

The Perfect Guest: The Poet and the Island—A Lasting Affair

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I. THE ARRIVAL

In the autumn of 1929, Robert Graves accompanied by Laura Riding left England in search for a place to live and work. The poet was coming out of a stormy personal and social crisis, and he was deliberately making a turning point in his life. They were heading for Spain where they knew that they could live with a quarter of the income needed in England. They had considered settling in the Basque Country, in Northern Spain.

On their way, they stopped at Belley, near Lyons, where Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas kept house. During a conversation, Graves expressed his requirements for the place he was looking for: peace, nice weather, cheap prices and not too long a journey away from London, so as to keep in touch with the publishing world. Gertrude Stein said: "Try Majorca. It is paradise... if you can stand it." This had been a standing joke for years between the two women. They had spent several periods on the island some fifteen years before in the company of the American painter William Cook and his French wife Jeannette, also a painter. Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, used to a hectic Parisian social life, had been bored to death with the dullness of a provincial town like Palma.

Incidentally, this bittersweet remark of Gertrude Stein's has been taken as a compliment by many Majorcans who use it as a sort of password when describing the peace and quiet one could enjoy on the island in times now unfortunately gone.

The description also appealed to Graves, who remembered that T.E. Lawrence had once pointed out to him the Western Mediterranean as the most consistent fair-weather area in Europe. And the Balearics was situated right in the middle of it, so the decision was taken then and there.

Robert and Laura arrived in Majorca and started to explore the island in search of a suitable place while staying at the Gran Hotel. This is a magnificent Art Nouveau building which, after long years of neglect, has recently been restored to its former splendour. In fact, some sort of poetic justice was done when some of the events of the Centenary Celebration in Palma in November 1995 took place in this building.

A few weeks after their arrival, a man called Clauker, a handicapped German café painter, insisted on painting Graves and started to cry upon his refusal. Graves finally conceded and, although he had to destroy later the frightful portrait that came out of the bargain, he obtained a valuable piece of advice. The artist suggested that he should have a look at the tiny fishing village of Deià, perched on the mountains of the rugged north-west coast of the island. It was astonishingly beautiful, and life was very cheap there.

Like many before him, Graves instantly fell in love with the landscape. In 1839, the French novelist George Sand and the composer Frederick Chopin spent a winter in the neighbouring village of Valldemossa. Sand writes of the unfortunate affair in *Un hiver à Majorque*, published in 1841. The book was written partly to abuse the islanders but, paradoxically, it spread across Europe the fame of the splendour of the island's scenery. Sand enjoyed an enormous fame among her contemporaries and such was the diffusion of her work that all English travellers in Majorca during the second half of the 19th century had read her account. This is more amazing when we realize that the book was not translated into English until 1956, incidentally by Graves himself. Perhaps the poet saw a parallel between himself and Laura and the two artists who ninety years before had arrived at the same neighbourhood in search of Eden in flight from social scandal.

In 1867, Ludwig Salvator, Archduke of Austria, a restless wanderer and author of painstakingly detailed ethnographical books, fell under the spell of the place and made it his home until his death in 1913. He bought a mountain farm halfway between Valldemossa and Deià and subsequently acquired the adjoining properties until he owned a substantial stretch of the coastline.

Even Charles, Prince of Wales, could not resist the charm of Valldemossa. In 1986 he sketched the village in a watercolour that he later published in his book on architecture, *A Vision of Britain*, as an example of building in sympathy and harmony with the environment.

II. LIFE IN DEIÀ

Robert Graves immediately blended into the surroundings—he was later to write: “The Majorcans soon accepted me as part of the landscape”—and started to work frantically. It is surprising what he achieved in the first few years of his stay.

He installed a printing press to continue his Seizin Press editions. It

was an old-fashioned hand-operated Albion which was later sold to an army chaplain, who never paid for it, and finished its working days printing parochial bulletins. It was later acquired, we could say legally seized, by Lluís Ripoll, a well-known Majorcan printer who is taking care of it until a typographical museum is established.

Graves also had his house built, a task in which he took part hand in hand with the masons; some of them were imported from surrounding villages because of the schedule imposed by Graves. He was active in carrying loads of rounded stones from the seaside with which to carpet the steps leading to the front door. This "borrowing" would be frowned upon in these days of Environment Preservation Laws but it was perfectly normal then. In fact, such pebbles are the typical outdoor flooring of the traditional architecture of the island.

Graves also undertook the building of a road to the cove, a venture that had unexpected consequences. On his arrival, Graves had made friends with Joan Marroig, nicknamed Gelat (which means ice-cream): an extraordinary character who managed the village café, owned and drove the only bus in the bus-line and also sold property. Laura described him as "a little bent," but Graves took him into his confidence. Gelat led them to believe that a German tourist hotel was about to be built next to their house. German tourists were a species particularly hated by Graves, and he was rightly horrified; the only way to keep them at bay was to buy all the land from the house to the seaside and build the hotel themselves at a suitable distance. The project could be financed by building a road to the cove and selling the plots along it.

The image of a land developer clashes noisily with that of the poet who so intensely loved that countryside and who later forcefully defended it against any danger of being spoilt. However, in those days the concept of balearization was not even an issue. (Balearization is a word coined by French geographers to describe the systematic destruction of the coastline by indiscriminate and excessive building.) Sadly, the scheme failed, and bankruptcy was looming over the inexperienced developers. Graves then unearthed a half forgotten idea about writing a historical novel set in Roman times. So something very good came out of the business, and the Claudius novels were written.

Yet the building of the road led to more peculiar events. In some places Graves was seen as a spy; the road he had built could serve some invasion plan that the Majorcans knew had been in the British

minds since Napoleonic times. An official enquiry took place, and the matter was speedily cleared thanks to a friend of a friend who was personal aide to a young general called Franco. Nevertheless, as Graves was evacuated in 1936 in a British destroyer, the rumour that Graves had been a spy lasted well into the fifties.

Finally, the question of the road emerged again in 1967 in a most surprising way when the poet was about to be named Adoptive Son of Deià. This was the sole point in the agenda of a special meeting held by the Town Council. In it, the Lord Mayor, when emphasizing the poet's merits, remarked: "Mr Graves has always been interested in matters related to this village, history, customs, folklore, etc. (...) In 1934 he built at his own expense a road leading to the cove...." Finally, in 1976, the Local Administration took charge of the road, repaired and paved it, and it was put into public service. A happy end for an embarrassing business.

In 1936, at the start of the Spanish Civil War, the British Consul on the island strongly recommended that all British residents should leave. Graves grudgingly followed the advice and could not return until ten years later. Upon his return the poet, with his wife Beryl and their first three children, was able—through a friend in the Royal Air Force—to charter a plane that took them from London to Palma. According to Ramón Rullán, retired pilot and amateur historian currently writing the history of Palma Airport, this was the first charter flight ever to land in Majorca, the first of many to come.

Upon landing on a primitive airstrip, Graves was terrified about the condition they were to find the house in after two wars, in the last of which Spain, though remaining neutral, had not shown much sympathy for the Allied cause. He need not have worried; the house was in pristine condition. The villagers had duly looked after the linen, books and silver, dusted the furniture, scrubbed the floors and aired the rooms while awaiting the owners' reappearance. Later the poet wrote: "If I felt so inclined, I could have sat down at my table, taken a sheet of paper from the drawer and started work again straight away."

Graves had returned to stay. Deià was to be the author's home for the remaining forty years of his life. In 1946, Graves met Gaspar Sabater, a neighbour and friend, and also his children's teacher. He was also a journalist and a scholar whose library Graves used quite often. Sabater, who died a few years ago, published the book *Robert Graves: De Wimbledon a Deyá* in 1968. The work is an essential piece of writing if we are interested in Graves' village life and the feelings of

the natives towards him. Conventional biographies are usually more concerned with his intellectual life or with his public activities than with his daily life in his modest mountain village.

From Sabater we can learn how hundreds of descendants of a couple of Abyssinian cats imported by Beryl still prowl around Deià and adjoining places. Or we learn how every year at Christmas Graves settled his account with the village baker. He wrote a cheque for the amount asked and, without giving it a glance, rolled the bill into a ball and left it on the counter. It was not a matter of indifference: it was a matter of complete trust. Then, invariably, he gave the baker a cigar, which was solemnly accepted. This was somehow mysterious as neither Graves nor the baker smoked cigars. Or we learn how at the death of his friend and estate advisor Gelat, in 1949, Graves appeared at his house and pinned a written piece of paper on the coffin. He stood there brooding until the coffin was taken away. Probably we shall never know what was written on the paper because it had vanished when Mr Sabater tried to get hold of it.

Graves enjoyed village life immensely: he was even an authority on current village gossip. He never left Deià except for a five-year gap from 1951 to 1956 because his children had to attend a secondary school.

When he died in 1985, he was buried in a privileged spot in the village cemetery under the shadow of a cypress. His grave does not even boast a tombstone; it is covered by a slab shaped with mortar made from calcined Majorcan limestone, the humblest of building materials. When it was still wet the family mason, Antonio Giménez, with a punch, scratched the words "Robert Graves. *Poeta*" and the dates of his birth and death.

III. MAJORCA IN GRAVES' WRITINGS

The first time that Graves wrote seriously about Majorca and the Majorcans was in *The Place for a Holiday*, an essay that appeared in *The Saturday Book* in 1948. The essay was a charming piece of writing drenched with the longing he had felt for his Majorcan home during the long years of war exile.

The same essay, suitably modified and lengthened, became "Why I Live in Majorca" which was the main chapter and the pillar that sustained his book *Majorca Observed*, where it was accompanied by a long postscript dated 1965. This piece, in its final form, is undoubtedly the key to understanding the close bond that developed between the poet

and the island.

In the book, which is embellished by magnificent pencil sketches by Paul Hogarth, Graves shows a sharp awareness of his surroundings: he suitably comments on gardening, food, society, housing, the tourist boom of the sixties, the immigration from the mainland, the sudden prosperity, the irretrievable loss of simple and peaceful living. He goes as far as reporting intimate matters such as the age-old—and now practically extinct—discrimination against the descendants of the converted Jews, or witchcraft practices in rural Majorca, an obscure subject of which most islanders know nothing and which he researched with gusto, no doubt because of his Irish ancestry.

The island is also present in his short stories. In *Collected Short Stories* (1965), Graves himself divided his stories into English, Roman and Majorcan, which proves that in the author's universe the Majorcan world carried undeniable weight.

The well-mannered Victorian gentleman in Graves was always grateful to the people who had graciously welcomed and accepted him, and he said and wrote repeatedly that he had always tried to be the perfect guest. So when he wrote serious essays about the island and the islanders he was always exquisitely respectful and considerate; but when writing short stories, he held his pen in a more relaxed way, as befits a more creative kind of writing. It is, then, that some harsh and rude comments drop from his pen. In fact, he is affected, like all travel writers have been, by the ever-present desire to shock and amaze fellow-countrymen and to look daring and adventurous before them. On the other hand, most of his short stories were destined to be published in periodicals and magazines, where some sort of strong sensations are demanded.

However, regarding Majorcan matters, it is interesting to note two different levels of discourse, one for the essays and another, sometimes even contradictory, for the stories. Graves described the natives as saying "This is a country where everyone has the manners of a gentleman. But more than money they value peace: they never draw knives, they never get drunk, they never beat their wives and children." These lines, in the final version of the same essay made twenty years later, became: "They have always been liberty-loving, though staunchly conservative; highly moral, though confirmed sceptics of ecclesiastical doctrine; with a rooted dislike of physical violence, drunkenness or any breach of good manners—for instance, money-grubbing." But in one of his short stories the natives become "these

simple people...."

Although Graves noticed the Majorcans' lack of religious zeal, he fell into the tradition of some 19th century British travellers who wrote that the islanders made the visiting Protestants responsible for droughts, earthquakes or any natural catastrophe that befell the island. "A blackmailer, a Protestant!" rings as an insult in his story *They Say... They Say*; or we are told how his son was mildly discriminated against by the priests at school because he obsturately wanted to remain a Protestant in *A Bicycle in Majorca*. In open contradiction to this, he stated clearly in *Why I Live in Majorca*: "They did not resent my being a Protestant and not attending Mass."

We can have little doubt that he fell in love with the land when we read about "the smell of olive wood fires; (...) the buoyant green waters of the cove; the sun-blistered rocks of the Teix mountain; (...) the night noises of sheep bells, owls, nightingales, frogs and distant surf..." or when he declares: "I am prepared to swear that nowhere in Europe is moonlight so strong as in Deià; one can even match colours by it...."

When commenting on housing Graves wrote: "the islanders have an ancestral tradition that winter does not exist. This ridiculous belief has affected architecture. Few houses have fireplaces except in the kitchen, most windows and doors fit badly, and one is expected to huddle over a charcoal brazier...." This is, or used to be, quite true; but we must not forget that Graves built his own house, and he could have tried to alleviate these shortcomings. In fact, Majorcan friends were often amazed by his Spartan ways and remembered him writing in his studio in the bitter cold winter months beside an unlit fireplace with a blanket wrapped over his legs.

Graves' feelings towards Majorcan food were ambivalent. While he praised the variety and quality of fresh fruit and vegetables—"a sequence of oranges, loquats, cherries, apricots, peaches, plums, strawberries, apples, pears, first figs, grapes, figs, pomegranates and oranges again..."—he wrote deprecatingly about Majorcan cookery. In one of his stories, *The Lost Chinese*, he describes *pa amb oli*, Majorca's poor man's dish, as "slices of bread, dunked in unrefined olive oil, rubbed with a half tomato and sprinkled with salt. Raw onion, bitter olives and a glass of red wine greatly improve(d) the dish." Here, the ever-present desire to shock fellow-countrymen that writers in foreign lands acquire, surfaces again. This dish, all honest, simple fare, bases its success on the superb quality of its ingredients, and it could have

been described in a much more appetizing way. As a matter of fact, it is known that all the Graves family became converts to it.

One curious aspect of Graves' likes and dislikes was his affection for the *Guardia Civil*, something that astonished a generation of Majorcans as this police force was associated for many years with the darkest side of the repression of Franco's dictatorship. Probably Graves' detachment from political matters made him see the face that they are now recovering: an efficient and kind corps of rural police. In his short story *A Bicycle in Majorca*, which in some aspects is a sort of summary of his thoughts about all things Majorcan, he wrote: "The Civil Guards are, by and large, gentle, noble, correct, courageous, courteous, incorruptible and single-minded." And he advised foreigners not to laugh at the "curiously shaped patent-leather helmets calling them 'comic-opera'. This antique headgear usually covers real men."

The poet used to invite the village Civil Guards to his famous birthday parties on the 24th of July, thus confirming his fondness for them. It seems that the Civil Guards' sense of duty made them watch for any breach of law and order rather than enjoy the party. On one occasion, in 1956, the guest of honour was Ava Gardner. It seems that the actress fancied a handsome young *Guardia* called Tomeu Rigo and asked him to dance. Tomeu politely refused, adducing that he was on duty. Ava was astonished, the foreign guests were flabbergasted and the Majorcans admired the young man's demeanour. From then on Tomeu was also known as "Corporal Gardner", and it must be said that in rural Majorca aliases are more important and often more widely known than family names. Graves wrote about Ava Gardner's visit in his short story *A Toast to Ava Gardner*, and it is really surprising that he did not see fit to include this juicy anecdote in it.

When the tourist boom of the sixties took place, Graves—like all peace-loving people—felt angry at the evaporation of the calm lifestyle that had lasted for centuries. He could hear from his study, over a dry-stone wall, the crackling voice of a loudspeaker informing a busload of tourists: "To the right, the house of the famous American novelist Robertson...". This put him in an irritated mood.

It was probably in one of these tempers that he wrote some harsh words about the local legends which were used to attract tourists to his neighbourhood. Concerning the romantic love story that was lived by the Archduke Ludwig Salvator and the local girl Catalina Homar, Graves remarked: "In fact, Catalina was a very efficient peasant-girl, with a face like a boot and limbs like clubs, who supervised the

Archduke's vineyards and won him gold and silver medals for wine at international exhibitions...." When commenting on the stay of Frederick Chopin and George Sand he said: "Chopin, sick of consumption, haunted by his Polish-Catholic guilt of adultery, and perishing of cold in one of the severest Majorcan winters recorded, hired a piano, wrote a prelude or two, and once witnessed a local folk dance."

Some ten years before, Graves had written a foreword to his translation of Sand's book. In it he showed a distinct sympathy and understanding for all the parties concerned with the episode. He quoted a paragraph from Franz Liszt, to which he gave his complete approval and a prominent position, just at the end of his Foreword. Chopin's Majorcan stay was described thus: "All the long-scattered rays of happiness were concentrated within this phase of his life.... The memories of the days passed in the lovely island of Majorca, like that of an entrancing ecstasy which fate grants but once in a lifetime even to her most favoured children, remained perpetually dear to Chopin's heart." This is just another example of Graves' two different, sometimes contradictory, levels of expression when dealing with Majorcan matters.

However, Graves was very good at demolishing legends. If there is already a legend of Robert Graves falling in love with Majorca, it could be argued, in the truest Graves style, that he just went there because of the fair weather, the cheap black tobacco, the sound heady wine, the brandy at three pesetas a bottle, and the natives so simple that they allowed him to build a house on the best site for miles. I have not said anything that Graves did not write, and I am sure that if he could read this—apart from enjoying it tremendously—he would recognize that it does not express the truth about his relationship with the island... at least not the whole truth.

Graves did not have the gift of tongues, or simply he was not interested in foreign languages. He wrote the most extraordinary things about the Majorcan language: "(It) is as old a language as English and purer than Catalan and Provençal, its nearest relatives." Or: "It is an easy language, a sort of Italianish French." Or: "This old language, not unlike Provençal...." Or: "In Majorca we speak an even coarser dialect of Spanish than the Chileans." In fact, these islands were conquered by James I, King of Aragon, in 1229, exactly seven hundred years before Graves' arrival, and populated by Catalan settlers. So, Catalan language in Majorca developed parallel to Catalan in the mainland, and it is now considered a regional variety of the latter, but definitely one and the same language. Graves knew, even wrote

about, the Catalan conquest; but it seems he never related it to the tongue spoken in the island.

Graves' confusion about Majorcan language was obvious. He named his house *Canelluñ*, spelt in a baffling way. Everybody thought that he meant *Ca N'Alluny*, or "the house that is far away." However, he once explained to Gaspar Sabater, and we have no reason to doubt his word, that it meant "the house of the moon" as near the house there were some strangely-shaped rocks that reminded him of a lunar landscape. In this case it should have been *Ca Na Lluna* or *Ca La Lluna*.

Anyway Graves, as a poet, was fascinated by words, by their ring and their nuances of meaning; and his close contact with two Romance languages, Catalan and Spanish, for fifty years, was to find its way into his prose writings. His short story *God Grant Your Honour Many Years* describes the agonizing hours the author spent fearing that his Residence Permit was going to be withdrawn. Finally he discovered that he had only been asked to collect it. The whole story is based in the misunderstanding of the word *retirar*, which can be translated into both "collect" and "withdraw." Two more short stories, *Thy Servant and God's* and *Ditching in a Fishless Sea*, consist completely of a game of double meanings and wrong translations played by Graves with evident enjoyment. The English language is here crowded with misused Hispanic words which sound strangely grand.

All this leads to an interesting point. Conceivably the author's exposure to Romance words while living in a Spanish-speaking country enriched his lexicon. Even his syntax seemed affected sometimes. He used many old words of Latin etymology that had an archaic ring; sometimes the literal translation of Spanish or Catalan expressions gave his sentences an enigmatic quality. This is an aspect that should not be forgotten by lexicographic studies of Graves' prose.

IV. THE ISLANDERS AND THE POET

Returning to his everyday relationship with the islanders, the people of Deià adored him; when he had to be evacuated in 1936 because of the start of the Spanish Civil War, "many of them wept," according to Graves himself. And when he returned ten years later he had to add: "Back in the village, I had to double-kiss a whole row of male and female cheeks, and tears were shed as at my departure."

In the poet's final years, as his dementia advanced, the villagers took care of him, covering him with warm clothes and taking him home when he went wandering at night.

He wrote, when describing the village of Deià: "Nothing of importance had ever happened there and I had no reason to suppose that anything ever would." The villagers would disagree with this, as Deià is known as the home, and proudly preserves the grave, of one of the greatest poets of the century. Most Majorcans admired and respected him. He was admired for his success as a man of letters and respected for his discreet, homely and industrious way of life. Nobody ever saw him sitting idly.

However, a legend of eccentricity was created around him. It surely had its origin in his peculiar way of dressing and his restless bearing. He was unable to stand still for a second, he walked with gigantic steps, and he covered himself with a *sombrero cordobés* when he went to town (nobody knew where he had got it from, as such hats were not easy to come by in Majorca). But Majorcans are reputed to be extremely tolerant people, and poets are entitled to a certain degree of unorthodoxy. In any case, the fact that he received the *Ministro de Turismo*, then Don Manuel Fraga, at the kitchen door wearing a pair of mismatched rope-soled shoes did not help at all to mitigate the legend.

I saw him only once. It must have been in the early sixties. He entered my father's book-shop wearing a white peasant shirt, a gay coloured neckerchief, corduroy trousers and a pair of canvas shoes with soles made of car tyre. An enormous straw basket full of vegetables hung from his shoulder, and he carried a leather-backed chair on his head, which he had bought at the flea-market nearby. My father whispered to me: "This is Mr Graves, the famous English poet." Then the newcomer put the chair down right in the middle of the shop, sat on it, and started leafing through books that he reached from the shelves with his long arms. I must have been only ten, and his image remains firmly etched in my memory. Perhaps it was because of this encounter that I started reading him at the first opportunity.

Majorca has not remained impervious to the success of his work. Educated islanders are familiar at least with his more popular books, and they consider him and his writings part of the island's heritage.

Majorcan people are proud to have had him as a neighbour and, in fact, often think of him as an islander. This feeling might have been shared by Graves when he gladly accepted to be named Adoptive Son of Deià in 1968, an epithet that he often added to his signature. Only the preceding year, in 1967, he had politely declined the offer of Prime Minister Harold Macmillan to be put down on the list of honours as a

prospective Officer of the Order of the British Empire. The same had happened in 1962 when he was offered a Fellowship by the Royal Literary Society. On both occasions, he claimed that the system of honours was against his principles.

Perhaps he was trying to be the perfect guest, and his delicate manners did not allow him to snub his hosts as he could rebuff the honours bestowed upon him by a country that represented all the things to which he had said publicly "goodbye" half a century before. The people of Deià prefer to think that he just loved them and their place dearly.

-UNIVERSITY OF THE BALLEARICS, MAJORCA

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