

A Superior Existentialism

Pierre Klossowski, *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*, translated by Daniel W. Smith (London: Athlone Press 1999)

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Thirty years after its publication in France in 1969 Klossowski's *Vicious Circle* has been published into English in a superb translation by Daniel Smith, well-known for both his excellent translations of, and commentaries on, Deleuze. Klossowski's text is often compared in stature to such classic and momentous readings as Heidegger's two-volume study, mostly composed of lectures given during 1936-40 and Deleuze's 1962 *Nietzsche and Philosophy*. Such comparisons, however, miss the essential *incomparable* character of Klossowski's text. It is one of those rare things, a text that is unique, singular, and incomparable. 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 of Nietzsche, but on account of its trenchant insights, exacting rigour, and exquisite precision, it goes way beyond anything one encounters in Bataille's book on Nietzsche. 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. Where Bataille's attempt to make Nietzsche impossible and unusable can often read like a series of unconvincing postures and poorly conceived riddles, in Klossowski's text these aspects of Nietzsche are pursued with an absolute rigour and a sustained logic of disablement.

Klossowski is a truly great writer and reader. His knowledge of Nietzsche's texts, including many *Nachlass* fragments from the 1880s (many of which do not appear in the English edition based on the Forster-

Nietzsche compilation), 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. Reading the text afresh in translation in 1999 I had the distinct feeling that its readers 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, etc. 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, the fact 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.

A certain and undetected Bergsonism hovers over the book, which I shall touch on shortly. It strikes me, upon encountering a few of them, that the commentaries on this remarkable and singular text have completely failed to come to terms with what distinguishes it as a book on Nietzsche. They have understandably concentrated their focus on Klossowski's privileging of the experience of eternal return but this has been done in isolation from the rest of the book. As a result these commentaries provide little more than perfunctory, even cavalier, comprehensions of the text. One recent commentator, for example, has classified it as moving from an 'existential' reading of eternal return to a 'deconstructive' one.¹ But this strikes me as a lazy conception of the book and of how Klossowski seeks to unravel and to stage an encounter with the central problem of Nietzsche's writing, that of teaching the unteachable (ultimately for Klossowski the thought of eternal return is unteachable and even unthinkable – it is beyond thought, beyond communication in language, beyond the human condition). There is little that is deconstructive in this book, and the existentialism that informs its understanding of eternal return (as beyond language and social consciousness), takes its inspiration not from deconstruction but from Bergson, notably his supremely antinomical modernist tract, *Time and Free Will*.

¹ D. Smith, *Transvaluations: Nietzsche in France 1872-1972* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp.150-164.

For Klossowski, Nietzsche was 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 key thought-experiments are simulations and simulacra and that his thought unfolds 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' (p. 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: 'his thought was lucid to the extreme, it took on the appearance of a delirious interpretation – and also required the entire experimental initiative of the modern world' (p. xvi). According to Klossowski, Nietzsche interrogates the nature and conditions of thinking and of philosophy – what is the act of thinking? what is philosophy? – like no thinker before or since. As a result he ended up producing 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 of the book 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 is a dramatic transposition into the heart of Nietzsche's darkness of the essential thematic of Bergson's first published text, *Time and Free Will*.

This text begins with out 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's text is informed by this configuration of the self and the priority of *lived experience*. He was, of course, 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 of intensity and the dissolution of both identity and reality. The opening chapter of Klossowski's text 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 which make up Western culture (p. 6). In response to the 'levelling powers of gregarious 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' (ibid.).

Chapter Two, 'The Valetudinary States at the Origin of a Semiotic of Impulses', is where we encounter for the first time in the text Klossowski's presentation of eternal return. This is then staged crucially in chapter three entitled 'The Experience of Eternal Return', with chapters four through to six are devoted to bringing out and examining the various aspects of the doctrine, including the scientific (chapter five) and the political (chapter six). It is clear that for him 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 which 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. The problems with Klossowski's reading need to be pinpointed precisely. Before identifying them, let me outline his conception of eternal return and the character of its experience.

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 because it is doing so through the 'impossible' mediums of language, pedagogy, culture, etc. Adherence to the non-sense of life and 'belief' in return – and Klossowski argues that this is all Nietzsche hoped for, that the doctrine would be met with belief – entails an 'impracticable lucidity' (p. 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' (ibid.). 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' (p. 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*.² 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' (p. 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' (p. 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*'. Moreover, 'The day human beings learn how to behave as *phenomena devoid of intention* – for every

² For Bataille on Return as a 'mode of drama' that 'unmotiates the moment and frees life of ends' see his *On Nietzsche*, trans. B Boone (London: Athlone Press, 1992), preface, p. xxxiii.

intention at the level of the human being always implies its own conservation, its continued existence – on that day, a new creature would declare the integrity of existence’ (p. 139).

This reading is both impressive and disquieting. It becomes even more so when Klossowski attempts to extend these insights to a conception of Nietzsche’s own organism and brain. 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, boldly or foolishly depending on one’s perspective, 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 order to inscribe itself in the depths of his organism, the law of the Eternal Return of all possible individuations, as the justice of *the universe*, required the destruction of the very organ that had disclosed it: namely, *Nietzsche’s brain*...(p. 221)

Klossowski is decisive in his choice of reading the eternal return in terms of what I would like to 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 wildly speculative claim that the reason why Nietzsche was himself 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: “Nietzsche no doubt believed he had gone mad since he had received this thought. To prove the contrary to himself, he wanted to appeal to science, he expected from science a proof that he was not the victim of a pure phantasm” (p. 97). This claim rests on a highly selective and tendentious reading of both the intellectual trajectory of Nietzsche’s thought, especially his engagement with the natural and physical sciences, including the matter of time – which is well-established and of an advanced character before the 1880s – and of the cosmology Nietzsche worked on and outlined in the 1880s (a decade that witnesses Poincaré’s efforts to establish a recurrence theorem within the field of science, but to which Klossowski makes no reference). In addition, it can be noted, that

Salome and Klossowski's preference for construing Nietzsche's relation to his abysmal thought of Return almost entirely in terms of him *suffering* from it, neglects the fact that he also derived great consolation from this thought: 'My consolation is that everything that has been is eternal: the sea will cast it up again' (WP 1065).

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' (p. 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, however, it is 'essentially an *institutional* principle dictated by reasons of security for the (gregarious) continuity of existence...' (p. 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' (p. 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': '...the 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 absolutely maintains, 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 or inadequacy of eternal return as a response to biological and cultural evolution. What can be said is that 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 but rather 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 excellence*. He refuses to work through the terms of the antinomy and instead sets it up a kind of *a priori* antagonism between intensity and institution, or, in Nietzsche's terms, as an irreconcilability between 'becoming' and 'knowledge', within which eternal return is bound up with the ecstatic experience of intensity that escapes any attempt to fix and determine its meaning or significance. This acceptance on Klossowski's part of Nietzsche's separation of becoming and knowledge has important consequences, for it basically means that the project of metaphysics has been deemed to be an impossible and unnecessary one from the start (this in stark contrast to the later Bergson and also the entire oeuvre of Deleuze from a philosophy of difference to a philosophy of concepts). It is this refusal of metaphysics, and of the generation of knowledge beyond the human condition, that distinguishes Klossowski's text and the treacherous way it aims to show this to be the necessary, albeit paradoxical, outcome of the pursuit 'of' knowledge (do we pursue knowledge or does it pursue us?).

Ultimately, for Klossowski, Nietzsche is not someone who thinks beyond the human condition. Rather, he is an exploding machine who dissolves this condition 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 – when he says for example that life comes up with the thought as a means of its own self-enhancement and overcoming – are doomed attempts to communicate what is beyond communication and to make sense of an irreducible nonsense. There is an excellent chapter on Nietzsche's political philosophy, one of the finest accounts of this dimension of Nietzsche to be found anywhere, where Klossowski aims to show that this is another misdirected attempt on Nietzsche's part to use the doctrine of return to calculative effect in the service of a politics that promotes a new discipline and breeding.

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 who attempts to unthink thought and then falls, unsurprisingly, into complete (and unsimulated?) muteness and madness.