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**Majorca: unreal estate**

Biographical note:

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## Maps and Majorca

I'm booked on a ship to Majorca in a couple of days. In Barcelona, where I stay at a dilapidated hostel in Carrer de Sant Pau, off La Rambla, the street is narrow, cars barely squeeze by, crowds flock at all hours. My Lonely Planet guide says be careful in this area. But I've always had a charmed existence in foreign countries.

I visit the nautical museum, housed in the beautifully-conserved Drassanes, the 13<sup>th</sup>-century royal shipyards built like a cathedral in the old Barcelona port. I soon discover Majorcans were among the first great mapmakers.

Majorcans introduced the idea of *illumination*—visual illustration and storytelling—to navigational maps. Majorcans made maps a rich narrative. Depictions of people, cities, animals, activities from history and biblical stories, travellers' notes and imagined exotica were incorporated among the purely functional elements of the map, all done with lavish colours and lashings of gold leaf. The famous *Catalan Atlas* of 1375 (a copy lovingly preserved here in the Drassanes museum) is a masterpiece of science and of art. Looking at it is like viewing the world as a giant stained-glass window—light seems to shine out of it. This atlas is a big book, more than 2 feet square when open. Meant to be walked around, it reads from whichever side you are sitting or standing at. Thus, as these maps orient the viewer, the viewer has to orient to the map.

The *Atlas*'s makers, Abraham Cresques and son, Jehuda, lived and worked in the Jewish quarter of Palma, the capital of Majorca. I can't wait to get to the city that produced such producers of maps. What was it about Palma in the 14<sup>th</sup> century that allowed its denizens to see the world so remarkably...to make maps like teeming novels? I bend towards the security box housing the *Atlas* and scan its intricacies, a myriad of details which make the Mediterranean an incredibly vital place. I note that the gold leaf is used exclusively on islands: Majorca, Corsica, Sardinia, Sicily, Crete and Rhodes. They shine golden. And the main spray of rhumb lines linking the known European world radiates from a point at the centre of a golden circle of islands from Catalonia to Italy. In spite of enigmatic England, resembling a potato on the periphery, this is a map made for a world understood as islands. Another Majorcan map on display here is Amerigo Vespucci's chart—the one he consulted as he plunged beyond its left-hand margin on his way west across the Atlantic...

## The shifting map of Palma

I arrive on the wharf in Palma de Majorca and buy a map of the city. I'm searching for a cheap hostel in Carrer del Vi—the Hostal Miope, recommended by my guidebook. The address appeals to me because 'Carrer del Vi' looks like it translates as 'Street of Life'. The Lonely Planet says the street is a picturesque narrow lane in the old part of town, but when I consult my newly-purchased map, I can't find it. As I walk a tangle of alleyways, constantly checking my chart, I end up at the Hostal Ricos. If I had found the Hostal Miope in Carrer del Vi I may have begun a quite different understanding of Majorca.

Place and time: how to relate them? Is a place always the same place, experienced in a different time? Or is it not the same place? Or is time just one time, and place myriad places? Or is time simply the name we give to a place, and its name keeps changing? The reason I missed Carrer del Vi is because on the cheap map I purchased from the first vendor I saw on the wharf, that street is called ‘Carrer de General Barceló’. I wonder what the General did to require his street-name being cancelled—something to do with the Franco era, I expect, thus showing how old my ‘new’ map is.

But I like the way new streets meet up in your head at last, after you’ve followed and re-followed them, not knowing their relations and orientations until—*allí!*—you realise Placa Mayor is just a set of steps away from Via Roma, Ramblas and La Unio (not that each of these is on your map anyway) which you first met up with quite separately a half-day of walking and searching previously.

It’s as if, to the new arrival, the blocks of an old city are a jumble of islands and you have to navigate them. And while the map is in your hand, the map in your head doesn’t yet exist, and you have to learn the bearings, the courses to take between blocks you don’t yet want and those you do. The sea-roads figured as rhumb-lines in the *Catalan Atlas* drew islands into intimate relationships. But, finding my way around Palma de Majorca, this island city-capital, I’m inclined to think islands were important on early maps not because they were destinations and setting-out points—blocks of a city in the sea, so to speak—but because they are like boats.

Checking the horizon from an isolated boat isn’t like checking the sea horizon from land. From a tall headland with an uninterrupted view, the sea’s horizon appears curved—we get a sense of the earth’s roundness. But from an isolated boat the horizon is curved all way round, and straight. It tells us nothing about curvature. When boats move, they take their horizon-ring with them. An island, being like a boat, albeit not a moving one, when you stand atop it and see a surrounding circle of sea, you can be forgiven for thinking you are standing at the centre of the world. Islands take the perspective of the subject, not the context.

There are people disenfranchised on the City of Palma map, either by the mapmaker or history or politics. I want to go to all the streets with proper names and see how they bear relation to the individuals they are named after. Carrer de Vasco de Gama. Carrer Colon (Columbus). Avenida Joan Miro. Carrer Velazquez. Carrer Federico Garcia Lorca. Carrer de Cervantes. Adventurers, artists, writers, I note. But the street that attracts me most is Carrer Roberto Graves—around the bay near the Club Nautico and the Transmediterranea terminal, quite near where I started my day’s long walk in search of a hostel and began to realise how the ground in my life was shifting.

### Stine’s place

At the Hostal Ricos, the owner is gaunt and Scandinavian. She tells me her name is ‘Steen-a’. She writes it down: ‘*Stine*’. She has done a lot of tanning in her life and her skin shows it. She’s a good sort, I decide; she keeps a glass of wine under the counter. She brings it out when she talks to me alone, but I notice she puts it away when young

backpackers are present. I'm an *old* backpacker, of course. Why she thinks I might be more trustworthy when drink is around has me baffled.

Stine gets up from her computer. She leans her scant breasts on the reception counter. They bulge a little over the top of her bra and look cute. She says she owns the place, and laughs. I ask her how she came to be owner and she tells me a story which is surprisingly candid and detailed. A university education, extensive travels abroad, a love affair with a Majorcan man, twenty-two years of running the hostel together, then he died and here she stands, the owner.

She brings out the glass of wine and asks, 'Would you like a drink?' I follow her into her quarters through the curtained doorway behind the counter.

I note the contrast. Upstairs I'm installed in a fairytale room, paradise for backpackers, with flounces on the bed, print curtains and pelmets. There's an invigorating *Sound of Music* freshness about it. But Stine's place, here on the ground floor, has a different innocence. It's madly cluttered and incredibly detailed. As I tag along behind her, it's almost impossible to keep up for danger of knocking something flying.

I sit on a lounge and she pours me a drink. I look around. The walls are swathed with shelves, and the shelves are swathed with objects. It's an inundation, a showcase, a complex statement. Every nook, every narrowness, every corner, every passage. Things exquisite and fragile, delicately ordered. Each looks to another, reflects it and echoes. Her life is here in ornaments, postcards, bric-a-brac. Nothing is bigger than a music-box. Myriad shapes and pastel shades. Islands of experience. I'm curious to touch them. I turn to the glass doors opening onto the patio. In their reflection her apartment is a map and I am an illustration in it.

'May I?' I say, indicating I would like to walk around.

'Be my guest.'

I view her life from different angles, see it in changing perspectives, pick things up and hold them. I am careful to replace as found. Each has been definitely positioned. The postcard showing Tintagel, the pink Californian plastic heart, the Pompeii snowdome, the ticket to Santorini, the Australian boomerang... But there's no chronology. It's a scattering and gathering, a museum and muddle. Shelf after shelf of memento—levels, strata and arrangements, swirls and clusters.

'It's amazing,' I say, lost for words. 'I don't think I've seen anything like this.'

She laughs, not at my clichés, but with a genuine delight that she has astonished me.

I find the wine affecting me quickly and I tell her I have to go. She seems happy with the visit.

As I leave I ask does she know where Robert Graves lived on the island. No, she says, she doesn't. I understand. Being Scandinavian, she might have no interest in the celebrated poets of English literature. But then...

'Oh, do you mean *Gra-vez?* *Roberto Gra-vez?*'

I say I do. She gives me directions to Deyá, the village on the other side of the island where Graves settled and plied his craft.

### Day trip to Deyá

I pay at the gate and enter the Fundació Robert Graves. I walk the drive to the house which has become his museum. I discover Roberto in his writing room. Nothing has changed, they say, since the day he died. The desk, the splodged manuscript, the writing implements, the cigarette papers, the tea cup, the magnifying glass, the vest slung over the back of his chair. I go upstairs and discover him again in the bathroom, shaving. A black-and-white BBC video loops repeatedly on a wall monitor. It shows his soaped-up reflection, a close-up in a cabinet mirror. I stop and watch it. The actual cabinet mirror he shaved in is beside the screen in front of me and I see myself in it. Roberto looks in the same mirror I look in and I see him while I see myself. ‘Grey haunted eyes, absent-mindedly glaring,’ Roberto intones. ‘From wide, uneven orbits...’

...one brow drooping  
Somewhat over the eye  
Because of a missile fragment still inhering,  
Skin deep, as a foolish record of old-world fighting.

Crookedly broken nose—low tackling caused it;  
Cheeks, furrowed; coarse grey hair, flying frenetic;  
Forehead, wrinkled and high;  
Jowls, prominent; ears, large; jaw, pugilistic;  
Teeth, few; lips, full and ruddy; mouth, ascetic.

I pause with razor poised, scowling derision  
At the mirrored man whose beard needs my attention,  
And once more ask him why  
He stands ready, with a boy’s presumption,  
To court the queen in her high silk pavilion.

– Robert Graves (1959)<sup>1</sup>

Roberto tells his life story as he soaps his face. Football, boxing, war, poetry, women. He confesses to the mirror his drives and vulnerabilities as he razors his beard off. The poem is a map of his life, as is his face. I look at my face as he looks at his.

### A White Goddess episode during a party at Roberto’s house<sup>2</sup>

That queen in her high silk pavilion? She’s in the garden behind me. She’s dark and Muse-hot and probably angry. All Deyá is here: the kids, the parents, the grandparents. In the flare-light they beat the Christ out of the *piñata*, blindfolded, frustrated. It’s nothing compared to my frustration dealing with this maverick girl-Muse-body, this girl-brain driving behind me, this twisting, lurking heat, this young woman/ancient fuck, this quintessence of creation who doesn’t want me much in my

fifties but still wants me, lures me, needs me as father, mentor, dying man, as rooted celebrity man.

There's a crazy drama on the stage in the garden, which I've written and commissioned. People hold their scripts in their hands. Monstrous masks dance and bump. I've invited good-looking men to test the Muse. They play bongos between their thighs, they sing sex, they talk it up in close conversation, eyes darting. Young girl gymnasts fall backwards onto their hands and thrust out their sex-bones. I turn and see the Muse's proud mouth at my shoulder, her lifting neck: her impatience, her disdain, her invitation.

The women blend into the shadows of the palms in the garden, and I see Roberto is still here on video, dragging on his cigarette in front of me. 'How many books?' I ask.

He shows me. 150 of them. An empire. A universe.

'A swindle,' I say.

He gives me the look of the man shaving in the mirror.

'The sexy Roman empire,' he cajoles. 'The sexy Celtic myths,' he contends. 'The Mediterranean as real estate,' he testifies. 'The getting away from the shit back home,' he declares. Then the brow droops, the forehead wrinkles, the scowl spreads.

'Christ,' he confesses. 'The women!'

### **Lost again**

Leaving Roberto's place, I make a bad decision. I decide not to take a taxi. I think I have plenty of time to walk back to Sóller, where the railway station is, before the last train for Palma leaves. From a Deyá shop I pick up a brochure with a map showing the official Majorca-island walking track passing through the village.

'Can I walk back to Sóller?' I ask the Englishwoman in the shop.

She tells me I can, and I set out according to the map. The afternoon sun is beating and I use the brochure as a hat for a time. Then the trail goes beyond the brochure's margin. From here I must follow signs on posts beside the pathway.

A ridge of the Tramuntana mountain range passes between Deyá and Sóller. The walking trail departs the bitumen road and takes its own more direct route up and over the ridge, heading straight for Sóller. It's a demanding climb in the hot afternoon, so I take a break along the way. I'm above the forested slopes which dive precipitously to the Mediterranean. I look around and notice, just above me, an isolated house for rent. How marvelous it would be to return to this spectacular place later on! I go up to the house and from its sign enter the rental phone number into my cell phone. I close my phone and continue on my way.

A long while later I realize I have taken a wrong turn. The track has been going up and up, from olive terrace to higher olive terrace. Eventually, even the olive trees thin out and the way underfoot becomes parched and prickly, progressively harder to discern. Trying to scramble up a broken terrace wall with only a semblance of trodden

way discernible, I find myself looking at a big face in close-up: a bulge-eyed wild goat with a body huge as a horse. He's as shocked as I am. We both turn and flee.

I calculate I've been traveling west when I should have been going north-west. It seems I have attempted to cross the high ridge, going inland, instead of staying parallel to the coast across the lower spur. All of this is speculation because I have little idea of where I am—I only know that I'm high up with a brilliant view of the afternoon Mediterranean on one side and a mountain wall on the other. I have no choice but to retrace my steps. It sounds easy—'to retrace one's steps'—but there's no sign of my steps to go by. Goat tracks lead off in all directions.

I look for signs other than my footsteps: a rock beside the way here, a twisted branch there, a particular dip in the terrace over yonder. I find I must attempt to read the ground itself as my map—a task made more difficult because I'm coming at it my way down as opposed to my experience of it from the opposite way up. Eventually, miraculously, I arrive again at the house for rent where I missed the ongoing turn in the track. I realize I've gone miles out of my way.

I look at the clock on my phone. Dusk is descending. There's still time to make the last train but I must move fast. I power on up the correct track, through forests, fields and the occasional yard of a beautiful *finca* where guard dogs announce my presence. I become tired and thirsty. The abortive climb up the terraced face of the mountain has taken it out of me. I've rationed my single bottle of water. The light pack I carry is getting heavy. It occurs to me that if I jettison it, I can make it to the train.

Then I think: *If I'm caught out here in the wilderness in the dark, the one thing I have that can make a pillow is my pack. And the one thing that can make a light is the screen of my phone.* I imagine myself illuminating the way with my phone screen. I realize that the pressure and disorientation of this trek has turned me a little crazy.

And suddenly I'm descending the track into Sóller. I'm at a corner with an open shop and I go in and buy a soft drink. Very soon, I'm standing on the moon-drenched Sóller platform with the train for Palma backing in, to pick me up.

## Endnotes

1. Graves, Robert 1959 'The face in the mirror', in *Collected poems 1959*, London: Cassell, 301 (As read by the author on BBC TV in 1959)
2. Robert Graves Birthday Party, film, 1959, 8mm movie transferred to video on a loop, Fundacio Robert Graves, Deià, Majorca, viewed 19 February 2008

## Research statement

### *Research background*

Discontinuous narratives invite the reader to discern correlations in disparate narrative parts and ‘read the gaps’ between them (viz. Faulkner, 1930; Coover 1969; Moorhouse, 1969). Whereas in America the term has come to mean simply that a narrative moves back and forth through time, Australian discontinuous narrative goes beyond the anti-chronological to involve setting, character, theme, symbolism and viewpoint orchestrated as a set of devices in a single fragmented narrative.

### *Research contribution*

In this work, I combine some longitudinal discontinuity with thematic layering to produce a piece where the gaps must be read both sideways and up and down. But significantly, I investigate a combination of genres—fiction, creative nonfiction and travel writing. The outcome here might be termed ‘radical memoir’. Considering the fragmented nature of experience and memory, it seems to me logical that memoir should be a discontinuous and layered genre, not subject to conventional structuring. Using the central image of the illuminated map, this piece weaves together philosophical issues of place and mapping with personal experience, fictional detailing, and literary studies.

### Research significance

‘Majorca: unreal estate’ straddles several areas of investigation in writing, literature and cultural studies, and is published in an ERA A-ranked journal.

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