

The Majorcan colònia estrangera ("foreign colony"): Fact and Fiction

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Robert Graves's life in Majorca evidently did not go unnoticed by native Majorcans. But neither did this necessarily mean that his experiences were displaced into native fiction, even amongst his Majorcan contemporaries, such as Llorenç Villalonga (1897 - 1980). Born in Palma, Villalonga trained in medicine and psychiatry but is best remembered as a novelist. I have so far been unable to locate any reference to Graves and Villalonga having met, although it seems that they must have encountered each other at some point during their time on the island (This view was echoed by Lucia Graves at the International Conference on Robert Graves at St John's College, Oxford, August 1995). Even so, their opinions on a number of issues coincide to a remarkable extent, and warrant mention. If Graves himself does not appear in the Majorcan's fiction, the community which evolved in Deià and which Graves helped to foment is implicit in Villalonga's later novels. This paper presents some reflections on their respective attitudes to the "colònia estrangera" in Majorca, and to the crisis of modernity.

Villalonga's intellectual formation was significantly French-influenced, but he remained profoundly attached to his Majorcan origins. As the island braved what appeared to be the unthinking, unfeeling onslaught of the twentieth century, Villalonga became increasingly preoccupied with what he saw as the levelling of social hierarchies, and with foreign influences on Majorca; sometimes this concern manifests itself in satire and irony, and occasionally in elegy for a paradise lost.

Villalonga lived for most of his life in Ciutat de Mallorca, but spent the civil war years in internal exile in the village of Binissalem, famed for its "very sound heady wine" (9) as Graves remarks in *Majorca Observed*. The two writers would have known of each other: Villalonga was a member of an old island family, a prolific contributor to such publications as *El Día*, *Baleares*, *La Última Hora*, and also to the Barcelona press in later years. Graves and Villalonga did of course have friends and acquaintances in common, such as the Barcelona painter Joan Junyer, on whom Villalonga wrote in *El Día*; Camilo José Cela, founder of the journal *Papeles de Son Armadans* to which both writers contributed; and perhaps most curiously, the German writer

Albert Vigoleis Thelen, sometime secretary to both Graves and Riding, and assiduous frequenter of the Villalonga brothers' café society. Villalonga makes no mention of Thelen in his works.

Thelen is an odd case: in his 1953 work *Die Insel des zweiten Gesichts*, translated into Spanish as *La isla del segundo rostro*, he details the feud existing between Graves and another Deià resident, the German writer and ex-soldier Joachim von Martersteig. Thelen was Martersteig's friend and at one point almost became his secretary, and he persistently refers to Robert Graves—not without amusement—as Martersteig's sworn enemy. When, according to the novel, Martersteig and Thelen fell out, Graves (says Thelen) took advantage and engaged the latter's secretarial services for himself and Laura Riding, and had him type *I, Claudius*. This contradicts what the biographies say on the matter of *I, Claudius*, and indeed Honor Ellidge has very kindly written to me confirming that, to her knowledge, Mary Ellidge typed the script of the novel. In an article in *Estudis baleàrics*, German Garcia states unequivocally that it was Thelen who copied up the final version, although there is no evidence of his having had access to any more authoritative source than Thelen's novel (24). Thelen himself is undoubtedly prone to exaggeration in his pseudo-autobiography, yet the details he gives about life in Deià do nevertheless suggest significant knowledge of local politicking and petty rivalries.

Thelen arrived on Majorca in 1931, and left the island, like Graves and Riding and many other non-natives, shortly after the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936. He seems to have tried hard to work his way into Villalonga's inner circle, and I suggest that it is quite possible that his acquaintance with the Majorcan bridged his (hypothetical) spell on *I, Claudius*. Although Richard Perceval Graves's, *The Years with Laura 1926-40*, makes no mention of Thelen in relation to *I, Claudius*, there is a later reference to "a Frau Thelin from Palma" (Seymour-Smith also gives "Thelin"). This is almost certainly a reference to Thelen's partner Beatrice. Miranda Seymour reiterates that Thelen's "wife" (the two were not in fact married) translated Georg Schwarz's "memories of a German boyhood" at Graves's behest, and she also refers to "the frequent disappearances of Mary and George Ellidge to attend to their baby" in 1933: this possibly occasioned the hiring of another amanuensis (RP Graves, 234). It does seem that Albert Vigoleis Thelen may have constituted a mutual, if not dedicated source of information for Graves and Villalonga about each other.

When Graves comments in a 1946 letter to Alan Hodge that "my

stock has gone up among the señores of the island since I have had my novels translated into Spanish" (Seymour-Smith, 412), the reference seems to be to that society of which Llorenç Villalonga formed a part, for he was undoubtedly a "señor" of the island. A further minor coincidence concerns Graves's edition of George Sand's *Winter in Majorca* which was elaborated, as Graves acknowledges, with the help of the 1932 critical edition by Gabriel Alomar, himself a controversial figure on the island, and uncle of the same Llorenç Villalonga. Alomar wrote the prologue to the first edition of *Mort de dama* (*Death of a Lady*), an hilarious satire which made Villalonga's name on its publication in 1931.

Just as Graves's fame was assured in 1929 by *Goodbye to All That*, so was Villalonga's by *Mort de dama*. This highly irreverent work provoked scandal for years after its publication in the conservative literary circles which had been the target of the writer's satire, and also on account of the traditional folkloric presentation of Majorcan culture. Villalonga writes:

El vestit típic de pagesa mallorquina, com el de napolitana, en realitat ja no es veia ni a Nàpols ni a Mallorca. Tampoc a les nostres viles no s'acostuma a ballar boleros, sinó foxs i pasodobles, com pertot arreu. Però a l'illa floria la *bergerie*: els poetes locals ho havien decretat, i ningú no tenia interès a contradir-los.

[D]isfressaven de tant en tant llurs pròpies filles amb el vestit típic i les menaven a algun poble a ballar boleros. Naturalment, les grandetes no es volien donar en espectacle, com si fossin una glosa del papà, i així les balladores d'any en any eren més diminutes. (130)

The typical dress of the Majorcan peasant, like that of the Neapolitan, cannot actually be seen any more in Naples or in Majorca. In our villages no one dances boleros these days; they dance the foxtrot and the pasodoble as people do everywhere. But the *bergerie* flourishes: the local poets have declared it so, and no one can be troubled to contradict them. [F]rom time to time they dress their own daughters in typical costume. [and have them dance boleros in some village or other. But of course the older girls don't want to make a spectacle of themselves as the living image of their fathers' poetry, and so every year the dancers get younger.

Mort de dama also ridicules the scandalized reactions amongst decent

society to the "immoral" customs of English and American visitors. Significantly, one chapter bears the ironic title "Depravation of the Foreign Colony" ("Depravació de la colònia estrangera"). The increasing concentration of foreigners who installed themselves in the vicinity of the British Consulate in El Terreno, Palma, caused ripples which eventually heralded far more worrying developments in Majorcan society. Tourism of one sort or another was no new phenomenon, either in the capital or in Deià and elsewhere: I need only mention such figures as George Sand and Chopin, the Archduke Ludwig Salvator of Austria, and countless travellers, intellectuals, exiles and others. Seymour-Smith cites from an 1898 guidebook to the effect that Deià was already known for "its collection of strange and eccentric foreigners" (201), and in Santiago Rusiñol's *L'illa de la calma* (The Isle of Calm, 1922) the author comments on the number of artists and eccentrics passing through Deià (146). But as Marius Verdaguer remarks in a review of *Mort de dama* in 1931, it was only relatively recently that the stream of foreign visitors had become a colonial influx. At the time of Graves's arrival on Majorca therefore, the foreign colony as a whole, not just the more notorious residents of El Terreno, were very much the subject of conversation. Seymour-Smith refers to "the strange lives of the strange foreigners [which] are more often than not lived without noise" (203); but of course, on an island the size of Majorca, any life that is *strange* will make some noise. In this connection Villalonga points to the attitude of the old quarter, inhabited by long-established island families: they pretend to ignore the so-called colonial presence, have the good sense to wipe from their vision of reality anything that might cause annoyance, declaring the foreigners non-existent. The foreign colony is even more ignorant of the old quarter than the old families pretend to be of the foreign presence. It is deemed indecorous to speak too avidly of the licentious habits of the newcomers.

What did Graves escape by setting up in Deià? What, may we ask, was imputed to the depraved of El Terreno? In a speech given at the Athenaeum in Madrid on 3 March 1964, entitled "El fenómeno del turismo" ("The Tourist Phenomenon"), Graves describes "una pequeña colonia británica de funcionarios gubernativos jubilados de dependencias de Asia y África, que no hablan osado enfrentarse con el clima inglés o con el precio tan alto de la ayuda doméstica", "a small British colony of government employees retired from their posts in the Asian and African dependencies", who set down their roots in El Terreno

some considerable time before the Second World War. It was apparently not only the advice of a German artist which persuaded Graves against El Terreno and for Deià, although Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas had stayed there at the beginning of the Great War; he claims also to be concerned that its residents played Bridge all day. This was as nothing compared to the horrors of the port of Pollensa, which "atraía una sociedad libertaria constituída no sólo por los 'Alegres jóvenes' de la época, pero también por afeminados, estafadores, drogados y alcohólicos", "attracted a libertarian society composed not only of the bright young things of the time, but also of effeminate men, racketeers, drug addicts and alcoholics"; and moreover the Pollensa contingent, not content with Bridge, played Strip Poker all night (4). Ultimately however, it is El Terreno which is singled out by Graves as the paradigmatic victim of mass tourism at the moment he delivers the speech in 1964.

The vision advanced by Villalonga in 1931 and subsequently, is one of a colonial world composed of painters, tourists and ladies who smoke. The foreigners "són gents estranyes, que es banyen a l'hivern i viuen d'esquena a la religió. Fabriquen cocktails endiablats. Donen balls i tes", "are strange people who bathe in the sea in winter and turn their backs on religion. They mix devilish cocktails, and organize dances and teas" (*Mort de dama*, 17-8). In *Mort de dama* it is principally the British and Americans who are targets of satire, though in later works German characters are increasingly singled out for attention: "Nord-Amèrica i Albió no volen conquerir violentament Mallorca: Satanàs es val avui de mitjans capciosos. Venus és el gran dissolvent de costums", "Albion and North America continue to introduce their perverse customs. [They] have no wish to conquer Majorca violently: these days Satan has far more insidious means at his disposal. Venus is the great dissolver of customs" (20). One of the characters is aghast that the English at the Hotel Mare Nostrum have been organizing teas throughout Lent, whilst in Pollensa the painters bathe in the nude. But, notes the narrator, strangers can now be assured that they will neither be stoned nor eaten alive whilst on the island, a fate which metaphorically befell the unfortunate George Sand.

Villalonga's attitude to the highlife of El Terreno is ambivalent, since before his marriage in 1936 he was both a frequenter of the artistic foreign colony, and by all accounts a keen imbiber of cocktails. He is also reputed to have been romantically involved with at least two or three female artists and dancers, most notably Eva Tay, a German ballerina.

It is not surprising, then, that as the problem of mass tourism begins to take shape following the Second World War, Villalonga's concern at the ferocity of the rabid tourist jaws is tinged with a nostalgia for the years when the present scale of development was little more than a twinkle in the eye of the prophets of doom. And whereas English tourists, according to Graves—and he claims that the Majorcans agree—are the most easily domesticated, don't haggle over prices, don't go scrumping for fruit or picking flowers in private gardens, or take out their soap and razors to shave at public fountains as other nationalities do, Villalonga makes no such distinctions (*El fenómeno*, 11). The situation for a native is particularly difficult to assimilate since tourism brings advantages in addition to disadvantages; and for Villalonga at least, those social, economic and technological factors which have facilitated the increase in tourism are themselves symptomatic of advancing Progress which has no brakes and is destined to end like a runaway train. In his Athenaeum speech at least—and this will change—, Graves steers clear of apocalyptic imagery; he prefers to talk of cities which sacrifice their natural beauties to the machinery of a tourist propaganda which begins in the centre and spreads like a cancer until the most important streets are emptied of soul and become as anonymous as airports. This has been the fate of El Terreno, he says, but must not be allowed to become that of cities such as Trujillo and Burgos on the mainland (29-30).

The artistic foreign colony which is established as a background presence in *Mort de dama* gradually becomes more imposing in Villalonga's novels of the fifties and sixties. The stereotypical English Miss indulging in literary pursuit, Carlota Nell, "amb la cara color de remolatxa, els ulls petits i fixos, protegits per les ulleres de conxa", "with her beetroot-coloured face and little eyes staring out from behind her tortoiseshell spectacles" (*Mort de dama*, 56-7), taking notes for her book at the deathbed of Dona Obdúlia Montcada, is replaced by other eccentrics: the German ballerina, Clawdia, who dances motionless, the French pianist Iréne Rimbaud who never quite manages to perform because her preferred composer writes music that is never to be played aloud, and the Cuban poetess Sílvia Ocampo who like a modern-day George Sand visits Majorca expecting adulation but who leaves in a hurry.

It is interesting that Villalonga should portray the expressive and sometimes financial failure of so many artists visiting the island. It is true that part of this is explained by Villalonga's dislike of many

avant-garde modes, emanating particularly from the German circle. But none of the people he satirizes sought the solitude or comparative financial ease of life in a place such as Deià. And had they done so, that solitude would have been short-lived. In a 1972 interview with Sempronio in the Barcelona daily *Destino*, Graves recalls that on arriving in Deià, the inhabitants of the village were all peasants, apart from two carpenters and a blacksmith. Rusiñol comments on the practice of moonbathing in Deià, and adds lyrically that Deià has its own wagon at the door to make trips to and from the moon (56-9, 135). But now, says Graves, everyone is a waiter. Waiters figure prominently too in Villalonga's dystopian novel published in 1974, *Andrea Vicitrix*: events are set in the year 2050 in Palma, now known as Turclub, pronounced "Toorcloef" by those in the know. The city has been transformed into the United States of Europe's premier beach resort, governed from Paris by the supreme hermaphrodite *Monsieur-Dame* de Pompignac la Fleur, and under the day-to-day control of the Waiters' Guild. The waiters are the new aristocracy, and one can be imprisoned or executed for insulting any of their number. So tongue-in-cheek is Villalonga, that when he boasts in a tour guide of Majorca published in the early fifties that "many waiters speak two or three languages", it is hard to ascertain quite how impressed he wishes the reader to be. But the reasons for the rise, so to speak, of the waiter class, which include the selling of land for property development, demographical shifts from rural areas to urban centres, or simply the loss of local trades as a result of having to cater for increased numbers of visitors, were decisive in social and economic terms, marking the end of the rather idiosyncratic rural aristocracy whose cause Villalonga championed, and securing the triumph of the bourgeoisie. But of course, Graves and Riding themselves had not been averse to a little property speculation of their own in Deià.

It is not just Graves's solitude in Deià that is being encroached upon; perhaps more seriously, the sense of soul or belonging that he had felt towards Spain and the Spanish as a child is threatened with destruction by tourism. In his Athenaeum speech he terms this almost spiritual quality *báraka*, enlarging upon the definition of a concept developed a few years earlier. *Báraka* is thwarted, to use Graves's words, by "expendability", this being "the manufacture and consumption of goods not meant to last for more than a short season." As he says in an interview with Peter Buckman and William Fifield, published in Spanish by *Revista de Occidente* in 1970, "el secreto de ser capaz de

pensar consiste en tener alrededor las menos cosas posibles que no estén hechas a mano”, “the secret behind being able to think is to have about one as few things as possible which are not handmade.” In the earlier essay on “báraka” he explains that “John Kenneth Galbraith and his fellow economists in the United States have emphasised that the old American ideal of thrift, which implied producing goods and using them with affectionate care until they disintegrated ... no longer thrives even in the backwoods” (“The Word *Báraka*”, 514). I direct anyone who might be interested in Villalonga’s fictional interpretation of precisely this cult of the consumer gods—and goods—to the post-brave new world scenario of *Andrea Vicitrix*: here, apartments are crammed to bursting with nuclear-powered domestic appliances which become obsolete within weeks or even days of their entry onto the market; and consumers are crippled by unfavourable credit terms but must buy new products to avoid prosecution as enemies of Progress.

The popular response to this sort of concern is alluded to in an article published in *Papeles de Son Armadans* in 1965. Douglas Day gives an account of his visit to Deià on the occasion of a poetry reading celebrating Graves’s seventieth birthday, and takes the opportunity to comment on an article by Philip Toynbee in the *Observer* newspaper in which Toynbee had sketched Graves as a pseudo-beatnik, emperor of a town populated by hordes of hairy and excessively attentive youngsters, American poets, painters, guitar players and marijuana smokers. Day shows himself sceptical of this view, but finds that he has to concede more than he likes: there is no doubt, he says, that Graves dominated the fragile little English-speaking literary world of the island. He recalls Toynbee’s words that when Graves arrived in Majorca, there were nine hundred Spaniards in Deià, a number now reduced to three hundred, but swelled by at least one hundred foreign artists. However accurate (or inaccurate) these figures may be, they suggest a quite monumental change, and not just in the local population statistics: the age of the hippy, or the flower people as Graves would call them, had arrived. Day compares the youth population of Deià to Greenwich Village, North Beach, or any present-day American college campus. But he distinguishes between the true artists of the colony and the more negative, imitative Beatnik element who with their characteristic passivity and “coldness” are in danger of vitiating the creative energies of the more productive members of the community. On leaving the village after the reading, Day finds that he can only lament

that Graves has allowed Deià to be converted into a poor imitation of an artists' colony.

Whatever the justness of Day's conclusions, his account brings Villalonga's concerns in the mid- and late sixties closer to the foreign colony of Deià, and away from the society of El Terreno. The magnetism exercised by Graves's circle and the general amenity of the village made Deià an ideal meeting point, a veritable Avalon for the spiritually committed. Villalonga takes issue specifically with the Beatniks and hippies of this period, but is not wholly condemnatory. He professes to understand them, though not to like them. The hippies are assimilated into the folklore of the island as products of, and a reaction against, an increasingly consumer-led society which is staggering blindly after its own interests, a society embodied by property speculators, advertizing companies, multinationals and the makers of Coca-Cola amongst others.

Villalonga's references to El Terreno are specific and pointed; he would not, I think, have singled out Deià for criticism because he was not a part of Graves's circle, nor of the Deianenc community more generally. However, increasingly in the novels of the late sixties and seventies he is geographically specific; old age seems to invite a nostalgic regression and the reader is returned to the rural Majorca of the first half of the century. *Les furies* (*The Furies*, 1968) and *La bruixa i l'infant orat* (*The Witch and the Wild Child*, 1992) both take as their setting villages based on Binissalem or Bunyola, the first a few kilometres to the south-east of Inca, and the second south of Sóller forming a rough triangle with Valldemossa. Here is the suggestion of Eden before the Fall, of foreigners skulking devil-like, or preying on and corrupting the pristine natives. Let us be certain about this: foreigners, be they tourists or artists, are bringers of evil and immorality. In *Les furies*, the entrance of the Englishwoman Mrs Peggy has the villagers run for cover, with the exception of Joanet, the dull-witted but enchanting gigolo who destroys the village peace with his state-of-the-art motor-scooter. But the narrator assures us that his heart is in the right place, and when he ends up in prison accused of trafficking stimulants, all eyes turn to Mrs Peggy. It is indeed the Englishwoman who is guilty of entrapping the gullible Joanet. On the other hand, the villagers themselves are not saints, but they act always with a primitive and gracious decorum.

In Villalonga's last, unfinished novel—he became progressively ill from about 1976—nostalgia for an idyllic childhood is stronger than

ever. Majorca was always more important intrinsically to Villalonga's art than it seems to have been to Graves's; but then Graves was not, after all, Majorcan. *La bruixa i l'infant orat* reintroduces an old character, the Parisian Madame Dormand. On renting property in a secluded village, she proceeds to hatch a plot to remove all the children under the age of about ten from their homes, to put them on stage as naked cupids riding bicycles at the Paris Casino. An ironic comment on the edifying effects of tourism is rather weakly expressed through a further minor character who is a prostitute turned captivating souvenir-seller. Thus the evil or ridiculous foreigners, artists as well, are almost all female: Mme Dormand, Carlota Nell, Sílvia Ocampo, Clawdia, Ms Rimbaud and so on. This casts tourism at any level as both Eve and serpent in the Garden of Eden.

In the end the two writers propose, even if Villalonga then rejects, the same solution to the problem of tourism, urban decay and mechanization: Graves hopes that there might be "unas reservas culturales que puedan quedar a salvo", and suggests that "un sitio apropiado podrían ser ciertas islas del Pacífico y ciertos parajes de Siberia y de Australia. Así es que cuando pase toda esta barahúnda podrá empezar de nuevo la raza humana partiendo de esos lugares", "some cultural reserves which may be spared harm [...] Appropriate sites might be certain Pacific islands and areas of Siberia and Australia. And when this chaos and confusion is over the human race will be able to begin again from the seed of these places" (Buckman and Fifield, 24-5). Doctor Nicola, a character in *Andrea Vicitrix*, has contingency plans for precisely this eventuality, but his plans depend on Majorca's first being obliterated, razed to the ground in anticipation of a new beginning. And this is too radical a step for Villalonga's narrator who rejects such a measure: Majorca must remain, if only in the memory, an island paradise.

There is substantial agreement between the Majorcan and the Englishman on the havoc wreaked by the oblivious foreign colony, and the notion of a "foreign colony" itself becomes quaint, even euphemistic as they grow older. But for Villalonga there appears to be no halfway point, no slot into which a foreign personality could have fitted without either being satirized, demonized or totally ignored. I fear the fate of Robert Graves in this particular instance of native reaction was to be ignored, at least in literary terms. But it would scarcely have enhanced his reputation to have been a character in Villalonga's fiction anyway, given the reactions of others who were so displaced.

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THE WILFRED OWEN SOCIETY

*"My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity ...
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