Louis Aragon (1897-1982)

Louis Aragon was a twentieth-century French poet, critic, theorist, and editor. After serving as a medical worker during the First World War, Aragon joined his friends, André Breton and Philippe Soupault, in establishing the Surrealist movement. His prose, poetry, criticism, and theory of the early 1920s, which was heavily influenced by Dadaist literature, gave the literary Surrealist movement a strong historical and theoretical context. His essay *Une vague de rêves* (1924) and his novel *Le Paysan de Paris* (1926) are seen as seminal Surrealist texts. Beginning in the late 1920s, Aragon gradually changed the nature of his writing to align with Socialism and Socialist Realism and eventually split with André Breton in 1931-32. With an ever-growing commitment to Communism, his marriage to Russian writer and activist, Elsa Triolet, greatly influenced his writing and actions. As the director of the *Commune*, he provided an avenue for dissent against fascism. Aragon’s legacy is largely defined by his wartime poetry of the Second World War. After being mobilized briefly at the start of the war, Aragon joined the Resistance and set up an underground press with Triolet. His poetry from the 1940s documented the memory of Resistance fighters and contributed to the collective memory of the Second World War from a Moddernist perspective of dissent.

Mobilized in 1917, Aragon trained in medicine and served as an auxiliary doctor. After the War, he began his career as a poet and theorist, publishing critiques of contemporary cinema and articles discussing the new objectives of artistic expression. He founded the review *Littérature* (1919) with André Breton and Philippe Soupault. In 1924, Aragon, Breton, and Soupault established Surrealism as a movement. Aragon was prolific in his Surrealist writings, often publishing in the group’s periodical, *La Révolution Surréaliste* (1924-1929). Aragon’s work and politics from the late 1920s until his death were largely inspired by his 42-year relationship with Triolet, whom he married in 1939. In the late 1920s, Aragon began to shift his interest away from the Surrealist movement, toward Communism, which was set in motion with his 1927 *Traité de Style*, written the year he joined the Communist Party. Aragon experimented with the relation between poetic style and social action. Still linked with Surrealism in 1927, Aragon claimed that Surrealists were providing a means of reclassification of values through writing itself. He strove to shock his readers by mocking the commercialization of Parisian culture. His work highlighted the ways in which the bourgeoisie’s hypocritical attempts to appropriate revolutionary ideas weakened the spirit of rebellion. He became director of the journal *Commune*, which provided a platform for authors working against fascism.

In 1939, Aragon was awarded the *Croix de Guerre* for bravery. While members of the French Resistance, he and Triolet set up the National Front of Writers in the Southern Zone. His poetry during the war documented the events of the Resistance; Aragon is often referred to as a wartime poet whose work commemorates the horrors of war and celebrates the spirit of the Resistance. Remaining a party member, he began to work against the effects of Stalinism in Eastern Europe in the 1960s and published the works of dissidents including Alexandr Solzhenitsyn.

References and further reading

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Josephson, H. and M. Cowley. (1946) *Aragon: Poet of Resurgent France*. London: The Pilot Press Ltd.

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List of Major Works

Novels and Essays

1924 *Une Vague de Reves*

1924 *La Libertinage*

1926 *Le Paysan de Paris*

1928 *Traité du Style*

1935 *Pour un Réalisme Socialiste*

1945 *Aurélien*

Poems

1919 *Feu de Joie*

1942 *Les Yeux d’Elsa*

1945 *En Étrange Pays dans mon Pays Lui-Même*

1964 *Il Ne M’est Paris que d’Elsa*