

Book Review of Such a Deathly Desire

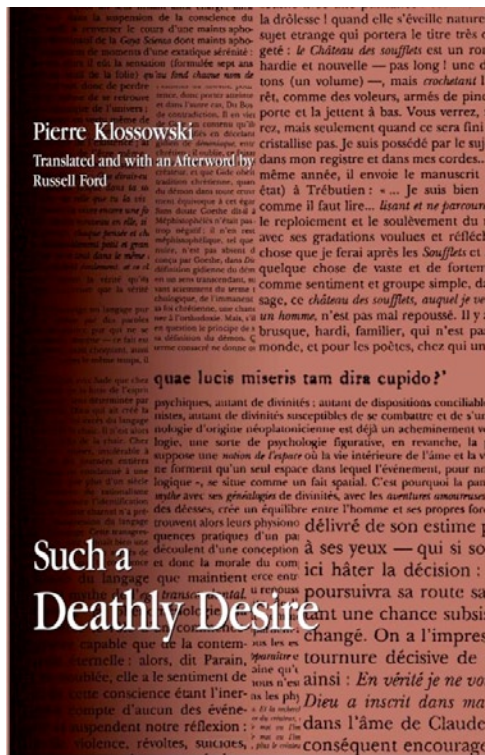
by Pierre Klossowski, translated, edited, and afterword by Russell Ford (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007)

reviewed by Yunus Tuncel (Ph.D., The New School)

Long due in English, *Such a Deathly Desire* (*Un si funeste désir*) by Pierre Klossowski was originally published in 1963 and consists of eight essays. Seven of these essays had appeared in various publications over a period of 15 years prior to 1963, and the last essay, “Nietzsche, Polytheism, and Parody,” was given as a lecture at the College de Philosophie in 1957. The essays deal with a variety of nineteenth and twentieth century authors including Nietzsche, Gide, Du Bos, Claudel, D’Aurevilly, Bataille, Parain, and Blanchot. Some of the topics that are addressed in these essays are death, the death of God, desire, language, silence, simulacrum, parody, and demonology.

Klossowski is perhaps one of the most elusive and cryptic figures of the twentieth century. Despite his somewhat reclusive way of living and his distance to the academic world, he was a major influence on the post-war French intellectual scene. Like Bataille, who was also a friend, Klossowski is a poet-philosopher, a distant echo of Nietzsche’s vision; he has written both fictional and theoretical works, worked with filmmakers, and dedicated the last 20 years of his life to painting. However, unlike Bataille, he has not found a broad community of readers in the English-speaking world. This may be due to the intricacy of his prose style and the multiplicity of layers of seemingly contradictory and enigmatically interwoven discourses in his texts that are informed by a history of literature that goes back to the ancient Greeks and Romans. All eight essays reflect a cross-section of this multiplicity, and what follows is a review of each essay.

The first essay, “On Some Fundamental Themes of Nietzsche’s *Gaya Scienza*,” is Klossowski’s introduction to his translation of *The Gay Science*, which was published in 1956. Out of many Nietzsches, Klossowski sets the task of finding the real Nietzsche, or in fact his own



Nietzsche. In his search he surveys a variety of themes in Nietzsche's works, one of which stands out more prominently than the rest: the eternal recurrence of the same, the dominant theme of Klossowski's only work on Nietzsche, *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*.

In Klossowski's account, to be modern for Nietzsche is to be set free from the rectilinear progression of humanity. A *gaya scienza* coincides with a recuperation of the past, and its joy lies in the rediscovery of the present in the eternal. The will that is liberated from the historical sense is like a child that plays. Here Klossowski uncovers some currents in Nietzsche's earlier works that prefigure the eternal recurrence; one such passage is in the second *Untimely Meditation*: "death brings the desired forgetting . . . the knowledge that being is only an uninterrupted has-been." In this conception, there is no telos, no final salvation. Each moment rediscovers and fulfills itself. Here Klossowski sidesteps into a discussion on polytheism to expound on how the forgetting of a historically determined present is possible and how the resources and plastic force of assimilation can function freely; therefore, in polytheism the god-creating or the myth-making functions are kept alive. With this Klossowski also exposes the affinity of Nietzsche's eternal recurrence to the mythic time of the ancients.

Klossowski then explores the context in which the thought of the eternal recurrence had come to Nietzsche. He refers to it as "a single instant" that ". . . thus charged, thus sub-came to in the suspension of the consciousness of the present, suffices to reverse the course of a life" (8). It is the choice of destiny made on the other side of forgetting. And the parable of the heaviest weight, whispered by a demon as a secret, is presented as an aporia; one must choose the repetition freely so as to be sovereign. There is a circular movement that is embedded in the eternalization of the ego, as it recreates itself in the cyclical being towards the overman, "a new maturity of the spirit" (12).

For Klossowski, the announcement of the death of God does not signify a vulgar atheism on Nietzsche's part. On the contrary, "the overman . . . reintegrates the sovereignty of being with the divine only in the mythic sense, thus renewing the myth of an ancient divinity as well as a divinity to come" (13). Moreover, Nietzsche must be read as a thinker who stands against the currents of nihilism, and not as a nihilistic thinker. Klossowski ends his preface to *The Gay Science* by situating it at the decisive point of Nietzsche's life, in which he finds several signs regarding the communicability of his experiences.

In the second essay of the book, "Gide, Du Bos, and the Demon," that appeared in *Les temps modernes* in September 1950, Klossowski discusses the question of the demon, a recurrent theme in his works. Charles Du Bos (1882-1939) was a French literary critic who studied at Oxford. He wrote criticism, made translations, and was a close friend and a correspondent of Gide's for many years until his conversion to Catholicism in the 1920s. In 1929 he published a direct attack on Gide, *Dialogue avec André Gide*. It is this work along with works by Gide and other exchanges between the two authors, which Klossowski studies to explore the demonic.

What does 'demon' or the 'demonic' mean first in its history, that is in Catholic theology,

exposed to sinister influences. As for Claudel's assessment of Gide's religiosity, "Gide recognizes Christ, but does not belong to the Church" (38); henceforth he calls Gide "a defaulting debtor." And he goes so far as to admonish Gide not to spread abominations and horrible practices and to cure himself.

At this turning point in their relationship, Gide has to make a confession to Claudel: he has never experienced desire before a woman. Further in this confession Gide admits that he has not chosen to be this way, God has chosen him to bear the enigma (echoing Claudel's own statement), and He is using Claudel in order to speak to him. While opening himself up to further vulnerability, Gide moves Claudel to pity. Claudel promises discretion, returns his two letters of confession, but does not withhold his urge to make suggestions to Gide. He asks Gide to suppress the pederastic passage of *The Games* and to consult with abbot Fontaine for a possible, official confession.

The letter of confession and Claudel's response were important events in Gide's life; his conversion to Catholicism seemed imminent to him at this juncture. Despite all, Claudel assures him that he would never abandon him: "I know the incomparable worth of a soul . . ." (41). However, events take on a different turn; discussions with Claudel on homosexuality, in which Claudel presents the dilemma of "God or homosexuality," force him to justify homosexuality by making it public. According to Klossowski, there are two periods in Gide's life: one that was placed under the sign of the secret (which justifies attitudes for contraries as in *The Counterfeiter*), and a second one that is marked by the disclosure of personal writings. Moreover, Gide ruined the traditional notion of personal life by publishing the secrets of his life while living. Gide's demon is present in the characters he had created; he is ". . . himself simultaneously the young woman, a voluntary and seduced victim and the monster hideous to all . . ." (45).

"Preface to *A Married Priest* by Barbey D'Aureville" is the fourth essay of the book and had appeared as the preface to the 1960 edition of D'Aureville's *Un prêtre marié*. Jules Amédée Barbey D'Aureville (1808-1889), an author forgotten by many, was a French novelist and a short story writer known for *Les Diaboliques* (*The She-Devils*), a collection of stories, his Catholicism, and dandyism. *A Married Priest* had first appeared in 1864. He was revered by the decadents of the late nineteenth century and had a decisive influence on writers like Henry James and Proust. He was a mélange of many impulses that are at work in his stories as Klossowski observes: dazzling verve, daintiness, slyness, a deep sense of the nobility of melancholy, aggressiveness, voluptuousness, violence, cruelty, and sensual delight in horror (47). While seemingly opposed themes from Catholicism, Sade, and dandyism appear interwoven in his texts, like many of his free-thinking contemporaries he takes a stance against the usefulness of his age (or the utilitarianism of the bourgeois world-order) and sees Christian inspiration in one of the leading principles of modernity, laicism.

A Married Priest, D'Aureville's "most forgotten work," is the story of a rebellious priest, Sombreval, who reneges on his priesthood and gets married because he ceases to believe (mar-

identification of language and transgression is intensified. Additionally, Sade denies the objective reality of sacrilege. This can also be observed in his vision for a pure society of libertines; in this vision for purity Sade does not consider what the libertines would transgress if there are no taboos. For Bataille, on the other hand, sacrilege has an ontological function; “in the act of profaning the most noble name of existence, its presence is revealed” (68). And this, for Bataille, has to do with the unity of taboos and transgressions in any socio-cultural context. Here Klossowski sees the elements of Christian social structure in Bataille.

In the next essay, one finds more of Klossowski’s interest in language and silence by way of Parain. Brice Parain (1897-1971), a French philosopher and theologian, wrote extensively on problems of language (he was called the “Sherlock Holmes of language” by Blanchard, a French critic) and also on communism, surrealism, and existentialism. He was a close friend of Albert Camus. The essay, “Language, Silence, and Communism,” had appeared in *Critique* in June 1949 with the subtitle “On *The Trouble with Choice* by Brice Parain.” The problem of language is central for Parain, because truth is revealed by language and language has created man. The ultimate task is to form a non-contradictory idea of God that is allied to the search for a just language and conversely to the search for a just silence.

Parain rejects any model of language that starts with the priority of the cogito (Sartre is mentioned here, but all the subjectivist models can be included here). On the contrary, he posits the priority of language against every myth of transcendental ego (in agreement with psychoanalysis, for Parain neither ego nor consciousness is an unbroken whole); language is almost always given from outside, it is “the stranger inside us” (76). The individual consciousness that always comes after language is animated by its subjection to the movement of language. And through language we are always outside ourselves, which makes us equal, just as we are before death. Ideas and names are integrally bound together; what the names designate cannot be undermined, and every name of existence asks to be. It is precisely our death that allows names to be, because language is collective (77). Now all of these bring us to the question of communism.

Parain regards communism only as a stage of the grand historical revolution and as the reign of the idea (collective) over the individual (a fragment), a condition necessary for the emergence of a new (non-contradictory) idea of God that he is after. What he sees in communism as positive, although he does not like its propaganda machine, are silence and the dialogue between the flesh and language. For Parain, language belongs to the flesh (a move away from the rationalist conceptions of language); one central problem for him is the dissociation of the two; namely that language has forgotten that it comes from the flesh (for instance, not feeling the words themselves when we utter them). As for silence, it is the silence of those who are sacrificed. Parain laments the fact that modern culture is not a culture of silence; with its hysteric emphasis on work, activity, and experience, it runs away from its mortal condition. Whereas, according to religion, speech coming from language lends itself to emotion to be expressed and returns to language that is God, for art speech comes from emotion that is nothing and wants to return to this nothing

is the latest function to develop in the evolution of the organic life; second, it is falsely considered as stable, eternal, immutable and again falsely linked to freedom and responsibility; third, it develops conscious thought out of the need to communicate through language; and fourth, it leads logical reason to establish habits of thinking. Finally, conscious thought produces the most utilizable part of our selves, the part that is communicable, and it always projects a goal. Here Klossowski establishes, via Nietzsche, a counter-force to this conscious thought, which is our essential part that remains incommunicable and non-utilizable. And this force is the unconscious life, the realm of the impulses and feelings, the domain of simulacra and what is related to it, such as fable, fiction, myth, and error.

Klossowski traces the etymology of the word *fable*, as in Nietzsche's famous "Wie die "wahre Welt" endlich zur Fabel wurde," to the Latin *fari* (to predict) and its participle *fatum* (fate) and establishes a connection between fable and the midday of Zarathustra in which everything begins again. "In antiquity, the hour of midday was an hour at once lucky and ill-fated" (103). This is the time of myth in eternity, the act of creating and forgetting. Here the unconscious forces that have no goal play their eternal game, and only the thinker who suffers deeply can see that he is only a fragment, an enigma to himself, and a horrifying chance. For him laughing and crying without reason that are *necessary* according to the eternal return are expressions of unknown motives. Myths embody these unconscious forces that are then produced as "willed error" or as simulacra that constitute manifestations of being in the existent beings. There are many different manifestations of simulacra such as playing, dissimulating oneself, acting, and ritual practicing, all of which form the important ingredients of polytheism and its myth-making where one sees the simulacra of multiple gods and the multi-layered, polysemic interaction between the divine and the human. And finally for Klossowski the death of God in Nietzsche does not signify an absence of gods; on the contrary, it stirs the eros of the soul and awakens the instinct of adoration that has to do with god-making, one of the most vivid and vital functions of polytheism. Both the overman as the union of the will to create and the contemplation of the absence of the gods and the eternal return understood as a simulacrum of a doctrine "whose parodic character gives an account of hilarity" as in god's laughter play their role in Nietzsche's epoch-making *parodic polytheism*.

Having dealt with each essay individually, a few words must be said on the book as a whole. How do all these essays belong together after all, essays that deal with authors some of whom would not want to sit together in the halls of Hades? To deal with this question, it is necessary first to discuss the title of the book, *Un si funeste désir*, and then some of the main motifs of all the essays. The title is a line from Klossowski's translation of Virgil's *Aeneid*, Book V, in which Aeneas, having found his father's shade at the Elysium, asks him about other shades and the river, Lethe: "quae lucis miseris tam dira cupido?" which translates as "what is this so deathly desire that these wretched ones have for light?" Upon this question, Anchises presents a cosmology to his son in which he explains how the shades of Elysium (the souls of the dead) are purified

after they have dwelt there for a millennium and gain the purity of their origin. At this point, they are called by the god to Lethe, “whose waters erase the memories of their body and, through this forgetting, their desire to be embodied is rekindled” (124) Russell Ford shows the intricacy of this phrase, an expression of the agonism between the forces of life and death, and the etymological layers that are embedded therein, warning the reader that “*deathly* certainly does not capture the full richness of the etymological resources that Klossowski makes use of . . .” (125).

This astonishment that Aeneas shows is repeated in the question of the eternal recurrence, the basic idea of Zarathustra for Nietzsche, which is the question posed by the demon in the form of a parable or a secret. Now this parable is significant not only in Klossowski’s reading of Nietzsche, but also, according to Russell Ford, for the whole organization of the book: “It is the circuit of this *salto mortale*, opened by the question of the demon, that organizes the subsequent essays of the book” (127). The theme of the demon then moves from one chapter to the next. Du Bos rightly apprehends Gide through the theme of the demon, for whom the demonic is conceived as a matter of the concrete and its freedom and for whom the simulation of freedom is the game that is played. On the other hand, the case with Claudel is somewhat different, more personal. Claudel, through his correspondence, provokes Gide to confess his secret, private life and to find his demons. “Ultimately, then, Gide’s project is the dramatization of the demonic interrogation . . .” (128). Barbey, a distant echo of Sade and also provoked by the question of the demon, would rather see the complete elimination of moral norms. As the book proceeds to the next three authors, language takes up the center stage. While Parain is concerned with the relationship between language and body, Bataille is concerned with the transgressive expressions of language. Inverting Parain’s model, Blanchot claims that mortal language does not end in death, but arises there. For him, language itself is demonic. And finally the demonic ends in Nietzsche’s parody.

Such a Deathly Desire is full of difficult and provoking thoughts on a variety of subjects and plunges the reader into debates in the recent history of ideas. Russell Ford has accomplished a difficult task by rendering Klossowski’s intricate French into English. We hope that the book will open yet another door into the Klossowskian labyrinth and that his demons will not be forgotten.

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