The Invisible Woman

5

Spain is in his name, but he was not born in Madrid.

In 1919, after *maman* entered the language, it entered the landscape as well. At the end of this war from which he should not have returned, and which keeps him mobilised, in Alsace, the Moder rose from his bed, swamping the plains where the wild geese fly. Louis drifts into the arms of girls and listens to the pianola from between the breasts of passing Lolas. The water has covered everything, doing away with borders and frontiers, the sky drowns in the river and the earth opens up beneath their shoes.

Moder Mother Madre Madrid. From Haguenau to Sarrebrück, Bischwiller to Fort Louis, he lets himself be carried along by the overflowing Moder. He learns German, freedom, the language of the enemy; he reads Rilke and Mörike, Heine and Goethe. He meets up with his mother, who had been so afraid that he should die and she remain, an orphan of this son she was not supposed to have. Moder Mother Madre Madrid, Marguerite, the white Castile and the blood red Spain of Aragon. Madre Madrid.

For the name of the unnamed mother, he blackens thousands of pages. He writes lines of verse that flow effortlessly and repeat at every opportunity the forbidden syllables: my mother, my murmur, my verses of vervain and vapour. He loves, above all, the ink, its smell, the sound of it squeaking across paper, the muck of it at the printing works, the fever it gives you when it comes out of the Roneo, its part of risk and scandal, the ink of words hurried by the steel-jaw trap of speed, supple and cadenced lines, eloquent rhythms, the lethargy of copious novels that never end.

Born in Paris, born in Madrid, in a country of novels and romances, of prattlers and mad wandering knights, born in Paris, in the 16th arrondissement, born on the esplanade of Les Invalides, born where? Aragon will never know.

Marguerite leaves without telling him.

A short time after his return to Nice, deep in mourning, he tries to say where he is from. He writes a short tale, a small unfinished novel, to go back to the time of the past, the time when his mother was alive. He goes back to his family, his childhood, to explain himself, or to lose himself. He says that he is writing a 'confession'. In reality, it is an evasion. Of the milieu in which he grew up, and from which he sought to break away, just as he tried to break with refined speech, rhetorical convention and medical studies, he says nothing of note. He emphasises the banality of it all. His home was no different to the home of any other born in the last years of the 19th century, in Paris, into a penniless bourgeois family. He turns everything to grey. He discards. Then he speaks of the war, the first one, the one about which he had decided, he and his companions of surrealism and misfortune, never to speak. And of Rimbaud too. Of the trafficking of Rimbaud. Of *rimbaldisme.* In short, he speaks of other things. He speaks in the plural: *nous*.

'We would like to think, in short, that we are swans raised among duck eggs, and we seek to act like swans, at every occasion. Whence stems this defiance, this revolt, this immoderate language, and the need to reject the morality of our milieu.'

The ugly duckling.

He shrugs off the question of his father in a single line: 'As for my father, the law gives me the right to consider him a stranger.'

He spends a little longer on the question of his mother: 'May my mother, my loved ones, rest in peace.'

It is she who forms the object of his desire for reconciliation, she who was laid so recently in a pitiable grave in the small cemetery of Cahors. His desire to make peace with her, with the memory of her. To ask her forgiveness now it is too late; forgiveness for having disparaged her milieu, her condition, and all that she had always done in her attempts to remain decent, holding her head high, in her apartment that was too big, too expensive, the piano she refused to not have, all those bourgeois conceits

he had despised and thrown in her face, aged twenty years, because when we are twenty we are ungrateful and unjust. Later I will recount how he regretted having denigrated his breadwinner and mocked Marguerite.

No matter how many time he repeats that these are not memories but a confession, no matter how softly he speaks, he cannot bring himself to ask for forgiveness. Or perhaps he goes about it the wrong way.

When he evokes his father, a stranger with no name, he hisses: 'Hence I require no further humiliation, being his son as I am.'

He drinks deeply from the cup of shame at being at once his son and not. He has no difficulty explaining himself on this point. But on the denigration of his mother, whom he left in Cahors, poor, alone, far from her sisters, from her brother's grave and Claire's, on the humiliation of his mother, he, who in the eyes of the law was no more her son than he was his father's, he must explain himself. But he cannot bring himself to do this either.

He does not publish his confession.

He writes *Aurélien,* the story of an upper-class man who, like himself, went to war and never recovered from it. He meets Henri Matisse. The painter also meets Elsa. For her he paints a series of hyacinths, meticulous and complete. He knows they are her favourite flowers. They grow on the sheet of paper, pretty, light and fragile. He completes several portraits of Aragon. He traces in charcoal a face drawn with sadness. The fingers against his ear form a strange angle, his suit is sombre and and hazy, a shadow passes over his brow. When Matisse shows them to Louis, of whom the modelling sessions had demanded an unbearable silence and immobility, he is stunned. In the mirror of charcoal, Aragon sees Marguerite. Matisse had painted the mouth of his mother, whom he had never seen. He had seen the ghost through the son.

Later, much later, Aragon publishes a preface to *Aurélien,* entitled with a line from Racine:

Now the time comes, I must explain myself.

Around the same time, he writes *Le Mentir-vrai,* in which his falsified childhood is unfurled.

Explaining himself, explaining who he was, where he came from, the imbroglio of signs, the humiliation of his mother and the shame of his father: he never could bring himself to do it. Instead, he invented scenes that did not speak, content with showing what is hidden without revealing it.

It is the other scene, that of Marguerite, that I wish to show.

6

To tell the truth, I encountered Marguerite before I went rummaging through the archives of the Aragon Collection. The first I heard of her was in a poem of *Le Roman inachevé.* Three young girls are getting ready for a ball, leaving a little boy alone in his room. The child is afraid, he is waiting for his goodnight kiss.

Together the sisters must go as three
On glass panes I write in weather wintry
With a finger their three names in my breath

Three sisters, like the three Graces, the three Parcae, the three little fairies watching over cradles, three Ms: Marguerite, Marie and Madeleine, Ma Ma Ma. There was a Marthe, too, but the poem does not mention her.

They for the Saint Cyricus ball be
In three of Donkey Skin's gowns gay
One the hue of the coastal way
One of wind, one astronomy
The first is sad of what does she think

The three of them go off to dance, leaving the child alone, afraid, curled up in his bed, waiting for the night to end and for dawn to bring back Marguerite.

Of the three sisters, she is the one he is waiting for: Marguerite, whose absence prevents him from sleeping, making him want to cry all the tears in his body, as only children cry, until they no longer know what they are crying for. He has not forgotten, in 1956, when he writes *Le Roman inachevé,* the taste of loneliness unique to the child. There should be a word for this, a child's loneliness, not one to which we can become accustomed over time, nor one that is abandoned and sequestered when no longer a child. Louis' loneliness is the devastation of the absent mother.

And so it was that in these lines I first heard tell of Marguerite. *Together the sisters must go as three,* as in those fantastical stories and tales in which we wish to believe. In the limbo of the novel and the poem that invent the life and name we never had.

I knew no more than that.

Of Aragon, I knew plenty. Of his father too. But of Marguerite I knew hardly anything, and I cannot even recall the moment when I discovered she was not Louis' sister. She would emerge again and again where I least expected her, when I was least expecting it.

In an airport waiting room, for example, where, with my foot through the straps of a rucksack, I wait with my children for a delayed connection. I doze. I ask the children to wait patiently or to try to get some sleep. The exhaustion of the journey weighs on me, my eyelids are heavy, like legs that have been still for too long. Sentences in my head jumble together and break into pieces. But the children have but one desire: to run around, to climb over the chairs, to wind each other up, releasing a pent up energy exacerbated by lack of sleep. I am tired, this trip has not started well. I daydream, and through my head run lines of poetry with a cradling cadence.

Do you know the isle
In the heart of town
Where all is at peace
Forevermore

Then suddenly, my two children pull on my arms, mum, look, three little nuns, tiny ones, grey and smiling in shapeless dresses down to their sandals, just a few wisps of hair escaping their veils. Rosaries fall between their breasts, or where one would imagine them to be. They look peaceful. They wait patiently. They have skin that does not share our time: smooth, glowing, unmoving. They are neither beautiful nor ugly, young nor old. They go as three. Three little witches. Three little fairies. Identical yet different. A fantastical apparition from another time, the time of stories and tales of bygone days. Sitting on the hard seats, their heads nod gently. Then they move away to check the departures board, bobbing along like little birds of woe.

Flustered from exhaustion, I had thought of *Le Roman inachevé. Together the sisters must go as three.* I thought of the three sisters, going to the ball, dancing, without him, the whole night. Marguerite, Madeleine and Marie. It was at this moment that I wondered why there was a brother. Edmond. Why was he not called Maurice or Marcel. The intruder.

What I discovered first was that he was a natural son. As a child, I had wondered about the significance of this word: natural, a self-evident son, granted by nature just as nature grants good or bad harvests? A love child, eluding laws, control, rules? We had not yet reached the time when artificial children could be made in hospitals – outside a few bad science fiction novels, at least – rendering the expression all the more incomprehensible.

I had often heard my mother or my grandmother, in the village where they were born, in Isère, making more or less shrouded allusions to kids who were not their fathers'. They knew the mother, a loose woman, one in the oven beneath her wedding dress, that Raymond was an obliging chap, giving her three more children, not one of whom resembled the eldest. Sometimes they approved: he married her despite her already having a kid, he raised him like his other sons, he's a good man. But would they say it was a matter of a natural child? The older I got, the less they would lower their voices. There were also the *fille-mères,* 'girl-mothers', an expression just as strange as the natural son. Were they

mothers who were not wives, a ring on their fingers and a wedding photo on the dresser? Or mothers who were too young, still little girls, living with their own mothers themselves?

If he had been a natural son, it follows that Aragon must have had a *fille-mère*. But this was not the story he was told. Nor was it the story that he himself told. He was told he was an orphan, and that Claire Toucas, the mother of Edmond and the three sisters, had taken him in and adopted him. Marguerite Toucas-Massillon was his older sister.

How can this double-barrelled name be explained, if not by the fact that Marguerite had later married? Marguerite must have attached her husband's name to her maiden one, without stripping herself of her original identity, and indicating, through this succession of surnames, her succession of states: daughter – the name of her father, then wife – the name of her husband. The two joined by a hyphen. Not an ampersand, as seen between associates, but a tie: the subtlest there is, distinguishing, for example, 'great-granddaughter' from 'great granddaughter'. I saw in it the modern sign of alliance, of the junction of two times, two identities, two stories. Modern until the most audacious women keep their maiden name, stop trading in their identity for that of their husband, and assent to no longer bearing the name of their children.

I remember my stupefaction when, as a young girl, I realised, from listening to mothers gossip about a neighbour, that Madame Georges Genevais and Jeanine Sandoz, this character who had appeared in their daily account and whom I had believed a stranger to me, were one and the same.

Louis Aragon. A pseudonym. That is what I had thought at first. In place of the father's name, he had chosen for himself a writer's name: he would be the son of his work, like Éluard, Saint-John Perse, Arthur Cravan, Céline, and so many others before him. A name that signals one's entry into literature and takes the place of the mother's name: Marguerite Toucas-Massillon.

Toucas was the surname of Marguerite's father, and Massillon, logically, that of the husband. The name of the husband who married Marguerite after her mistake, who, finally, made of her a woman, and no longer a *fille-mère*.

That is the story I told myself, not imagining that I was on the wrong track, that it was all false and made up. The names, the dates, the filiations, the conditions.

And yet, that title, *Le Roman inachevé,* should have put me on the right track. An autobiography in verse, a book of poems recounting a life – a life that is unfinished, as is the life of every autobiographer when they set themselves the task of recounting it, feeling that it is eluding them, or reaching its end. We know how a novel will finish. They all die, in the end. But when you are writing your own story, you go about it differently. You prefer to focus on beginnings, to reassure yourself, to rectify, correct, gather together. To keep. To look at yourself in the mirror of time. In the erosion of bevels and embraces. *Le Roman inachevé.* A novel, because that was the only form that could proffer a falsified identity. It is signed Aragon. A novel for giving free rein to language, without asking whether it is true or false. For it was both, true and false. Or rather, the opposite, whatever you wish. Neither true nor false.

The astonishment of the child I was when my father would ask me, looking right into my eyes: is this lie true? The novel to escape this trap. It is true and it is a lie, it is false, it is not a lie, it is true and it is false.

Louis had never sought to tear off the masks. Twenty years after he wrote *Le Roman inachevé,* in which he returns to his childhood, avenue Carnot, Neuilly, Marguerite, Nancy, he appears on a television set, masked, his pale face concealed. Scandal. There is an uproar, claims of provocation, duplicity, betrayal, cowardice. As if this were the first time. As if he had not always asked the same thing of words.

He had been tricked about the names and the signs. He did not rectify this: he went along with the plot of falsified words.

I wanted to move away from the fantastical version of the tale. Marguerite needed to be uncoupled from the trio she formed with Madeleine and Marie. She needed to be brought out from the corners to which she has been reduced in Aragon's biographies. I was entering a zone entirely orientated towards the son, in which she is close to invisible.