from the 1880s, as well as rare material from Nietzsche's schooldays at Schulpforta (including a horror story called "Euphorion"), is impressive. Klossowski has a rare understanding of the details of Nietzsche's thinking and of what is truly at stake in it. His book takes us further into the treacherous depths of Nietzsche's thought than any other study I know. In many ways, its readers may still lie in the future. The danger with this book is that it will be read too cavalierly in terms of the alleged fashionable tropes of deconstruction or poststructuralism, such as the incompleteness of meaning, the infinite play of interpretation, and so on. This would be a great shame since such institutionalised readings miss its crucial dimension and fail to engage with what makes this such a convincing and remarkable text, namely, that it has penetrated the strange depths of Nietzsche's thought and shows what this amounts to, not only for his critique of language and meaning, but for his engagement with "life" in terms of both a theory of knowledge and a theory of evolution.

For Klossowski, Nietzsche is a thinker of the near and distant future, a future, he says, which has now become our everyday reality. However, everything depends on knowing how we ought to read Nietzsche. Klossowski is ingenious in his response. He argues throughout the book that Nietzsche's

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key thought-experiments are simulacra which unfold in terms of the simulation of a “conspiracy.” The Nietzschean conspiracy is not, of course, that of a class, but of an isolated individual “who uses the means of this class not only against his own class, but also against the existing forms of the human species as a whole” (xv). The second key component of the reading is the claim that Nietzsche’s thought revolves around delirium as its axis and, furthermore, that it is incredibly *lucid* on this issue (Klossowski’s unfolding of the drama of Nietzsche’s last days in Turin in his final chapter makes for some truly chilling and remarkable reading since it demonstrates in a way that is both convincing and unnerving that there was something completely lucid about Nietzsche’s descent into muteness and madness). Klossowski insists that, conceived in terms of a project of delirium, Nietzsche’s thought cannot simply be labelled “pathological.” It is far too knowing about itself for this and lucid to the extreme. Nietzsche produces a body of work that challenges both the principle of identity (the authority of language, of the code, of the institution) and the reality principle (consciousness, the subject, the ego, substance, etc.). His new demonstration—“required by institutional language for the teaching of reality”—takes the form of the movements of a “declarative mood.” Ultimately this contagious mood, or what Klossowski calls the “tonality of the soul,” supplants the demonstration and both thought and life become “mute.” The limits of the principles of identity and reality are inevitably and inexorably reached.

By the end of the introduction, we have in place a theme that will become one of the text’s most important features: the opposition between “culture” (society, language, and consciousness), which is based on the intention to teach and learn, and the tonality of the soul, which operates on the level of *intensities* that can be neither taught nor learnt. This opposition strikes me as a dramatic transposition into the heart of Nietzsche’s darkness of the essential thematic of Henri Bergson’s first published text, *Time and Free Will*. This text begins with the phenomenon of intensity and intensive magnitudes, moves on to a conception of duration as a virtual multiplicity, and then arrives at a twofold conception of the “self,” the “superficial” self of language and society and the “deep-seated” self of duration and intensity. Klossowski was a keen reader of Heidegger (whose two volumes on Nietzsche he translated into French in 1971). However, the “authenticity” at stake in his reading of Nietzsche is not that of historicity and resolution, but rather that of intensity and the dissolution of both identity and reality. The opening chapter, entitled “The Combat against Culture,” presents Nietzsche as a thinker “beyond the human condition,” that is, one who challenges and puts to the test the knowledge, practices, customs, and habits that make up Western culture (6). In response to the “levelling powers of gre-

gamous thought,” Nietzsche champions the alternative “erectile power of particular cases.” Since morality is by definition the domain of gregariousness, it is viewed as the “principal ‘metaphysical virus’ of thought and science” (6).

In chapter 2, “The Valetudinary States at the Origin of a Semiotic of Impulses,” Klossowski commences his presentation of eternal return and its essential paradoxical nature as a doctrine that cannot be taught since it is an experience that is not bound up with either language or social communication. The actual and complex nature of its experience is the focus of chapter 3. Chapters 4–6 are devoted to bringing out and examining the various aspects of the doctrine, including the scientific (chapter 5) and the political (chapter 6). It is clear that for Klossowski the most crucial dimension of the thought-experiment is to be found in the descriptions Nietzsche gave his Sils experience in August 1881 “6000 feet beyond man and time.” Klossowski accords a tremendous privilege to this event in Nietzsche’s life since it provides access, he holds, to the tonality of the soul and the intensities of lived experience that are beyond knowledge and outside communication. However, because everything that is at stake in Nietzsche is made dependent on this momentous experience in Klossowski’s reading, it also becomes the vulnerable point in that reading.

Klossowski approaches the eternal return in terms of asking the question, “What kind of invention does it provide?” The invention is a deeply paradoxical one, not only because it is attempting to respond to the deepest problems of “life,” but also because it is doing so through the “impossible” mediums of language, pedagogy, culture, and such. Adherence to the non-sense of life and belief in return entails an “impracticable lucidity” (53). The project is not one of renouncing language, intentions, or even willing, but rather one of evaluating them “in a *different* manner than we have hitherto evaluated them—namely, as subject to the ‘law’ of the vicious Circle” (53). The law of this circle has a specific non-sense to it, which is to do with the liquidation of meaning and goal. This is how Klossowski brings together the thought-experiments of the later Nietzsche:

The “overman” becomes the name of the subject of the will to power, both the *meaning* and the *goal* of the Eternal Return. The will to power is only a *humanized* term for the soul of the Vicious Circle, whereas the latter is a pure intensity *without intention*. On the other hand, the Vicious Circle, as Eternal Return, is presented as a chain of existences that forms the individuality of the doctrine’s adherent, who knows that he has *pre-existed* otherwise than he now exists, and that he will yet exist differently, from “one eternity to another.” (70)

This articulation of the doctrine reveals both the enormous influence of Bataille on Klossowski's configuration (or disfiguration) and gives expression to his own unique conception of a new fatalism, that of fortuity.¹ This can be understood in terms of a "renewed version of metempsychosis," in which the "richness of a single existence" resides in infinite possibilities of becoming-other; it resides in "affective potential" (71). Within the economy of the vicious circle, one fortuitous soul is dissolved in order to give way to another equally fortuitous soul. The experience of return is one of intensity, then, which "emits of a series of infinite vibrations of being" (72). The promise of this new teaching is the promise of a new creature coming into being, one that has gone beyond the established *gregarious* conditions of life and which no longer lives according to the "*durable fixity of species*" (139).

Nietzsche's body and organism became, according to Klossowski, the battleground upon which the struggle of life seeking to overcome itself to higher levels of intensity and energy was played out. He interprets the collapse in Turin in terms of disproportion between "the time of the pathos" and the "time of the organism." This gives rise to an exchange or transaction in which the organism and the body "are the *price* of the pathos." In other words, the law of eternal return required "the destruction of the very organ that had disclosed it: namely, *Nietzsche's brain*" (221).

Klossowski is decisive in his choice of reading the eternal return in terms of what I would designate as a "superior existentialism" (the authenticity of self-dissolution) and disregarding its cosmological aspects. He endorses Lou Salome's judgement that the search for a scientific foundation to the doctrine is an error, though he does not give an account of his reasons for adhering to this now widespread view. He does entertain, with Salome, the highly speculative claim that the reason why Nietzsche himself was so keen to find proof of his doctrine in a cosmology was because this would help him in the task of dissuading himself of a delirious intelligence. This claim rests on a highly selective and tendentious reading of the intellectual trajectory of Nietzsche's thought and disregards the cosmology Nietzsche worked on and outlined in the 1880s (a decade that witnesses Poincaré's efforts to establish a recurrence theorem in science, to which Klossowski makes no reference).

It is not that Klossowski ignores completely the relation between Nietzsche and science; on the contrary, he has some stimulating things to say about it. His stance on this issue is to argue that Nietzsche's researches into the biological and physiological sciences were only ever motivated by the needs of his own personal singularity or "particular case." Thus, Nietzsche wanted "to find a mode of behaviour, in the organic and inorganic world, that was analogous to his own valetudinary state . . . based on this mode of

behaviour, to find the arguments and resources that would allow him to re-create himself, beyond his own self" (32). Science is an ambiguous ally in Nietzsche's inhuman project. On the one hand, it explores life and the universe without being concerned about the consequences for human behaviour with regard to the reality principle. On the other hand, it is "essentially an *institutional* principle dictated by reasons of security for the (gregarious) continuity of existence" (134). Klossowski argues that Nietzsche projects the "conspiracy" of his teaching of the vicious circle against the "external conspiracy . . . of the science and morality of institutions." It is in this context that we can best appreciate the meaning of Nietzsche positioning himself "contra Darwin": "The selection expounded by Darwin coincides perfectly with bourgeois morality." Natural selection "*conspires with gregariousness* by presenting *mediocre* beings as *strong*, rich and powerful beings" (169). Klossowski is right to make Nietzsche's engagement with Darwinism central to a reading of his texts, but I am not convinced that he has got to grips with either the full complexity of Nietzsche's response to Darwin or the challenge Darwinism presents to any Nietzschean-inspired thinking of life. Nietzsche's thinking—notably the doctrine of will to power—reaches an impasse once it realizes that "Darwinism is correct": "[T]he will to power in which I recognize the ultimate character and ground of all change provides us with the reason why selection is *not* in favour of the exceptions and lucky strokes" (*WP* 685). Now if the triumph of reactive values is not "antibiological," as Nietzsche himself tells us, then what becomes of the doctrine of will to power? If it ends up concurring with Darwinism, then is the doctrine of return Nietzsche's attempt to find a way out of this impasse? If these are the right kind of questions to pose, then the truly key issue becomes that of the adequacy of eternal return as a response to biological and cultural evolution. It is inadequate to simply assert, as Klossowski does, that Nietzsche equated Darwinism with bourgeois morality. On the contrary, for Nietzsche, Darwin's theory of evolution is the correct one—even at the level of will to power. This is why he tells us that his engagement takes place around a "problem of *economics*." In short, Nietzsche seeks to identify within evolution a different energetics, one in which "'Duration' as such has no value" (*WP* 864). In neither case, then, that of Darwinism or Nietzscheanism, are we dealing simply with a problem of morality; rather, we are dealing with a problem of economics and energetics.

The intelligence of this text on the vicious circle demands an exact engagement. For me the most important problem of Klossowski's reading revolves around the manner in which it unknowingly takes over the central antinomy of Bergson's early text and produces through its lens an interpretation of the eternal return as the paradoxical doctrine of muteness *par ex-*

cellence. He refuses to work through the antinomy and instead sets it up a kind of *a priori* antagonism between intensity and institution.

Ultimately, for Klossowski, Nietzsche is not someone who thinks beyond the human condition. Rather, he is indeed “one of those machines who explode” and who *feels* the dissolution of all identity and reality, and so is, in some quasi-mystical sense, beyond truth and knowledge, beyond metaphysics and science. This explains why he spends so little time on Nietzsche’s attempts to come up with some cosmological proof of the doctrine. For Klossowski, this is not because the thought is ethical, but because both the ethical and cosmological renditions of the thought-experiment miss the essential point of it, chiefly, that it is outside of thought altogether. All the stress is placed on the ecstasy and the agony of the 1881 summit experience in Sils-Maria. For Klossowski, this is the decisive turn in Nietzsche’s lived experience. His subsequent attempts to work out the meaning of what had happened to him are doomed attempts to communicate what is beyond communication and to make sense of an irreducible non-sense.

The disjunction between life and knowledge on which so much of his staging of the case of Nietzsche rests proves a fateful, and perhaps ultimately fatal, choice for Klossowski to make since it condemns Nietzsche to isolation and solitude as his irrevocable destiny, playing the role of a simulator of thought, the supreme conspirator-actor in Klossowski’s stage production of the filthy lessons of philosophy, one who teaches the unteachable, thinks the unthinkable, and attempts to unthink thought—and then falls, unsurprisingly, into complete (and unsimulated?) muteness and madness.

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Note

1. For Bataille on return as a “mode of drama” that “unmotivates the moment and frees life of ends,” see his *On Nietzsche*, trans. B. Boone (London: Athlone Press, 1992), preface, xxxiii.