

LOUIS ARAGON: THE NOVEL AND
POLITICAL COMMITMENT

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of
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by
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ABSTRACT

The problem of the tripartite relationship between the F. C. P., the Soviet Union and the individual communist writer is treated in this thesis. Considering that Louis Aragon spent nearly half a century in the service of a revolutionary cause, accepted social realism, the official aesthetic doctrine of the communist movement, and wrote a number of novels under its influence, the thesis focuses on the relationship between Aragon's literary and political activities. It attempts to show that the historical context, the influence of contemporary historical events and the pressure of politics led Aragon to an unconditional commitment to Marxist ideology which in turn led him into the Stalinist phase of international communism.

Since the private existence of a communist writer cannot be wholly dissociated from his public figure it is plain that the distinction between "life" and "literature" becomes untenable. Therefore, instead of beginning the study with a brief biographical sketch and thereafter concentrating on a purely literary analysis of Aragon's work, the thesis attempts to consider simultaneously each work and the historical and biographical circumstances in which it was written.

A body of literature pertaining to the subject has been investigated: memoirs, articles, reports, historical studies, etc., the main emphasis, however, is on the works of the author himself, of those of his wife, Elsa Triolet and of his former friends and collaborators most of whom have left the ranks of the F. C. P. As far as possible care has been taken to avoid conclusions based on hostile publication, such as those of the extreme right.

The study shows that Aragon passed through important stages in his development; the transformation of the youthful surrealist into the Marxist writer and his subsequent political and organizational involvements; the decisive plunge into party affairs in the thirties and the forties when he distinguished himself for his unflinching orthodoxy. The study further shows an evolutionary movement from total and unconditional support of Soviet policy and the prevalent party line to gradual disengagement until the moment when Aragon took a decisive stand against party dogmatism as well as against the tenets of the socialist realist doctrine. Despite Aragon's disillusionment with the Stalinist phase of communism, changing policies in the party enabled him to retain both his Party membership and the right to pursue his own policy in his review, Les Lettres Françaises. The demise of this review dealt the final blow which explains the deep pessimism of his latest writings.

Aragon is an unusually difficult writer to assess and to explain. His life and his works are closely intertwined and much of his work is important for a deeper understanding of political and cultural currents in twentieth century France.

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ABBREVIATIONS

- A.E.A.R. Association des Ecrivains et Artistes
Révolutionnaires.
- C. du C. Cahiers du Communisme.
- C.N.E. Comité National des Ecrivains.
- C.P.S.U. Communist Party of the Soviet Union.
- F.C.P. French Communist Party.
- L.F. Les Lettres Françaises.
- N.R.F. La Nouvelle Revue Française.
- T.M. Les Temps Modernes.
- O.C. Oeuvres romanesques croisées d'Elsa Triolet
et Aragon.
- O.P. L'Oeuvre poétique.
- P.C.F. Parti Communiste Français.
- R.A.P.P. Russian Association of Proletarian Writers.

Note: The Library of Congress table is used for transliteration of original Russian texts.

FOREWORD

Certain writers seem to be mysteriously attracted to a country other than their own. Stendhal's attachment to Italy, the fascination exercised on André Gide by Africa, the influence of Germany on the writings of Mme de Stael, Diderot's and Voltaire's interest in Russia: all these are literary history. In our time the Soviet Union has cast a spell on some, ever since the birth, out of the former Russian Empire, of the first socialist state in November 1917, with the subsequent formation of communist parties in various countries of the world.

Among contemporary French writers whose fortunes have been closely linked with the Soviet state, Louis Aragon is perhaps the best known. A member of the French Communist Party since January 1927 and a candidate member of its Central Committee since 1950,¹ Aragon, the party's most outstanding literary figure, was, until the late sixties, not only the foremost propagandist for his party's literary policies, but also its chief link with Soviet literary circles.

The number of studies devoted to Aragon's work is already considerable. Some critics have tried to give a

¹Aragon became permanent member of the Central Committee in 1954.

general view of his output, others have discussed only a particular facet of it: for example, its surrealist aspects, its love themes, or its style. Yet, despite Aragon's political activity, comparatively little attention has so far been given to his political commitment and its influence on his imaginative writings.

Certainly, there are many valid critical approaches to Aragon's work, but it seems to us that no matter which one is chosen, it is well nigh impossible to discuss adequately its literary aspects while still ignoring the author's political activity. The reason is simply that, as a member of the F.C.P. Aragon was obliged to adhere to its literary policies. What is more, for three decades Aragon himself refused to make a distinction between his political activity and his creative work. In 1946, in a speech delivered on the 45th anniversary of Zola's death, he declared: "pour moi, il n'y a pas l'écrivain d'une part, et d'autre part, le politique. C'est un seul homme."² It is only in statements of later years, when, after Stalin's demise and subsequent events, Aragon tried to dissociate himself from Stalinism, that we encounter such declarations as: "On s'est beaucoup trompé sur moi. Je ne suis pas, à aucun moment de ma vie je n'ai été un homme politique; je suis d'abord un écrivain qui a été amené à penser politique-

² Louis Aragon, "Actualité de Zola," Les Lettres Françaises, 4 Oct. 1946, p. 3. See also: Louis Aragon, "L'exemple d'Emile Zola," in La culture et les hommes (Paris: Editions Sociales, 1947).

ment."³ For, in spite of the occasional such statement, the very fact that Aragon belonged to the higher echelons of the F.C.P. made it necessary that his literary output be oriented in the direction of Marxist ideology. In other words, one must expect to find that Aragon was, for the most part, the champion of his party's policies, not the least of which was the literary doctrine of socialist realism.

From the very beginning of socialist realism, Aragon proclaimed himself a socialist realist writer. Even after Stalin's death, and notwithstanding some important revisions of the basic principles of the doctrine, he stubbornly declared his continued adherence to it. This insistence on saving face invites an examination of his novels from the point of view of socialist aesthetics.

Because the doctrine was first elaborated in the Soviet Union and only subsequently adopted by communist writers in other countries, our analysis of Aragon's commitment would not be complete without reference to Soviet literary policies and to the close links which the F.C.P. maintained with the Soviet state. This tripartite relationship between the party, the Soviet Union and the individual communist writer has already been mentioned, with reference to Aragon's Le Monde Réel, by Pierre Daix: "il existe la liaison entre ces ouvrages et l'effort de la littérature soviétique, la concordance avec une direction

³ Claude Sarraute, "Propos sur 'Les Poètes,'" Le Monde, 15 Oct. 1960.

permanente de l'action du P.C.F. auprès des écrivains."⁴

It is clear that any critic of Aragon's work must keep in mind the historical context in which it was written and, above all perhaps, take into account the shifts in the party line. Aragon himself was conscious of the influence on him of contemporary historical events. "Les hommes croient inventer seuls leur pensée," he wrote. "Ils ignorent le plus souvent que ce qui soulève leur coeur, ce qui les entraîne dépend moins de leurs goûts, de leurs tendances personnelles, que de ce climat social où ils ne peuvent s'isoler."⁵

The purpose of this essay is, then, to situate Aragon's novels in the historical context in which they were written, and to attempt to show how historical events, the policies of the Soviet state and those of the F.C.P. have influenced his imaginative writing. Our study makes no claim to be either a definitive or an exhaustive analysis, especially since some important documents--the minutes of party meetings, Aragon's and his wife's memoirs and diaries, as well as their correspondence--are for the most part inaccessible to researchers. Furthermore, notwithstanding a number of recent critical studies on the author we know little about Aragon's life and even less about his intimate

⁴Pierre Daix, "Une domestication des écrivains d'aujourd'hui," L.L.F., 8 September, 1949, p. 3. Pierre Daix, a former communist and Aragon's collaborator on L.F.

⁵Louis Aragon, Littératures soviétiques (Paris: Editions Denoël, 1955), p. 219.

thoughts. Most of the available information has had to be gleaned from Aragon's published work, where the frequent use of masks, mirrors, and "hommes doubles" indicates the probable existence of discrepancies or at least divergences, between the author's public statements and his private convictions. The reader of Aragon's work must thread his way through a labyrinth of ambiguity.

It goes without saying that Aragon's literary output is the product of more than his Marxist conception of the world. His middle class background, his childhood, which witnessed a number of traumatic personal experiences, his artistic and psychological make-up: all these things played a part in the formation of his sensibility. Nevertheless, we hope that this essay, which focuses on the relation between his literary and his political activities, will contribute in some measure to the understanding of Aragon's work.

The study follows the course of Aragon's life from the moment of his adherence to the F.C.P. in 1927 up to January 1976, and concentrates mostly on his novels.

INTRODUCTION

. . . Ce n'est pas dans les cendres du temps,
mais dans les dangereuses flammes de l'événement
que naissent les images valables de l'homme,
dût celui qui a l'audace de les y arracher s'en
brûler affreusement les mains . . .

Oeuvres romanesques croisées d'Elsa Triolet et Aragon

"Un créateur ne s'évade pas de lui-même, quoi qu'il fasse."¹ This statement, penned by Elsa Triolet, Aragon's wife, is particularly true of her husband, who consciously gave personal experience a central role in his literary work. "Et je peux bien raconter l'histoire d'autrui, c'est toujours la mienne," he wrote.² In Aragon's case, this personal experience included an unconditional commitment to Marxist ideology and led him into the tragic Stalinist phase of international communism with its unfortunate legacy of bitterness and despair. For over twenty years, Aragon promoted Stalinist policies and glorified the Soviet state. As a follower of his party's communist aesthetics he became the champion of socialist realism and wrote a number of novels under its influence. When the Stalin myth began to crumble, Aragon's attitude too started to change, but this slow change was not immediately apparent because of Aragon's continuing loyalty

¹ Elsa Triolet, La Mise en mots (Geneva: Albert Skira, 1969), p. 89.

² Louis Aragon, Théâtre/Roman (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), p. 28.

to the Soviet Union and to the F.C.P. It was only in the sixties, after a long series of painful episodes had proved irrefutably the real character of the Soviet regime, that Aragon finally and reluctantly abandoned his pro-Soviet position and began to point out the shortcomings and injustices of the existing regime. This change in attitude and position towards the Soviet Union was accompanied by a reappraisal of the concept of socialist realism and led finally to Aragon's renunciation of the Soviet doctrine.

Any attempt to establish definite dividing lines between the various phases of Aragon's career is, to a certain extent, arbitrary. However, for the purposes of analysis we will do so, because this division may help, we believe, to appreciate more clearly the consistency of Aragon's work.

There have been four broad periods in the author's evolution since his adherence to the F.C.P. The first period spans the years 1927-1932 and includes four major events: Aragon's adherence to the party in 1927, his trip to the Soviet Union in the fall of 1930, his final break with the surrealist group in 1932, and his subsequent indoctrination in the Soviet Union. Although Aragon joined the party at the beginning of 1927, for nearly five years his participation in party activities was marginal and intermittent. Following his first trip to the U.S.S.R., Aragon tried to reconcile the two mutually exclusive ideologies of Marxism and liberal democracy and the equally dissimilar

aesthetics of socialist realism and surrealism. When the party increased its pressure, Aragon realized that reconciliation was not possible and he opted for communism. His second trip and his work in the Soviet Union completed his integration into the F.C.P.

The year 1933 marks the beginning of the second period, which can be called the Stalinist period, and which lasted until Stalin's death in March 1953. This period included many major events in French and world history and can be subdivided into three parts. The second half of the thirties saw the interlude of the Popular Front, the Spanish Civil War and the growing menace of fascism. 1939 and the early forties brought the "Phony war"³ and the defeat and occupation of France, all traumatic experiences for Aragon. Then came the years of the Resistance, an exhilarating time for Aragon. Years later, Elsa wrote: "La résistance et la libération brillent dans notre passé, parées de ce que l'homme a de meilleur en lui, de ce qui nous porte vers l'homme de l'avenir."⁴ The post-war period saw a growing disenchantment. During the war, any future for France had seemed impossible without the participation in the government of the communist party--"le parti des fusillés," and, indeed, after the Liberation, the F.C.P. took its place in

³ The name given to the period extending from the moment of the declaration of war until the German attack on France: September 1939-May 1940.

⁴ Oeuvres romanesques croisées d'Elsa Triolet et Aragon, XXII (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1966), p. 141.

the government of the nation. However, its cooperation with other political parties did not stand up to the pressure of events. The exclusion of communist parliamentarians from the government was followed by a period of isolation of the F.C.P. and of extreme hostility towards its cause on the part of the public. It was during this second period that Aragon wrote all his socialist realist novels. The first three novels of Le Monde Réel,--Les Cloches de Bâle, Les Beaux Quartiers and Les Voyageurs de l'Impériale--were written before the war;⁵ Aurélien, written during the war, was published only in 1944, and the last novel of this series, Les Communistes, was written after the war, when Zhdanovism was at its height. Zhdanovism in literature was characterised by a sterile dogmatism and a suspicion of experimentation. It demanded, moreover, an unrestrained glorification of the party and the Soviet Union, as well as an expression of hatred of all the enemies of communism.

The second period also had some tragic consequences for Aragon. When, in 1946, Zhdanov reiterated the principle of "partiïnost'"⁶ in literature and denounced apolitical, cosmopolitan and bourgeois nationalist writers, Aragon, who was the most influential literary figure in the F.C.P., played a decisive part in the implementation of the literary policy laid down by the party. Together with

⁵Les Voyageurs de l'Impériale was completed just as the war broke out.

⁶See p. 189.

Kanapa, Casanova and other high-ranking party officials, he was responsible for implementing stiff intellectual and artistic regimentation. In the later phase of Stalinism, it was not enough for members to admit and to justify the crimes of Stalin on the grounds of "historical necessity"--one had to believe in the infallibility of the Stalinist line and the party used Aragon's polemical skill to convince the public. When other intellectuals refused to co-operate, the F.C.P. entrusted Aragon with the task of propagandizing the party's position, as in the case of the Lysenko affair.⁷ The Lysenko affair demonstrated how the party used the author as "une bonne à tout faire," as Edgar Morin expressed it,⁸ and it showed the absence of scruples on Aragon's part. This page in Aragon's career earned him many another unflattering epithet as well.

The decade following Stalin's death can be regarded as a transitional period in the author's evolution. Although Aragon's attitude shifted from year to year, a clearly defined development can be discerned over the whole period, as Aragon moved from his early confusion to a later attempt at disengagement. Destalinization, which had started in the Soviet Union after Stalin's death, did not gather momentum

⁷ Lysenko, a Soviet biologist, developed a theory about the transmittance of acquired characteristics, which was questioned in Western scientific circles, and which was later condemned by Soviet authorities themselves.

⁸ Edgar Morin, Autocritique (Paris: Aux Editions du Seuil, 1965), p. 112.

in the F.C.P. until some time after the Twentieth congress in 1956. Aragon's first reaction to destalinization was to join dogmatic traditionalists within the party, who for several years refused to accept any liberalizing trend; later, however, he showed an unmistakable desire to extricate himself from this dogmatic position.

The process of disengagement began around 1955 when a certain ambivalence became noticeable in Aragon's attitude towards the official party line in literature. Thus, certain passages by Aragon in Littératures soviétiques indicate that, despite this book's conformity to ideological requirements, Aragon was moving from compulsory socialist realism towards more liberal trends in literature. Then came the Twentieth congress, with its revelations about the Soviet regime, closely followed by the uprisings in Poland and Hungary. The disillusionment which accompanied these events led to the publication of Aragon's autobiographical poem Le Roman inachevé. It seems that at this point the author became concerned with the future fate of his imaginative writings and the image which posterity was to retain of their creator. The evidence suggests that he decided that this image would be better served if he presented himself as a living symbol of fidelity: fidelity in love, fidelity to his party, fidelity to the Soviet Union. This last feature became exceptionally apparent when Aragon came forward to defend the Soviet system in his Histoire de l'U.R.S.S. (1962).

A corollary of the events which took place in the Soviet Union after Stalin's death was the disrepute into which the socialist realist doctrine fell even within the Soviet orbit. The trend towards artistic freedom was, for a time, even encouraged by Soviet authorities, and the rules of socialist realism were somewhat neglected in literary works. As a result, Aragon first wrote La Semaine Sainte, then, in his collection of speeches, published under the title J'abats mon jeu, he took the offensive by attacking the dogmatism of the F.C.P., as well as the tenets of the socialist realist doctrine, which he had only recently promoted. This period also witnessed the high point of Aragon's career. In 1957, on the occasion of his 60th birthday he was awarded the Lenin prize for peace. (This prize was, by the way, regarded by some as the reward for Aragon's unconditional support of Soviet intervention in Hungary).

The fourth period opened with Aragon's endorsement of Roger Garaudy's essay D'un réalisme sans rivages, which was published in 1963 and which represented, among other things, a clear repudiation of the doctrine of socialist realism. From this time onwards, Aragon tried to undo what he now felt was the harm he had perpetrated in the past. He rewrote Les Communistes, his most outspoken socialist realist novel, removing from it all passages dealing with events his interpretation of which was now proven to be wrong, as well as those passages which had damaged his

reputation. With Elsa Triolet, he published their Oeuvres romanesques croisées wherein he presented his imaginative writings as a harmonious entity. In addition, he put out articles and essays in which he stressed the unpremeditated character of his writings and, as evidence of his change of heart, he wrote a number of novels in a style reminiscent of his surrealist days.

This period also saw the gradual worsening of Aragon's relationship with the Soviet Union. The tension caused by his defence of certain victims of the Soviet regime--Siniavski, Daniel and Solzhenitsyn, for example--culminated in an open break after the invasion of Czechoslovakia and the consequences thereof. This split with the Soviet Union, and the deteriorating position of international communism as the result of inner strife within the communist camp, had an adverse effect on Aragon personally, greatly diminishing as it did his influence and prestige. His recent novels contain an examination of his past and a reappraisal of his political and aesthetic views. Extremely bitter, they testify to the errors of unconditional commitment and they carry a tragic warning to Aragon's reading public.

PART ONE
THE LURE OF THE EAST