

## Graves, Nietzsche and Modernism

As we enter into our own *fin de siècle*, it becomes increasingly evident that the problem of modernism in art and philosophy has become a crucial aspect of our self-awareness. In the last few years a veritable deluge of erudite books on modernism, a series of noteworthy exhibitions (Paris-Berlin etc.), the opening of the Musée d'Orsay, and the proliferation of university courses on the subject leave one with the impression that this aesthetic concept is provoking our *thauma* in some unparalleled way. The name of Robert Graves is, however, conspicuously absent from this discussion. This comes as more than a little surprising, for Graves wrote often and well on the theme of modernism in literature; he was personally acquainted with artists whose *titres de créance* as modernists seem beyond desire for a radical reflection on the western literary tradition. The purpose of this essay is modest and propaedeutic: we will not attempt to define or describe Graves' relationship to modernism; instead we will attempt to determine how one goes about posing the question of Robert Graves' affiliation to modernism.

Graves provides us with a convenient vehicle for this project. Writing in *Epilogues*, he published an essay on the writer whom the twentieth century has come to consider the "seminal modern," Friedrich Nietzsche. Read superficially, this essay would seem to be a typical expression of pedestrian Anglo-Saxon positivism; analyzed carefully "Nietzsche" reveals a rich, multi-dimensional text which contains modernist methods and themes.

At first glance, Graves' essay on Nietzsche would seem to contain little to distinguish it from many late nineteenth or early twentieth century texts of the *belles lettres* variety. Graves uses a three part format to review what he calls Nietzsche's spiritual autobiography, *Ecce Homo*. The body of this essay analyses a series of what Graves terms "inconsistencies," "lies," and "contradictions." Graves approaches these so-called contradictions by juxtaposing quotes from *Ecce Homo* and the rest of Nietzsche's work which seem to stand in opposition to one other. Thus, Nietzsche, according to what Graves suggests, only seems to be anti-German; in fact, he is a clever literary tactician who looks for approbation from foreign audiences in order to win indirectly the esteem of his native German reading public. Nietzsche, Graves points out, is contradictory about the question of Europe: at times he believes the German bemoans the heterogeneity of Europe; at times he praises this same heterogeneity for offering unimagined possibilities. Graves both introduces and concludes his essay with considerations of a wider nature. He discusses the congenital related qualities of Germans and mentions that Nietzsche's "contradictions" are typically German. At this level of analysis, Graves' essay is more closely related to the "race, milieu, moment" problematic of Henri Taine than it is to understanding writing. However, the richness of Graves' text is not yet accounted for. A closer analysis reveals a series of modernist themes and techniques.

Graves' text is distinctly modern in that he does not study Nietzsche's "contradictions," "inconsistencies," and "lies" for an absence of logical rigor. The

English poet is no Leibnizian logician squeamish about the principle of contradiction; he is a modern analyst wielding a hermeneutical scalpel in order to determine the dynamics of Nietzsche's neurosis. Each of Nietzsche's *lies* is studied by Graves in order to determine the dynamics of Nietzsche's neurosis. Each of these lies follows a similar pattern. Nietzsche experiences something (an aspect of his own personality or national characteristic) as disquieting; he responds to his discomfort either by philosophical criticism or personal flight; this occurs with such vehemence and with such lack of any real understanding that the original discomfort is only exacerbated; and madness is the inevitable result. Graves evokes a whole complex of neurotic symptoms to support his *Rezeption* of Nietzsche. Nietzsche suffers from delusions: "Wherever I go here in Turin, for instance, every face brightens and softens at the sight of me." Nietzsche shares the typical German's fetish for cleanliness: "I am gifted with a sense of cleanliness the keenness of which is phenomenal." Nietzsche, according to Graves, writes *Ecce Homo* in a state of euphoria. To him the German lacks all sense of proportion: he believes that his spiritual autobiography is the most wonderful book—apart from his own Zarathustra. In all this, Graves uses Nietzsche's assertions as symptoms of underlying sickness: Nietzsche, according to Graves, would like to see himself as heroic and world historical; in reality, he is willing his own destruction by pushing basically unhealthy traits to their "dangerous extreme."

Graves uses Nietzsche's neurotic symptoms as a stepping stone to an even deeper understanding of the German philosopher. Graves makes it clear that the individual neurotic symptoms derive from what one might call a fundamental orientation toward life, a *Wertungsweise* (a value judgment). Graves detests self-loathing; possessing a profoundly negative approach to life in general. Beneath Nietzsche's posturing, Graves detects self-loathing; "Nietzsche loathed himself for being a German. . . ." Nietzsche's self-proclaimed heroism and sense of proud isolation in reality can be reduced to deep fear of life. This fear is such that Nietzsche cannot restrain from filling his spiritual autobiography with prattle about what kind of cocoa to drink for breakfast. This negative *Wertungsweise* has another more violent face, Nietzsche is unstable and can pass from self-contempt to machismo and militarism: "That the manliest should rule, this is the only natural order of things. The future of German culture rests with the sons of Prussian officers." Once again Graves is using a modernist interpretative technique to reveal the lurking violence in the *Abgrund* (the abyss) of Nietzsche's consciousness.

Graves attempts to probe this *Abgrund* by concentrating on the somatic dereliction of Nietzsche's personality. Here Graves follows in the wake of a tradition which dates, at least, from Schopenhauer. This tradition considers the body as the source of all "mental" phenomena or, even more radically, attempts to explode the entire body/soul dualism by creating a new notion of "body." Graves' use of this device is careful and clever: he shows that Nietzsche's fear is in the first place a fear of nutritional indisposition. Nietzsche is confused about his needs: on the one hand, he detests the German tendency to "guzzling and sousing"; on the other hand, he is capable of boasting about his own

drinking exploits at Pforta. In addition, Nietzsche's relationships with women seem unhealthy and unstable. His desire to stand alone is fanatic; his need for feminine society is unrelenting. Finally, at this somatic level Nietzsche also shows evidence of aggression. He is fully capable of bloodthirstiness. As Graves points out, "The anti-sentimental, bloodthirsty side of Nietzsche's Germanism is manifest in his glorification of war and his description of himself in *Ecce Homo* as 'the most terrible man who has ever existed. . . .'"

Graves clearly understands that Nietzsche's psychopathy is trans-personal. Nietzsche is a foreground figure within the framework of thousands of years of cultural development. Graves employs modernist techniques in so far as he attempts to understand the genesis of this general pathology and Nietzsche's exact relationship to it. For this, Graves uses both ethnological reflection and classical scholarship. He believes that Nietzsche is the distant inheritor of a German schizophrenia which derives from an "unresolved strain between their patriarchal Aryan strain and their matriarchal Mediterranean strain, which though recessive is attested by physical traits and numerous folk-customs." Furthermore, Graves cites Tacitus as a writer who is already sensitive to dangerous traits in the German psyche. Throughout Nietzsche, Graves identifies traits in Nietzsche (ambiguity toward women, love or risk and danger, bathing manias) which were already analyzed by Tacitus. This in Graves' view confirms that they are perennial pathological traits. Finally, Graves discusses how much the modern Germans' love of risk and danger shows that the pathological traits which Tacitus had studied are still very much present in nineteenth century German culture.

It is characteristic of the Germans, too, that once one of them gets drowned in a foreign river or killed on a foreign mountain, his example is always followed by others.

It takes little imagination or speculative panache to grasp the direction of Graves' thought; he is trying to understand how a self-deluded "great" German and a people with a demonstrated capacity for bellicosity "unite" in a flawed culture which makes international conflict seemingly inevitable.

But these four techniques do not fully account for the originality and density of Graves' text. At certain crucial points in his essay, Graves abandons discursive language; he has recourse to metaphorical and mythic expressions. The result is a particularly powerful synthesis of conceptual acumen and poetic insight. Graves' use of metaphor is itself systematic and elegant. At a first, very simple level of analysis, the poet uses element metaphors to illustrate and reinforce ideas which he has already fairly well established. Thus, Graves expresses Nietzsche's attempts to transcend his own culture in terms of air metaphors: Nietzsche wants to "soar" or "climb" above the flatlands of European culture. Nietzsche, like most Germans, loves to overcome the taint of living in an axiologically corrupt culture by swimming and bathing. Graves is very scrupulous here: he knows perfectly well that Nietzsche is conscious of his own ambiguity about "escaping." At other points in the essay, Graves deepens his whole

account of Nietzsche by the use of dissolution/regression metaphors. Graves explores dimensions of Nietzsche's life and writing that have seldom if ever been understood. With regard to Germany, Nietzsche acts like a "spoilt" child, seeking approbation but not getting it—and then sulkily stalking away. Graves is probing at Nietzsche's posturing, his instability, his juvenile violence, his duplicity, and his personal dishonesty. In addition to being a spoilt child toward the Germans, he is also less than human, a demonic figure, a "tempter." Graves clearly perceives how volatile a combination this errant German philosopher could be. Finally, Graves brings together all his themes in the final paragraph of his essay. He makes use of successive animal metaphors to express his sombre vision of Nietzsche's place in European culture. Nietzsche is not a Napoleonic eagle; that is, he is not a world historical philosopher who would inaugurate a new epoch in the life of the West. On the contrary, the German philosopher is an ox: he has attempted to break loose from the herd but has only fooled himself; he has blundered into the booths by constructing a false system of thought; he has in reality done nothing but enter into the spirit of the market place, repeating pathological possibilities that have been awaiting expression for two thousand years.

Beneath a deceptively simple, common sense surface, Robert Graves' essay on Nietzsche contains a rich reservoir of modernist themes and methods. Graves is returning to a pre-twentieth century writer to understand better the proliferation of violence in our own century. His description of the demonic reciprocity between an unstable philosopher and death-bent Germany pales much of our contemporary criticism. Undoubtedly, Graves has a personal stake in his analysis of Nietzsche, for Nietzsche's path is in many fundamental ways the opposite of Graves' own. Thus, Graves' *Rezeption* of Nietzsche is coherent, modernist, and significant. It remains to ask whether this reading of Nietzsche is true.

Graves' essay on Nietzsche is as frustrating as it is fascinating. Graves comes very close to breaking new ground in the history of the European essay; he also repeatedly misreads Nietzsche.

In the very first place, Graves misreads crucial chapters of *Ecce Homo*. He claims that "'Warum ich so weise bin' is largely an assertion of his own (Nietzsche's) physical soundness and the identity of physical with spiritual well-being." This reading of *Weise* supports Graves' vision of Nietzsche as self-deluded and violent; it is also characteristic of the view which sees Nietzsche could be more erroneous: no reading of *Weise* could be such a total *contre sens*. The first chapter of *Ecce Homo* is an example of the genealogical method—in this case applied to Nietzsche himself. Nietzsche develops three different ideas about himself. First, he discusses his own origins, stressing his dual descent. "Diese doppelte Herkunft, gleichsam aus der obersten und der untersten Sprosse an der Leiter des Lebens, décadent zugleich und Anfang." Nietzsche is anything but an overweening titan: he is keenly conscious of the fragile complexity of the human personality. Second, Nietzsche discusses his personal evolution. Once again, Graves evokes "physical soundness" where Nietzsche writes about painful, precarious self-recovery: "Eine lange, allzulange Reihe von Jahren bedeutet

bei mir Genesung—sie bedeutet leider auch zugleich Rueckfall, Verfall, Periodik einer Art *décadence*.” Finally, in this chapter Nietzsche discusses the fundamental uniqueness of his philosophy. Once again, Nietzsche emphasizes balance within complexity. “Von der Kranken-Optik aus nach gesunderen Begriffen und Werthen, und wiederum umgekehrt aus der Fuelle und Selbstgewisheit des reichen Lebens hinuntersehn in die heimliche Arbeit des *Décadence*-Instinkts.”

Secondly, Graves neglects whole sections of *Ecce Homo*, and thus distorts the book's meaning to a public without access to numerous translations and Colli-Montinari. Graves asserts that *Ecce Homo* is one long diatribe against spiritual and physical uncleanness. Graves is referring to Nietzsche's somewhat tedious egotism and one can easily sympathize with him. Nevertheless, *Ecce Homo* is in reality divided into two major parts: one of these could conceivably be considered a diatribe; the second part of the autobiography, however, is a terse account of Nietzsche's development as a thinker. There is very little hyperbole or egotism in this account of the unfolding of Nietzsche's ideas. In this second section Nietzsche demonstrates total intellectual mastery of his text. In order to prove his thesis about Nietzsche's instability, Graves would have to account for Nietzsche's clearness and balance in this part of *Ecce Homo*.

Thirdly, Graves seems sadly intolerant of Nietzsche's attempts to renew the language of philosophy. Nietzsche is going out of his way in the first part of *Ecce Homo* to forge a new tone, a new, more literary form for discursive thought. Nietzsche wants to bring philosophy back to concrete existence and is willing to sacrifice some professional seriousness to do so. Nietzsche is using figures of speech, wit, and romantic effusion to bring life into the dull sobriety of much of philosophical writing. It is not so simple to alter a received tradition.

Finally, Graves' whole account of mad Nietzsche is somewhat cavalier. Graves draws the major support for his reading of Nietzsche from *Ecce Homo*. This book is meant to be something of a satyr play: Nietzsche has just written a handful of books in a single year; he has published a book a year for almost a decade; he has filled notebook after notebook with *Fragmente* of a highly systematic, often polished nature. It is hard to imagine a man who “allowed himself to disintegrate mentally” to be capable of such concentration.

Graves uses the interpretative tools of modernity; he makes a brilliant attempt to create an original form of “prose” essay; he does not adequately explain Nietzsche's psychological development or really give a just account of Nietzsche's thought. This is no ordinary misunderstanding, however. It is highly revelatory of a characteristic modernist fashion. Graves is never more modern than when he misreads and distorts our seminal modern, Nietzsche. Two examples of this dialogue between great moderns should make this idea more comprehensible.

Heidegger's two volumes of lectures, published as *Nietzsche I* and *II*, follow much the same pattern as Graves' essay. He brings a radically original philosophical

problematic to “the problem of Nietzsche.” For the first time in Nietzschean criticism, a thinker seriously attempts to place Nietzsche precisely within the mainstream of Western philosophy. Unfortunately, Heidegger’s effort and brilliance present us with only a jaded image of Nietzsche. Like Graves, Heidegger misreads crucial texts, he omits passages that undermine his own interpretation, he has little interest or tolerance for Nietzsche’s linguistic innovations. Nietzsche and Heidegger have many deep affinities; they are not brought out by Heidegger’s interpretation of his forerunner.

Nietzsche’s *Auseinandersetzung* (altercation) with Wagner also follows very similar conceptual lines. Nietzsche sees Wagner as his personal antipode and a nexus point for most of the negative artistic characteristics of the nineteenth century. In Nietzsche’s eyes, Wagner embodies a crisis in art: “das Bild eines Verfalls der Kunst, eines Verfalls auch der Kuenstler.” According to this interpretation, Wagner toward the end of his life renounces the political, social, and artistic ideals of his youth. He has transformed himself into a *Reichsdeutsch* Wagner; he has taken up the Christian cross; he is a mere actor, the Cagliostro of Modernity. In fact, none of these statements is true. In 1878 Wagner writes “Public and Popularity” in order to express his concern for the hazards of fame and the threat of artistic prostitution. On 12 August 1881 Wagner states that he wants nothing more to do with opera and large, massed orchestras: he contemplates working on chamber music and takes up works from his youth; he would seem to be almost infinitely creative. His fidelity to the past is often evidence: he finds the repression of the socialists under Bismarck infantile and stupid (24 May 1878). He complains about militarized Germany (1 Dec 1888). Once again subtle, ambitious methods have been used to reduce the real stature of a great modern artist.

An examination of the conditions of possibility of Graves’ problematic use of modernist interpretative methods goes far beyond the scope of this essay. For the present, it is sufficient to bring to light the spectacle of our three great modern figures: each is powerfully in possession of a unique perspective on Western culture and modern life; each is seemingly incapable of applying this perspective to others of similar stature; each reduces the object of his reflection to caricature. Thus, instead of a richer understanding of modern experience and the tradition which formed it, we are left with empty displays of critical virtuosity. Could it be that this spectacle is our version of the *gigantomachia* to which Plato refers in his late dialogue? Could it be that this *gigantomachia* is the cultural space in which we can best come to understand what it means to be modern? In any case, one of the objectives of *Focus on Robert Graves* will be to explore this space.

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