

Reading Nietzsche's 'Sick' Body: Klossowski's interpretation of Nietzsche

Pierre Klossowski, who is known variously as artist, novelist, philosopher, and pornographer, demonstrated throughout his diverse 'corpus' a preoccupation with the unknown capacities of the human body. In particular, Klossowski was concerned with language, as fabrication of the body, in every sense of the word 'fabrication': that is, as both its product and its falsification. His interest in Nietzsche's philosophy is guided by this concern for the relation between the body and language. According to Klossowski, Nietzsche put his own life at risk for the sake of his experimentations with writing. In his *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*, Klossowski establishes Nietzsche's importance as a thinker of the body. Moreover, Nietzsche's attempts at developing a singular corporeal experience in writing set him apart from other philosophers, who instead sought to distance their work from their bodies. In this paper I wish to demonstrate the significance for Klossowski of Nietzsche's sick body to the development of the doctrine of eternal recurrence.

Reading Nietzsche, Klossowski is able to elaborate a narrative on the journey of the human body from silence, to speech, and then finally back to muteness. "Muteness," because in the end, according to Klossowski, the body is not able to communicate its internal states to another, or indeed to its own consciousness. The internal state *gives rise* to speech, but does not itself pass over into language: of the corporeal state that initiates our thought, we know nothing. Doesn't it seem problematic that language, as an artefact of the body, does not reveal something of its origin? According to Nietzsche, the problem is even more enigmatic: the body invents language *in order to deceive us about itself*. Language for Nietzsche is the frontier of organic life's will to complexify, and ultimately to misinterpret itself. Conversely, communication in the "inorganic" world is direct and simple: pure action and reaction. But the impulse in which a particular thought originates in the human body, once it gives rise to thought, already obscures itself: the thought is already a movement away from the impulse. According to Klossowski, this is because language cannot grasp what he calls the 'motive'—or 'outrage'—of the initial impulse. Language is always a *reaction*, whereas the impulse is action. Language, rather, monumentalises the impulse. Like a funereal procession, it buries the corporeal event. At one and the same moment as the impulse gives voice to itself, it alters in quality such that the utterance becomes a mere *phantom* of—or memorial to—the bodily impulse. Thus, language always distorts the body, but presents itself to us as the truth of things.

Nietzsche was privy to his insights on the relation between thought and the body, according to Klossowski, because of the nature of the symptoms that continually beset him: the cycles of migraine, vomiting of phlegm, dyspepsia, and blindness that both interrupted and fuelled his work. By adopting a stoic disposition regarding his suffering, Nietzsche was able to observe the interplay of body and thought: his body became an experimental laboratory through which were gained his signature theories of will to power and the eternal return of the same. According to Klossowski, the periods of greatest creativity for Nietzsche *originate* in these bouts of sickness, as if the sickness were an accumulation of force that found its expression in his philosophy:

The euphoria that gripped Nietzsche after each of his crises from 1877 to 1881, led him to scrutinize ever more carefully the forces that had been revealed through the disturbances of his organism. He gave them free rein, during which time he returned to his notebooks and submitted them to his vocabulary... the afflux and reflux of these forces, their tension or relaxation, could find an apparent outlet only by being translated into words, images, reasonings, or refutations. (NVC, 15)

Nietzsche's sick body, according to Klossowski, presents him with a perspective on language, writing, and thinking, which is unavailable to the healthy man. By means of his sickness, Nietzsche is able to observe the body at war with itself, and thus is conceived his theory of the will to power. Life, says Nietzsche, is a state of continual warfare: species against species, body against body, impulse against impulse. But we must not forget that species, bodies, and impulses, also occasionally collude with one another, to form greater bodies: if one impulse can convince others, through sheer force, of its superiority, then they will subordinate themselves to it, and thus become subsumed in its 'will.' In sickness, Nietzsche witnessed his own body break down into some of its component parts: he understood his body to have turned against itself. During these times, in which Nietzsche observed and experimented upon his own broken body, his faith in his self, or his consciousness—which is supposed to provide a coherent veneer for the inherently conflictual body—also broke down. As Klossowski puts it, Nietzsche “sided *with* his body”:

If the body is presently in pain, if the brain is sending nothing but distress signals, it is because a *language* is trying to make itself heard at the price of reason. A suspicion, a hatred, a rage against his own conscious and reasonable person was born. This person—fashioned by a particular epoch, in a familial milieu he increasingly abhorred—is not what he wanted to conserve. He would destroy the person out of a love for the *nervous system* he knew he had

been gifted with, and in which he took a certain *pride*. By studying the reactions of his nervous system, he would come to conceive of himself in a *different manner* than he had previously known—and indeed, in a manner that will perhaps never again be known. (NVC, 24-5)

Klossowski demonstrates the connection between Nietzsche's sickness and his philosophy by emphasising that for Nietzsche sickness does not *oppose* health: in fact, sickness is often the *precursor* to good health. Klossowski quotes Nietzsche:

The first shoots of fecundity, insofar as they are a sign of health and promote vigour and resistance, initially have the character of *sickness*. {KSA, 40[65]} (NVC, 6)

Sickness for Nietzsche creates conditions for change and growth that otherwise would not come about in 'good health.' In sickness, the body undergoes a process of reconstitution and selection: it must turn in upon itself—listen to itself—in order to pass through a stage of difficulty and self-immolation. During a period of convalescence, the body stockpiles its resources, creating a surplus for lean times. Nietzsche urges the philosopher to spend this excess during the times of his greatest health: to *give* out of a feeling of abundance rather than from need. Through his philosophy, Nietzsche was able to see his suffering as a valuable resource and a means for creativity. His concern was to convert his sickness into a form of 'play,' or self-regulating activity, in order to put to use the self-referential closedness of pain. Treating his sickness as play, Nietzsche was able to accumulate a type of experience: the pain was able to learn about itself, to differentiate itself, and finally to find an outlet. By submitting his suffering to his own vocabulary, as Klossowski puts it, Nietzsche is able to 'objectivate' his pain: to give it an end beyond itself, such that he could convert the circuitous reactivity of sickness into direct and transformative active thought. To convert his suffering into play, Nietzsche is able to achieve an accretion of his forces, such that they become over-ripe and in need of a goal. According to Klossowski, in Nietzsche's work on his sickness the bodily impulse takes *itself* as its goal, and thus produces the phantasm that is language.

For Klossowski, the thought of eternal return most adequately expresses the transformative thought that, through his sickness, Nietzsche laboured to communicate. In the thought of eternal return Klossowski found the culmination of Nietzsche's will to self-dissolution: his impulse to side *with his body* and against his 'person.' First, eternal return is the affirmation of the chance occurrence of one's life, as one possibility among many; but it also affirms other possibilities, or other trajectories that one's life might have taken.

... the representation of a *prior* life and an *after-life* no longer concerns a beyond, or an individual self that would reach this beyond, but rather the *same life* lived and experienced through its individual differences. (NVC, 72)

Primarily, then, eternal return affirms chance, which for Nietzsche is the motor for existence. Second, eternal recurrence affirms re-evaluation, and the will to the *destruction* of one's life as it presently is. Destruction, as life's means to regeneration, is bound up for Nietzsche with the selective function of eternal recurrence: what cannot be affirmed by the thought of eternal return, must pass away. Thus, eternal return becomes a mechanism of will to power. It is posed as a question to life: can you repeat yourself now and for eternity. Only the strongest force will take that risk, and thus selects itself as dominant. Third, eternal return negates the possibility of self-coherence, and eliminates the concept of the 'will.' Klossowski writes, "there is no will that is not a will to *power*, and in this regard the will is nothing other than the primordial impulse" (NVC, 73). Will is thus not a stable and non-corporeal element which reins over the body, but rather it is an *effect* of the body, or a perspective that the body takes upon itself that *thinks* itself non-corporeal. Eternal return reintegrates will and body, by demonstrating that the body is in fact a particular arrangement of forces, as will to power.

For Klossowski, the thought of eternal return, as a transformative thought, gives expression to Nietzsche's nervous system, the task of which is continually to destroy and to create anew his own organism through his various states of health. This thought is dispatched, first to Nietzsche's friends and then to his readers, as the disclosure of the most profound truth of which he is capable, because it communicates his most dominant impulse, to which his life-system returns recurrently. The tone with which Nietzsche communicates his idea is critical to our understanding of its significance to him: Nietzsche encounters the thought of eternal return as if it were a revelation of the meaning of existence, and wishes his friends and readers to adopt it as the key to their own lives. He believes it to be a thought that could transform the human species, for if we were all to regard eternal return seriously, we would live or die by its measure. There is another connection in Klossowski's work between Nietzsche's sickness and his thought of eternal recurrence that I would like now to discuss, but it is not contained in his writings that deal explicitly with Nietzsche. Rather, a concept that he introduces in *Sade My Neighbour* intersects neatly with the work on Nietzsche at this point. In his account of transgression in Sade's writing, Klossowski identifies 'perversion' as the device with which Sade fashions *his* expression of singularity. Perversion is characterised not simply as an 'eccentric' desire. Rather, it is as an *all-consuming* desire: an impulse that organises the entire organism, which action is commenced only for the satisfaction of

the perverse desire. The pervert is thus obsessional, subjecting his body—his senses, his tastes, his thoughts, and actions—to one aim only, such that the body *deifies* its perversion. The perversion becomes the meaning and centre of the pervert's entire existence; he will even risk life in the pursuit of his object.

In this case, can we locate in Nietzsche's attachment to the thought of eternal recurrence a propensity for perversion? Could Nietzsche's sick body, which gives rise to the insight that leads to the formulation of eternal return, also be an obsessional body, which organises itself around the one impulse: destabilisation, and expropriation of the self from the body? Nietzsche was willing to risk all for his perversion: in fact, to experience eternal return was by definition to risk all, as it leads for Nietzsche to total dissolution of the self. Moreover, by thinking eternal return as Nietzsche's perversion, we are able to theorise a proximity of language to the body that is generally undermined in philosophical argument. Because his account of eternal recurrence can be read, not so much as an argument, but as incitement to a particular experience, perhaps we might conjecture that the impulse is *awakened* in Nietzsche's account of eternal return, rather than buried and monumentalised. The reader brings the impulse, which lay mute within Nietzsche's text, to its full expression by affirming eternal return: thus she becomes part of what Klossowski calls the *complôt* in Nietzsche's writing: the plot or conspiracy against main-stream values and culture. In the expression of his thought of eternal return, Nietzsche thus appeals to the senses, or corporeal states, of his readers, rather than through argument to 'reason,' which is assumed to have been expunged of these states.

Finally, I wish to reflect briefly upon an issue that inevitably must be broached in any discussion of interpretation, but which has a particular resonance in the case of Klossowski and Nietzsche: that is, the issue of the *contagion* of Nietzsche. In other words, what of Nietzsche remains with Klossowski, infecting his philosophy and clouding his vision? Particularly if Klossowski himself were one of Nietzsche's own, whom he had summoned with his appeal to the tastes and the senses of his readers? Through Klossowski's account of eternal return it becomes clear that the power of this thought is that it by-passes argument, appealing instead to the reader's imagination: the reader needn't be convinced of the veracity of eternal return. If she is induced to experience the eternal return through Nietzsche's account of it, then she will be forever under its influence. Eternal return is thus Nietzsche's agent of contagion, whereby he circumvents our usual defences, and particularly, our defences in reason.

By focussing his analysis of Nietzsche upon the thought of eternal return, Klossowski thus submits himself to Nietzsche's sickness, and allows it to pervert his

life-perspective. Perhaps we needn't view this in such a negative light though. If, as Klossowski wrote in his *Sade* essay, writing has its means of reproduction just as the body does, then perhaps Nietzsche's 'contagion' may be read more positively as *seminal* to Klossowski's own philosophy. Perhaps the eternal return does not repeat itself—ever the same—in Klossowski's writing, but instead gives us a different variety of philosophy, inspired by Nietzsche but by no means directed by him. As his progeny, it would have a life of its own, but circuits back to its genealogical roots when Klossowski reflects upon Nietzsche, in *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*. In that case, Klossowski was *willingly* 'infected,' and a new species of writing thus generated itself through his interpretation of Nietzsche.

Conclusion

With the thought of eternal return, Nietzsche attempted to make public an impulse that had been rendered 'mute' when bound to the conventions of philosophical argument, and in particular, to the principles of identity, and of non-contradiction. The thought of eternal recurrence became for him the medium of an experience of self-dissolution—and self-overcoming—that otherwise conflicts with, and thus cannot be understood in terms of, philosophical discourse. The telling of the thought, in *The Gay Science* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, playfully converts the suffering that he determined *not* to reveal into an affirmation of the decomposition of self. Language runs its course through the narrative of eternal recurrence, from silence to speech, and returns to the impulse, by 'repeating the same' through the body of the reader. We must recall, however, that the experience of eternal return is not as it seems: the same returns only as difference. Thus, Nietzsche left it to his reader to return him to himself, as someone irrevocably other.

Sources

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