

SEX, LIES, AND NIETZSCHE ACCORDING TO ROBERT GRAVES

It would be very easy for a late twentieth century reader, especially one well versed in the secondary literature on Friedrich Nietzsche, to denigrate Graves' short essay on the German philosopher. Originally published in *Epilogue I*, (1935-37) "Nietzsche" contains almost none of the distinguishing characteristics of most commentary written on Nietzsche since the Second World War: it contains no technical terminology, no mention of Nietzsche's cardinal philosophical concepts, no extended references to the history of ideas, and no polemics against other commentators. Graves' essay must be one of the least philosophically erudite essays to appear on Nietzsche in the last seventy-five years; its sophistication lies elsewhere.

Nonetheless, if the hypothetical well-versed reader can overcome his impatience with Graves' intellectual modesty, he will almost immediately discover clear and impressive virtues in this crisp and tidy essay. First, Graves has clearly read a lot of Nietzsche, something that should be of considerable surprise to a contemporary reader who, even in 1995, cannot obtain a properly edited *Complete Works* of Nietzsche in English. Somehow Graves, despite innumerable editing difficulties in the early history of the Nietzschean texts, managed to read and evaluate both prose and poetry from all the major Nietzschean periods. Second, Graves has read Nietzsche very carefully indeed. Even the most rigorous contemporary Nietzsche scholar would agree that Graves does a fine job of isolated key passages, interpreting them with fairness and audacity, and weaving them into a coherent interpretation. Third, Graves is at ease in the torturous waters of Nietzsche's systems of metaphors and mythological figures. Finally, Graves has a solid knowledge and understanding of Nietzsche's life. This is especially laudable because until the 1978 publication of the volumes of Curt Paul Janz, only one insightful biography on Nietzsche existed--and that was *Vie de Nietzsche*, written in French by Daniel Halévy.

Delving more deeply into the conceptual core of the essay, one finds a rigorous logical structure that would solicit respect from any discerning reader. Graves first states his thesis in all clarity and proceeds to prove it in a classically argued demonstration. Graves asserts that Nietzsche fails as a philosopher because in all essential points he either misconstrues reality or contradicts himself. Writing in a blunt, utterly self-confident style, Graves claims that

Nietzsche piled lie upon lie, but in the writing of *Ecce Homo* he must have come to understand himself, for the sequel was the madness that he had so long deferred (225).

Graves then proceeds to demonstrate his thesis by showing in a tightly written sequence of fourteen

paragraphs that Nietzsche's self-awareness is at once muddled and self-destructive. Nietzsche, according to Graves, doesn't understand his own emotions; he either distorts or lies about his family origins; the philosopher's motivation is duplicitous; finally, and perhaps most tellingly, Nietzsche's sexuality is as underdeveloped as it is perverse (226-234).

Surrounding this negative image of Nietzsche is a conceptual frame. At both ends of his essay, Graves explores Nietzsche's relationship to Germany. Is Nietzsche a typical German? Does he carry within himself the essential traits of the race, analyzed often since Tacitus' *Germania* (225-6)? The question might seem specious, but in fact, Graves has chosen the approach that most easily takes him to the heart of Nietzschean thought. After all, Nietzsche's main philosophical theme in *Ecce Homo* and in all the great works of the 1880's concerns the relationship between philosophy and society. A philosopher, according to Nietzsche, succeeds in his task in so far as he escapes from and overcomes the culture around him (*EH Destiny*). Thus, in asking how *German* Nietzsche is, Graves is asking a specifically Nietzschean question about Nietzsche himself. Graves is one of the few writers on Nietzsche to avoid applying ideas or ideologies to the German philosopher that are alien to him and thus essentially arbitrary. Graves, as we shall see, stays very close to the letter and spirit of the Nietzschean text.

Three remarks are in order before I examine the specific facets of Graves' understanding of Nietzsche's philosophical and personal failure.

First, the scope of Graves' essay is very ambitious. Graves feels at ease in trying to evaluate Nietzsche's status as a major European philosopher. He has a kind of refreshing irreverence toward Nietzsche, so unlike the academic commentators of our own time. He also attempts to bridge the gap between Nietzsche's life and work, something that even today is rarely attempted by Nietzsche scholars. Second, Graves very astutely anchors his essay in the notion of transformation from one psychological and moral condition to another. This not only underscores Graves' precise knowledge of Nietzsche's work but also allows Graves to study two of the three main pillars of Nietzschean thought (his rejection of the tradition and his attempt to found new values) in a very compressed space. Third, Graves is overturning with an admirable *sang-froid* the positive image of Nietzsche that has tended to exist throughout our century. Whether Nietzsche commentators have been from the right or from the left, philosophical or literary, academic or otherwise, they have almost all seen Nietzsche as a great agent of truth and renewal. Graves is one of the very few well-informed writers to resist this tendency.

So what does Graves mean when he says, "Nietzsche piled lie upon lie...?"

In the very first place, Graves portrays Nietzsche as having almost no self-knowledge. Graves burrows into Nietzsche's autobiographical writings to show their mendacity and confusion. In *Ecce Homo*, for example, Nietzsche boasts of his successful personal transformation. As a youth, Nietzsche claims, he was sickly and confused about his life's task; however, he takes responsibility for his development and heals himself psychologically, thus discovering his true vocation--the reevaluation of all previously created Western values. In this brave new philosophical world, Nietzsche is attempting to establish the groundwork for nothing less than a new way of thinking, feeling, and seeing. All well and good, argues Graves, but one shouldn't overlook the fact that as Nietzsche is writing his putatively serene and triumphant autobiography in 1888, he is only weeks away from the breakdown that will end his life as a normally functioning human being. Didn't Nietzsche, Graves asks, have any sense of the impending crisis? Isn't the philosopher at all sensitive to the strain that shows here and there throughout *Ecce Homo* (225)?

Moreover, throughout Nietzsche's so-called "self-overcoming" (*Selbstüberwindung*), he is plagued by migraines, cramps, fainting spells, vomiting, and attacks of temporary blindness. In hundreds of published texts, letters, and posthumous writings Nietzsche blames his chronic illness on Germany and everything that goes with it (climate, diet, institutions, and people) but never gives much thought to the obvious correlation between his father's premature death from congenital syphilis and his own symptoms.

I believe that Graves is right here, not so much in connecting the illness of the son to that of the father, but in pointing out Nietzsche's reluctance to delve into important areas of his experience. Indeed, there are many things that Nietzsche does not want to think about--and this philosophical timidity is in contradiction to our contemporary image of Nietzsche as an intrepid seeker of truth.

Graves pursues his analysis of Nietzsche's limitations by examining the whole notion of self-overcoming or radical personal transformation. Citing *Ecce Homo* once again, Graves reminds us that this book is replete with metaphors and anecdotes of cleanliness, swimming, and mountain climbing. Nietzsche uses these as figures of speech in his quest to explore the transformation from a polluted, corrupt, disgusting, or ambiguous state to one of cleanliness, purity, unity, and serenity. Graves analyzes this notion of transformation in two ways. First, he shows that in many instances obsessive cleanliness or desire for purity has a specific psychological source--personal malaise or even, in extreme cases, self-loathing (226-7). Secondly, Graves is astonished that Nietzsche, of all people, could naively edify this heroic and conquering image of himself without reflecting on the psychological underpinning of his drives. After all, throughout his philosophical trajectory, Nietzsche proves himself the great master of revelatory psychology, showing that almost all the ideals of Western

culture spring from negative psychological traits such as resentment, guilt, and hatred of life (GM). Thus, in very simple terms, Graves is saying that Nietzsche has powerful insights and great psychological tools, but he simply cannot apply these same tools to himself.

Graves continues to dissect Nietzsche's personality by drawing on a wide array of texts and biographical examples (227-233). In each case, Graves point is the same: Nietzsche mangles the truth with such demonic energy that he pushes himself into madness (225). Graves is claiming that if one probes just a bit below the surface of the self-adulation of *Ecce Homo*, one discovers a personality which is fragmented and fragile. In other words, the sunny perspective of *Ecce Homo* is a sham. Nietzsche fails the Delphic commandment: "know thyself."

Nietzsche's psychological distress is above all seen in his attitude toward his national origins: he detests admitting that he is German and, especially in the last ten years of his life, edifies innumerable personae and cultural affiliations to persuade others that he is no blustering Wilhelmine tyro. Throughout the 1880's Nietzsche refuses to admit to being a German; he often boasts of being a Polish gentleman. At times, he claims that his real roots are in French culture, that his subtle personality could be at home only in a place like Paris. By moments, Nietzsche will maintain that he is really closest to the Italians, perhaps a *Genovese*, which would link him to Columbus, a discoverer of new worlds. And, of course, by moments he becomes a "good European." Graves is right to point out the illusory nature of the Nietzsche personae: the English writer has no trouble in pointing out that Nietzsche springs from ordinary, upstanding provincial German stock (229). In fact, had Graves possessed our biographical information about Nietzsche, he might have pushed this idea even further. Nietzsche was anything but a "good European," for he could never really speak a language other than German and had to stoop to fanciful explanations to explain away this provincial trait. He had very few non-German acquaintances and seemed most comfortable in the company of marginal German expatriates. Furthermore, despite his disdain for things German, Nietzsche was never able to stay away from that country for very long. I have always found it disconcerting to read of this lonely, sick man making long, tiring trips over the Alps to return to Naumberg's bitter weather and drab surroundings for a few unsatisfying weeks and frequent family quarrels. Despite the claims of *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche was never at ease anywhere in the world and spent most of the last decade of his philosophical life wandering from one station of champagne Bohemia to another.

Graves is equally perceptive when he explores the calculating and resentful traits in Nietzsche's personality. Once again, Graves' essay serves as a healthy antidote to much of the late twentieth century hagiography by

Nietzsche commentators. For example, Graves shows that Nietzsche's constant praise of the French is a carefully planned ruse which cuts in two directions. First, by glorifying the Parisian cultural life of the 1880's, Nietzsche

ingratiates himself to the French by appealing to their vanity, deeply wounded after the 1871 war. Moreover, Nietzsche elevates the French in order to diminish the cultural achievements of the new German Reich, which never showed interest or esteem for his writing. All of this is human enough but hardly coincides with the nobility of values and personal autonomy that Nietzsche extols so frequently. Graves is exploring terrain that has seldom been touched by any of the important twentieth century biographers of Nietzsche.

Graves also analyzes the bloodthirsty, sadistic side of Nietzsche which has been totally ignored and often misrepresented since the invention of the so-called new Nietzsche in the 1970's. Graves is referring to Nietzsche's praise of hardness and glorification of war (233). Nietzsche sees himself as "the most terrible man who has ever existed," on whose appearance follow cataclysmic world-happenings (233). He calls himself "dynamite," the man who divides European history into two halves (*EH Destiny*). Here, Graves understands Nietzsche perfectly: the German philosopher is maniacally justifying himself rather than attempting mature self-examination.

The disarray in Nietzsche's way of thinking is above all seen in his remarks about women. Graves exposes Nietzsche's contradictions and his fanaticism (233). Nietzsche wrote hundreds of texts on women during his lifetime and seldom does he have original or insightful things to say about them. Above all, he shows a hysterical inconsistency. At times, Nietzsche claims that women are most natural and happy when they are involved in one stage of maternity or another. By moments, he presents women as erotic ornaments of masculine desire. He claims that women have no place in public life and are never to be trusted with serious work because of their fickleness. On the other hand, at times they are seen as superior forms of humanity. And as one might expect from this kind of confused writer, Nietzsche discerns scores of symbolic roles for women: women as Ariadne; woman as Truth; women as anything and everything. Graves rightfully ridicules Nietzsche for his superficial remarks about female attractiveness. How can we take a writer seriously who believes that English women are unappealing because they have big feet, that French women are physically superior because of their daintiness, and that German women are hateful because they are so "bovine" (234)? One could probably accept this kind of attitudinizing, allowing for a philosophical "bad day," but not a single time in his published or posthumous work does Nietzsche attempt to draw this material together into a meaningful whole; never does he take the time to study seriously women as individuals; never does he bother to think about the use of female traits in Western mythology or folklore. What we get from Nietzsche are adolescent, irresponsible, and ultimately superficial comments on women. These remarks are not generated *ex nihilo*: they derive from the scores of tormented relationships he had with the women in his life: his mother, his sister, Cosima Wagner, and Lou von Salomé--not to speak of the women to whom he proposed

after a single meeting. It is no wonder that all Nietzsche biographers tread very carefully in this area rather than delve into Nietzsche's cramped and skitterish sexual relationships with women. And one wonders how long it will take scholars to even begin to inspect Nietzsche's relationships with his younger male friends such as Peter Gast, Paul Deussen, Paul Rée, and Heinrich Romundt.

Graves' strategy in his exposure of Nietzsche's limitations is as admirable as it is intelligent. Nietzsche's thought is built on several conceptual pillars. On the one hand, he has a goal, a task, a philosophical project--the comprehensive reevaluation of all values and invention/creation of replacement values (*EH Destiny*). On the other hand, Nietzsche develops an original *method* for interpreting Western life. Nietzsche calls this method *genealogical*. For Nietzsche, the key philosophical question becomes not the Greek "what is it?" but "who?". Nietzsche's method moves from an ethical ideal, an artistic work, or a real action to the person from whom these ideas or acts emanate (GS 370). Nietzsche also begins to develop a set of criteria, a table of values, or, as he sometimes says, a "morphology" for dealing with the answers to these questions. Used with discernment, this method can have powerful results.

Graves spontaneously understands Nietzsche's thought and turns it back on Nietzsche himself. This skillful maneuver, accomplished with supreme self-confidence, marks Graves' "Nietzsche" as one of the few essays written on Nietzsche which is devoid of hagiography and tendentiousness.

And so we must, in conclusion, see how Graves answers his own question. Does Nietzsche escape his own culture? Does he transcend the values of Germany and Western civilization? Does he create a new form of thinking, feeling, and seeing?

Graves believes that Nietzsche does none of these things: he never comes close to freeing himself from the limitations of his own personality and culture. Each one of Graves' terms in the last paragraph of his essay is pregnant with powerful insights. Graves does agree that Nietzsche *intended* to "break loose from the herd." He leaves Germany but never really thinks through his relationship to his homeland. What he does do is succeed in "blundering into the spirit of the market place." That is, he attempts his reevaluation by working on hundreds of writers, ideas, and historical periods but never brings anything into meaningful order. Nowhere in Nietzsche is there a satisfactory account of his method; in two decades of writing philosophy, Nietzsche never studies a single writer in a thorough manner. Nowhere in Nietzsche is there a systematic account of the will to power, eternal return of the same, nihilism, or any other of his primary notions. Nowhere does Nietzsche even begin to probe his personal instability and unhappiness.

Graves chooses his verbs well: Nietzsche does indeed "blunder" from one cultural flashpoint to another. Time after time, he announces some startling cultural or philosophical revelation, but he seldom if ever delivers

anything of real substance. All his major ideas are disappointing: his critique of Christianity is sophomoric; his study of European nihilism is surpassed by all the important European novelists; his theory of the will to power is left in a chaotic and fragmentary state. Nietzsche was no cultural "dynamite," but a very lonely, incredibly self-absorbed writer who is indeed important—but as a mirror of our deep confusion and lost sense of purpose, not as a creative philosopher.

Robert Graves grasped this very clearly in the 1930's and offered us one of the best essays ever written on Friedrich Nietzsche. Graves sees what is valuable in Nietzsche, the genealogical method, and appropriates it

with unparalleled force. Although not a professional philosopher, Graves has more insight into Nietzsche than most of the academically trained commentators that have so dominated our intellectual landscape for the last forty years. In short, "Nietzsche," a small gem written during a very troubled historical period, serves as yet another example of the enduring importance of Robert Graves.

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Notes

1. For a more realistic view of Nietzsche's sexuality, see Joachim Köhler's *Zarathustras Geheimnis: Friedrich Nietzsche und seine Verschlüsselte Botschaft. Eine Biographie*. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1992.