

УНИВЕРЗИТЕТ У БАЊОЈ ЛУЦИ  
ФИЛОЛОШКИ ФАКУЛТЕТ

# ФИЛОЛОГ

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# ROBERT GRAVES – A MODERNIST NIETZSCHEAN POET?

**Abstract:** *The aim of our analysis is to explore the influence of Nietzsche's aesthetic doctrine on Robert Graves (1895–1985), the famous English poet and novelist. The paradox we lay our emphasis on in the very beginning lies in the fact that Robert Graves used to speak about Nietzsche and his works in a rather deprecatory manner. However, it is too obvious that the views of both authors and their approach to certain key categories of modernism are strikingly similar. The aim of our comparative survey is to juxtapose Nietzsche's and Graves's views on history, poetry, the nature of poetic inspiration, and modernist myth-making and to prove that Graves as many other modernist writers, did not escape being influenced, directly or indirectly, by the ideas of the great German philosopher.*

**Key words:** *modernism, influence, history, poetry, Apollonian, Dionysian, inspiration, myth, cyclicity, iconoclasm.*

The analysis of the Graves–Nietzsche relationship makes us think of Graves's famous essay 'Nietzsche' that was supposedly written in 1935 and then included in the collection entitled *Essays from the Epilogue* (1935–1937). It can also be found in the later collections known as *The Common Asphodel* (1949) and *The Crowning Privilege* (1959). The authorship of the essay was at first disputable because in *Essays from the Epilogue* it was published under the pseudonym Madleine Vara. Nowadays it is almost unanimously assumed that Graves wrote it. Professor Richard Schumaker, who has never had any doubt about the authorship, wrote two illuminating studies on the Graves's essay. These are 'Graves, Nietzsche and Modernism' (1988), and 'Sex, Lies and Nietzsche according to Robert Graves' (1996).

In the second article, which is a modified version of the first one, professor Schumaker draws our attention to the key issues of Graves's analysis of Nietzsche's work. According to Graves, Nietzsche lamentably fails to avoid being trapped within

the limits of his own culture and Western civilisation and that in his philosophising he didn't provide a new form of 'thinking seeing and feeling'. (Schumaker 1995–96: 20) In other work, Schumaker criticises Graves's views on *Ecce Homo*. Some of the views are, according to Schumaker, totally unfounded but Schumaker praises Graves's incredibly modern interpretations of Nietzsche and at the same time draws an interesting comparison between Graves's denigrating survey of Nietzsche's achievement and Nietzsche's unfavourable account of Wagner. (Schumaker 1988: 15)

The aim of our comparative survey is to cast a light upon similar aspects in the works of the two iconoclasts, Nietzsche and Graves. Nietzsche's ideas are generally recognised as one of the shaping forces of modernism. The reception of Friedrich Nietzsche's works is still widely studied. His philosophical concepts such as 'will to power', 'overman', and 'eternal recurrence' are taken almost as doctrines by many modernist authors. In his essay, Graves is highly critical of most of Nietzsche's atti-

tudes exposed in *Ecce Homo* but the German philosopher in this very work, dating from 1888, uttered a statement that proved prophetic: 'I know my lot. One day my name will be connected with the recollection of something enormous — with a crisis like never before on earth, with the deepest clash of conscience, with a decision solely invoked against all that had until then been believed, demanded, hallowed'. (2004: 90)

### History as a Malady of Modern Age

The end of the nineteenth century, marked by the beginning of the modernist movement, coincided with a kind of a crisis that Pericles Lewis saw in its triple aspect: the literary and artistic (crisis of representation); the socio-political (crisis of liberalism); and the philosophical and scientific (crisis of reason). (2007: 3) Nietzsche's work *On the Use and Abuse of History* is the direct reaction on nineteenth century historicism that grew increasingly endangered by the crisis of representation. Having rejected historical objectivism, Nietzsche maintains that history will no longer be comprehended as a linear, logical, meaningful process. 'The excess of history has seized the plastic force of life ...', claims Nietzsche '... it understands no more to make use of the past as a powerful nourishment.' (2010: 58) He suggests the two 'poisons' to so called 'historical sickness' and these are 'unhistorical' and 'superhistorical'. (2010: 65) These two categories are, according to Nietzsche, nothing but tools for dismantling the Cartesian view of modern metaphysics that advocated man's seclusion from his own historical life: 'With the phrase "the unhistorical" I designate the art and the power of being able to *forget* and to enclose oneself in a *horizon* with borders; "superhistorical", I call the powers which divert the gaze from what is developing back to what gives ex-

istence an eternal and unchanging character, to *art* and *religion!*' (2010: 65)

The famous statement 'History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake' (Joyce 2008: 34), uttered by Joyce's hero Stephen Dedalus, may be taken as a direct reflection of Nietzsche's postulates written some thirty years before Joyce described Stephen's attempts to save himself from the historical nightmare by art. Graves, like Nietzsche, attacks the teleological view of history. In his early work, *Poetic Unreason and Other Studies*, he insists upon the duality of history. (Graves 1968: 154–157) In other words, he distinguishes historical record from the event which it describes. He lays an emphasis on the discord between these two: 'History is not as tradition claims, the reflection in an Unchanging Mirror of some phase of life. It has a separate identity as distinguishable from the form of life of which it is a history, as dreaming is distinguishable from falling asleep.' (1968: 156)

The typical Nietzschean urge to overcome the malady of history by art is to be found not only in Graves's prose. His early poetic work entitled '*Antigonus: An Eclogue*', (included in the collection *Mock Beggar Hall*), contains a kind of a verbal duel that is staged for the purpose. The participants in the stichomythic dialogue are James (the historian) and John (the poet):

- James: Is there much fun in forging history?  
Nothing you write can alter facts.
- John: When you say "history", what does that imply?  
The logical or psychological?  
Logical? But there is history that refers  
To another context with new premises  
Not bound by challenge of empiric proof.  
One day history may become supreme  
As your empiric kind succeeded myth,  
And then who'll be the forger, you or I?  
(Graves 2000: 192)

James, the epitome of *fiat veritas pereat vita*, accuses John of forging history

for the sake of art or of a poetic truth of a kind but John the poet indicates the malleability of objective history. This dichotomy of poetry and history dates from Aristotle who considered poetry as more philosophical since it refers to what could happen whereas history concentrates on what really happened. (2013: 14)

### The Division of Poetry

Nietzsche was also interested in the dichotomies such as history vs poetry and objective truth vs fiction. In his book *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche, through the mouth of the prophet, speaks of poets as vain and deceitful peacocks, who are obliged to lie too much because of the lack of learning. (n. d. a: 121-123) Zarathustra, a poet himself, admits that he also forges truth and at the end of this slightly paradoxical musing on poetry, he exclaims: 'Ah, there are so many things betwixt heaven and earth of which only the poets have dreamed [...] for all gods are poet-symbolizations, poet-sophistications!' (n. d. a: 120) Graves, on the other hand, also juxtaposes poetry and truth. In the poem 'The Naked and the Nude', Graves tries to distinguish between these two qualities by saying that they: '...stand as wide apart /As love from lies, or truth from art.' (2000: 475)

Nietzsche's division of poetry, or art in general, known as the Apollonian-Dionysian dichotomy, is something that is often referred to as the most influential and most inspiring and intriguing qualification ever uttered on the subject. In his famous *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche expounds:

'What is the meaning of the conceptual opposites which I have introduced into aesthetics, Apollinian and Dionysian, both conceived as kinds of frenzy? The Apollinian frenzy excites the eye above all, so that it gains the power of vision. The painter, the sculptor, the epic poet are visionaries par excellence. In the Dionysian state, on the other hand, the whole affective system is excited and enhanced: so that it discharges all its means of

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expression at once and drives forth simultaneously the power of representation, imitation, transfiguration, transformation, and every kind of mimicking and acting.' (n. d.c: 10)

Graves's division of poetry is exposed in his essay 'The Dedicated Poet':

'Apollonian poetry is composed in the forefront of the mind: wittily, should the occasion serve, always reasonably, always on preconceived plan, and derived from a close knowledge of rhetoric, prosody, Classical example, and contemporary fashion. ... The Apollonian allows no personal emotions to obtrude, and no unexpected incident to break the smooth flow of his verse. The pleasure he offers is consciously aesthetic.'

'Muse poetry' [on the other hand] 'is composed at the back of the mind: an unaccountable product of a trance in which the emotions of love, fear, anger, or grief are profoundly engaged, though at the same time powerfully disciplined; in which intuitive thought reigns supralogically, and personal rhythm subdues metre to its purposes. The effect on readers of Muse poetry, with its opposite poles of ecstasy and melancholia, is what French call a frisson, and the Scots a "grue" - meaning the shudder provoked by fearful or supernatural experiences'. (Graves 1969a: 286)

Graves's division of poetry, although rather elaborate and ideosyncratic in certain aspects, is but a version of Nietzsche's division of art including poetry. If we take a closer look we will see that the category of Apollonian in Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* implies moderation, self-control, knowledge of the self (n. d.b: 19), which corresponds with Graves's emphasis on the fact that Apollonian poetry is created in the 'forepart of the mind, wittily, always reasonably.' (1969a: 286)

According to Graves, the Apollonian artist creates free from anything (personal thought or incident) that could obstruct 'the smooth flow of his verse'. (1969a: 286) Graves's idea of a poet who creates in the Apollonian poetic mode complies with the famous *principium individuationis* (*principle of individuation*). Nietzsche sees Apollo himself as the marvellous divine image of

the *principium individuationis*. 'We could say of Apollo', claims Nietzsche 'that the imperturbable trust in that principle and the calm sitting still of the man caught up in it attained its loftiest expression in him.' (n. d.b: 12)

As far as the second part of the division is concerned there is a difference since Nietzsche expounds on the Dionysian state of mind of an artist whereas Graves speaks about the poetry of the Muse. Having in mind that the central myth of Graves's poetic universe was the myth of the White Goddess, we should not wonder why Graves insisted upon feminine nature of Dionysian cult. The femininity of the cult was recognised by the famous anthropologist Johann Jakob Bachofen. (Kermal et al. 2002: 74) Graves is known to have read voraciously Bachofen's works whereas it is generally thought that Bachofen never influenced Nietzsche. (Seymour-Smith 1983: 383)

It is evident that Nietzsche's qualification of Dionysian poetry resembles Graves's perspective on the muse poetry and besides, the phraseology is almost the same. Both of them are ready to observe Dionysian or Muse poetry as some unaccountable product of trance, ecstatic and intoxicating at the same time. Nietzsche's favouring of Dionysian is well-known and Robert Graves is, according to Robert Davis, quite like Nietzsche, the heir: '... of the poetry of darker Arcadia.' (1999: 211)

### The Nature of Poetic Inspiration

Graves, who is known as the muse poet, attributes all his poetic power to his Muse. A poet should address his poem to the Muse-Goddess. The moment of poetic inspiration is, according to Graves, quite specific since a poet gets suddenly obsessed with some emotional problems to the extent of falling into a kind of trance and: '... in this trance his mind works, with astonishing boldness and precision, on several imaginative levels at once.' (1959a: 214)

Nietzsche identifies poetic inspiration as a kind of trance even revelation: '... in the sense that suddenly, with indescribable certainty and subtlety, something becomes visible, audible, something that shakes one to the last depths and throws one down - that merely describes the facts.' ... 'a rapture whose tremendous tension occasionally discharges itself in a flood of tears [when] ...the pace quickens involuntarily, now it becomes slow; one is altogether beside oneself.' (2004: 71)

Nietzsche does not mention the muse as a poet's ideal but speaks of the reconciliation of the Apollonian and Dionysian element which in fact results in the birth of attic tragedy. (n. d.b: 20) On the other hand, Graves believes that a good poem is composed when the author 'creates in passion, then by a reverse process of analysing, he tests the implied suggestions and corrects them on the common - sense principles so as to make them apply universally.' (2004a: 4) Graves, as we see, offers his own version of the reconciliation of Dionysian muse aspect and Apollonian rationality.

Good poetry according to Graves is the one 'that makes complete sense; and says all it has to say memorably and economically; and has been written for no other than poetic reasons.' (1969b: 218) His poetry may be qualified as a kind of 'pure poetry' in its own way. 'The poet', says Graves '... refuses to be anyone's lackey, or ever to write for the wrong reasons (such as fame, fashion, money, patronage, political or ecclesiastical propaganda, idle rhetorical experiment); or ever to behave in a manner inconsistent with devotion he owes his muse.' (1960: 125) Intellectualism is, according to Graves, an obstacle. To think in a poetic sense, says Graves: '... one must first rid oneself from a great deal of intellectual encumbrance including all dogmatical prepossessions.' (1999: 400)

Nietzsche also opposes intellectualism and mentions 'an eternal struggle be-

tween the theoretical and the tragic world view' and the spirit of science is the very thing that hinder the 're-birth of tragedy'. (2012b : 59) The whole world, according to Nietzsche, is enslaved by so-called Alexandrian culture and its chief protagonist 'the ideal of theoretical man' whose 'prototype and progenitor' is Socrates who is directly opposed to mythical thinking. (n. d.b : 52)

Graves also despises Socrates, a notorious myth-breaker, who 'turns his back to myths' thus rejecting the Moon Goddess. In the introductory note of *The White Goddess*, Graves claims that the whole book is a kind of a prolonged controversy with Socrates, in which he successfully solves the problem Socrates posed. (1999: 11)

### Modernist Myth-Making

It appears that, in the course of the twentieth century, Socratic rationalism became, in certain aspects, overpowering because modern culture turned thoroughly anti-mythical. Modern culture lost mythic potential. Myths are devalorised because reason does not only explain myths but explains them away and the transcendental elements of myths are contextualised into a particular historical situation. Nietzsche traces the decline of classical tragic myth and criticises historiography which is but a kind of malaise threatening to replace myth in modernity. What Nietzsche advocates is the revival of myth as a life-affirmative force and the revival of mythical communication that touches the inner life of humanity owing to the poetic genesis of myth and the mythical language that is still pre-conceptual because 'it is still poetry image and feeling'. (2007: 237)

Graves is also highly critical of the desecralisation of myth in modern civilisation under the reign of 'unholy triumvirate, Pluto god of wealth, Apollo god of science and Mercury god of thieves.' (1999: 476) He condemns Socrates but his view of myths was also permeated with some kind of rationalism. He says:

'One constant rule of mythology is that whatever happens among the gods above reflects events on earth, one function of myth being to justify an existing social system and account for traditional rites and customs. Hence all mythology is a dramatic shorthand record of such matters as invasions, migrations, dynastic changes, demission of foreign cults, and social reforms.' (Graves 1959b: vii)

Sir James George Frazer is known to have tried to rationalise myths and in the quoted passage one easily recognise Graves's Frazerian heritage. The return of the old myths was, of course, impossible in the age of modernism and the two authors propagate a new mythology or new mythological concepts that should serve as a life-affirming force. Nietzsche offers the idea of *Overman* and the concept of *eternal recurrence*. Graves, on the other hand, announces the emergence of a new myth. In his 'Antigonus: an eclogue', John and Jim, engaged in a long stichomythic dialogue, finally reach the issue of mythology:

James: John, I don't follow you: it sounds nonsense.  
I can't believe you mean half what you say.  
Must we revert to myth?  
John: No, not to myth,  
In the dimmer sense, but a new form of myth  
Alert, with both eyes open, self-aware –  
This is my point, the past is always past  
And what the present calls past history  
Springing new, capricious, unforeseeable'.  
(Graves 2000: 192)

What Graves wishes to promote is, in fact, the primordial myth - the myth of the supreme Goddess. Both authors tend to introduce some allegedly new mythical concepts, the embryos of new mythologies. This particular tendency is clarified by Claude Levi-Strauss who claims that central myth, which appears always in the same form, simply does not exist. Every single speech about myth is a production of new myths and the process is called the *bricolage* which is in fact the production of

new literature and not just the talk about literature. (Levi-Strauss 1964: 10–23) Graves uses his primordial myth as a means for the remythologisation of the Greek myths and Christian mythology in his novels. These myths are rearranged to the extent of being hardly recognisable apart from some remnants of the old structural patterns. Both Graves and Nietzsche deny Christian mythology and dogmas.

Graves's mythography is different from Nietzsche's but there are some striking similarities as far as some poetic motifs are concerned. One of the most outstanding is the motif of *eternal recurrence* which refers to the fact that everything that happened in the world including man's life, with all its good and bad aspects, will happen again and again. Both Nietzsche and Graves were carried away by the motif the very thought of which is, according to Martin Heidegger, rather 'burdensome'. (Heidegger 1984: 25) Their masterly treatment of *eternal return* or *eternal recurrence* motif, no less effective than Camus's or Sartre's achievements, contributes significantly to the widespread modernist tendency of the withdrawal of the linearity of history before the cyclicity of myth.

As far as Nietzsche is concerned, we can trace it in his fully poetic work *Thus Spake Zarathustra* in the famous dialogue between Zoroaster and the Dwarf. Confronted with the plain paths of human destiny, the Dwarf says: 'All truth is crooked; time itself is a circle.' (Nietzsche n. d.a: 146) But Zarathustra responds:

'Observe, [...], this moment! "Observe," continued I, "This Moment!" From the gateway, This Moment, there runneth a long eternal lane *backwards*: behind us lieth an eternity. Must not whatever *can* run its course of all things, have already run along that lane? Must not whatever *can* happen of all things have already happened, resulted, and gone by? And if everything have already existed, what thinkest thou, dwarf, of This Moment? Must not this gateway also - have already existed? And are not all things closely bound together in such wise that This Moment draweth all

coming things after it? *consequently*—itself also?' (Nietzsche n. d.a: 146)

Graves on the other hand exploits the same motif in some highly poetic parts of his famous historical novel *The Golden Fleece*. In the thirteenth chapter, Orpheus speaks of the exasperating notion of life cycle:

'Not even death. We are all caught on a wheel from which there is no release but by the grace of the mother. We are whirled up into life, the light of day and carried down again into death, the darkness of night; but then another day dawns red and we reappear, we are reborn. And a man is not reborn in his accustomed body but in that of a bird, beast, butterfly bat, or creeping thing according to the judgement passed upon him below.'<sup>2</sup> (Graves 2004b: 129–30)

## Conclusion

Upon reaching the end of our comparative study, we cannot but remember the famous Nietzsche's words from *Ecce Homo* that Graves severely caricatured: 'I am not a man, I am dynamite. — And with all that, there is nothing in me to suggest the founder of a religion — religions are rabble-affairs, I find it necessary to wash my hands after contact with religious people... I *desire* no "believers."' (2004: 90)

Robert Graves was certainly neither a believer in the particular sense nor an epigone and follower of Nietzsche's doctrines. We may say that these two have the same guiding ideas and principles but Graves, a highly idiosyncratic spirit, clothed them with a new, typically Gravesian aura. In fact they have much in common. They were iconoclasts, mythographers, poets, each of them Corypheus of his own epoch. Nietzsche, the predecessor, who is thought to be the prophet of the modernist era, and Graves the man who stood alone in the flux of modernist movement, invigorating it with a new extraordinary poetic concept and a new spirit. We may assume that

Graves was, at least, in this particular respect a Nietzschean.

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## РОБЕРТ ГРЕЈВЗ – НИЧЕАНСКИ МОДЕРНИ ПЕСНИК?

### Резиме

Упоредна анализа релевантних фрагмената из дела Фридриха Ничеа и Роберта Грејвза показала је да је утицај немачког филозофа и књижевника на енглеског аутора несумњив. Ничеова побуна против „болести историје“ нашла је одјека и у Грејвзовом делу, али је изражена путем платонског дијалога. Такође је доказано да је Грејвзова подела поезије заправо варијанта чувене Ничеове дихотомије аполонијско–дионизијско. Што се песничке инспирације тиче, оба аутора је сагледавају у јединству рационалног и ирационалног. Модерна митопеја, коју је Фридрих Ниче перпетуирао, наставља се, сматрамо, на исти иконокластички начин и код Грејвза, који је, као и Ниче, митоборац али и творац нових митова. И коначно, ма колико то Грејвз одрицао, закључујемо да је у многим аспектима он ништа друго до управо ничеанац, али исто тако и аутор великог и оригиналног стваралачког генија, који га је сачувао сваког епигонства.

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