

Poetic Unreason: A Film-maker's Journey

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Fade In:

EXT. MARBELLA BEACH (SPAIN) – FLASHBACK

A YOUNG FILM-MAKER sits on the beach, his chest starting to hurt from the unrelenting sun that even the '45 Lotion' can't screen off. The Young Film-maker rolls over, exposing his back to Apollo as he turns the page of the book he has been reading in the sweltering heat for two hours. The book is Martin Seymour-Smith's Robert Graves: His Life and Work. CLOSE on the young film-maker's eyes as he absorbs the drama of Robert Graves's life, especially his years with Laura Riding, like something out of a latest 'page turner' – even though this is a biography of an important and respected poet. He sits up with the book on his lap, gets up, and heads back to his hotel room to escape from the sun.

INT. NEW YORK CITY OFFICE (TWELVE YEARS LATER) – DAY

The Young Film-maker is older, his hair is greying a bit, his stomach a bit more pronounced. The CAMERA PANS around the office where a variety of materials on Robert Graves's life is on display: books about and by Graves; costume sketches of the period in a corner, stained with Starbuck's 'Light Notes' blend; pages from Robert's diary strewn across a coffee table; and headshots and CVs from hundreds of actors, some famous, many others just hoping to catch a break, neatly stacked in another corner.

The Young Film-maker is sitting at his computer typing the last lines of what has been countless revisions to try to tell the story of this man, this poet who has been his favourite writer for most of his life. He types his last few lines. CLOSE on the computer as he types the words: FADE OUT. The Young Film-maker takes another swig of his coffee and looks at the cursor pulsating, blinking, taunting. He taunts back:

YOUNG FILM-MAKER

I am finished!

The telephone rings. The Young Film-maker picks it up.

YOUNG FILM-MAKER

Hello.

It is his producer CARLO calling from London.

CARLO

Well?

YOUNG FILM-MAKER

It is finally ready. Let's start rolling!

The Young Film-maker is of course, myself, and I have just finished writing my fourth draft of the beast I now call *Poetic Unreason*. A story that has haunted me now for seven and a half years and one that will finally go into production towards the end of 2007.

I spoke at the Robert Graves Conference in 2000 detailing my plans, and my reasons for wanting to make a film about Robert Graves. Now in 2006, those reasons still hold, truer than ever. Robert Graves's metamorphosis into a first rate love poet (from a first rate war poet) began with the end of his relationship with his first wife and the start of his association with the American poet Laura Riding.

In my screenplay of *Poetic Unreason*, I deal with the relationship between Robert and Nancy, and Robert and Laura, as well as Laura and Nancy, as all their lives changed dramatically after Laura came into Robert and Nancy's lives.

Writing this screenplay was no easy task as I had to tell the story of a literary figure over a critical span of his literary evolution (four years in total) in just two hours. At the same time I had to ensure I would keep an audience (which will mostly be in the dark about any aspects of Robert's life) glued to the edge of their seats.

Like most Americans, I was introduced to Robert Graves's work through the television series *I Claudius*. After watching the series, I read both novels, followed by *Goodbye to All That* and *King Jesus*. I remember thinking how expertly written, engaging, and detailed the writing was, how each book created its own world, drawing the reader in completely. Even though that is the primary function of a writer, I find it is an easier task to attempt than to accomplish.

Although his biographical details state that he was a poet, I did not have a chance to read much of his poetry because in the 1980s not many (if any) of his poetry volumes were to be found in the bookstores of America. I consider myself lucky that growing up in the New York City area, I was able to find a few of his volumes at the library. I photocopied and kept them for study. It was not

until 1990 that I finally purchased my first volume of Robert Graves's poems, *Poems About War*, edited by William Graves.

After I finished reading Seymour-Smith, I wrote a story outline and then quickly filed it away. I did not return to it for eleven years. The reason: I realized that at my young age (I was 21 at the time, just out of New York University) there was no way anyone was going to finance a film project about two poets directed by a young film-maker. They would have been right. I did not feel mature or secure enough to tackle an ambitious subject filled with these adult themes. I was honest with myself: I had to live a little before I could devote my energies to filming the life of Robert Graves.

So I moved on with my career. I have directed over 100 commercials, made award-winning short films, directed television news for CNN, and made a feature film called *Carnaval*. Through all this the Graves project has never been far from my mind, even keeping it a secret so that no one would steal my idea.

I had finished my first draft of *Poetic Unreason* when I spoke at the 2000 Robert Graves Conference in Buffalo, New York. Although it was my intention at that time to go into production the following year, the spectre of Robert Graves haunted me. I could not find the actors I felt could do the story true. I did not feel my screenplay would evoke the essence of Robert, and the period in which he lived; the England he loathed for its strict social mores and rules, yet an England he defended in a war, wrote passionately and lovingly about. Contradictions! Yes, I had my own as well, and many times I wanted to say 'goodbye to all that' and watch the story of Robert Graves recede from view.

A few years later, a play produced and a film on its way out, I returned to my computer and the pulsing cursor appeared as if saying, 'I knew you would be back'. My strong belief that this is a story worth telling, and that others in the film industry in Britain and the United States want me to tell it, encouraged me to give it another go.

I have written a new draft, recruited what I believe is a crop of exciting actors from both sides of the Atlantic and streamlined the story to concentrate more on Robert's journey from war to love poet and his rejection of all he was brought up to be in English society.

Indeed, *Poetic Unreason* will be a universal yet compelling story about a man for whom creativity is everything and who falls under the spell of a woman who treats him poorly. Because she has become his Muse, his dedication to her becomes synonymous with his dedication to his art and knows no bounds. Now, that devotion comes with a price: that of his relationships not only with his wife and children, but with his friends, parents, literary community, and his personal relationship with England, a country that flowed through every inch of Robert's body (even when he ceased to live there for the last 40 years of his life).

At first glance, one might feel that this is a study of dysfunctional relationships and it may seem as though one party is to blame for the chaos. However,

all individuals suffer and gain equally from relationships they have created and continue to feed off.

Although *Poetic Unreason* will be seen by some as a 'period art movie', I plan to shoot the film in a modern way, and tell a story that is universal to all people regardless of their age or outlook on life. Why? Because *Poetic Unreason* is the story of wanting to be loved unconditionally and the consequences of that love. And once an audience sees that drama on the screen, they may be better able to understand what makes a poet – or any artist, for that matter – create.

A very young cast lead by James Darcy, Natalie Press, and Frances O'Connor will appeal to a younger audience while keeping the subject matter focused for all age groups.

A fresh approach to the 'biopic-literary genre' will be key here. Robert suffered through shell shock and basic poverty, and I will not hold back in the telling of what these circumstances are like. Because of these difficult times one will be able to see how a person like Laura (someone who may not be likeable to an audience) might be seen by Robert as his true love and saviour. James Darcy is a strong and proficient actor and I can't think of anyone better for the part. He'll be brilliant.

The shooting style will come out of the characterization and story. We will use the actual locations where the events took place: The World's End (Islip), 35A St. Peter's Square (Hammersmith, London), and the surrounding London area. I feel that this decision will bring much realism to the story.

Poetic Unreason is a film for a discerning audience who seek a powerful narrative, who look for passion and depth in the storytelling, and who are not frightened of a profound and disturbing look at relationships between the sexes. It's a film for the same audience who appreciated *Shadowlands*, or *Last Tango in Paris*, or *Sylvia*.

Even though Robert Graves was a British writer, I consider him universal, much like Lorca is universal even though he was Spanish, or Hemingway even though he was American. Hopefully, *Poetic Unreason* will be a universal story for everyone to enjoy.