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For Tony Connor

*It is for us to decide who is 'truly great';
Davies and Farrance certainly, and all those
like them.*

THERE IS A SCANDAL attached to this book, a silly unwarranted scandal that began as a storm in a local teacup but eventually made an appearance in the lower reaches of the national press.

The original manuscript came to me through my letterbox, unsolicited and unexpected. The author, or rather compiler, an English teacher I knew and admired, had made my acquaintance when I once visited his school to talk about my work as a writer.

The papers, when I examined them, proved to be, in the main, a collection of favourite pieces of poetry and prose taken from what used to be called, at least when I was a boy, a 'commonplace-book'. Interspersed with these pieces were some pages from a diary kept, over the course of an academic year, by a young girl – one of the English teacher's students and a person with whom he seems to have been deeply infatuated.

The manuscript itself was the classic scissors and paste compilation: some sections were cut from printed volumes, others were dog-eared photocopies of treasured verses. As well as the pages taken from the girl's diary there were, here and there, in his own hand, the private thoughts of the teacher himself, probably collected over a number of years. The whole thing was a jumble of poetry, dreams, memories and desires and all these separate elements, written and printed, had been glued, with no regard for tidiness, onto the grey leaves of a large scrapbook.

On receipt of this parcel I made a few telephone calls and discovered that there had indeed been some kind of a to-do at the school – involving both the teacher and his student. The

teacher had been reprimanded by his Principal and then obliged to move on. The whereabouts of the girl were unknown.

According to the brief note that came with the manuscript, I had been chosen as the book's guardian so that the young woman in question might know where to find it. It seems she already knew of me by reputation and had been told where I lived. The teacher's new address was written in large letters at the end of the manuscript.

The scandal rumbled on for a while but then, as such things do, it died away and became a half-forgotten chapter of local folklore. From time to time I showed the manuscript to a number of friends, just as a curiosity, and explained what I knew of its story. One of these friends, a publisher, made a copy of it a few months ago and that is how the 'Journal' comes to be in print.

I gave permission for this publication for three reasons: firstly, because I was relieved of my guardianship – the young woman had called on me to collect the manuscript: secondly, because I have an understanding of the teacher's predicament and feel that his side of the story should be told, at least as some kind of counter-balance to what was said in the tabloids at the time: and thirdly, because the desire for recognition is implicit in everything the man writes.

If the compiler of this volume (he begins by calling himself 'Narcissus', but his real name soon emerges) should happen to read this introduction – he has not yet responded to my letters – I can assure him that the small advance on royalties paid over to me has been lodged with a reliable building society, is accruing interest, and awaits his attention.

Michael de Larrabeiti
Oxford, 1992

There are three voices and so three typefaces:

The Teacher's

The Young Woman's

. . . and another for the quotations.

How many people die without even bothering
to ask who they are or where they are bound?

N Lestrange

AUTUMN

I am a kind of farthing dip,
Unfriendly to the nose and eyes;
A blue-behinded ape, I skip
Upon the trees of Paradise.

Robert Louis Stevenson

THERE IS A SMALL Tudor chapel a few miles from the town, near a bend, through a farm gate and just out of sight of the road. Even the countryside here has a Tudor style to it – a cleft in the landscape, mixed woodland, clouds touching the green with dark now and then, though each blade of grass remains sharp and bright.

In the gentle fold of the hill stands an Elizabethan manor, its hand-shaped tiles a deep and ancient red that looks rough to the touch. The tiles are uneven and cling to the long, sagging sway of the roof, pegged close, rising and falling.

The chapel itself is exquisite, built in stone. Elizabeth prayed there when she was Mary's prisoner. Inside there is a gallery for minstrels and two gated pews for the quality, with canopies and seats of dark wood made darker by the touch and movement of human bodies.

Outside the turf is soft, close-cropped by the mouths of sheep. To the north the ground slopes away into the shade of a nearby wood, moving from the shining paleness of the open air into the dusty gloom which lies in the spaces between the tree-trunks, their columns making a crypt beneath low branches. To one side, high, and massive round its base, is a yew tree, planted in the reign of King Stephen.

We had come to the chapel, the whole school, teacher and taught, to celebrate the end of the academic year, as we always did, with wine and food, music and dance, masques

and plays. Girls in their finery and boys in their borrowed boaters stood in groups amongst the trees and a hazy light covered their shoulders like cloaks and fell to their feet. Others lay in the full strength of the sun and tipped their glasses against their mouths.

I could hardly stand the beauty of it. It was one of those young summer days when England steals your heart; one of those days when you never want to be anywhere else, never want to die, and yearn with all the power of lunacy for the golden gift of Apollo, so that you might shape fine poems in sounds of fire.

I was Narcissus again that day, always Narcissus, searching for myself, my own true love. It was just a glimpse of the girl that shook me out of it. Her white frock on the sunless side of the chapel, near the ancient grey of that flaking wall of stone; she stretching on tiptoe, her bare arms up and round him as they kissed – all forgotten and all forgetting. The bustle of the merry-making was stilled in that kiss, and I the only one aware that a spell had been cast.

I walked further away then so that I might see the scene from a distance – searching for perspective. The kiss she gave him was not long. I put my tongue to my lips, searching for the taste of her . . . there was none. Suddenly, more than anything else in the world, I wanted the feel of her arms, cool with love at my neck. He was leaving school that day; she would be taking English with me in the autumn, only two months away.

> *NARCISSUS: A beautiful youth, son of Cephisus and the nymph Liriope, born at Thespis in Boeotia. He saw his image reflected in a fountain, and became enamoured of it, thinking it to be the nymph of the place. His fruitless attempts to*

> *approach this beautiful object so provoked him, that he grew desperate and killed himself. His blood was changed into a flower, which still bears his name. The nymphs raised a funeral pile to burn his body, according to Ovid, but they found nothing but a beautiful flower.*
>
> Lemprière's Classical Dictionary

This is the grove of Narcissus. I lay out these stolen lines at random to show you where I have wandered for a lifetime. Round and round, back and forth.

Still I haunt this familiar grove, wishing I were young. I recite the verses I learnt then. When I look into the pool I see only the grave marks on my face. A man fast becoming old, I take pleasure only in the words of others, flaunt them as if they were my own, even though their beauty and power make me melancholy. They are words beyond my inventing. There is no despair deeper than that of the artist without talent.

What did Narcissus want to be before he became too old to desire? A Mediterranean poet with a private income, living in a villa with the sea just below the terrace. He listens to the waves, a mantle of admiration around him; lovers come and go. He is a Picasso with words, dangerous and randy for fame. His verses are like statues, classical and romantic, immutable and sinuous, the sun shining behind them.

At the end of the year she sent me her diary and gave me the silver gift. 'Write,' I'd said to her. I should have added – '. . . because I can't.'

'What do I want with last year's diary?' she'd written on the cover. 'It's next year's I want to read.'