

"A metaphysical sex novel."—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

ROBERTE CE SOIR

— *And* —

THE *REVOCATION*
OF THE
EDICT OF NANTES

Pierre Klossowski

INTRODUCTION BY MICHAEL PERKINS

TRANSLATED BY AUSTRYN WAINHOUSE

PRAISE FOR
PIERRE KLOSSOWSKI

“Klossowski uses all the resources of the ‘new novelists’ to disorient the reader in time and blur the distinction between real and imagined events.”

—*Library Journal*

“A complex jumble of erudition and erotica, ancient traditions and radical experimentation. . . . Klossowski’s words, like his characters, are free to play in the billowing currents of Eros.”

—*Voice Literary Supplement*

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY THE AUTHOR

Dalkey Archive Press



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INTRODUCTION

In *Roberte Ce Soir* and *The Revocation of the Edict of Nantes*, the author's interpretation of the rules of hospitality may at first seem confusing. Octave, an elderly professor of scholastics, presses his wife's sexual favors on their guests, in order that he may see into her mystery. She is an Inspectress of Censorship whose own fantasies include seducing her young nephew, Antoine.

Clearly we are not in Kansas. We are about to enter a labyrinth of mirrors, led by a lean, priestly figure in black. We scramble to keep up. He turns occasionally to give us a thin smile of amused encouragement. He winks.

This saturnine guide is Pierre Klossowski, the older brother of the painter Balthus. His mother was an artist whose friendship with Rilke was such that she asked the poet to introduce young Pierre, just come to Paris, to André Gide. Gide generously took the twenty-year-old under his wing, finding him an apartment and paying his college tuition. Klossowski studied scholastic philosophy with the Dominicans, and attended the Collège de Sociologie, which was directed by his friend Georges Bataille. His novels, translations of the classics, and literary essays—particularly his study of Sade—influenced the French postmodernists. Klossowski's own literary antecedents include the classic Greek, Roman and French authors; he has affinities with Lautréamont, Gide, André Breton, Céline, Queneau, and of course, Bataille. The dark figure of Sade looms over all.

Klossowski published these two strange and singularly fascin-

ating novels in the 1950s. Existentialism reigned on the Left Bank, and his formal inventiveness and unsettling metaphysical comedy must have made him seem an odd duck indeed: an avant-gardist from the seventeenth century.

I think the time to enter Klossowski's mirrored labyrinth is now, and that he was wise to exploit the popular genre of erotic writing to make the approach to it as broadly appealing as possible. (Similarly, according to Robert Darnton, erotic novels were also employed as vehicles for political expression in eighteenth-century Paris.)

But pity the poor masturbator who comes to these pages for a peep and a wink—and finds Klossowski winking back at him! It is no use asserting that these novels are fully accessible to all. They are destined to delight most those readers who think it possible that perversity may be one of the paths to transcendence.

Klossowski is an erotic writer in the sense that Italo Calvino talks about in *The Uses Of Literature*: “In the explicitly erotic writer we may . . . recognize one who uses the symbols of sex to give voice to something else, and this something else, of a series of definitions that tend to take shape in philosophical and religious terms, nay in the last instance be redefined as another and ultimate Eros, fundamental, mythical, and unattainable.”

The ideal reader of Klossowski's subversive masterpiece will possess a capacious literary intelligence that includes a more than passing acquaintance with French history, philosophy and art; Medieval theology; familiarity with erotic literature—along with an ungrudging interest in the ideas of the Marquis de Sade; a sense of humor equal to Klossowski's sly ironic wit; and—this is essential—an awareness of “the connection between metaphysics and the flesh,” in Yukio Mishima's phrase.

Fortunately for the less-than-ideal reader, Klossowski is a

master of literary seduction. He is hospitable. He employs—and explodes—the conventions of the erotic and suspense genres as he draws us deeper into his labyrinth, utilizing a variety of narrative techniques, from eighteenth-century philosophical dialogues to Surrealist dream strategies. (Mishima has written perceptively about our seducer's methods: "The writers I pay most attention to in modern Western literature are Georges Bataille, Pierre Klossowski, and Witold Gombrowicz. . . . [Their] works reveal an anti-psychological delineation, anti-realism, erotic intellectualism, straightforward symbolism, and a perception of the universe hidden behind all these.")

In precise and elegant language, Klossowski leads us through theological and philosophical arguments, political debates and aesthetic ruminations, elaborate jokes, nightmares, *tableaux vivants*, and diary entries, into sacrilege, war crimes, and murder. His tone is always mocking and often mysterious, and sometimes, especially in his seriocomic erotic scenes, grimly hilarious. He is the writer playing God whose characters seek God; his subject, in the largest sense, is creation.

He offers pleasures for his readers in surprising contexts. One of the greatest surprises he provides is typical of his jokes: the book we are reading has been officially banned by Roberte, our Inspectress of Censorship; her hospitable husband Octave is none other than the book's author, Pierre Klossowski.

*

Roberte Ce Soir opens with Antoine's view of his uncle and aunt in "the house where I spent such a trying adolescence." Small wonder: his Uncle Octave "suffered from his conjugal happiness as though from an illness, firm in the belief he would be cured of it once he made it contagious," and his aunt Roberte's "beauty was of that somber sort which so often conceals pronounced tendencies to frivolity." Frivolity?

Winning Antoine—adopted by them at age thirteen—is the first objective in the couple’s struggle for dominance. “My aunt treated me like a brother, and the professor had turned me into his favorite disciple; I served as the pretext for the practice of that hospitality which was practiced at my aunt’s expense.”

Octave has hung in his guest room, framed under glass, “THE RULE OF HOSPITALITY,” a parody of Medieval theology which is both funny (well, it’s a churchy wit) and an introduction to some of Klossowski’s ideas. In making love to Roberte, a proper guest grants actuality to her—brings her from potentiality to essence—and illuminates her mystery for Octave. Eros becomes a direct route to hypostasis; the metasexual leads to the metaphysical.

While their main contention is religious, Roberte and Octave also debate philosophical, political and artistic issues. Each has an agenda. Roberte is a left-wing humanist, and Octave is a Catholic, an aesthete, a sensualist. The couple argue a lot about ideas which are of the utmost importance to their creator. In fact, Roberte and Octave come to life in our minds to the extent we are willing to engage with the ideas that drive them. Then they step off the page. They act for themselves.

Klossowski, in the character of Octave, believes that he is creating Roberte, a creature made of her own elements, “which first took draft form in my mind.” But Roberte, in a diary entry, denies that “he is at the origin of my temperament.” She is capable of devilishness unaided by her husband’s machinations. And he can never know her, for one of Klossowski’s themes is the unknowability of others.

But it is possible, sometimes, to glimpse the spirit through the flesh. The temptations of Eros are the temptations of love that reveal the soul. Thought wears the garments of skin and bone.

In one dialogue (“The Denunciation,” Klossowski’s homage

to Corneille) uncle and nephew debate Thomist ideas about the soul while illustrating them with humor and sex. One minute we are following an intricate argument made by Octave about “the mystery of hypostatic union,” and the next he is showing Antoine a film in which Roberte’s skirt catches fire, and her rescuer molests her. (Antoine exclaims, “My stars, there in her panties is the outline of her bottom.”) Klossowski’s use of erotic elements is the more powerful for being deft, spare, and ironic—a glimpse of a bare thigh, a momentary encounter, often with dream figures made manifest by Roberte’s rambunctious libido.

Roberte the Censor is ravished by spirits she refuses to give voice to. Either speak the unspeakable, as Sade warned, or suffer the demons. In his essay on Sade, Klossowski writes of the natural order of things, “Only motion is real; creatures are nothing but nature’s changing phases.” The temptations of Eros allow the transcendence of this natural order. And for the novelist, as Milan Kundera says, “I have the feeling that a scene of physical love generates an extremely sharp light that suddenly reveals the essence of characters. . . . Certain erotic passages of Georges Bataille have made a lasting impression on me. Perhaps it is because they are not lyrical but philosophical.”

It has been suggested by symbolists that some labyrinths should be interpreted as diagrams of heaven. I think that is how Klossowski would like us to see this splendidly intricate maze. When we come to the end of it, and bid him farewell, we emerge blinking into unfamiliar light, looking up at the heavens.

MICHAEL PERKINS

2002

ROBERTE CE SOIR

Illustrated by the author

. . . *cujus abditis adhuc
vitiis congruebat.*

—Tacitus

My Uncle Octave, the eminent professor of scholastics at the University of Y***, suffered from his conjugal happiness as though from an illness, firm in the belief he would be cured of it once he had made it contagious. My Aunt Roberte's beauty was of that sober sort which so often conceals pronounced tendencies to frivolity: discovering them, you feel wronged and regret not having proceeded somewhat more purposefully. Strangely enough, my uncle considered himself the foremost victim of this equivocal situation; my aunt realized it, and had become that much more rigid in her hostile attitude toward all his ideas. And the more she entrenched herself in this attitude, the more enigmatic my uncle judged her to be; searching a way out of his perplexity he had hit upon nothing better than to introduce into their way of life a rule of hospitality which our traditions condemn as shameful. My aunt passed for an "emancipated" woman, but here again my uncle was wrong; she of course could not do otherwise than disapprove of my uncle's innovation; but, and this is equally certain, she had been more than once obliged to fall in with the established custom. This, today, is how I account for the atmosphere in the house where I spent such a trying adolescence. My aunt treated me like a brother, and the professor had turned me into his favorite disciple; I served as a pretext for the practice of that hospitality which was practiced at my aunt's expense.

I was thirteen when my relatives adopted me. My uncle thought it necessary I be given a tutor, and I had a series of three, all chosen from among his and my aunt's acquaintances. They used to have a good many visitors at their summer home. This or that guest would suddenly be declared responsible for my education; a few months later, sometimes a few weeks later, he would disappear.

It is true enough that Aunt Roberte had aroused a storm of emotions in me. But my uncle, having correctly guessed what the matter was, took perfidious advantage of it in order to contemplate his own perversity at work in me. As with most boys at that age, my passion strove along thoroughly platonic lines. My uncle managed to transform it into a perfect nest of vipers, I don't know how else to describe the awful tangle of carnal and spiritual desires which the mental torture he inflicted upon me shortly had seething inside my breast. But that part of the story seems to me of only limited interest; on the other hand, since the professor's behavior demonstrates into what kind of pitfall language can lure even the most lucid intelligence, I have thought it worthwhile to note certain of his digressions and to reproduce them in the context of this extraordinary experience of my student years.

DIFFICULTIES

When my Uncle Octave took my Aunt Roberte in his arms, one must not suppose that in taking her he was alone. An invited guest would enter while Roberte, entirely given over to my uncle's presence, was not expecting him, and while she was in fear lest the guest arrive—for with irresistible resolution Roberte awaited the arrival of some guest—the guest would already be looming up behind her as my uncle made his entry just in time to surprise my aunt's satisfied fright at being surprised by the guest. But in my uncle's mind it was all over and done with in the twinkling of an eye, and once again my uncle would be on the point of taking my aunt in his arms. It would be over in the twinkling of an eye . . . for, after all, one cannot at the same time take and not take, be there and not be there, enter a room when one is already in it. My Uncle Octave would have been asking too much had he wished to prolong the instant of the opened door, he was already doing exceedingly well in getting the guest to appear in the doorway at the precise moment he did, getting the guest to loom up behind Roberte so that he, Octave, might be able to sense that he himself was the guest as, borrowing from the guest his door-opening gesture, he could behold them from the threshold and have the impression it was he, Octave, who was taking my aunt by surprise.

Nothing could give a better idea of my uncle's mentality

than these hand-written pages he had framed under glass and then hung on the wall of the guest room, just above the bed, a spray of fading wildflowers drooping over the old-fashioned frame.

THE RULE OF HOSPITALITY

The master of this house, having no greater nor more pressing concern than to shed the warmth of his joy at evening upon whomever comes to dine at his table and to rest under his roof from a day's wearying travel, waits anxiously at the gate for the stranger he will see appear like a liberator upon the horizon. And catching a first glimpse of him in the distance, though he be still far off, the master will call out to him, "Come in quickly, my happiness is at stake." This is why the master will be grateful in advance to anybody who, rather than considering hospitality as an accident in the souls of him and of her who offer it, shall take it as the very essence of the host and hostess, the stranger in his guest's capacity partaking of this essence. For with the stranger he welcomes, the master of the house seeks a no longer accidental, but an essential relationship. At the start the two are but isolated substances, between them there is none but accidental communication: you who believe yourself far from home in the home of someone you believe to be at home, you bring merely the accidents of your substance, such accidents as conspire to make a stranger of you, to him who bids you avail yourself of all that makes a merely accidental host of him. But because the master of this house herewith invites the stranger to penetrate to the source of all substances beyond the realm of all accident, this is how he inaugurates a substantial relationship between himself and the stranger,

which will be not a relative relationship but an absolute one, as though, the master becoming one with the stranger, his relationship with you who have just set foot here were now but a relationship of one with oneself.

To this end the host translates himself into the actual guest. Or, if you prefer, he actualizes a possibility of the guest quite as you, the guest, actualize a possibility of the host. The host's most eminent gratification has for its object the actualization in the mistress of the house of the inactual essence of the hostess. Now upon whom is this duty incumbent if not upon the guest? Does this mean that the master of the house might expect betrayal at the hands of the mistress of the house? Now it seems that the essence of the hostess, such as the host visualizes it, would in this sense be undetermined and contradictory. For either the essence of the hostess is constituted by her fidelity to the host, and in this case she eludes him the more he wishes to know her in the opposite state of betrayal, for she would be unable to betray him in order to be faithful to him; or else the essence of the hostess is really constituted by infidelity and then the host would cease to have any part in the essence of the hostess who would be susceptible of belonging, accidentally, as mistress of the house, to some one or other of the guests. The notion of mistress of the house reposes upon an existential basis; she is a hostess only upon an essential basis: this essence is therefore subjected to restraint by her actual existence as mistress of the house. And here the function of betrayal, we see, is to lift this restraint. If the essence of the hostess lies in fidelity to the host, this authorizes the host to cause the hostess, essential in the existent mistress of the house, to manifest herself before the eyes of the guest; for the host in playing host must accept the risks of the game,

and these include the consequences of his wife's strict application of the rules of hospitality and of the fact that she dare not be unmindful of her essence, composed of fidelity to the host, for fear that in the arms of the inactual guest come here to actualize her *qua* hostess, the mistress of the household exist only traitorously.

If the essence of the hostess lay in infidelity, the outcome of the game would be a foregone conclusion and the host the loser before it starts. But the host wishes to experience the risk of losing and feels that losing rather than winning in advance, he will, at whatever the cost, grasp the essence of the hostess in the infidelity of the mistress of the house. For to possess the faithless one *qua* hostess faithfully fulfilling her duties, that is what he is after. Hence by means of the guest he wishes to actualize something potential in the mistress of the house: an actual hostess in relation to this guest, an inactual mistress of the house in relation to the host.

If the hostess' essence remains thus indeterminate, because to the host it seems that something of the hostess might escape him in the event this essence were nothing but pure fidelity on the part of the mistress of the house, the essence of the host is proposed as a homage of the host's curiosity to the essence of the hostess. Now this curiosity, as a potentiality of the hospitable soul, can have no proper existence except in that which would look to the hostess, were she naive, like suspicion or jealousy. The host however is neither suspicious nor jealous, because he is essentially curious about that very thing which, in everyday life, would make a master of the house suspicious, jealous, unbearable.

Let the guest not be the least bit uneasy; above all let him not suppose he could ever constitute the cause for any jealousy or suspicion when there is not even anyone to feel these

sentiments. In reality the guest is anything but that; for it is owing to the absence of cause for jealousy and suspicion, which are not otherwise determined than by this absence, that the guest is going to emerge from his stranger's accidental relationship to enjoy an essential relationship with the hostess whose essence he shares with the host. The host's essence—hospitality—rather than being confined to impulses of jealousy or suspicion, aspires to convert into a presence the absence of cause of these impulses, and to actualize itself in that cause. Let the guest understand his role well: let him then fearlessly excite the host's curiosity by that jealousy and that suspicion, worthy in the master of the house but unworthy of a host; the latter enjoins the guest loyally to do his utmost; in this competition let them surpass each other in subtlety: let the host put the guest's discretion to the test, the guest make proof of the host's curiosity: the term generosity has no place here, it is without meaning in the discussion, since everything is generosity, and everything is also greed; but let the guest take all due care lest this jealousy or this suspicion grow to such proportions in the host that no room is left for his curiosity; for it is upon this curiosity the guest will depend in order to display his abilities.* If the host's curiosity aspires to actualize itself in the absent cause, how does he hope to convert this absence into presence unless it be that he awaits the visitation of an angel? Solicited by the host's piety, the angel is capable of concealing himself in the guise of a guest—is it you?—whom the host believes fortuitous. To what extent will the angel actualize in the

* But here a new element enters into the picture, here opens a new phase: realizing that to attain his ends he needs means which concrete life does not afford, Uncle Octave goes off to hunt for them in the obscurest mysticism. (*Antoine's note.*)

mistress of the house the essence of the hostess such as the host is prone to visualize it, when this essence is known to none but him who beyond all being knows? By inclining the host farther and farther, for the guest, be he angel or no, is only inclination in the host: learn, dear guest, that neither the host, nor yourself, nor again the hostess herself yet knows the essence of the hostess; surprised by you she will attempt to find herself in the host who then will no longer hold her back: but who, knowing her in your arms, will hold himself richer in his treasure than ever.

In order that the host's curiosity not degenerate into jealousy or suspicion, it is for you, the guest, to discern the hostess' essence in the mistress of the house, for you to cast her forth from potentiality into existence: either the hostess remains sheer phantasm and you a stranger in this house if you leave to the host the inactualized essence of the hostess; or else you are indeed that angel, and by your presence you give an actuality to the hostess: you shall have full power over her as well as over the host. And so, cherished guest, you cannot help but see that it is in your best interest to fan the host's curiosity to the point where the mistress of the house, driven out of herself, will be completely actualized in an existence which shall be determined by you alone, by you, the guest, and not by the host's curiosity. Whereupon the host shall be master in his house no more: he shall have carried out his mission. In his turn he shall have become the guest.

I
THE DENUNCIATION

*Allez, allez, Madame,
Etaler vos appas et vanter vos mépris
A l'infâme sorcier qui charme vos esprit.*

—Corneille, *Médée*, II

*In Octave's study. Evening.
Octave and Antoine, his nephew.*

ANTOINE

Have you developed more pictures of your stay at Ascona,
Uncle Octave?

OCTAVE

Look at this one. Quite a success, wouldn't you say?

ANTOINE

Where on earth did you take it?

OCTAVE

In Madame de Watteville's villa where the debates were
held.

ANTOINE

What an extraordinary scene . . . this young lady . . .

OCTAVE

. . . whose skirt is starting to burn and who leaps away
from the fireplace and into the arms of this gentleman who
has rushed up to her rescue and is snatching off her burning
clothes.

ANTOINE

But it's Aunt Roberte! . . . Come now, uncle, you've faked it somehow, haven't you? You don't mean to say this is a picture of something that actually happened?

OCTAVE

I snapped it while your aunt was in the midst of delivering her lecture in the living room of the villa. While speaking she carelessly leaned her elbow on the mantelpiece, and the next moment her skirt caught fire.

ANTOINE

And all you could think of was to take a picture of her at a time like that?

OCTAVE

I tell you I had my camera out to photograph her giving her speech, and just as I was ready to click the shutter the incident occurred. . . .

ANTOINE

The accident, Uncle Octave.

OCTAVE

The incident, I tell you.

ANTOINE

Will you give me a copy of this photo, Uncle Octave?

OCTAVE

Quite out of the question. It's vital to an operation I might however be prepared to let you in on if you're sure you can hold your tongue.

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