

**Review by Douglas Kellner (<http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/>)**

**Pierre Klossowski, Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1998, xx + 282 pp.**

**Geoff Waite, Nietzsche's Corpse/e. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996, xii + 564 pp.**

The translation of Pierre Klossowski's Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle finally provides an English-speaking audience with access to one of the most influential texts in the French Nietzsche tradition. First published in France in 1969, Klossowski's text consummated over three decades of intense work and discussion on Nietzsche's most enigmatic and original ideas. Working with Bataille and the famous College de Sociologie, Klossowski published a series of important studies of Nietzsche culminating in Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle which Foucault described in a letter to Klossowski as "the greatest book of philosophy I have read" in addition to Nietzsche himself. Deeply influencing Deleuze, Lyotard, and other major Nietzscheans, Klossowski's work remains a seminal text of the contemporary French reading of Nietzsche.

Several major themes inform Klossowski's work. The text opens with an original reading of Nietzsche's semiotic of impulses, a theme that runs through his work and strongly influenced Klossowski's generation. Whereas Saussure's semiotic was an Apollinian semiotic of language interpreted as a formal system of difference, Klossowski's semiotic is a Dionysian one in which impulses break through conventional forms of thought, reinscribe received ideas, and generate new, emancipatory perspectives. Klossowski interrogates the relationship between impulses, ideas, memory, intellect, and other categories, disclosing Nietzsche's unique philosophical perspectives and questioning of major philosophical categories which are displaced, deconstructed, and in some cases demolished in relation to Nietzsche's mediations on impulses and related conceptions of instinct, drive, and passion.

Klossowski also relates Nietzsche's semiotic of impulses to his own major philosophical categories. Klossowski's reads Nietzsche's doctrine of the eternal recurrence as a translation into language of his most profound experiences that further put in question major philosophical concepts such as the self, life, fate, necessity, causality, and other key conceptions in the Western philosophical tradition. Nietzsche emerges in this reading as both a major deconstructive philosopher whose work overturns previous philosophies, as well as cultural forms like religion, morality, and politics, and a highly original constructive philosopher who provides wholly unique and explosive philosophical perspectives.

Klossowski himself develops a concept of the "vicious circle" to point to the scandal of the doctrine of eternal recurrence, how it confounds rational and scientific explanation, and how it forces one to become another self with another vision of the world to accept it. Klossowski shows how the doctrine causes tensions with other of Nietzsche's ideas and how it led Nietzsche to question his own sanity and to seek scientific validation of the concept. The inability, indeed impossibility, of such a proof led Nietzsche, in Klossowski's interpretation, to henceforth develop two opposing philosophical perspectives: an exoteric one based on his more accessible ideas such as self-overcoming, the transvaluation of values, and his affirmative Dionysian philosophy,

and a more esoteric one based on literal acceptance of the eternal recurrence and thus the vicious circle, an idea that Nietzsche believed would divide humanity into half, bifurcated along the lines of those who did and did not accept this momentous idea. The esoteric teaching, in Klossowski's view, was for select individuals who would become "masters of the earth" and produced Nietzsche cults who dwelled on and within his most secret teachings.

The esoteric doctrine was rooted in his theory of impulses which would generate phantasms that could be sublimated into ideas that would provide a remystification to heal the demystification that the more radical and corrosive of Nietzsche's critical ideas would produce. The remystification, Nietzsche's esoteric philosophy, would in turn create new forms of life and creativity more vital, healthy, and life affirming than traditional and modern values and philosophy.

Throughout his study, Klossowski interrogates the meaning of Nietzsche's illness, suffering, madness, and devastatingly tragic life for his thought. His text intersperses long selections from Nietzsche's works, especially the unpublished notebooks, his letters, and Klossowski's extended philosophical commentary, woven into a complex tapestry of explication and interpretation. The result is a highly original reading of Nietzsche

Klossowski's book can be profitably read alongside Geoff Waite's Nietzsche's Corps/e, perhaps the most interesting book on Nietzsche of the last decade. Waite argues that Nietzsche provides the dominant ideological-philosophical-cultural matrix of the twentieth century whose only contender is communism and urges all Marxists and progressives to beware of Nietzsche's influence which Waite believes to be pernicious. Defending Althusser against Nietzsche (and Heidegger who Waite sees as the most consequent and dangerous Nietzschen), he pursues to the limit Bataille's bon mot that "Nietzsche's is the only one outside of communism."

Wishing to free the Left from the taint of Nietzscheism, or what he calls a "Nietzschoid" Leftism, Waite argues that Left-Nietzscheism is a contradiction in terms, an impossible synthesis of warring antagonists. Wishing to free the Troika of Marx-Freud-Nietzsche from the influence, indeed hegemony, of Nietzsche, Waite sets out to raise questions concerning both Nietzsche's thought and influence. The result is a highly original and extremely provocative reading of Nietzsche and his influence full of exhilarating critique, spirited polemic, surprising connections, and highly original insights.

While one might be put off by Waite's highly tendacious political reading, the text is a stupendous work of scholarship, surpassing by far the many books on Nietzsche's influence. Indeed, this book is unlike any in the highly academic and often pedantic ranks of Nietzsche-scholarship. Containing almost as many footnotes as text, the book provides an excursion into a multiplicity of competing readings of Nietzsche, citing his manifold effects, and the ways that Nietzsche's corpse, his life and body of texts, produces a Nietzschen corps that does ideological battle in the service of his ideas, or are passively, and perhaps subliminally shaped by Nietzsche's ideas to think and act in ways programmed by Nietzsche himself.

Like Klossowski, Waite wants to distinguish between an esoteric and exoteric Nietzsche, but unlike his French predecessor wishes to polemicize against the esoteric Nietzsche. He claims

that Nietzsche devised multiple rhetorical and literary strategies to promote his secret teachings, hid or sugar-coated the more pernicious aspects of his thought such as his defense of slavery, eugenics, euthanasia, or misogyny, and programmed his future reception into the writing of his texts.

After a long rambling preamble where Waite lays his hermeneutical and political cards on the table and spells out the parameters and goals of his project, Waite takes on some leading Nietzsche interpretations, showing how readers on both the Right and Left fail to see Nietzsche's esoteric philosophy and cunning strategies to make himself the fate of the twentieth century, systematically occlude the more disturbing elements of Nietzsche's thought, underestimate the importance of Nietzsche's unpublished notes and manuscripts for his esoteric teachings, and ignore or are ignorant of the more pernicious effects and consequences of Nietzsche's teaching.

In the most substantive sections of his highly eccentric but lucid text, Waite takes on the readings of Bataille, Derrida, and Klossowski, appreciating their insights, but criticizing their failures to show how Nietzsche's texts actually work and to ignore, or misrepresent, the esoteric teachings. In a long essay on "Esoteric Semiotics," Waite provides his most extensive reading of Nietzsche's writing strategy and program, while his concluding study on "Trasformismo from Gramsci to Dick, or, The Spectacular Technoculture of everyday life" makes a fascinating case for the continued relevance of Nietzsche's writing in the high tech and cybernetic age of the present.

Books by both Nietzsche's defenders and critics show the extent to which his thought remains lively and relevant to the present age. Nietzsche remains one of the more provocative and controversial thinkers and to some extent Waite is correct that we all philosophize and act in the ambience of Nietzsche's thought. It is well-acknowledged by now that there are a tremendous diversity of Nietzsche's, that every distinct reading provides another Nietzsche, and that Nietzsche both promoted and facilitated such a fecund reception through his literary strategies and talents. As we enter the next millennium, it continues to be important to read and position oneself in relation to Nietzsche and one of the major challenges of the coming century will be the problem of what to do with this highly explosive and provocative thinker.