

Graves in Deya

Kingsley Amis (circa 1960)

'Majorca is paradise if you can take it,' Gertrude Stein told Robert Graves a generation ago. She turned out to be right as far as Graves was concerned. And he could take it. With a single interruption brought about by Franco's war and Hitler's war, he has made his home on the island since 1929. Its obvious attractions are abundant: the most reliable climate in Europe, a low cost of living, a scrupulously courteous population, an absence of politics and an abundance of fruit, trees, wine, sea ...

These things are generically Majorcan. The village of Deyá where Graves established himself soon after arrival, offers more. It has the negative advantage of not catering for the tourists who, in the last ten years or so, have made part of the island the most overcrowded resort in the western Mediterranean. There is no way to get a car anywhere near Deyá's beaches, and hotels and night-clubs are lacking—not surprisingly in a place with only about 350 residents, most of them fisherfolk or workers on the terraced hillsides where olives and almonds are grown. Above these run precipitous mountain ridges whose bareness sets off the rich variegated greenery below, all bathed after dark in the most brilliant moonlight imaginable.

The moon was high when we drove up to Deyá. We could see enough to make it appear that we had come far more than the sixteen miles from the blazing neon of Palma, the capital and principal port. As we slowed and peered around, Graves walked into the beam of the headlights. Partly because of the Majorcan habit of economising on signposts we were some hours later than I had expected. But it was characteristic of Graves to find it the most natural thing in the world that, deciding we were about due, he had wandered along to the road and picked out our car from the three that happened to be approaching.

As we disembarked, an instant rapport sprang up between Graves and my eight-year-old daughter Sally. He hoisted her on to his shoulders and led the way down a flinty path to an irregular area at the foot of a rock-face, where the moon-light was supplemented by candles fastened in crevices. It was in fact a natural theatre in miniature, to which corporate effort from round about had added a few tiers of concrete benches across recess in the rock, and a circular concrete stage.

This I learnt was the setting of an annual play—another corporate effort, in which Graves regularly appeared (I had just missed this year's). At the moment a party was in progress.

In swift succession we were introduced to Graves's family and friends, helped to say good-night to the guitar-and-song team from the next village, and were regaled with pizza, hot dogs and local red wine. Majorcan, British and American voices could be heard, sometimes raised in folk-songs; not all the guitars had departed. Then we got the marriage of the resident Graves cat to a new arrival. Both animals were Abyssinians, slim and sand-coloured, the nearest thing to a lion at standard cat size. 'They're the original Egyptian cat,' Graves explained—'disappeared there ages ago.' Except when a Graves poodle tried to gatecrash the wedding feast, the ceremony went off smoothly.

Next day I went up to the Graves's house. Of comfortable size without being anything of a mansion, it was built (back in 1931) in the local style—square and unadorned—but with larger windows. Its prize feature is the kitchen sink. Over 300 years ago this graced the house of St Catalina Toms, a Deyá girl whose uncorrupted body lies in the cathedral at Palma. One day the Devil came up the waste-pipe of the sink and tempted her, but she resisted him. On another occasion, perhaps in a fit of vengeful spite, he pushed her off a cliff while she was picking olives. She quietly climbed up again and went on picking olives. The Majorcans are a pacific people.

Graves was in his study, a small high unspectacular room. We talked. I noticed that, like some other genuine writers I know, his expression and demeanour constantly altered; grim one moment, gay and warm the next, abstracted and alert by turns, his talk fluent and hesitant. He will range from an anecdote about one of his children to a sharp but never churlish comment on some inflated contemporary reputation, from a piece of erudition about *The Odyssey* to a Welsh dialect story. He can dress up adequately to go out to dinner but his working rig is shirt, shorts and slippers, with perhaps a day or two's growth of beard. I formed the impression of a man incapable of doing or saying anything for effect.

'Of course I had my personal reasons for leaving England,' he said in answer to my question. 'But even then, in the late '20s, that ribbon-building idea, extending towns into the country along the roads, neither one thing nor the other ... And it's so dirty. Oh yes, I like going there and the United States. There's no better country to visit if you're

on a high enough income level. I really feel at home in New York, especially among show people. I'm always happiest with them. Literary people anywhere are the worst—unbelievable pomposity. Robert Frost is a shining exception: I've known him since 1914.'

'My New York friends tend to live in the East 70s and be elegant, or in the Village and be less elegant ... The American women's colleges I gave lectures at interested me—those talented beautiful well-groomed studious girls, and their dreadful ignorant loutish escorts with nothing to talk about except the ball game ... American writing? Well, not all that much has happened since *Huckleberry Finn*, has it? (But then does anybody really like the work of more than two or three of his contemporaries?)'

'The real trouble with the States is there's no fresh fruit. And all the food's processed. Even worse than England. And there's no wine, either. It's always a relief to get back here. One great thing about this place is there's no telephone. And I can entertain my friends properly - poets ought to be hospitable in the traditional Irish way, it's part of their nature. I can get to know people here in a way I can't in England or the States. It isn't me, it's Deyá ...'

'Yes, there is an expatriate colony of a sort, mainly Americans, most of them semi-impoverished, doing a bit of painting or writing. Quite a few neurotic casualties. This is a dangerous place—there's no inspiration here. People tend to think there must be, but there isn't any inspiration anywhere, is there? You have to bring that sort of thing with you. The trouble comes when you find all you've brought with you is your own private hell. I don't think the artists'll last here much longer. Electricity and the rest of it's on the way and it'll send prices up too high. Oh, we do get some distinguished visitors. We haven't had Kennedy yet but Adlai Stevenson turned up. Most amusing chap. And Ava Gardner ...'

In the afternoons we would go for a swim. At the speed at which Graves likes to move this can be a testing experience, even on the way down to the cove. Here I floundered in the shallows, as is my wont, while Graves, as untanned as if he had arrived from England the day before, climbed round the cliff and plunged in. There was an interlude when someone found an octopus near the beach. The sight recalled to me, first, a very detailed account I had recently read of a death caused by a bite from an octopus of just about the present small size; secondly, the fact that octopus is a Majorcan delicacy, eaten for preference with hot chocolate sauce. Neither thought made me want

to go too near this animal.

We left it to its fate and took off up the cliff path very little slower than we had descended it. Graves told me how Persian culture had been spread over south-west Europe by the Moors: Dante's account of his meeting with Beatrice had a Persian original—'very satisfying to know he didn't invent it himself.' Listening, keeping up and not falling over from heat exhaustion used up all my energies until we got back to the house, where I went on sweating vigorously for another twenty minutes or so.

Graves poured beer and said a little about his poetry. Here, alone of all the topics we touched on, I had to keep prodding him. 'I think I'm lucky to be able to write what I want and publish it—and incidentally these last few years it's brought in a staggering amount of money. Before that, poetry just about kept me in cigarettes. But ... in another way when the stuff becomes public it takes on an aspect I regret. It's a pity it has to have my name on the packet—people are all too ready to take literature as merely a matter of personality and the expression of personality. I don't really feel my poems are mine at all; I didn't create them out of nothing; I owe them to my relations with other people. The whole thing's so intimate ... it's hard to talk about it ...'

With obvious relief he switched to showing me his collection of coins—'though I don't actually collect them; they just turn up.' Watching him handle these—an Elizabeth I sixpence, a gold piece from Carthage, an Iberian bronze one of the 2nd century—was instructive. In retrospect, the keenness of his attention to the coins seemed to me to tie up with such apparently disparate things as the care he lavishes on his garden, the speed and efficiency with which he makes a salad, his hatred of ball-point pens and insistence on steel nib and ink-pot as the only decent way of getting words on paper. (He was quite shocked when I told him I did most of my own stuff at the typewriter.) I decided that Graves is a living refutation of the sentimentalists' view of the poet as one who inhabits some cloudy idealised world of the imagination. On the contrary, such a man moves in a severely tangible and concrete world, one in which he is not insulated from reality, from things, by the civilised devices of packaging, canning, machinery, synthetics.

The tie-up here with Graves's attachment to Deyá is obvious enough. Since his concern and need for the natural and the real is no mere programme, but lies at the very heart of his work, he has been able to devise an alternative to Anglo-American air-conditioned existence that

is perfectly valid, free alike of the check-shifted lumberjackism and beatnik pseudo-saintliness which have beset more self-conscious strivings after escape. There are other factors, of course, without which the Deyá solution might not have worked. Among these a deep enjoyment of domesticity comes high. This Graves has. Given this particular wife and these children, I could see his point without having to try: I have never met a group of human beings among whom affectation, meanness, ill-nature of any kind seemed further away than it did in the Graves family.

From many points of view, the most important amenity of Deyá is its lack of telephone and the most important object in Graves's house the eight-foot-long row of his published work. It would be hard to miss the connection between the two. Graves is just not available for the television appearances, the publishers' cocktail parties, the writing of book reviews for the popular Press, the giving of one's views on anything from artificial insemination to Zoroastrianism which for many people constitute the major part of the literary life, and the more enjoyable part too: who would turn any of that down in favour of sweating and groaning over the construction of actual poems, scenes, chapters?

Graves would and does. In a revealing anecdote he tells how, when he was seven years old, his mother drew him aside and whispered a family secret into his ear: 'Work, darling, is always far more fun than play.' He goes on to explain that, for him, writing is 'a compulsion neurosis, psychologically indistinguishable from Dr Johnson's urge to touch lamp-posts. I find it impossible to take a day off from it ...' 500 words is his regular daily output, all taken through at least three re-writings afterwards. If only he liked cocktails, he laments wistfully, he might be able to cut his quote down by something like 300, which would be a huge relief to the book trade.

This not being a critical article, I cannot—though at another time I could—quote evidence to support the spreading conviction that, apart from being an authority on myth and an almost eerily convincing historical novelist and a few other things like that, Graves is the best poet now writing in English. But this is how I must end, because more than anything else about him it is his poetry that matters. What I have written here will not have been wasted if it sends a few more readers in search of that poetry. Not that Graves is likely to care very much either way. Whatever happens he will go on working in his study, breaking off in the afternoon to stride down through the olive trees for

a swim, talking with his family and friends in the evenings over a glass of wine.

Return of the Goddess

Deborah Tyler-Bennett

Primavera!

*Fleshy foot
treads verdant
milfoil, daisies
burst, fire-
works from your
open mouth. Winter
can't fog rising
couch-grass, vetch forces
your tongue
forward.*

*Olive branches
shiver, groves ignited
by attic laughter, Expected
tingle, every
year you touch
renewal's robe.*

*In dreams, vocal
chords pull
tight, coriander
forces bicuspid
apart, lips
bleed parsley, shepherd's
purse foams out of
nostrils.*

*Evening's cusp, twilight
holds our high
path home. Tonight, salt
goddess lips sting
my Chianti
Silvered
as olive leaves or viscid
honey.*