The Madonna in the Fur Coat[1]

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Andrea del Sarto, "Madonna delle Arpie" (Madonna of the Harpies, 1517)

In this "Europe", I expected I would learn a foreign language and read books in that language, but especially that I would finally encounter the people I had so far only known in novels. Wasn't my own savageness, my disaffection toward my

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surroundings, merely the result of having been unable to find these people I had met and loved in books?

Within the week I was ready to go, and I set off through Bulgaria on a train to Berlin. I did not speak the language at all. Thanks to the five or ten words I learned out of a conversation book during my four-day train ride, I was able to make it to a *pension*, a word I had jotted down in my notebook back in Istanbul.

I spent the first weeks trying to learn the language at a survival level, wandering the city and admiring it. The wonder of these first few days didn't last long. Ultimately, this was just another city. A city with wider streets—much cleaner, and with blonder people. But there was nothing about it that would make a person swoon with awe. For my part, I was still unaware what kind of a thing the Europe of my dreams had been, and how much the city I was now living in lacked, in comparison to that image… It had not yet dawned on me how the mind can produce the most stupendous projections of all.

Having come to terms with the fact that I couldn't get anything moving here without the language, I started taking private lessons from an officer who had served in the World War. He had spent some time in Turkey and learned some Turkish. The madame who owned the pension also was fond of having a chat in her spare time, and she became a great help to me. The other guests at the pension also relished the opportunity to be friends with a Turk, and the silly questions they asked often made my head ache. The crowd that gathered around the table at dinnertime was a rather motley one. My friends among them were a Dutch widow named Frau van Tiedemann, a Portuguese trader named Herr Camera who imported oranges from the Canaries to Berlin, and old Herr Döppke. This last guest was a tradesman who had been compelled to leave behind his livelihood in the German colony of Cameroon after the armistice and had found shelter back in his home country. He was now leading quite a modest life with the money he had been able to smuggle back, and he spent his days at political meetings—which were quite numerous at the time—and related his ideas about them at night. He often brought back with him this or that recently discharged and unemployed German officer he had just met, and they would debate for hours. Though my understanding may have been flawed, these guests of his seemed to be of the opinion that Germany could survive only if a man with an iron will like Bismarck were to lead the country, and that injustices needed to be corrected with a second war, for which the only adequate preparation was immediate and rapid armament.

Now and then one of the pension's guests would depart, and another guest would fill the vacant room without delay. After a while, I grew used to these changes and even tired of them: the reddish light shining from the lampshade in our dining room—which was always on, by the way—the ubiquitous smell of cabbage throughout the day, and the political arguments among my dinner friends. Those arguments… Everyone had his own idea about how to save Germany. Their ideas were however not so much about saving Germany per se, but rather about protecting their own personal investments. An old, formerly wealthy lady was bitter at the officer corps, though she had lost her fortune due to her own sheer avarice. The officers found fault with the striking workers and with soldiers who were no longer willing to keep up the fight. And totally out of the blue, the colonial tradesman cursed the emperor for starting a war in the first place. Even the maid who cleaned my room in the mornings tried to drum up political conversations with me, and she would read her newspaper whenever she had a spare moment. She had her own ardent opinions, and while talking about them, her face would flush red and she would swing her fist in the air.

I almost forgot why I had come to Germany. Whenever I got a letter from my father the soap business came back to mind, and I would assuage him and myself by claiming that I was still learning the language, and that I would be applying to an establishment of that sort very soon.[2] My days passed, one identical to the next. I had seen the entire city, the zoo, and the museums. It almost brought me to despair to think that I had consumed this city of millions within a few months. I told myself: "Europe! So what?" and I concluded that the world was essentially a very boring place. Often, I wandered the broad thoroughfares among the crowds, and I watched the women casting smiles with their languorous eyes while pulling on their men's arms: women returning home with the earnestness common only among those who accomplish important things; men who still maintained their proper soldier's gait.

So as not to lie to my father outright, I applied to a couple of luxury soap companies with the help of some Turkish friends. The German employees of one originally Swedish company gave me a very warm welcome, probably due to our not-yet-forgotten alliance of recent years. However, they declined to teach me anything more than what I had already learned through passive observation in our own soap workshop back in Havran. They were most likely keeping the company secrets to themselves.

Or maybe they had caught on that I was less than enthusiastic, and they didn't wish to spend their time in vain. I gradually stopped going to the factory. They did not ask where I had been, my father wrote less frequently, and I—here in the city of Berlin—continued living, without quite remembering why I had come here or what I had come to do.

I was taking German lessons three evenings a week from the ex-officer. In the morning, I went out to view the paintings in the newly opened galleries, and I could smell the cabbage 100 paces away from the pension upon returning. Now that the first months had passed, I was no longer as disposed to boredom as I had been before. I slowly endeavored to read books, and with time, this brought me more and more pleasure. After a while, it almost became a passion. I would open a book as I lay on my chest in bed and stay there for hours with the thick, old dictionary beside me. Frequently I could not bear looking up something in the dictionary, and I would try guessing the meanings of sentences based on clues. It was as if a new world were opening in front of my eyes. This time my books were not talking solely about the heroes, like the original or translated books of my childhood and adolescence. In almost every one, I now found something of myself, my surroundings, what I saw and heard. I came to think that now I was giving real meaning to the episodes I had experienced previously but had not been able to see and understand. The Russian authors were the most influential for me. I could read the vast stories of Turgenev to the end in one sitting. One of them actually had me shaken for days. The protagonist of the story, a girl named Klara Milic, falls in love with a rather simple student, but without breathing a word of it to anyone, she falls victim to her astonishing obsession, merely out of the shame of loving such a simpleton. I considered this girl to be an intimate of mine, whatever the reason was. Not being able to say what is transpiring inside you; hiding the strongest, deepest, and most beautiful aspects of the self beneath tremendous jealousy and vulnerability—with this I could certainly identify.

But now, here in the museums, it was the old masters of painting that were granting me the chance to live free of my troubles. There were times when I would

[2] Translators' note: Previously, the protagonist reports that his father sent him to Germany to acquire new techniques for use in the family's soap-making enterprise in Havran, Turkey.

look at a painting in the National Gallery for hours on end and then envision the same countenance and landscape for days afterward.

At that point it had been almost a year since I'd come to Germany. One day—I remember it perfectly—a rainy and dark October day, a critic's column about an exhibition of new painters caught my eye while I was looking through the newspaper. I did not really understand these up-and-coming painters. Maybe I disliked them because the haughty pretension of their works, the inclination to be eye-catching at whatever expense, the showiness, was against my nature in some way…. That being the case, I did not even read the article. A couple of hours later, while I was wandering the streets, doing my daily promenades, I realized I was in front of the building where the exhibition mentioned in the newspaper was opening. I didn't have anything important to do. If only to honor the coincidence, I decided to enter, and I walked around for a while, looking at the various small and large paintings on the walls.

Most of the paintings were the sort that made one smirk. Angular knees and shoulders, disproportionate heads and breasts, landscapes designed in bright colors, as if composed of crepe paper. Crystal vases, unshapely as a piece of broken brick, dead flowers that looked as if they had been kept in books for ages, and finally, portraits that seemed to have been taken out of an album of mug shots... To be sure, there was something to entertain everyone. Maybe I ought to have resented the fact that these people had accomplished so much with so little effort. But I could do nothing but pity them with almost a morbid pleasure—considering how they would reap ridicule from all, and understanding from none.

I stopped suddenly along one wall of the great hall, near the door. It is impossible to convey the feelings I felt in that moment, especially after these many years have passed. I only remember standing, as if I were fixed in place, before a portrait of a woman in a fur coat. Other people were jostling me left and right as they regarded the paintings, but I could not move from where I stood. What were the contents of that portrait? I know I can't explain this, but she had an uncanny impression—a little bit savage, proud, and very strong—one that I never had seen in any woman. Although I knew from the first instant that I had not seen this face anywhere, any time, I felt that there was some relation between us. And yet this pale face, this dark brown hair, this expression that reconciled innocence with volition, a boundless ennui with a brazen character: the combination could be nothing but familiar to me. I knew this woman from the books I had been reading since age seven, and from that realm of dreams I'd been conjuring since age five. Pieces of her came from Halit Ziya's Nihal, from Vecihi Bey's Mehcure, from Chevalier Buridan's lover, from the Cleopatra I'd read about in history books, and even from Amine Hatun, Muhammed's mother, as I envisioned her while listening to the mevlits. She was the amalgam, the combination of all the women of my waking dreams. Though she was wrapped in a wildcat's fur and sheathed in shadow, I could still see a small, matte, white portion of her neck; and above it, an oval human face, slightly inclined to the left. Her black eyes looked as if they were drawn up in incomprehensible, profound thought; searching with a last modicum of hope for something they'd been assured was impossible to find. Nonetheless, the sorrow in her aspect was somehow mixed with plaintive rebuttal. They looked as if they were saying: "Yes, I won't be able to find what I am looking for… But what does it matter?" This expression of appeal attained total clarity in her plump lips, the lower one larger than the upper. Her eyelids swelled slightly. Her eyebrows were neither thick nor thin, but short; her dark brown hair clasped her wide

forehead and blended into the wildcat's hair. Her chin was slightly curved forward and a bit edged. She had a slim, long nose with slightly fleshy nostrils.

I went through the catalogue, my hands near trembling. I hoped to find a critique of this painting. Toward the end, on the back of one of the pages, I found three words: *Maria Puder, Selbstporträt*. There was nothing else. I realized that the painter had only one piece at the exhibition: her self-portrait. I was somehow elated about this. I feared that other works by a woman who paints so wonderfully could not have the same effect on me, and that perhaps they would even lessen my initial admiration. I stayed there until late in the day. From time to time, I walked around, looked at other paintings blankly, and then came right back to the one painting and looked at it at length. Each time I felt like I was seeing a new expression, a life that gradually appeared on her face. I started to think that her slightly downcast eyes were secretly surveying me, that her lips were making slow movements.

No one was left in the hall. I think the tall man by the door was waiting for me to go. I pulled myself together in haste, and left the building. It was drizzling out. I didn't spend any time lingering on the street, as I had on other such evenings, but went straight back to the pension instead. I wanted nothing but to eat my dinner quickly and then steal back to my room to picture that face again in solitude. I did not talk at all at the table. The owner of the pension, Frau Heppner, asked:

"Where did you go today?"

I replied: "Nowhere… Just around, then I saw an exhibition of modern artists."

The people in the dining room promptly took to conversing about modern art, and I took the next opportunity to go up to my room.

While undressing, a newspaper leaf fell from my pocket onto the floor. When I picked it up and put it on the table, my heart flushed. It was the newspaper that I had bought that morning, in which I had seen the article about the exhibition. I tore open the pages to see what this article had to say about the painting and its artist. Even I was taken aback by how excited such a slow and intractable man like me could become, given the situation. I skimmed the article from top to bottom. By the middle of the article, my eyes were fixed on the words I had seen: Maria Puder…

The piece talked at length about this young artist, whose paintings were being exhibited for the first time. The author of the article spoke of the great expressive talents of this woman, who wished to follow in the footsteps of the classicists. Apparently, the painter was not inclined toward the kind of beautification, nor toward the deliberate uglification, that was common among many self-portraitists. After a couple of technical digressions, the author claimed that, thanks to a strange equivalence of posture and facial expression, the woman looked so much like the depiction of Mother Mary in Andreas del Sarto's painting *Madonna delle Arpie* that the resemblance could give someone the chills. Then, with a rather tongue-in-cheek turn of phrase, the author wished this "Madonna in a Fur Coat" great success, and moved on to another artist.

The next day, my first chore was to search for a shop that sold replicas of famous paintings and look for the Arpie Madonna. I found it in a heavy album of Sarto's work. The badly imprinted copy didn't reveal much, but the author of the article was right: sitting higher than the others, the holy child in her arms, she looked downward without noticing the bearded man on her right and the young man on her left. The Madonna's disappointed, irritated expression—observable in her gaze and lips, her face, and how she held her head—was precisely the one in the painting I'd seen the day prior. They were selling this page of the album individually, so I was able to buy the painting and return home. Looking carefully, I realized the painting was of great

import from an artistic point of view. It was the first time I had seen such a Madonna: In the illustrations of Mother Mary I had encountered before, there was an expression of innocence, which was emphasized a little bit more than was necessary, and sometimes senselessly so; they either looked like little children who were saying to the baby in their arms, "See what God has bestowed upon me!" or they were housemaids, staring with fixed eyes and smiling in confusion at their sons, whom they had conceived by way of a man these girls could not even name. The Mary in this painting by Sarto was however a woman who had learned how to think, who conveyed all her judgments about the world, and had begun to treat the world with a bit of levity. She wasn't looking at the saints, standing as if in worship on either side of her. She wasn't looking at the Messiah in her arms, nor at the sky, but down toward the earth. And it is clear that she saw something there.

I put the image down on the table. I closed my eyes and thought about the painting in the exhibition. At that very moment, it occurred to me that the person depicted there actually existed. Of course this was the case—the painter had made a self-portrait. This spectacular woman was wandering among us, guiding her deep, dark eyes down to earth, or toward the person opposite her, parting her lips to speak, the bottom one a little bigger than the top. She was alive. I could go see her somewhere… The first thing I felt, when I thought about it, was tremendous fear. It would be a genuine disaster if a man like me—someone who had never had any adventures with a woman before—were to have his first time ever with a woman like this.

Although I was 24 years old, I'd never had any adventures with women. A couple of licentious expeditions under the tutelage of some older friends in Havran were nothing but the gauntlets of intoxication, and the timidity in my nature protected me from the desire to repeat them. Woman was a creature that whipped my imagination; she was the abstract, unreachable heroine of my numerous, never-experienced adventures envisioned while lying under the olive trees on hot summer days. For years, I loved our neighbor Fahriye without saying a word, and I would have imaginary relations with her that bordered on shamelessness. When I came across her on the street here and there, my heart would pound strongly enough to knock me down, and I would look for a place to hide, my face burning as if it were ablaze. On Ramadan nights, I would go out and hide opposite their door and watch her accompany her mother to nightly prayers holding a torch; but as soon as those bodies appeared in their long coats at the open door—under the yellow light shining from inside the house—I would turn my head to the wall and start shivering, as if they had noticed I was there.

When I was fond of a woman for any reason, the first thing I did was run away from her. I feared that my every move, my every look would disclose my secret when I encountered her; and, with an inexplicable and suffocating shyness, I would turn into the most pitiful person on earth. I can't recall looking into the eyes of any woman in my life, my mother included. Recently, especially in Istanbul, I found the determination to fight this meaningless bashfulness, and I tried to act at ease with some girls whom I had met through friends. But when they showed any interest in me, all my determination and decisiveness would fly off. I had never been an innocent person: When I was by myself, I would play out scenes more extreme than even the most experienced lovers could think of. With the women of my imagination, I could feel the inebriating pressure of hot, throbbing lips—a few times stronger than reality permitted.

However, this fur coat picture I saw at the exhibition shook me in a way that kept me from touching her, even in my imagination. I could not even envision us sitting

across from each other, like two friends, let alone touching her. I put my coat on, and headed to the exhibition. And this continued for days.

Every day, always in the afternoon, I would go and walk down the rows, as though I were regarding each of the paintings slowly, when in actuality I was feeling very impatient. I wandered, trying with great difficulty to hold back my eager steps; and yet I would fall back into regarding "the Madonna in the fur coat" as if it were a painting I had come across just then, and I would wait there until closing time. I noticed that by then the gallery guards and the various painters who came there daily had all come to recognize me. As soon as I entered, a wry smile would spread across their faces, and they would track this strange art lover for the duration of his stay. Toward the end of my time there, I dropped the charade I was playing in front of the other paintings. I went directly to the woman in the fur coat, sat down on one of the benches there, and fixed my eyes upon it, casting my eyes downward only when I got tired of looking.

It was obvious that this condition of mine would provoke curiosity among the people at the exhibition. One day, what I feared would transpire actually did. A young woman with longish hair, black garments, and a long scarf—I had come across her a couple of times and was able to surmise by her conversations with other painters that she was a painter herself—approached me and said:

"You are very curious about this painting, right? You look at it every day!"

I raised my eyes briefly and then shot them back down again. The over-informal and slightly mocking smile of my interlocutor left a bad impression. Just a single pace in front of where I was sitting, her pointy shoes looked up toward my face as if awaiting an answer. The legs springing out from under her short skirt—which I must admit were very shapely—swelled slightly now and then, issuing a sweet wave toward the knees under her stockings. When I noticed she would not be leaving without hearing my response, I said:

"Yes. It is a beautiful painting…" Then—I don't know why—I had the urge to tell a lie, or to give an explanation; and I murmured:

"She looks a lot like my mother…"

"Oh, so that's why you come here and look at it for hours!"

"Yes!"

"Is your mother dead?"

"No!"

She waited as if she wanted me to continue. My head bowed, I went on:

"She is far away!"

"Oh, where?"

"In Turkey!"

"Are you a Turk?"

"Yes!"

"I gathered that you were foreign!"

She gave a slight laugh. She took a seat by my side, nonchalantly. When she crossed her legs, her skirt climbed higher up her knees, and I realized my face had started burning, as was to be expected. My condition seemed to have amused this woman beside me. She asked again:

"Don't you have a picture of your mother?"

The woman's untoward curiosity was bothering me. I realized she was behaving like this just to mock me. The other artists were looking at us from a distance, most probably laughing with contempt.

"I do, but… This is different!" I said.

“Ha!... Is that so?”

And then she chuckled.

I made a move to stand up and escape. The woman, noticing this, said:

“Don’t bother, I’ll be leaving… I’ll leave you with your mother!”

She stood up, and took a couple steps. Then, she paused, and walked back, drew close to me, and with a serious and even sad air, very different from her attitude thus far, said:

“Would you really want a mother like that?”

“Yes… You’ve no idea how much!”

“Oh, really!”

She turned her back and drifted away, with a youthful gait. I straightened my head up and looked after her. Her shortly cut hair bounced on the back of her neck, and her tight blouse, which had pockets where she put her hands, clung to her body.

When I thought about how my last sentence had given away my lie, I was utterly astonished. I immediately stood up and stole into the street, utterly void of the courage to look around me.

I felt as though I were saying farewell to someone I had just met on a journey, but from whom I had to separate very hastily. I knew I could no longer set foot in this exhibition. Those people—who understood not a single thing about one another—had driven me away again.