**Max Aub (1903-1972)**



**Thumbnail:**

Max Aub was one of the most important Spanish authors and critics of the twentieth century. A prolific writer of poetry, fiction, drama, screenplays and essays, his work spans the period from the late 1920s to the 1960s. Aub is most celebrated for his six-volume novel cycle, *El Laberinto Mágico* (*The Magic Labyrinth*)*,* written between 1939 and 1968, which marries aesthetic experimentation with testimonial realism about the Spanish Civil War. As cultural attaché for the Spanish Republican Government, Aub was responsible for commissioning Pablo Picasso’s ‘Guernica.’ Imprisoned in 1940 in Vichy France, Aub escaped to Mexico where he wrote prolifically and collaborated on many films with Luis Buñuel and others. He became a professor of film and directed the Radio and Television program of the University of Mexico between 1961 and 1966. He became a Mexican citizen in 1955 and was made Chevalier of the Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in France in 1972.

TIMELINE OF LIFE:

1903-born, Paris;

1914 - moves to Valencia, Spain;

1926 marries Perpetua (Peua) Barjau;

1936-38- cultural attaché in Paris;

1940 – imprisoned in Camp Vernet and Djelfa, Algiers;

1942- settled in Mexico;

1943-51 Professor at the Instituto Cinematografico of Mexico City

1955 – Mexican citizenship

1961-66 – directs radio programming a the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (Radio UNAM)

1969- visits Spain;

1972 – Chevalier, Ordre des Arts et des Lettres, France;

1972- died in Mexico

Aub was born Max Aub Mohrenwitz in 1903 in Paris to a French Jewish mother and a German father who was a prosperous businessman. When war broke out in 1914, Aub’s father was caught in Spain and brought his family to join him in Valencia. Once Aub had finished his basic schooling, he joined his father’s business, traveling with him throughout Spain and on his own in Europe. It is in this period that his lifelong identification with the country developed, and he became a Spanish citizen in 1924. In 1926 he married Perpetua (Peua) Barjau.

Aub began writing short prose, poems and theatre sketches as an amateur before leaving school and subscribed to all the major literary magazines in French, German and Spanish, including *La Nouvelle revue française* and *España*. He soon came under the influence of Ortega y Gasset and the Spanish ‘vanguardist’ writers who surrounded him. Aub’s earliest narrative works, *Geografía* (1929), a retelling of the Phedre story primarily through dreams, *Fábula verde* (1933), a strange combination of fantasy, symbolism, and mystery, and *Luis Alvarez Petreña* (1934), a highly abstract text merging actual and fictional characters, have many of the stylistic trademarks of the modernism Ortega described as ‘dehumanized literature.’ Aub’s plays from the period, collected in the 1931 *Teatro incompleto,* are avant-garde works focusing on themes of human isolation and incommunication.

By 1928 Aub became a socialist and joined the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (Spanish Socialist Worker’s Party). He became increasingly involved in left-leaning politics, and began to publish essays in leftist journals as well as continuing to write plays and narratives. In 1933, he travelled to Russia to see socialist theatre first hand. By 1936, and the victory of the popular front, he was in charge of the socialist newspaper “Verdad.” His plays from the thirties, such as *La guerra* (*The War,* 1935) and *El agua no es del cielo* (*The Water does not Belong to the Sky,* 1936*)* reflect this political shift. Aub also composed poetry and other short works throughout the thirties, even as he took on more public responsibilities, serving as a key member of the Alianza de Intelectuales Antifascistas par la Defensa de la Cultura (Alliance of Anti-Fascist Intellectuals for the Defense of Culture). He was cultural attaché to France in 1936-8 and as deputy commissioner of the Spanish pavilion at the Paris world’s fair commissioned Picasso’s Guernica to hang in it. In this period Aub began to develop the narrative mode he would later call ‘transcendental realism’, which marries vanguardist experimental narrative with a socially and politically engaged realism.

In 1938 Aub helped André Malraux transform his novel *L’Espoir* (*Man’s Hope)* into the film *Sierra de Teruel*. Aub wrote the screenplay and assisted in the filming on the streets of Barcelona just before it fell to Franco in 1939. Having escaped to Paris, he was denounced as a Jewish communist, arrested, and imprisoned by the Vichy government in 1940. Aub spent almost three years in concentration camps in France and Djelfa, Algiers, where he began work on his magnum opus, the six-novel cycle on the Civil War, *El laberinto mágico* (*The Magic Labyrinth*). He escaped the camps, bringing with him many poems, which he published in *Diario de Djelfa*, as well as notes for at least the first three volumes of *El laberinto mágico*. The Mexican government helped him resettle in Mexico City in 1942, where he immediately began to collaborate with other Spanish exiles, including, eventually, the filmmaker Luis Buñuel.

Aub’s exile in Mexico began a period of immense productivity and continuation of the politically and socially engaged writing he had begun as the war broke out. The six plays he wrote between 1942 and 1950 all focus on the possibility of human action under the conditions of duress and especially warfare. Perhaps most significantly, he transformed his camp notes into the six volumes of *El laberinto mágico*, which he published between 1943 and 1968. The novel cycle is at once a tour de force of narrative innovation and a moving chronicle of Spain during wartime. The volumes are characterized by an abandonment of narrative omniscience, the disruption of plot order, and the use of a labyrinthine narrative structure even as they display accuracy of detail, strength of characterization, and complexity of situation. The novel as a whole works on the most direct level as reportage, and on the most abstract, as meditation on humanity and the situation of total war. It forms the best example of Aub’s ‘transcendental realism’, a mode that combines subjectivity of perspective and objectivity of focus on the external world.

In Mexico, while directing for the theatre, translating, writing criticism, and producing anthologies, Aub also worked in the media of film, radio and television. He considered film a major influence on all his work and collaborated on at least 24 films in the forties and fifties. He became a professor of film from 1943-51 and directed the Radio and Television program of the University of Mexico between 1961 and 66. He founded the journal *Sala de espera,* which published between 1948 and 1951, and later *Los Sesenta*, whose editors included Jorge Guillén and Rafael Alberti. Aub collaborated on the script for Luis Buñuel’s celebrated 1950 film *Los Olvidados.* In 1961 he initiated the long running radio series *Voz viva de México* and later *Voz viva de América Latina*.

Several of Aub’s final texts display a new interest in literary masquerade and parody. Aub’s celebrated 1958 mock biography of the fictional painter Jusep Torres Campalans, who was supposed to be a friend of Picasso and the first cubist painter, appeared at the same time as an exhibit of paintings attributed to Campalans (but created by Aub). Critics such as Octavio Paz and Carlos Fuentes fell for the ruse and praised Aub for making such an important discovery. His collection of poems *La antologia traducida*, published in 1963, constructs a similar subterfuge, purporting to be a collection of translated poems from minor, unsung writers, when in reality the volume is Aub’s own work. In 1966-7, Aub lectured for Unesco at Hebrew University, Jerusalem, producing as a result the collection *Impossible Sinai*, poems supposedly found in the pockets of Arabs and Jews who were killed in the Arab-Israeli War of 1968. The texts, however, were entirely written by Aub.

In his final years of life Aub was able to return to Spain (1969, 1972), where his literary work began to be republished. He was made Chevalier, of the Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in France shortly before his death in 1972.

Selected references and further reading:

Fiction

1929  *Geografía*

1933 *Fábula verde*

1934 *Luis Alvarz Petreña*

1943 *Campo cerrado* (*El laberinto mágico*, vol. 1); *Field of Honour* (Trans. Gerald Martin, 2009)

1944 *No son cuentos*

1945 *Campo de sangre* (*El laberinto mágico* vol. 2)

1951 *Campo abierto* (*El laberinto mágico* vol. 3)

1953 *¡Yo vivo!*

1954 *Las buenas intenciones*

1958 *Jusep Torres Campalans* (Trans. Herbert Weinstock, 1962)

1960 *La verdadero historia de la muerte de Francisco Franco y otros cuentos*

1961 *La calle de Valverde*

1963 *Campo de Moro* (*El laberinto mágico*, vol. 4)

1965 *Campo francés* (*El laberinto mágico*, vol. 5)

1965 *Historias de la mala muerte*

1968 *Campo de los almendros* (*El laberinto mágico*, vol. 6)

1969 *Ultimos cuentos de la guerra de España*

Drama

1928 *Narcisco*

1931 *Teatro incompleto*

1938 *Pedro López García*

1943 *San Juan*

1944 *Morrir por cerrar los ojos*

1944 *La Vida conyugal*

1946 *El rapto de Europa*

1948 *Cara y Cruz*

1949 *De algún tiempo a esta parte*

1950 *Deseada*

1952 *No*

1956 *Tres monólogos y uno solo verdadero*

1960 *Obras en un acto*

1962 *Después*

1965 *Las vueltas*

1968 *El cerco*

1968 *Teatro complete*

1969 *Retrato de un general*

Poetry

1925 *Los poemas cotidianos*

1933 *A*

1944 *Diario de Djelfa*

1971 *Subverciones*

1963 *La antologia traducida*

*Impossible Sinai*

Criticism

1945 *Discurso de la novela española contemporánea*

1947 *La poesía española contemporánea*

1952 *La prosa española del siglo XIX*

1967  *Hablo como hombre*

1974 *Manual de historia de la literatura española*

See:

<http://www.maxaub.org/>

<http://www.spainisculture.com/en/artistas_creadores/max_aub.html>

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