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BOOK REVIEW

Nietzsche's Culture War: The Unity of the Untimely Meditations. Shilo Brooks (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, ISBN: 3319615203)

Reviewed by Dirk R. Johnson, Hampden-Sydney College, United States

Shilo Brooks' study on Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations* (*UM*) (1873-76) is one of the few scholarly works that examines all four of these early essays in combination. Even taken separately, there are fewer independent studies of the *UM* compared with *The Birth of Tragedy* (*BT*) (1872) and the middle works (1878-82), except for "The Use and Disadvantage of History for Life" (*HL*) (1874), which has garnered the most critical attention. Brooks suggests a compelling reason to investigate all four works together. His organizing principle is reflected in his title: the four essays were individual constituents of a large-scale "culture war"—a philosophical *Kulturkampf* (p. 12)—that the young Nietzsche waged against Bismarck and the political, social, and cultural conditions in his newly established Reich. Brooks' decision to treat all four pieces in a single monograph makes eminent sense, and the fact that Nietzsche assembled the essays under the title *UM* suggests he saw them as part of a common endeavor—or at least as reflective of a certain prevailing mindset at the time: "[W]hen viewed from the perspective of his later works, the critique of German culture featured in the *Untimely Meditations* and the plan Nietzsche sketches to revitalize it provide a holistic if early blueprint for his later attempt at a revaluation of values" (p. 15).

Brooks' approach is part of what seems to be a recent trend in scholarship to bring together works of a period under an overarching theme. It is an approach that has been particularly noticeable in the case of the middle period works. While that approach might serve as a useful organizing principle for a scholar, it can obscure the fact that Nietzsche, as a writer, often did *not* proceed according to any central organizing principles and would only in retrospect recognize, or wish to highlight, themes and emerging patterns he saw reflected in earlier works and which he then began to recognize as parts of a single larger project. A look at the various titles he took up and discarded over the years, as well as the projects he pushed forward and then dropped—including the famous *The Will to Power,* with its consequential afterlife—reveals that he rarely developed his thoughts with a larger single purpose in mind but often let his current preoccupations dictate the themes and style of the work in progress.

Such skepticism does not mean that scholars cannot, nor should not, detect and foreground patterns that might underlie or unify the texts. But we should resist assuming that Nietzsche was pursuing a conscious narrative strategy. Most often, he would decide on a suggestive title only toward the end of composition to give thematic coherence to thoughts and insights that he could have as easily published in another form and under a different title. Above all, his most influential themes recur like leitmotifs throughout, and

they get reorganized and repackaged on an ongoing basis. This process reflected Nietzsche's growing awareness of his central points, which he would repeatedly circle back around in his effort to improve their theoretical incisiveness.

Brooks breaks down the four *Meditations* neatly into two distinct categories: the first two essays—on David Strauss (*DS*) (1873) and the *HL*—were Nietzsche's attempt to subjugate his culture to a systematic critique and to detail its shortcomings. On the other hand, the final two essays—on Schopenhauer (*SE*) (1874) and Wagner (*RWB*) (1876)—were meant as positive, aspirational models for an ideal culture Nietzsche offered as an antidote to the type of debased culture he had critiqued in the first two. Though this breakdown is cogent and straightforward, it leads Brooks to gloss over many of the interesting details in the works for the sake of his larger thematic point.

For example, it is obvious that the first essay establishes Strauss as a model of the philistine culture in Germany, and that much of *DS* makes the case for this philistinism, but Nietzsche also makes insightful comments about many other topics, including the nature of scientific practice in his time, in particular Strauss's deficient understanding of Darwinism. The price that Brooks pays to make the case that Nietzsche's primary objective is to critique the cultural landscape Strauss embodies is to miss the opportunities to examine the many isolated and profound insights he makes in this essay—and in all four essays, for that matter. It seems that Nietzsche was less satisfied with the *UM* because he realized that his strength as a thinker resided not in meta-level critique but in the pointed observations that were more often brilliant in isolation. Indeed, aside from *Zarathustra* and parts of the *Genealogy*, Nietzsche from then on avoided grand cultural projects and sweeping narratives and worked with aphorisms or loosely interconnected longer paragraphs separated into sections.

In the case of *HL*, Brooks interprets the essay as Nietzsche's critique of the practice of history in Germany at the time. On Brooks' view, Nietzsche saw that the new "scientific" understanding of academic history stood in the way of a higher culture. Nietzsche famously divided up the study of history into three main categories: the monumental, the antiquarian, and the critical. For Brooks, Nietzsche's main interest was the "monumental": "His preference for it is indicated by the fact that he treats it first, and that it is the only form of history treated alone in its own section" (p. 86).

Brooks argues that the essay was critical of what was primarily an antiquarian form of scholarship practiced by professional historians and that Nietzsche positioned the essay against that method to make space for a "monumental" approach—a history fashioned by creative individuals who would revive the cultural landscape: "It speaks to individuals, peoples, and cultures who want to become giants instead of standing on the shoulders of giants" (p. 86). Brooks thus structures the essay in the following rather facile way: *HL* as a whole is a "critical" exposition of an "antiquarian" culture that will allow for the possibility of a resurgent "monumental" future.

Here, again, Brooks' thesis that the *UM* were primarily a critique of, and a solution to, the problem of contemporary culture skews his reading of the texts. Certainly, one of the dominant strands of *HL is* Nietzsche's condemnation of "scientific" historicism that had become dominant in the newly established Reich as well as the Germans' recent obsession with the study of history. In fact, it is *the* dominant strand, and the essay is directed against

the way that history was being taught and instrumentalized and how fixation on the historical sense in German higher education stifled the productive life-forces of individuals, who were now weighed down by historical knowledge and were deadened to new creative aspirations.

The three categories Nietzsche then introduced were meant to show that the study of history could be practiced in different ways, and for different ends, depending on the result that one wanted to achieve. Instead of a solitary allegiance to an ostensibly scientific and objective form of history, which was merely a cover for a teleological narrative of historical "success," Nietzsche proposed alternative approaches to the study of history that allow for human growth and liberation. Instead, Brooks takes the entire essay to be directed against the formal academic study of history (which he equates with the "antiquarian" per se) and suggests that he wanted to make room again for a "monumental" approach. This misses the essay's purpose altogether. I would argue that what made the history piece original and "untimely"—and what continues to make it timely—is Nietzsche's incisive awareness (for the period) that history is *never* objective and is always being written by invested actors, and that the writing of history will always serve different ends and interests.

Brooks then turns to the two final essays, which he interprets as the response to the crises Nietzsche had articulated in the first two: "*Schopenhauer as Educator* (*SE*) concludes Nietzsche's critical task in the *Untimely Meditations* and marks the beginning of his creative one" (p. 127). Both *SE* and *RWB* dealt with cultural "heroes" who present a vision for a way of life, in the case of Schopenhauer, and a cultural renaissance, in Wagner's case, that could help lead the Germans out of the crisis of modernity. Brooks makes much of the fact that Nietzsche later claimed that when he had talked about Schopenhauer, he had been referring to himself. In *Ecce Homo*, he stated that "'Schopenhauer as Educator' registers my innermost history, my *becoming*. Above all my *pledge*" (*EH*, 'UM' 3)! Thus, SE is important in that it referenced character traits and positions that Nietzsche would later more strongly endorse for himself.

However, Brooks does not probe any deeper the question as to how Nietzsche could assume the "identity" of Schopenhauer at this time even though we now know that he would radically undercut all the positions that Schopenhauer stood for. It would have been compelling to reexamine that text to establish possible fissures or discrepancies between the image he creates of Schopenhauer on the one hand, and Schopenhauer's actual positions on the other. I would agree with Brooks that Nietzsche needed positive identification figures and role models as counterpoints to the negative foils such as David Strauss or the antiquarian historians and scholars he had critiqued. But how could he so "misread" Wagner and Schopenhauer as to present them as the opposites to what he would come to endorse? And yet, that line of questioning might yield another inconvenient truth: that Nietzsche no longer believed in the cultural missions that he had naively championed as a young man.

This critical development is even more apparent in *RWB*. Nietzsche took longer to compose and finalize this essay than the previous three. At this point, he had developed serious reservations concerning both Wagner the man and his cultural project. His loyalty to him as a friend remained strong, but he knew that Wagner would not follow him on his more independent intellectual course. As a result, the psychic strains on Nietzsche during the composition of the essay were intense: he was called on to write a panegyric to Wagner,

a man whom he still valued, but his thoughts and his philosophical orientation were taking him in a new direction.

Brooks acknowledges that the *RWB* is the "most peculiar of the four" texts, "in part from an uneven literary tone which alternates between worshipful and ambivalent" (p. 185). But then he writes that Nietzsche treats his mentor as the "highest human type." But I would argue that the unevenness of the essay is symptomatic of the competing pressures he had to endure. The stylistic traces of that dilemma reveal that he had grown ambivalent or had at least cooled to the Wagnerian project. A recognition of this alienation challenges Brooks' notion that Wagner at this stage still represented a cultural lodestar for Nietzsche.

But Brooks does not examine the evidence, because it would problematize his central claim: that Nietzsche's final two essays were neat endorsements of a "monumental" cultural project. While it is true that Nietzsche shared many of the cultural aspirations of Wagner and had for a while seen in him a cure for the crises of modernity, that allegiance did not run as deep, or as long, as one might assume, nor was it as naïve as Brooks makes it out be. In fact, Nietzsche would later resent the continued identification of him with Wagner and his cause, which carried on through his career, even though his later writings would challenge Wagner head on: "[It is with the *BT*] that Wagner's name began to give rise to great hopes. People still remind me of this […]: how it is on *my* conscience that there are such high opinion of the *cultural value* of this movement" (*EH*, 'BT' 1). The clues for his earlier break from both figures can be found in these two "paeans" and examining them would render the emergence of the later Nietzsche more explicable.

The main shortcoming of Brooks' study is that it offers a conservative summarization, not a critical appraisal, of the *UM*, and it contributes very little that is new to our scholarly understanding of these four early texts. While it is helpful in reintroducing the structure of the arguments, Brooks skims over the many nuanced positions that still make these early texts memorable and eminently readable. The *UM* do reveal significant flaws as well as stylistic inconsistencies and unevenness—a fact that Nietzsche himself lamented and made him less favorable to them in later life. But the richness of the texts does not reside in the overarching critique of the society and the cultural ambitions he pursued in the writing of them, as Brooks argues, but in the insights that were planted like seeds in the body of the essays that would become the germs of his mature philosophy. These texts are a barometer of his early mindset, but they also give us subtle signs of what he would later become.

What he would *not* become was what Brooks would suggest he was: a pessimistic culture warrior focused on the decline of culture. For Brooks, the *UM* was "the first shot in Nietzsche's culture war" (p. 211)—"his first practical attempt to diagnose and cure the ailments of modernity" (p. 15); it was a fight he continued until the end. But a look at his future texts would indicate that he never again attempted to propose a resonant cultural enterprise as he had once tried with Wagner, unless one considers the enigmatic, multivalent *Zarathustra* to be the cornerstone of such a resurgent culture. Hardly likely with a text that no two people can seem to agree on. Instead, he would explore the opposite in future writings: the roots of "idealism" and our sustained need for grand cultural narratives. The first indications of this later Nietzsche, who would dismantle all the ideals that had led him to fall for Schopenhauer and Wagner in the first place, reside in the *UM*, and it is unfortunate that Brooks did not use the opportunity of reexamining the texts to give us a fuller understanding of that future Nietzsche.