

'Dreaming True' - An Imagined Conversation with Daphne du Maurier

"The first thing I noticed was the clarity of the air, and then the sharp green colour of the land."<sup>1</sup> The sea stretches out before me, crystal clear and shimmering in the morning sun. This is the Cornwall of my childhood. From behind, I hear Daphne's voice.

'Oh' she says, 'I thought it might be *her*. Well, come on. The dogs need their walk.' She strides across the grassy cliff towards the sea, two West Highland terriers at her heels. It would be easy to mistake Daphne for a man in her rust coloured cords, padded fisherman's waistcoat and stout boots.

As if in a dream I follow, running to keep up. 'Just now, who did you think I was?'

'Why, Rebecca of course.' She gives me a disdainful look. 'You know, you shouldn't play about with things you don't understand.'

'Dreaming true<sup>2</sup> you mean?'

'Exactly.' Twinkling eyes belie Daphne's age. "Do you ever have a silly sort of imagining thing that I do at times? I lie in bed, and imagine towns and villages, and what is happening at just that minute... Paris... Moscow..."<sup>3</sup>

'I can't believe it worked,' I say. 'I was just thinking about being here and...'

"Grandpapa George developed the ability to visit the past,"<sup>4</sup> says Daphne. "In *Peter Ibbetson*"<sup>5</sup> Peter goes into a trance-like state to access long forgotten memories. Dreaming true involves self-hypnosis, as does mesmerism.<sup>6</sup> I adapt Kicky's<sup>7</sup> idea in *The House on the Strand*, but my character Dick uses drugs to travel back to the fourteenth century.'

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<sup>1</sup> Daphne du Maurier, *The House on the Strand* (Aylesbury: Heron Books, 1971), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> In his book *Peter Ibbetson*, George du Maurier introduced the technique of 'dreaming true' a form of self-hypnosis allowing 'Peter' to visit the past.

<sup>3</sup> Oriol Malet, ed., *Letters from Menabilly – Portrait of a Friendship* (London: Orion Books Ltd., 1994), p. 129 Letter dated 3<sup>rd</sup> January 1962.

<sup>4</sup> Daphne du Maurier in *Enchanted Cornwall* (1989) cited in Piers Dudgeon, *Captivated* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2008), p. 107.

<sup>5</sup> George du Maurier, *Peter Ibbetson* (London: Gollancz Classics, 1969) Novel introduces 'Dreaming True'.

<sup>6</sup> George du Maurier, *Trilby* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) In the novel *Trilby*, Svengali uses mesmeric influence on his muse Trilby and the lively outspoken girl changes into a dull-witted marionette, her personality annihilated, and her emotions erased. Betsy Van Schlun, *Science and Imagination: Mesmerism, Media and the Mind in Nineteenth-century English and American Literature* - Leipzig Explorations in Literature and Culture XIII (Glienicke/Berlin: Galda + Wilch Verlag, 2007), p. 215.

<sup>7</sup> Kicky is George du Maurier's family name.

Daphne whistles. ‘Mac, Kensie,<sup>8</sup> come along boys.’ Passing a five barred wooden gate, we skirt a field. The land is rocky underfoot, but shady due to sycamore and beech trees on either side.<sup>9</sup> Daphne lifts her hand to shield her eyes from the sun. ‘You can just catch a glimpse of Menabilly, see, through the trees? I remember the day I first saw her. Must have been in my early twenties. “I edged my way on to the lawn, and there she stood. My house of secrets. My Menabilly...”<sup>10</sup>

‘You lived there a long time?’

‘For fifteen years I just trespassed in the grounds, “I could scarcely see the soul of her for the decay. The mould was in her bones.”<sup>11</sup> Eventually I rented her, twenty-six happy years. Sometimes it’s like I’m still there.’

I do understand. When Virginia Woolf and her siblings revisited their old home, Talland House near St Ives, she said it was as though they had just left that morning. “We hung there like ghosts in the shade of the hedge, and at the sound of footsteps we turned away.”<sup>12</sup>

‘Exactly,’ says Daphne, as if I have spoken these words aloud. “No one realises that I have been in love, literally in love, with Menabilly for twenty years.”<sup>13</sup> She’s my creative inspiration, my muse. “And at midnight, when the children sleep, and all is hushed and still, I sit down at the piano and look at the panelled walls, and slowly, softly, with no one there to see, the house whispers her secrets, and the secrets turn to stories, and in strange and eerie fashion we are one, the house and I.”<sup>14</sup>

The hedgerows are ablaze with celandines, stitchwort and campion.<sup>15</sup> Daphne sits down on a grassy bank to light up a cigarette. ‘Tell me, what is your day?’<sup>16</sup>

‘Until I retired, I was teaching.’

‘Splendid,’ she says. ‘Couldn’t have done it myself of course, those tiresome little brats... You’ve left it a bit late to begin, the writing I mean. Mind you, Kicky was nearly

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<sup>8</sup> Forster, *Daphne du Maurier* (London: Arrow Books Ltd., 1994) p. 398. Daphne du Maurier’s West Highland pups in 1970’s.

<sup>9</sup> Sue Kittow, *Walks in the Footsteps of Daphne du Maurier* (Ammanford: Sigma Press, 2018), pp. 79-80.

<sup>10</sup> Daphne du Maurier, *The Rebecca Notebook and other Memories* (London: Pan Books, 1982) p. 122. Menabilly was the inspiration for Manderley in Rebecca.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>12</sup> Julia Briggs, *Virginia Woolf - An Inner Life* (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 162.

<sup>13</sup> Jane Dunn, *Daphne du Maurier and Her Sisters* (London: William Collins, 2013) p. 303. Letter to Ellen Doubleday.

<sup>14</sup> Du Maurier, *The Rebecca Notebook and other Memories*, pp. 127-8.

<sup>15</sup> Sue Kittow, *Walks in the Footsteps of Daphne du Maurier*, p. 74.

<sup>16</sup> Malet, *Letters from Menabilly*, p. x. Glossary of du Maurier codewords - ‘day’ = daily routines, habits, lifestyle.

sixty when he wrote his first novel. But you can't afford not to finish what you start. What are you working on?'

'It's a psychological thriller inspired by autobiographical events.'

'They always are, in a way... What's the plot? Although "you don't have to have a plot...you don't even have to have action... but you must have [...] a reason for the things you want to say... I am still for a beginning, a middle and an end, but it doesn't have to be a plot.'"'<sup>17</sup>

'It's about triplets, but there's an unreliable narrator. You used doubles in *Rebecca* and doppelgangers in *The Scapegoat*. Is it true that John and Jean are two aspects of the same man?'<sup>18</sup>

'It's interesting that you ask about characters in *The Scapegoat*, "because they are completely imaginary, and not one Peg.'"'<sup>19</sup>

'Peg?'

'Yes. I often used pegs for my characters, made up characters based on tiny bits of people you know.'

'I suppose we all do, to some extent.'

'Take the psychic twins in *Don't Look Now*.<sup>20</sup> I met them not far from here. They lived in a little cottage in the Menabilly grounds. Funny old beans...' She tosses her cigarette butt. 'Rachel was pegged of course... "if I was writing my autobiography, I would have to say it was the most emotionally-felt book I had ever written."<sup>21</sup> "I had that thing about Ellen...pure Gondal...it was only by making up *My Cousin Rachel*, and pegging the Rachel woman on her, and making her die, that I was able to rid myself of it. For writers, the only way we can do it, is to write them out.'"'<sup>22</sup>

'Kill them off you mean?'

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 32. 25<sup>th</sup> Oct early 1950's, letter refers to Oriel's novel, *Jemima*.

<sup>18</sup> Horner, Avril and Zlosnik, Sue, eds, *Daphne du Maurier Writing, Identity and the Gothic Imagination* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 1998), p. 149. In *The Scapegoat*, 'John and Jean represent two aspects of the same man.' They are mirror images when they meet.

<sup>19</sup> Malet, *Letters from Menabilly*, p. 80. Letter dated 19<sup>th</sup> October 1956.

<sup>20</sup> Picarde, *Daphne*, p 367. Two elderly ladies, one of them blind, who lived in the game-keepers cottage not far from Menabilly.

<sup>21</sup> Malet, *Letters from Menabilly*, p. 80. Daphne used what she felt about Ellen Doubleday when constructing the character Rachel.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 133. Letter dated 31<sup>st</sup> January 1962. 'Gondal' means pretend or made up.

‘Of course. “I don’t feel I need Pegs anymore... Looking back, although they served beautifully as characters in books, it was awfully silly...I learnt my lesson...having pegged Gertrude (bits of Maria, bits of Rachel) and then she died...a peg had vanished!”’<sup>23</sup>

We emerge onto the lawns of Kilmarth House. ‘Come on.’ Daphne leads the way up stone steps to her front door. ‘Time for a coffee before work.’ We enter past umbrella stands crammed with walking sticks, one either side of the door. ‘They belonged to Daddy,<sup>24</sup> can’t get rid of them of course.’

A sixteen-year old Daphne stares down from a portrait on the wall.<sup>25</sup> ‘Come and see this one.’ She points to the painting on the landing. ‘It’s the three of us. I’m the one standing, it’s meant to be Hampstead Heath... I was thinking about your triplets in your main.<sup>26</sup> You’ve got sisters?’

‘Just the one. My other sister died before I was born.’

In her library Daphne pours coffee, but I don’t drink. I am in awe. As readers we often yearn to know more about the writer whose words have touched us. This ‘through the Looking Glass’ effect, allows us ‘to come into contact with the imaginative world created by the author, and thus to participate in his (*her*) imagination.’<sup>27</sup>

‘This is Tommy.’ Daphne picks up a photograph from the top of the piano, a handsome man in uniform. ‘He didn’t make it here of course, and those busts are Daddy and Grandpapa.’

‘You had a special relationship with your father?’

‘Oh yes. Well, we all did I suppose.’

‘I was a Daddy’s girl too,’ I say, ‘before my brother was born, I suppose I was surrogate son.’

Daphne nods. ‘I didn’t have a brother of course. My one regret, Daddy never got to have a son. Although he always said, “daughters were the thing”,<sup>28</sup> Uncle Jim<sup>29</sup> used that line in *Dear Brutus*. I always wished I’d been a boy.<sup>30</sup> That’s why I created my fantasy side, Eric Avon.’

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 178. Letter dated 23<sup>rd</sup> August 1964.

<sup>24</sup> Wilfred De’Ath, *Daphne du Maurier*, BBC documentary (1971).

<sup>25</sup> Daphne du Maurier, *Growing Pains – The Shaping of a Writer* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1977) This portrait of Daphne aged sixteen, by Harrington Mann, is the book jacket illustration.

<sup>26</sup> Malet, *Letters from Menabilly*, p. x. Glossary of du Maurier codewords - ‘main’ = main story or plot.

<sup>27</sup> Harald Hendrix, *Writers’ Houses and the Making of Memory* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 239 (*my italics*).

<sup>28</sup> Forster, *Daphne du Maurier*, p. 46.

<sup>29</sup> Uncle Jim was J M Barrie, guardian to Daphne’s boy cousins (the original ‘lost boys’) after their parents died.

<sup>30</sup> Forster, *Daphne du Maurier*, p. 12.

‘My brother was younger than me and my sister, he grew up virtually an only child.’ I move across to look at another portrait. ‘Is this Branwell Bronte?’ I ask.

‘Branwell<sup>31</sup> always fascinated me,’ says Daphne. ‘Perhaps because of poor Moper’s nervous breakdown.’<sup>32</sup> ‘None of (*his sisters*) novels would have come into being had not their creators lived, during childhood, in this fantasy world, which was largely inspired and directed by their only brother, Patrick Branwell Bronte.’<sup>33</sup>

‘I’ve been to Haworth,’ I say. ‘It’s like the biographer Richard Holmes says, he’s haunted by his subjects but finds them elusive, ‘you would never quite catch them.’<sup>34</sup>

I had walked around the Bronte Parsonage taking photographs of the table where the three sisters used to write, staring at the nursery walls, smaller now than when Bronte children played there,<sup>35</sup> I marvelled at miniature books describing the imaginary worlds of Gondal and Angria. When Daphne visited Haworth<sup>36</sup> she wrote: ‘The nursery window is the centre one. You can still see pencil drawings on the wall and the letter bricks for learning the alphabet that were found under the floor boards...’<sup>37</sup>

‘So much work in the juvenilia<sup>38</sup> was done by Branwell,’ continues Daphne. ‘I could never understand, “why modern Bronte research has neglected him.”<sup>39</sup> Such a gifted and yet tragic young man, sadly suffering from ‘his inability to distinguish truth from fiction, reality from fantasy.’<sup>40</sup>

‘My family has its share of mental health issues. That’s where the idea for my novel stems from.’

Daphne is animated. ‘Listen, have you heard of Jung? He is an old psycho man, but nicer than Freud or Adler because he’s spiritual. [...] Only he does say that the ordinary life

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<sup>31</sup> Daphne produced a biography of Branwell, *The Infernal World of Branwell Bronte*.

<sup>32</sup> Daphne du Maurier, *The Infernal World of Branwell Bronte* (London: Virago Press, 2006) Introduction by Justine Picardie (2015) p. ix. Daphne wrote to Symington of her frustration, not able to research because she was nursing Moper (Tommy) after his breakdown. ‘I have been in constant attendance on my husband, I feel like Charlotte Bronte when nursing Rev. Bronte and finding it difficult to get on with Vilette.’

<sup>33</sup> Du Maurier, *The Infernal Life Branwell Bronte*, preface p. xix (*my italics inserted*).

<sup>34</sup> Richard Holmes cited in Midge Gillies, *Writing Lives: Literary Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) p. 46.

<sup>35</sup> Hendrix, *Writers' Houses and the Making of Memory*, p104. Myth busting - Viewing the cupboard sized space, visitors assume the nursery was tiny. Charlotte enlarged bedroom in 1850 at the expense of this room.

<sup>36</sup> Daphne du Maurier had been asked to write the introduction for a new version of *Wuthering Heights*, so she visited Haworth in 1954 (the year of my birth) in preparation for this commission.

<sup>37</sup> Postcard written in 1954. Daphne read *Wuthering Heights* when she was twelve (same age as my reading of Rebecca) and was inspired by the Brontes as I am by her. Title of her first novel *The Loving Spirit* was a line in Emily Bronte’s poem, *Self-Interrogation*, verses from the poem separate different parts of the novel.

<sup>38</sup> Bronte childrens’ imaginary worlds of Gondal and Angria.

<sup>39</sup> Forster, *Daphne du Maurier*, p. 306. Letter to Symington.

<sup>40</sup> Daphne du Maurier, *The Infernal Life of Branwell Bronte*, preface p. xx.

of an artist or writer can never be satisfactory, because of the awful creating thing that goes inside them all the time, making them Gondal.”<sup>41</sup>

‘Was your life not satisfactory?’ I ask.

‘Read *The Parasites*,’ Daphne says. ‘Probably the closest thing to an autobiographical novel I’ve ever written. “Maria, Niall, Celia were the three people I know myself to have been.”<sup>42</sup> Wrote it straight off, no notebook, it just flowed. “The whole thing was rather drawn from the sub-conscious spread with fiction.”<sup>43</sup> I identify with Jung’s explanation that everyone has dual aspects within one’s self. “When I get madly boyish number two is in charge.”<sup>44</sup> But there’s always that *power* thing. That’s when “I pushed the boy back in the box.”<sup>45</sup>

‘Number two... Eric Avon, your alter ego?’

‘Eric was my creative side. Remained in my “unconscious, to emerge in later years [...] as narrator of five novels.”<sup>46</sup> Daphne lifts a silver framed photograph from the small table beside her armchair. ‘This is Kits, so handsome.’<sup>47</sup> We worked together on *Vanishing Cornwall* you know? Kits took all the photographs.’

‘Is this where you work?’ I ask.

‘Most of the time. I don’t know... I find it difficult to settle nowadays. I really need a hut, like at Menabilly, but when the weather’s bad I wouldn’t want to be trekking out to it. I have another desk upstairs.’

Daphne’s bedroom is like the prow of a ship, windows to both sides. ‘My compensation.’ She adjusts the teddies<sup>48</sup> on the window ledge, gazing out over Rackham-like trees<sup>49</sup> towards the sea.

Back downstairs Daphne leads me into a room lined in shelves. ‘This was the old kitchen, now my archive room.’

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<sup>41</sup> Malet, *Letters from Menabilly*, p. 33. Letter written to Oriel (25<sup>th</sup> October early 1950’s) when Daphne was in the process of self-interrogating her own writing process.

<sup>42</sup> Forster, *Daphne du Maurier*, p. 242.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 241.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 276. Letter to seventeen-year old Flavia, her daughter.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 222. Letter to Ellen Doubleday, American publisher.

<sup>46</sup> Du Maurier, *Growing Pains*, p. 59. Five novels written in first person singular, masculine gender – *I’ll Never be Young Again*, *My Cousin Rachel*, *The Scapegoat*, *The Flight of the Falcon*, *The House on the Strand*.

<sup>47</sup> Kits (Christian) was Daphne’s third child, her much longed for son, receiving far more attention from Daphne than her daughters, Flavia and Tessa.

<sup>48</sup> Tommy’s teddies. Picardie, *Daphne*, p.11. Tommy’s teddy bears travelled with him – throughout the war, then London and Menabilly. He called them ‘my boys’.

<sup>49</sup> Malet, *Letters from Menabilly*, p. 232. Oriel Malet visit August 1969.

I run my fingers along the spines of black lever arch files,<sup>50</sup> each labelled with the title of one of her novels or short stories. ‘Can I ask about your writing process?’

‘For the novels you mean? Well, let’s see. First something just wells up inside, it’s impossible to say why, but I like to let it brew. I do lots of digging, and “thinking, and slowly putting the outline into chapter headings in my notebook.” It takes huge amounts of research.’ She waves at the files. ‘It’s all here, “I have to study the plans and postcards [...] I could find my way blindfold [...] then when I come to outline the story I find the first suspense idea [...] what is his deep unconscious motive...”’<sup>51</sup>

‘How do you create suspense?’

‘Ah, now, that’s the question. Suspense is important. Get the notebook stage right, that’s key, I even jot down some dialogue. Once you’ve got it all down, the writing will flow. Especially for “imaginative writers, like you and me [...] when we do our Gondally novels.”’<sup>52</sup>

‘Then, when you start to write you stick rigidly to the notebook?’

‘If you’ve read *The Rebecca Notebook*, you’ll know. Maxim’s name was originally Henry. I suppose, once I started to write, I thought Henry sounded a bit dull. And Mrs Danvers wasn’t nearly as nanny in the notebook.’<sup>53</sup>

‘I have written a Gothic flavoured novel, with a ghost from the future.’

‘Oh, I don’t believe in ghosts.’ Suddenly Daphne’s distracted, as if she doesn’t know how we came to be here. She clutches my arm. “You are still writing? You must, it’s the only way!”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Wilfred De’Ath, *Daphne du Maurier*, BBC documentary.

<sup>51</sup> Malet, *Letters from Menabilly*, p. 167. Letter dated 23<sup>rd</sup> February 1964.

<sup>52</sup> Malet, *Letters from Menabilly*, p. 238. Letter dated 20<sup>th</sup> January 1970.

<sup>53</sup> Malet, *Letters from Menabilly*, p. x. Glossary of du Maurier codewords - ‘nanny’ = scary or frightening.

<sup>54</sup> Malet, *Letters from Menabilly*, p. 295. Daphne’s last telephone call to Oriel.