

Making Time Count

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Counting the Beats: Robert Graves' Poetry of Unrest by Anne Mounic

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Anne Mounic, who teaches in Paris, is a fine and prolific poet, and an admired translator. Her own English prose is faultless, nuanced, precise. She is also, to my mind, a marvellously astute commentator on Robert Graves, that 'poet of unrest', as she calls him. And as a French academic, she has none of that Anglo hesitancy in thinking that philosophers may offer a fruitful place to begin talking about poetry. She likes to quote Franz Rosenzweig, and one sees why. A veteran himself of the First World War, he first opposed Hegel's philosophy 'because it did not take into account the individual's fear of death – what he himself had experienced in the trenches, and which he considered the starting point for knowledge. The new language emerging from the First World War is the language then of individual reality'. It is stripped of sentiment, of idealism, of dogmatic comfort, 'a daring attempt to face what escapes our grasp'. The necessary state of mind, one could say, before the poetry begins. The link from this to the mature, enduring Graves is, Mounic argues, both obvious and consistent, as 'mythic figures give the individual an existential status, providing recognition of his paradoxical position [. . .] the question of salvation is expressed in the individual's voice'. Her reading of the poetry is also insistently existential. The thread to finding one's way from the domination of the past and its accrued nightmares leads to the supreme assurance that only poetry offers a certain temperament, to 'Take your delight in momentariness, / Walk between dark and dark'. As Mounic glosses it, 'The self reveals itself in the paradox of the moment.' To create and to self-create might then be read as fairly

much the same thing. As the French Jewish poet Claude Vigée, a survivor of a different kind, puts it in his resonant Foreword to Mounic's work, this is especially so with Graves, who renovated poetry as well as himself 'against all the trends, ideologies or literary fashions in vogue at the time'.

Mounic's own poetry is steeped in Kierkegaard. She does not attempt to impose her broad rapport with the Danish thinker on Graves, or to derive Graves from Kierkegaard. But her method of reading allows her to argue that an openness to one attunes us to a sympathetic reading of the other. What the earlier writer claimed for myth, Graves exemplified in what he later wrote. Or as this enthusiast for both writers puts it of each, 'Myth helps to dramatise the individual quest for being.' This alertness to immediacy authenticates what is drawn from the past. Fear and desire, she argues, fulfilment and loss, are thus not necessarily exclusive of the other. Skirting as she does the shores of psychoanalysis without ever quite declaring landfall, Mounic's insistence is that myth is where a poet's life goes on, once extinction has been outfoxed.

The author is so good on *The White Goddess* because she reads it not as a scholarly excursus, or an obligatory preliminary to poetry, but as the natural way to think for a poet as informed as Graves, and with his searing sense of vocation. She takes it as a poet's handbook on how to survive *mere* survival, so that one is left with what he calls 'True life, natural breath; not this phantasma'. For as Mounic explains it, breath itself is the beginning of rhythm, personal to the man who draws it, communal as it aspires to declaration. ('The shout', if things go badly, the poem, if well.) After duress, as Graves well knows, rhythm quite literally is to get one's breath back, the poem making time count. An image which Graves as much as Kierkegaard makes much of is Jacob, drenched from wrestling with his angel, proclaiming by his walk quite what survival means. The poem too is the mark of coming through.

Time and again, Mounic offers a summary of what she thinks it essential to remember, as she tracks through the Gravesian terrain to bring us not only to how the poetry is read correctly, but

through the intricacies and expansiveness of the myth that enables it. 'Violence and pain have to be taken into account, Dionysus rather than Apollo.' And the trial, as the Goddess variously assures, is the guarantor of more.

Here then in majesty I rule again,
And grassflesh pays me tribute as of old;
In wind and sun and stream my joys I take,
Bounded by white horizons beyond touch.

Mounic's eight chapters in their various ways consider the Gravesian challenge of 'regaining rights to time', and how most fruitfully to talk about a surprisingly straightforward poet. His vast scholarship *outside the poetry* should not obscure what is in it. Although the book reads impressively as a total approach to the poet, each chapter also stands alone, often in direct descent from the separate occasion it was written for. There is a fine discussion on Graves and the Bible that sets out the coherence of the poet's interpretations, his reading the Christian books as a continuing Jewish Testament, rather than a 'New' and severing one. (Graves's fiction presented his views in a quasi-popular way, as well as his more academically 'restoring' the Nazarene Gospel. Yet more than half a century later he failed even to make the index in Donald Harmon Akenson's splendid *Surpassing Wonder*, where the historian discusses a similar approach. The penalty Graves still pays for his reputation as 'eccentric'?)

To say Graves reads the Bible as poetry carries none of that phrase's overtones of 'reading it with the religion left out'. For Graves, the more poetry means, the more sacred; the more sacred, the finer the poetry. The language of prophecy, as Mounic writes, 'is that of hope against fate'; what myth brings the individual as an existential gift. That divine possibility, 'God' for the Hebrews, the 'Goddess' for Graves, offers, admittedly to very different constituencies, the 'bladed mind', as the poem 'On Portents' puts it, pulling through time. In Mounic's typically direct and persuasive gloss, 'Through this spiritual wrestling, the individual

mind dilates so as to communicate with the rest of the living, and reach the proper realm of life.’ From a slightly different and frequently erotic tack, time is where the personal pronouns bear a shekinah of their own. Revelation is always of and for the minute it occurs. Mounic’s account is full of grammatical aperçus and philosophical asides, yet never loses its focus on making Graves’s ‘one story and one story only’ a matter of shared excitement with her reader. In two other chapters, she sets that story against David Jones’s Catholic drive toward belief and its immediacy. Here was a poet who shared Graves’s war, even to the same regimental colours. They are vastly different yet congenial minds. Eliot by comparison she finds static, dogmatic, ‘saved’, determined to escape the immediacy Graves hungers towards and revels in. The challenge Graves’s œuvre engages with and brings off is both the contest and its rewarding enchantment, as he takes his chance on attending to cyclic time, to the rhythms of language, the service of a redeeming myth lived out as well as written. The last words of this finely instructive study are taken from another soldier poet, André Breton, declaring his own epitaph. It is as apt applied to Graves: ‘Je cherche l’or du temps.’

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