

‘Be Prepared for Music’: Inspiration and the Last Muse

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Write me a book, she said
All about love

I am quoting the two first lines of an unpublished poem, dated 28 April 1973, written to me, Robert Graves’s last Muse, on the front of an unused air mail envelope. The poem refers to a particularly barren period when, to keep Robert focused, I was cajoling him to write a book about love. It seemed, to me, that if inspiration to write love poetry was faltering, then unravelling the whole mystery behind love, itself, might prove a stimulant. Robert did manage a few tenuous forays into assembling his thoughts and theories on the complex subject of love but by then, well into his seventies, he lacked the heart and concentration to focus on the Herculean effort needed to research and write such a book. The poetic fragment that I’ve quoted came into being more by command than by that altogether different phenomenon, inspiration.

Artistic inspiration cannot be bought or made to happen. It comes out of nowhere, very often as a sort of vision, and is generally triggered by something or someone striking an immediate chord with the creative artist. In Robert’s case, that someone was a Muse, a woman who both understood and worked along with the creative process. Granted, her looks and how she moved were important to him aesthetically, but it was her ability to ‘make things happen’ and her extreme, and at times volatile, emotions that became the bedrock of his late love poetry.

The first of many poems for which I was to be the inspiration, was ‘Tousled Pillow’. It is also one of five Graves poems which the composer Geoffrey Alvarez has set to music for his song cycle

Not surprisingly, the poem was to change my life. I found myself for the first time directly experiencing the extraordinary poetic metamorphosis of a seemingly ordinary moment in time being taken and distilled into a poem of powerful beauty. I was both the subject and the recipient of the poem but, most importantly, I was the inspiration behind it. The poem had evolved from a simple visit I had made to Robert's hospital bedside a few days earlier. Nobody present there – doctors, nurses, porters, other patients' visitors – would have batted an eyelid, the scene was so unimposing, yet Robert and I felt an unstoppable drawing together of kindred spirits, and a recognition that we were destined to speak and think as one in a challenging expedition in search of poetic truth. As he wrote in a later poem, 'Child With Veteran', it was as if we

both claimed citizenship of the same land
Conversing in our own soft, hidden language,
Often by signs alone.

Over three decades later, I read 'Tousled Pillow' as part of a 'performance talk' titled 'From White to Black', which I gave at the 1998 Robert Graves Conference on 'The White Goddess', held in Manchester. Geoffrey, who was giving a talk in another session, attended. He told me later that my presence and talk had inspired him to think about doing musical settings to a selection of poems that Robert had written to me and asked if I would be consultant on the project. I was pleased to accept. His choice of poems included 'Tousled Pillow', 'The Narrow Sea' (another poem which I had read at the Manchester conference), 'Her Beauty', 'The Window Pane' and 'The Green Woods of Unrest'. These five poems had been written over a nine-year period, between 1966 and 1975.

'Her Beauty' is one of what I call Robert's obligatory 'portrait poems', where he describes the attributes of his Muse in a direct manner and not one shrouded in metaphor or symbolism. He wrote one such poem to three of his four Muses. This is mine.

Let me put on record for posterity
The uniqueness of her beauty:
Her black eyes fixed unblinking on my own,
Cascading hair, high breasts, firm nose,
Soft mouth and dancer's toes.

Which is, I grant, cautious concealment
Of a new Muse by the Immortals sent
For me to honour worthily –
Her eyes brimming with tears of more than love,
Her lips gentle, moving secretly –

And she is also the dark hidden bride
Whose beauty I invoke for lost sleep:
To last the whole night through without dreaming –
Even when waking is to wake in pain
And summon her to grant me sleep again.

When I questioned Geoffrey recently about why he chose particular poems, he immediately focused on 'The Narrow Sea'. 'It's so wonderfully moody,' he enthused.

Setting a scene or mood in a direct and economical manner was one of Robert's great skills. He was never happy until he had found just the right metaphor, with its powerfully evocative nouns and adjectives, to say what he wanted to say in the shortest space. With only four lines, 'The Narrow Sea', one of my most treasured poems, is a fine example.

With you for mast and sail and flag,
And anchor never known to drag,
Death's narrow but oppressive sea
Looks not unnavigable to me.

'The Window Pane', another 'moody' poem, centres on one of Robert's favourite symbols, the thunderbolt or storm, which he

either uses as a metaphor for inspiration or as a veiled response to stormy relations with his Muse, or both. In one letter to me Robert wrote, ‘I feel too clear-headed to write you a poem; poems come out of thunderstorms as a sort of rain shower.’¹

To bed, to bed: a storm is brewing,
 Three natural wonders – thunder, lightning, rain –
 Test our togetherness. The window pane,
 Regaling us with vistas of forked lightning,
 Grants our mortality fair warning;
 And every stroke reminds us once again
 How soon true love curves round to its beginning.

Geoffrey’s final chosen poem, ‘The Green Woods of Unrest’, written in 1975, ends Robert’s last edition of *Collected Poems*, published later that same year. Only a handful of poems were written after it.

‘Green is the colour of magic,’ Robert had often told me. It was also his colour metaphor for love.

Let the weeks end as well they must
 Not with clouds of scattered dust
 But in pure certainty of sun –
 And with gentle winds outrun
 By the love that we contest
 In these green woods of unrest.
 You, love, are beauty’s self indeed,
 Never the harsh pride of need.

Out of the five poems Geoffrey selected for his song cycle, I am especially pleased he found inspiration in ‘Tousled Pillow’, which has proved inspirationally active over a thirty-four year period. I was the initial inspiration for the poem in 1966 and, in reciting it in 1998, I then inadvertently became the inspiration for Geoffrey’s musical setting in 2000. The poem is a good example of creative

transferral and how the inspirational torch is handed on and taken in new directions.

When first written, a love poem is a very private affair. However, once published and therefore in the public domain it becomes wide open to debate, interpretation and even re-interpretation. It is not uncommon for practitioners of different creative disciplines to find inspiration in each other's work. Robert's own godson, the actor Julian Glover, used a selection of Robert's poetry to illustrate the variety within Robert's work in a biographical one man show, *Man Does, Woman Is*. The British painter Paul Hogarth illustrated five poems of Robert's for a limited edition, *Deyá: A Portfolio*; Mick Kelly, a younger British painter, was inspired by other poems and a short extract from Robert's autobiography, *Goodbye to All That*, to do a series of nine paintings; the Catalan painter Joan Miró did original illustrations for Robert's poem 'The Colours of Night' and for a ballet poem written for me called '*Casse-Noisette*'; and I, a dancer and choreographer, found inspiration in two of Robert's poems which formed ideas for a ballet that, given the opportunity, I would dearly love to stage.

The composer Ivor Gurney, a contemporary of Robert's, and the twentieth century composers Samuel Barber, Benjamin Britten, Gordon Cross, Morten Lauridsen and Peter Wishart, amongst many others, have all provided musical settings for poems by Robert from the 1920s to early 1950s. From this period, the poems 'Counting the Beats' and 'She Tells Her Love While Half Asleep' appear to be the most popular choices amongst composers, whether set individually or as part of a short song cycle.

Working in very different styles and traditions, the composers who have taken inspiration from Robert's later works tend to use more poems per individual song cycle, sometimes mixing the older poems with the new. Among them is Hugh Wood, who in the 1970s produced Robert Graves Songs Set 1, op. 18, for tenor and piano, using five different poems and repeating the first, 'The Rose', at the end. This was followed by three more four-poem sets

(op. 22, op. 23 and op. 36), and, in 2006, a piece commissioned by BBC Radio, *Wild Cyclamen*, using twelve poems.

The German composer Carl Mansker, who lives part of the year in Deyá and knew Robert well, has written settings for tenor, flute and percussion of three poems from the mid-1960s. Philip Hattey used voice and piano for his settings of seven poems selected from both the early and late periods, and Robin Holloway used soprano and piano for settings of five poems from the mid- to late 1960s, four of which Robert had written to me.

In 1984 Robert's then son-in-law, the Catalan jazz musician and composer Ramón Farran, produced a compilation record using two tracks he had made of Robert reciting his poems 'Under The Olives' and 'The Far Side of Your Moon', and two original instrumental tracks plus musical settings for female and male voice of six further poems. In yet a different musical vein, the American folk musician and composer Jay Ansill set fourteen poems to music in 1996 for a CD called *A Lost World*.

Out of the sizable collection of late poems selected by the different composers I've mentioned, only three titles overlap – 'A Lost World', 'The Far Side of Your Moon' and 'Olive Tree' (the former two chosen by both Ramon Farran and Jay Ansill and the latter by Ramon Farran and Robin Holloway). In addition, out of the forty published poems which Robert, himself, had headed as *songs* (poems one might naturally assume a musician would gravitate to), only four get selected – 'Olive Tree', 'Seven Fresh Years', 'The Promise' and 'The Far Side of Your Moon' (all four selected by Ramon Farran with 'The Far Side of Your Moon' also being chosen by Jay Ansill and 'Olive Tree' by Robin Holloway).

'Poems have a music and movement in themselves, as words,' states the poet and writer Alastair Reid in the sleeve notes of Jay Ansill's CD. 'To set them to music is to give sound to their sense, to pay homage to them. When they come together, the words give their substance and shape to the music and the music provides the words with air and wings.'

'Read the poems first, as words alone: and then listen to the flights they take with the music. Always, the mystery deepens.'

There are several references to musical instruments in Robert's poetry – drums, bells, fiddles, flute and double bass all crop up. However, more frequently, he concerns himself with music itself – pure melody, song and rhythm – at times even using the actual words to drive the rhythm, as is the case in the first verse of 'The Young Sibyl':

The swing has its bold rhythm,
Yet a breeze in the trees
Varies the music for her
As down the apples drop
In a row on her lap.

In a letter to me Robert wrote, '[...] poetry begins with dance and [...] the immensely subtle rhythms of real poetry, which go with the meaning, are based on physical motion to music'.²

Robert, without having had a musical training, had a good ear and an astute sense of rhythm. Early on he had committed to memory songs from his nursery years, later adding Irish ballads to his repertoire, as well as songs from his war days, performing them at private gatherings and even on public stages – several of the songs being eventually recorded. He liked simple music – music that was single-layered and direct. Alluding to his poem, 'The Jewel Case', he wrote, 'The "pure melody" in the poem refers to the ancient Irish refusal to orchestrate or choralize their music; they kept to pure melody'.³

Robert warmed to folk songs but not grand opera. 'One disagreement we had – how few there are! – was over opera', he wrote in a letter to me⁴ when I was busy with rehearsals at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, for the ballet scene in a production of *Aida* starring the young Plácido Domingo. 'One can enjoy opera', he went on, 'as a great "In the good old days" joking sense. But it is wholly false in its main features: the singing of songs unintelligible to the audience which the singers themselves don't really understand, the warbling and shaking of the voice

instead of striking the true notes; the creaking plot; the unnecessarily lavish stage setting; the dinner jackets & tiaras.’ And Robert wasn’t much more comfortable with the grand symphony, though he did profess to like Mozart.

He wrote poetic *songs* but understood his shortcomings as a musician, as he illustrated in his 1950s poem ‘Your Private Way’:

Whether it was your way of walking
Or of laughing moved me,
At sight of you a song wavered
Ghostly on my lips; I could not voice it,
Uncertain what the notes or key.

Be thankful I am no musician,
Sweet Anonymity, to madden you
With your own private walking-laughing way
Imitated on a beggar’s fiddle
Or blared across the square on All Fools’ Day.

We all have our own inner rhythms and therefore, though driven by the poet’s underlying rhythm, we recite poems in very different ways. The timbre of an individual voice, how we pause and how we draw out a particular word or line, all affect the reading’s outcome.

Setting the natural rhythm of a poem to music inevitably creates new layers of rhythm, sometimes working counter to the original. A musician can literally hijack the poem’s underlying rhythm and take it on endless mysterious journeys. Three poems, ‘Olive Tree’, ‘Three Words Only’ and ‘The Promise’, all set to music by Ramon Farran in agreement with Robert himself and with his complete trust, have been, in my view, so successfully hijacked that I find it impossible to recite them anymore. I now only hear them in those particular musical settings. For me, they really have become ‘songs’.

The poet/muse inspirational roles are clearly summed up in the first verse of Robert’s poem ‘Secret Theatre’, which describes the

moment of poetic inspiration when ordinary concerns fall away, allowing the Muse to set the stage.

When from your sleepy mind the day's burden
Falls like a bushel sack on a barn floor,
Be prepared for music, for natural mirages
And for night's incomparable parade of colour.

Robert's love poetry is full of music. It is direct, uncomplicated, atmospheric and visual and will continue to inspire future generations, providing it remains in print and accessible.

Postscript

The premiere of Geoffrey Alvarez's, *My Last Muse*, finally took place at St John's, Smith Square, London, on 15 November 2008 – eight years after the score's completion.

For me the wait proved advantageous for, once again, the Fates were able to intervene at yet another Robert Graves Conference – this time at St John's College, Oxford, in July 2008 where I gave the above paper.

Geoffrey was scheduled to give his paper on *My Last Muse* and I was asked if I would base my talk on the five Graves poems he had orchestrated so that we could share a session to maximum effect. We had written our papers quite independently and were surprised how well one seemed to compliment the other without repetition.

This fortuitous reunion meant that Geoffrey heard me recite the poems, and immediately after the session he asked if I would recite them at the November premiere as an introduction to each corresponding section of the work. I was overjoyed at the prospect for it meant that I would be an integral part of the performance itself, as well as part of the ongoing collaboration, rather than just a proud member of the audience.

Thus it was, on a rainy November afternoon, I found myself inching my way in gridlocked traffic to Roehampton University's Digby Chapel, where rehearsals were taking place. I was apprehensive. I had no real notion of what to expect. Geoffrey had given me a signed copy of the impressive manuscript but sadly I was not musically gifted enough to transfer the scored notes into actual sounds in my head. I had heard and admired other works of his but *My Last Muse* was personal!

I remember walking down the long passage adjacent to the rehearsal hall and stopping in my tracks as this beautiful bass voice filled the gloomy corridor and beyond with the words of Robert's 'The Narrow Sea'. It was a moment of immense pride and wonder and I immediately felt the excitement of being part of something theatrically very special.

I crept into the hall and sat on a bench, humbled by the creativity around me. I was completely captivated and couldn't help thinking of the second verse of Robert's poem 'Secret Theatre', which describes the charged moment when the creative fuse has been lit but its direction is still not known.

Neither of us daring to assume direction
Of an unforeseen and fiery entertainment,
We clutch hands in the seventh row of the stalls
And watch together, quivering, astonished, silent.

Writing a poem, choreographing a dance and composing music are all highly-charged disciplines dependent on a sudden moment of inspiration, a frenzied working period and an incubation period when small details get tightened, changed or cut away. It is a lonely business. The overall vision kicks around in your head and is your responsibility regardless of exterior input from those involved in its development.

At a pause after the 'Narrow Sea' section, Geoffrey put down his baton, spotted me and introduced me to the rest of the team – the soloists, the singer Patrick Ardagh-Walker and guitarist Timothy Walker, and the very young and talented members of the Alvarez

Chamber Orchestra, many of whom seemed to be strikingly beautiful East Europeans.

For a brief moment we sized each other up, curious and expectant: I, the human inspiration behind the poems and music, and they, the musical interpreters. Then we got down to business. I read a poem, Geoffrey raised his baton and the music took flight. To me, it just seemed very right – a wonderful evolving process of creativity.

For the premiere at St John's, Smith Square, I was placed amongst the musicians, high up on the tiered stage, on the opposite side to Patrick's powerful 'Graves figure'. He was placed at stage level, close to the conductor's podium where Geoffrey stood.

During the inevitably rushed pre-performance run-through, I had felt strangely disconnected as I recited the poems full-front to the audience. So, with theatrical instinct, I decided to change my angle for the performance, turning very slightly in the diagonal direction of my collaborators. This minimal move gave gravitas to the idea of my being the inspirational force on high, the voice speaking to the poet and composer. It was a moment of fine-tuning that made me feel involved, emotionally and theatrically, and part of an unstoppable creative force.

The secret, and at times unspoken, language between Muse and creator acts as stimulus for creativity. Once embellished with metaphors, connotations and dramatic storylines for public observation it is time to retreat and once again 'be prepared for music' – as Robert illustrates in the third and final verse of 'Secret Theatre':

It is hours past midnight now; a flute signals
Far off; we mount the stage as though at random,
Boldly ring down the curtain, then dance out our love:
Lost to the outraged, humming auditorium.

NOTES

¹ 14 February 1970.

² 22 April 1967.

³ 8 October 1970.

⁴ 5 July 1968.