

Narcissus and Goldmund

NARCISSUS

an ascetic monk; a rigorous intellectual remains in the monastery to become an abbot; the epitome of the masculine, analytical mind.

GOLDMUND

romantic, dreamy, flaxen-haired boy; celebrates the lush, lyrical, rapturous, sensuous quality of women; leaves the monastery to find his true nature; he epitomizes the feminine mind.

NARCISSUS AND GOLDMUND

two antithetical natures, the best of friends, who understand and assist each other.

Translated by Ursule Molinaro

Outside the entrance of the Mariabronn cloister, whose rounded arch rested on slim double columns, a chestnut tree stood close to the road. It was a sweet chestnut, with a sturdy trunk and a full round crown that swayed gently in the wind, brought from Italy many years earlier by a monk who had made a pilgrimage to Rome. In the spring it waited until all the surrounding trees were green, and even the hazel and walnut trees were wearing ruddy foliage, before sprouting its own first leaves; then, during the shortest nights of the year, it drove the delicate white-green rays of its exotic blossoms out through tufts of leaves, filling the air with an admonishing and pungent fragrance. In October, after the grape and apple harvests, the autumn wind shook the prickly chestnuts out of the tree's burnished gold crown; the cloister students would scramble and fight for the nuts, and Prior Gregory, who came from the south, roasted them in the fireplace in his room. The beautiful treetop—secret kin to the portal's slender sandstone columns and the stone ornaments of the window vaults and pillars, loved by the Savoyards and Latins—swayed above the cloister entrance, a conspicuous outsider in the eyes of the natives.

Generations of cloister boys passed beneath the foreign tree, carrying their writing tablets, chatting, laughing, clowning, and squabbling, barefoot or shod according to the season, a flower or a nut between their teeth or a snowball in their fists. There were always newcomers; and the faces changed every few years, yet most of them resembled one another, if only for their blond and curly hair. Some stayed for life, becoming novices and monks; they had their hair shorn, donned habit and cincture, read books, taught boys, grew old, died. Others after finishing their studies were taken home by their parents to castles, or to merchants' and artisans' houses, and then went out into the world and lived by their wits or their crafts. They returned to the cloister occasionally as grown men, bringing their little sons to be taught by the priests, stood for a while smiling pensively at the chestnut tree, then vanished once more. The cells and halls of the cloister, between the thick round window vaults and the trim double columns of red stone, were filled with life, with teaching, learning, administration, ruling; many kinds of arts and sciences—the pious and worldly, the frivolous and somber—were pursued here, and were passed on from one generation to another. Books were written and annotated, systems invented, ancient scrolls collected, new scrolls illuminated, the faith

of the people fostered, their credulity smiled upon. Erudition and piety, simplicity and cunning, the wisdom of the testaments and the wisdom of the Greeks, white and black magic—a little of each flourished here; there was room enough for everything, room for meditation and repentance, for gregariousness and the good life. One interest would usually outweigh another, predominating in accord with the personality of the incumbent abbot or the tendency of the day. At times the cloister's reputation for exorcism and demon-detecting would attract visitors; at other times the cloister would be known for its fine music, or for a holy monk who had the power to heal and perform miracles, or for the pike soup and stag-liver pies served in the refectory. And among the throng of monks and pupils, whether pious or lukewarm, fasting or fat, who came and lived there and died, there would always be one or another who was special, whom all loved or all feared, who seemed to be chosen, of whom people spoke long after his contemporaries had been forgotten.

Even now the cloister of Mariabronn had in its midst two persons who were out of the ordinary, one old and one young. Among the many brethren who flocked to the dormitories, chapels, and classrooms were two of whom all were aware, whom all respected:

Abbot Daniel and Brother Narcissus. Though the latter had only recently entered on his novitiate, he had, because of his gifts, been appointed a teacher, mainly of Greek, against all tradition. These two, the aging Abbot and the novice, had special standing in the house; they aroused curiosity and were watched, admired, envied, and sometimes slandered.

Most brothers loved the Abbot for his kindness, simplicity, and humility. Only the learned were a trifle condescending in their affection for him, because, for all his saintliness, Abbot Daniel would never be a scholar. He had the simplicity of wisdom, but his Latin was modest and he knew no Greek whatsoever.

The few who permitted themselves an occasional smile at their Abbot's simplicity were all the more enamored of Narcissus, the handsome prodigy who possessed elegant Greek, impeccable manners, quietly penetrating thinker's eyes, and beautiful, sharply outlined lips. The scholars admired him for his extraordinary Greek; almost all the others, for his nobility and refinement. Many quite simply loved him, but there were inevitably those who resented his extreme reserve, self-control, and exquisite manners.

Abbot and novice, each bore his fate and ruled and suffered in his own way. They felt closer and more drawn to each other than to anyone else in the cloister, yet neither found the way to the other or felt at ease in the other's presence. The Abbot treated the young man with the greatest solicitude, worried about him as though he were a rare, sensitive, perhaps dangerously precocious younger brother. The young man accepted the Abbot's every order, counsel, and good word with perfect equanimity, never argued or sulked, and if the Abbot was right in finding that Brother Narcissus's only sin was pride, Narcissus was a master at concealing it. There was nothing to be said against him; he was perfect and no one was a match for him. Yet, apart from the learned, he had few friends; his distinction surrounded him like a chilling draft.

Once, after confession, the Abbot said to him: "Narcissus, I admit that I am guilty of having judged you harshly. Often I have considered you arrogant, and perhaps I have done you an injustice. You are very much alone, my young brother, you have admirers, but no friends. I wish I had reason to scold you from time to time, but I have none. I wish you would misbehave occasionally,

as young people of your age often do. But you never misbehave. I worry about you a little, Narcissus."

The young novice fixed his dark eyes on the old Abbot.

"I wish above all not to worry you, gentle father. It may well be that I am arrogant. If so, I beg you to punish me. Sometimes I feel an urge to punish myself. Send me to a hermitage, father, or assign me lowly chores."

"You are too young for either, dear brother," said the Abbot. "Besides, you are eminently gifted in speech and thought. To assign you lowly chores would be wasting these God-given talents. In all probability you will become a teacher and a scholar. Is that not your own wish?"

"Forgive me, father, I am not certain what my own wishes are. I shall always take pleasure in study, how could it be otherwise? But I do not believe that my life will be limited to study. A man's wishes may not always determine his destiny, his mission; perhaps there are other, predetermining, factors."

The Abbot listened gravely. Still, a smile played about his old face as he said: "Insofar as I have come to know people, we all have a slight tendency, especially while we are young, to confuse our wishes with predestination. But tell me, since you believe that you have foreknowledge of your destiny, tell me what you believe yourself destined for?"

Narcissus let his dark eyes close until they disappeared in the shadows of his long black lashes. He did not answer.

"Speak, my son," the Abbot ordered after much waiting.

In a low voice, his eyes on the ground, Narcissus began: "I believe, gentle father, that I am destined above all else for cloister life. I believe that I shall become a monk, a priest, a prior, perhaps an abbot. I do not believe that this is because I wish it, I do not wish for offices. They will be laid upon me."

Both were silent for a long time.

"What gives you this belief?" the old man asked hesitantly. "What

talent is there in you, other than learning, that expresses itself in this belief?"

"It is a capacity to sense the characters and destiny of people," Narcissus said slowly, "not only my own destiny, but that of others as well. It obliges me to serve others by ruling over them. Were I not born for cloister life, I should have to become a judge or a statesman."

"Perhaps," nodded the Abbot. "Have you tested your capacity to recognize people's characters and destinies? Have you examples?"

"I have."

"Are you willing to give me an example?"

"I am."

"Very well. Since I do not wish to pry into the secrets of our brothers without their knowledge, you might perhaps tell me what you think you know about me, your Abbot Daniel."

Narcissus raised his lids and looked the Abbot in the eye.

"Is that an order, gentle father?"

"An order."

"I find it difficult to speak, father."

"And I, my young brother, I find it difficult to force you to speak.

And yet I do. Speak."

Narcissus bowed his head and said in a whisper: "I know little of you, gentle father. I know that you are a servant of God who would rather watch over goats and ring the bell in a hermitage and listen to peasants' confessions than head a large cloister. I know that you have a special love for the Holy Mother of God and that most of your prayers are addressed to her. Occasionally you pray that Greek and similar subjects that are studied in this cloister do not lead the souls in your care into confusion and danger. Occasionally you pray for continued patience with Prior Gregory. Sometimes you pray for a gentle end. And I think that your prayer will be heard and