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H-France Review Vol. 19 (December 2019), No. 267

Jonas Hock, *Bekanntnis und Ambiguität: Pierre Klossowskis Frühwerk*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2017. 213 pp. Notes and bibliography. 39.00€. (hb). ISBN 9783825368784.

Review by Leslie Hill, University of Warwick.

Pierre Klossowski (1905-2001) is, with little doubt, one of the twentieth century's most singular and intriguing figures. From the outset, his life was never markedly orthodox. His early years were polyglot and peripatetic. He was born in Paris to the painter, art critic, and stage designer Erich Klossowski and to Elisabeth Dorothea Spiro, a notable painter in her own right (under the name Baladine), both of whom were originally from Poland and had German nationality. Most of his teenage years were spent in Switzerland, alongside his younger brother, the future painter Balthus, and his mother, who, after separating from her husband in 1917, embarked on a lengthy amorous liaison with the poet, Rainer Maria Rilke. Happily, however, through the good offices of Rilke, and as a result of the latter's friendship with André Gide, Pierre was finally able to return to France where, among other things, he helped Gide correct the proofs of *Les Faux-monnayeurs* before being enrolled at the prestigious lycée Janson de Sailly in the 16<sup>th</sup> arrondissement.

During the 1930s, having now acquired French nationality, Klossowski remained a peripheral, eccentric figure, albeit one who found himself at the often controversial cross-section between some of the most influential intellectual movements of the time. In 1932, he began work as secretary to René Laforgue, one of the leading figures in French psychoanalysis, and was encouraged by Marie Bonaparte to emulate her pioneering work on Edgar Allan Poe by undertaking a similar study of the Marquis de Sade, which, when Klossowski's article was published, caused such scandal he was promptly dismissed. At around the same time, by way of anecdote, he met Georges Bataille, with whom he attended Alexandre Kojève's celebrated Hegel seminar at the École des Hautes Études. It was through Bataille that he became involved in the anti-fascist group known as Contre-Attaque and contributed to Bataille's journal *Acéphale* while also being a member of the secret society or secular religion of that name that Bataille sought to found between 1937 and 1939. But relations between the atheist Bataille and the still Christian Klossowski, even though the latter also helped launch the Collège de sociologie, often remained tense. While Bataille, under Kojève's influence, held to a dissident reworking of Hegel's phenomenology, Klossowski, partly as a result of Rilke's interest, was much closer to Kierkegaard, and it was with an extract from the latter's *Either/Or*, translated by himself from the German, in which the Dane offered a decidedly non-Hegelian portrait of Sophocles' Antigone

as a figure of resistance, that Klossowski addressed the Collège in 1938. He followed this up, a year later, along similar lines with a presentation entitled "Sade and the Revolution."

Klossowski's main professional activity at the time, as it would be in subsequent years, was as a translator. As such, he helped the poet, Pierre Jean Jouve (who knew little German), to produce a volume of Hölderlin translations; worked on books by the journalist Friedrich Sieburg (later denounced as a Nazi spy); as well as on extracts from Kafka's *Diary* and on Walter Benjamin's famous essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility," which led to proposals from Benjamin that he also translate Brecht and Horkheimer. In 1940, as France was overrun by the Wehrmacht, Klossowski underwent a spiritual and existential crisis, rediscovered his Catholic faith, and embarked on a religious vocation, first at the Benedictine Abbaye d'Hautecombe, on the banks of the Lac du Bourget. He remained there only for a matter of weeks, dismayed at the antisemitism displayed by the monks and congregation. He then moved to the Dominican convent at Saint-Alban-Leyse, outside Chambéry, attracted by the strong intellectual traditions associated with the order, not to mention the fact it was thought to be politically more progressive. But his stay was again relatively brief, and by November 1941 he had moved to the Couvent des Frères prêcheurs in Saint Maximin in the Var, where he shocked his fellow novices with accounts of Acéphale and Bataille's Church of the Death of God and allegedly tormented his tutors by challenging their Thomist scholasticism with the help of Heidegger's "What is Metaphysics?". Here, too, Klossowski's stay would be short-lived. He moved to Lyon, then to Paris where, after the war, following a brief interlude in the Lutheran Church, but by now having renounced his religious vocation, he married, was received back into the Catholic faith, and launched a career as a writer. In 1947, he published the first version of his book, *Sade mon prochain*, on which he had been working for fifteen years and in which he argued that Sade, on the grounds that the Divine Marquis, in violently denying the Christian God, was by that very token, and in spite of himself, a paradoxical yet unrepentant Catholic. It was a view Klossowski, recalling Nietzsche, would later repudiate as "a welter of quasi Wagnerian Romanticism" in the 1967 version of the book. Shortly after, in 1950, seeking to put a final distance between himself and his lengthy sojourn in the bosom of the Church, he published *La Vocation suspendue*, a text that presented itself as a *roman*, but which many took to be thinly disguised autobiography.

Any critic approaching Klossowski's early career is faced, then, with a perplexing range of palinodic reversals, of steps forward and steps back, by which one decision is seemingly always already inhabited by its opposite. The choice made by Jonas Hock in this impressively thorough and methodically-argued volume is to concentrate attention on Klossowski's work of the late 1940s, and in particular on *La Vocation suspendue*, which so far, as he points out, has been relatively neglected. It is itself, however, as Hock observes, an often bewildering work, "simultaneously a novel of personal development and yet not, an autobiography and yet not, an antinovel that yet also remains a novel," or, in Étiemble's words, which he quotes, a "récit-compte-rendu-d'un-roman-qui-n'existe-pas" (p.85). In other words, *La Vocation suspendue* is in the form of a metanovel; that is, an essay-like summary or description of a supposedly earlier, different novel bearing the same title as Klossowski's, published however, it is claimed, by an anonymous author, in a vanishingly small number of copies, in a place called Bethaven (which readers familiar with the Lutheran Old Testament [Amos 5:5] will immediately identify as the "house of nothingness" or of "idols" come to usurp the "house of God"). Among other things, this peculiar and dizzying conceit of turning the novel into an interpretation of a second hypothetical novel makes it impossible to tell text and commentary apart. For instance, is the Bethaven novel, as is suggested

at one point, “really” about political events under the Occupation or are these but the manifestation of darker forces issuing from within the Church itself?

What Hock convincingly shows is the extent to which, palimpsest that it is, Klossowski’s novel is a work in which confessional autobiography is exposed to a form of radical ambiguity, such that the novel might be seen to hang uncertainly between a belated parody of the novels of Léon Bloy or Barbey d’Aureville or of other members of the Catholic Revival, who are explicitly referenced in Klossowski’s text, and a precursor of the *nouveau roman* of Alain Robbe-Grillet or Claude Simon. It also might be argued that a more accurate source of inspiration ought surely to be found in the heteronomous confessional writings of Kierkegaard, notably *Either/Or*, this “Bildungsroman without Bildung,” as Louis Mackey calls it in his *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet* [1], which has itself been seen as an ironic reworking of Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister*, a novel, as Hock points out, also explicitly referenced in *La Vocation suspendue*. It is, in any event, indisputable that Klossowski’s novel not only consists of a valedictory summation of the writer’s earlier intellectual or affective experience, but also, as Hock suggests, provides the fulcrum on which Klossowski’s work as a whole may be thought to turn, albeit the radical ambiguity, or reversibility, that is such a feature of the novel seems to have informed Klossowski’s thinking from the outset, and would continue, for instance, to exert a profound influence on his later fiction and his remarkable—and remarkably idiosyncratic—account of eternal return in his hugely influential 1969 study, *Nietzsche et le cercle vicieux*.

Hock’s meticulously structured study is in four main parts. In the first, he provides a succinct overview of issues of literary structure and critical reception. In the second, he goes on to assess in more detail the status of *La Vocation suspendue* as a kind of autobiography and *roman à clé*, since this is how the book was first received and is still most often read. But as he shows, ambiguity and indecision are in attendance from the very beginning. What or whose vocation is alluded to in the title? If it is allegedly “suspended,” does this mean it is “abolished,” “*aufgehoben*,” i.e. “sublated,” or simply “interrupted,” in order to continue elsewhere and otherwise? And, even if some contemporary readers who knew Klossowski at the time are able to identify the “real” individuals on which the novel is allegedly based, this provides no “absolute solution,” but merely provides an extra level of mystification (p. 75).

In the third part of his study, Hock examines in further detail the religious or theological dimension of Klossowski’s novel; the extent to which its protagonist, Jérôme (who bears the same name as Klossowski during his time in the convent) falls prey to dark, psychological, demonic forces beyond his control. To this end, showing greater resourcefulness than many earlier commentators, Hock offers a virtuoso reading of the suggestive, but convoluted *mise en abyme* sequence in the novel in which Jérôme is invited to project his ongoing dilemmas onto the unfinished three-panel fresco he finds in the church, inspired by the famous actual fresco in Saint-Maximin. What comes to the fore, as a kind of exorcism, is the no-less-famous story of the Lady of La Salette, with its associated question as to the immaculate conception of Mary, mother of Jesus. The question also raised here, as Hock argues, is that of Klossowski’s alleged discovery of the feminine as vouchsafed by the explicit Marian fantasy in his novel and by the fact that Jérôme, at the end, like Klossowski himself, abandons his calling and holy orders in order to marry, at which point Rome, no less, declares itself ready to claim him back. The thematic core of the novel, according to Hock, by way of a turning aside from the idealized female figure of Mary and the issue of her (un)representability within the visual space of the fresco, remains, however, this appeal to real-life femininity. Such recourse to stereotype, as Hock is quick to concede, is not

unproblematic, either in its own terms, nor indeed, as a reading of Klossowski's novel, in which so much, including sexual identity and orientation, is rarely to be taken at face value.

In this sense, as Hock's analysis shows, it is a brave reader and an even braver critic who sees *La Vocation suspendue* as culminating in any stable conclusion. Doubleness, duality, and duplicity are everywhere to be found. There are two novels named *La Vocation suspendue*, with two beginnings (the first a metacritical preamble, the second a commentary proper) and two endings (one concluding on Jérôme's denunciation of Rome, the other on Rome's renewed claim on him). In the fiction itself, there are two antagonistic parties, the *Parti noir* given over to the Occupation and the Devotion dedicated to the redemptive Marian principle, and two versions of homosexuality, one associated with the aggressive homosociality of Ernst Röhm's stormtroopers, the other with diligent and caring solicitude for others. Many of the main characters are double too: Jérôme finds his vocation only in so far as he abandons it, La Montagne is a convert to the Marian cause while also suspected of being an enemy infiltrator; Malagrida is both avant-garde painter and Chief Inquisitor, the Abbé Persienne likewise a servant of the Church and an atheist. And so on and so forth. Mystification rubs shoulders with mystery, the revealed with the ridiculous, the trivial with the transcendent. These questions are not, however, external to Klossowski's writing. On the contrary, they are inseparable from the logic of the text itself. Valedictory, confessional overcoming of the past on its author's part *La Vocation suspendue* may have sought to be. But at the same time, and almost inevitably, as Hock's excellent study demonstrates, it is an exploration of radical and unsurmountable ambiguity.

#### NOTE

[1] Louis Mackey, *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), p. 274.

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ISSN 1553-9172