

## Psychoanalytical Musings on Christ

A talk given by Patrick Declerck, author in residence at the Maison Française d'Oxford, on the 4<sup>th</sup> of November 2009.

Chairperson: Richard Scholar (Oriol College)

*Report by Neil Martin*

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This talk was the second and last of a series of lectures given by Patrick Declerck as part of his residency at the Maison Française d'Oxford. It opened with a short presentation of the author by Richard Scholar who drew attention to the breadth of Patrick Declerck's intellectual and literary activities, his experience as a psychoanalyst, his work with the homeless in Paris, as well as his previous participation in the Oxford Amnesty Lectures.

Following in the footsteps both of C.H. Dodd or Rudolf Bultmann's literary analyses of the biblical text and of Bruno Bettelheim's study of the psychoanalytical content of fairytales, Patrick Declerck seeks to lay open an unconscious structure behind the Gospels and the story of their central protagonist, Christ. On this interpretation, the New Testament can be seen as a stage upon which the conflict between an array of primordial fantasies and desires plays out and whose originality and success lie in the solution it offers to the Oedipal complex.

In striking contrast to the radical nature of his project, Patrick Declerck starts out by sounding a note of warning. In doing so, he draws attention to the necessarily uncomfortable and perilous character of such an inquiry, as well as to the fact that it is still very much for him a "work in progress". In this respect, the title of the talk aptly reflects the author's intention: what is meant here is less a demonstration or a definite analysis than a series of musings on the figure of Christ. Through the reading of a number of key passages of the life of Christ (the Annunciation, the presentation of Jesus at the Temple, the wedding at Cana, the Sermon on the Mount, Gethsemane, the Crucifixion...), these musings bring to light a cluster of symbols and tropes which are traditionally associated in many different cultural contexts with figures of fertility gods and trickster gods: miraculous conception, castration (Atys, Osiris), submission to the father (Baal and El, Exu and Ogun), sacrifice (Balder) and resurrection (Dionysos). For

Patrick Declerck, what lends special insight to the psychoanalytical approach and authorises the use of Freudian categories in the case of the Gospels is their historical and biographical nature. For this very reason, the symbolic content does not simply operate at a mythological level but is rooted instead in a personal and familial reality, and as such refers to and maps out the path and destiny of a man.

However, Patrick Declerck's reading of the Gospels goes beyond the uncovering of an unconscious structure behind the religious texts and the offering of a psychoanalytical explanation for their success. He proceeds further, along Nietzschean lines, to question the psychological and cultural significance of this structure's emergence and the subsequent influence it has come to exert as a religious meme on human practice and thought. Yet in this respect, the Christian solution to the Œdipal conflict seems extremely difficult to fully sum up and interpret.

Indeed on the one hand, Patrick Declerck sees the Christic figure as embodying an ideal of reconciliation, and as such, as expressive of the nobility of tragic heroism. This trend, particularly manifest at Gethsemane but already foreshadowed at Cana, marks him out as kindred to the figure of Dionysos –forefather of tragedy–, to Prince Mishkine and, through a subtle and ingenious detour, to another princely figure, that of Hamlet. What Patrick Declerck seems to touch on here is the kerygmatic function of the Gospels, notably emphasised by Paul Ricœur: its human protagonist being called upon to gradually disappear behind the message of Good News that he bears witness to and that, for Patrick Declerck, he somewhere inherits despite himself.

On the other hand however, Christianity's dualism, its exaltation of spirituality and its doctrine of Love can be interpreted in a much more sinister, negative light, as elements partaking of a will to deny physical and natural reality, and in particular sexual differentiation. What Patrick Declerck sees at work here behind the evangelical text are processes of repression, denial of one's origins and an anger vested against oneself and against one's *locus generis* (Mary). In this perspective, the Œdipal conflict isn't so much overcome as it is simply refused.

The questions opened to the floor gave rise to a fruitful debate and a number of useful clarifications. Most of these questions were related to Patrick Declerck's method of analysis and touched on issues of interpretation. What justifies the use of Freudian categories, rather than any other competing psychoanalytical framework, when interpreting the religious texts? How far can one fully make sense of a text –of whatever nature it may be– simply through a targeted approach and selective reading, without having addressed the questions of its unity and continuity, that is without having previously set up a corpus and (Nietzschean precaution) having adopted a philological approach? And this even more so in the case of the New Testament, a text divided and mythological in its own way as its root matter has constantly been rewritten, translated and reinterpreted. Answering these questions, Patrick Declerck acknowledged that they raised real issues concerning the interpretation of the Gospels and pointed once again to the modest nature of the work presented here, which is intended as a first attempt at a dialogue with the evangelical narrative rather than as a rigid and definitive analysis of it. He also took the opportunity to reaffirm his belief in the significance of the Gospels' symbolic content and in the importance of sexual differentiation and of the Oedipal conflict when it comes to understanding this content. From this point of view, he is convinced that a dialogue between psychoanalysis and the Gospels remains a relevant and worthy undertaking and that the Freudian framework retains its explanatory power here.