

*Bearn*

LLORENÇ VILLALONGA

**B**earn smiled on me for twenty-two years: an eternity. Today, as I look at it from outside, is when I realize it was a paradise, because in this world the only paradises we have are lost ones. Now I can appreciate the oak woods, the sunsets and the beauty of the Christmas snows above the pine wood of “Sa Cova”. The same happens to me with absent friends, every day I miss them more. For me, the name of Bearn, full of ancient pastoral reminiscences, brings to mind the eighteenth century habits of the master and the parsimonious kindness of donya Maria-Antònia. As the years passed by, she became more and more kind-hearted with me. Her death, as I shall show later, was exemplary. Suspecting that she was dying, she made no attempt to confirm it but preferred to devote her last energies to making a good holy confession. I am sure she is in Heaven. It would be difficult to conceive of anything different because she was one of those people who can create a heaven out of the elements that surround them.

I remember on one occasion, when we were out walking, we came to a little shack set in the middle of a small plot of land. This was the home of an old woman called madó Coloma. She lived alone, with a goat and a little mongrel dog known as Trinxet. She told us how every week her nephew and niece brought her two loaves of bread. She lived on milk soups. She showed us an orange tree that gave her oranges for almost half the year and six pomegranate trees which, according to her, were the best thing you could have and produced fruit without having to be looked after. Apart from these riches, for riches they are to anyone who knows how to accept them and is in God’s grace, she had a water tank with the best water in the county. Once, and this seemed to have been the greatest adventure of her life, she had a visit from two burglars, but when they saw that all she had was a goat, and not one of good breeding at that, they didn’t want to steal it. (“They turned it down as if it was a question of buying it”, explained the master.)

Donya Maria-Antònia offered to send her three laying hens, but she wouldn’t accept the offer.

“Anyway”, she said, “I wouldn’t know how to keep them and neither Trinxet nor the goat like seeing other animals; so I’d rather avoid any unpleasantness.”

“Well, then, I’ll send you a quarter of sugar to have with your milk”, said donya Maria-Antònia.

“Now that I would be grateful for, madam, but don’t send so much because I don’t expect to live until next year and if I die it’d be a shame to waste that sugar, what with the price of things today.”

When we said goodbye she gave us each a pomegranate, like a grand lady. When donya Maria-Antònia was about to leave, my protector took me by the arm and, opening a little door, made me take a look at a little garden there was. There, below a grapevine, was a magnificent hydrangea, just like the one at Bearn. I gave him a questioning look and he smiled and raised a finger to his lips (...)

Translated by Andrew Langdon-Davies



# LLORENÇ VILLALONGA



ONE OF VILLALONGA'S GREAT QUALITIES AS A WRITER IS HIS ABILITY TO SYNTHESIZE, THAT IS TO SAY, TO RELATE ALL THE VARIOUS DIFFERENT ELEMENTS, FIND ALL THEIR SIGNIFICANT CONNECTIONS AND IN THIS WAY CREATE A COHERENT WHOLE, FOLLOWING THE TRADITION OF THOSE GENIUSES OF ANTIQUITY WHO CREATED THE MYTHS THAT STILL FEED OUR CULTURE.

JAUME VIDAL ALCOVER AUTHOR

**L**lorenç Villalonga was born in Ciutat de Mallorca on 1 March 1896. He had three brothers and was particularly fond of the youngest, Miquel, the author of a novel in Castilian, which was well written and enjoyed a certain success: *Miss Giacomini*. Villalonga's literary vocation started early: he and his brother Miquel, at the age of fifteen or sixteen, sent articles to *Última hora*, a newspaper that accepted spontaneous anonymous contributions. His first novel, however, was published when he was in his thirties: *Mort de Dama* (1931). It is a light novel with a simple, satirical plot. It caricatures Majorcan high society and the Catalan-language writers of the time. After this came a series of works in Castilian: the plays *Fedra* and *Silvia Ocampo* and the novel *Mme. Dillon*. In all three the theme is the myth or legend of Fedra and Hypolitus adapted to modern times: the impossible love of an adult woman for an adolescent.

In 1934 he was made literary director of an illustrated magazine, *Brisas*, which he came to write almost entirely by himself. In it he wrote a more frivolous type of literature, superficial but original, considering what was available in our country at the time, and amusing: sentences that were like jokes or insolences under the common heading "Pousse-café", photograph cap-

tions, the odd story or poem, book reviews, sports commentary, etc. The magazine closed down in July 1936. When the Civil War started, Villalonga, who had attacked the Majorcan Catalanist intellectuals, now had to defend them from the military wrath. From then until 1952—when a certain permissibility in the publication of books in Catalan became apparent—he limited himself to his contributions to the daily press on a wide range of subjects.

In 1952 he published *La novel·la de Palmira*, a satire on life after the war, built around the narrator's supposed cousin, who lives in Barcelona and frequents bars and cafes as well as a type of establishment which was in fashion at the time: the *grills*, which in Castilian were called *parrillas*. In these places, Palmira enjoys the waiters' courtesy, the last remnant of the good manners from before the war. From then on, Villalonga's literary activity was never-ending: in 1955 he finished writing his novel *Bearn*; in 1956 the first part was published in the form of a play, with the title *Faust*; at about the same time, he translated the novel into Castilian and published it; in 1958 he published the collection of stories *El lledoner de la clastra* and in 1961 the short novel *L'àngel rebel*, a dialectical story in which two moralities are opposed: the rigid puritanism

of an adolescent and the lax scepticism of an enlightened older man.

That same year, the Barcelona publishers "Club Editor S.A." came to an agreement with him which gave them the exclusive publication rights over all his novels. They started with the original Catalan version of *Bearn* and then commissioned him to translate the novel *Il gattopardo* (1962) by Tomasi de Lampedusa. In 1963 he published a Catalan translation of an old novel, originally written in Castilian, *Desenllaç a Montlleó*. In 1964, a new version of *Mme. Dillon* appeared, under the title *L'hereva de dona Obdúlia*; this is a continuation of the original story with the addition of a series of chapters that tell the story of an affair between the heiress of the protagonist of *Mort de Dama* and an immigrant worker from the south. It was the result of the publishers' suggestions, and took advantage of the success of *Mort de Dama*, published in its fourth edition in 1965.

1964 also saw the publication of a play, *Aquil·les o l'Impossible*, the reworking of a theme from antiquity after the style of J. Giradoux. In 1965 *Desbarats* appeared, a collection of very amusing light-hearted dialogues which the author started to write in the first years after the war. Although the author never considered them publishable, and intended them to





be read privately amongst his circle of friends, they have always had great success when presented on stage.

These were the peak years for Villalonga's prestige and for the interest in his work. The best-known publishers in Barcelona, "Edicions 62", published the first volume of a complete works under the title *El Mite de Bearn* in 1966. In 1967, "Club Editor, S.A." published the *Falses memòries de Salvador Orlan*, which were just as authentic as any other memoirs, even if the author's name isn't the same as the autobiographer's and they are described as "false". In 1968 he started his last period of production with *La gran batuda*, *La Lulú* (1970) and *Lulú, regina* (1972). The critics gave these novels a bad reception, so much so that the publisher, Joan Sales—also a novelist and poet—to be on the safe side, wrote a prologue justifying the publication of the book. The three novels taken as a whole constitute a satire of the present times and of material and political progress: they attack the increasing me-

chanization, but also the progressiveness of the church, the consumption of mass-produced goods, the power of advertising, abstract art and socialism. The same ideas are to be found in two novels published by different publishers: *Les Fures* ("Proa", 1967) and *Andrea Victrix* ("Destino", 1974). The former describes the idyllic life of a young boy in a Majorcan village in the first part, and, in the second part, the return of the boy, now grown up, to the village, which he finds taken over by television, American manufactured drinks and electrical goods. *Andrea Victrix* is a sort of pastiche of Aldous Huxley's famous novel *Brave New World*. Another novel, *El Misanthrop*, originally written in Castilian, was published by "Edicions 62" in 1972. This novel is a fictionalised account of the years that Villalonga spent studying in Saragossa during the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera, in 1928 or 29. Finally, *La "Virreyna"*, (1969) is the search for the author's ancestors amongst some old papers given to him by a relative.

This anti-progress feeling and his genealogical vanity give us the human image of Llorenç Villalonga which he transcended literarily. He came from a financially modest—they lived on the meagre military pay of his father—and socially not very well-placed family, in a Majorca which was highly class-based. It is therefore understandable that he should have tried to solve these two problems, and having done that, that he should have resented the progress which was in fashion and which threatened to take away what he had achieved. For a good understanding of the work of Villalonga, one should remember that *Mort de Dama* and *Mme. Dillon* came before these achievements and *Andrea Victrix* and *La gran batuda* came later. Also, the first two are products of his youth, and youthful conservatism always seems progressive, a progressiveness which disappears in the work of his later years, and whose conservative spirit is identical. I myself was misled by this mirage: through some arti-





cles, I got into argument with Villalonga, because I could not understand how the author of *Mme. Dillon* could criticise young Majorcans like myself for going out in shirtsleeves and without a tie.

As we have seen, Llorenç Villalonga wrote both in Catalan and in Castilian. He never wrote in his own language, Catalan, through patriotism. He wrote *Mort de Dama* in Catalan because he wanted to caricature the Majorcan world, and he needed to use the language of the world he was caricaturing; he wrote *La novel·la de Palmira* in Catalan because he had to imitate the Barcelona language of the novel's protagonist; *Desbarats*, because the characters are Majorcan, though those who are French or Castilian are made to speak in the corresponding language. Villalonga always felt attracted by the pastiche, the imitation of the world he was portraying, and he was a real master of the genre. For the same reason, he wrote *Bearn* in Catalan: he wanted to

reproduce in his novel the lively expressive Majorcan of the simple people who surrounded him in the farming country where he lived after his marriage to a woman who owned land in a village in the centre of the island. And if later, after 1961, he wrote always in Catalan and translated Castilian novels into Catalan, this was because he had finally found a publisher, and this publisher dealt with Catalan books. The Castilian-language publishers, writers and intellectuals never opened their arms to the Villalongas, although Miquel always wrote in Castilian, and always had problems getting his books published. When Llorenç translated *Bearn* into Castilian with the intention of entering it in literary competitions, in one case it was not even placed among the finalists, and in the other it got second or third place after the winning novel, which followed the "behaviourist" trend of the time, 1955.

In 1975, Villalonga's last great novel appeared: *Un estiu a Mallorca*. It was the

old Castilian play, *Silvia Ocampo*, turned into a novel, placing the protagonist, a daring, scandalous south-American authoress, in a successful parallel with the George Sand who visited Majorca in the winter of 1841 and wrote a book on her stay on the island, *Un hiver à Majorque*, where she praises the Majorcan landscape and criticises the inhabitants. One of Villalonga's great qualities as a writer is his ability to synthesize, that is to say, to relate all the various different elements, find all their significant connections and in this way create a coherent whole, following the tradition of those geniuses of antiquity who created the myths that still feed our culture. *Un estiu a Mallorca* is a great novel, amongst the author's best, if not the best: with allusions to *Mort de Dama*, *Mme. Dillon*, *L'àngel rebel* and *Bearn*. After 1975 he became the victim of a process of senile arteriosclerosis which did not leave him until his death, on 28 January 1980, at the age of eighty-four. ●