

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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ARAGON, LOUIS (1897-1982)

Aragon, Louis: importance for French literature. Louis Aragon (1897-1982) was born and died in Paris. He left a noteworthy mark on French literature. He, along with Andre Breton, was at the foundation of the literary movement of Surrealism. In addition he was a devoted member of the French Communist party, during the dramatic Cold War Years in which intellectuals in the West were defining themselves in terms of extraordinary new political ideologies.

Louis Aragon; Life and Works. Louis Aragon was born and died in Paris. The story of his upbringing is unparalleled in its complexity, and surely has a bearing on his work. Louis was raised by his mother and by his maternal grandmother. However—thanks to the manipulations of his mother and grandmother—he was convinced that these two women were, respectively, his sister and foster mother. His biological father, the senator Louis Andrieux, was thirty years older than his wife, and essentially refused to recognize Louis as his son. As a result, Louis was fobbed off as Louis's godfather. The truth of this entire ruse was revealed to Louis at age nineteen, but by then his father's refusal to recognize him had cut a deep wound, and Aragon lived his with this absence of an active father. Who can doubt that the backstory to his family tree played a role in the upside down syntax of poetry within Surrealism? From 1919 on, at the end of one all enveloping war, but at the start—as we would be forced to know—of a far worse, Aragon plunged into the center of his society, writing his poetry, joining fellow writers in the Dadaist movement (1919-1924), and from the early 20's on joining the Communist Party as a fellow-traveler. (It is for this wholehearted engagement with his time, that Aragon continues to fascinate us.) In 1924 Louis Aragon became a founding member of the Surrealist Movement, along with his colleagues Andre Breton and Phillipe Soupault. By the same year, 1924, he became a full member of the Communist Party, and began to work for the Communist newspaper, *L'Humanite*. In other words, Communism and Surrealism—two very different versions of status quo rebellion—coincided in the developing Aragon. From this point on, as he configured his world view, Aragon wrote fervently about the beliefs and styles he admired.

I demand that my books be judged with utmost severity, by knowledgeable people who know the rules of grammar and of logic, and who will seek beneath the footsteps of my commas the lice of my thought in the head of my style.

In other words, the refusal of bourgeois language went hand in hand, in Aragon, with his refusal of the bourgeois structure of society. His poetry on war, love, nature, and confidence in the future is memorable and assumes many forms, not simply the extreme surrealist form: his poems from the war years are collected in the volume *Aragon, Poet of the French Resistance* (1945). Even before that, though, he was known for his novels, among which the later attempt to portray the whole of French society. In other words Aragon is a flexible writer, deeply involved with own time and, like many writers, skilled at assuming contradictory guides in his expression.

Reading

Primary source reading

Paris Peasant, tr. Taylor, 2004.

Secondary source reading

Aragon: Poet of the Resistance, ed. Josephson and Cowley, 1945.

Further reading

Adereth, Max, *Elsa Triolet and Louis Aragon: An Introduction to their Interwoven Lives and Works*, 1994

Original language reading

Sanouillet, M. *Dada a Paris*, 1993.

Suggested paper topics

What relation do you see, between Aragon's complex and insecure childhood, and the kinds of surreal verbal projects from which he made his literature? Would you like to generalize about the psychological origins of surrealism in general?

As you reflect on Aragon's life and work, consider the relation between literary surrealism and communism. Can you see how they can coexist? Do they share certain common values and perspectives?

Excerpt

http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/l/louis_aragon.html

We know that the nature of genius is to provide idiots with ideas twenty years later.

Light is meaningful only in relation to darkness, and truth presupposes error. It is these mingled opposites which people our life, which make it pungent, intoxicating. We only exist in terms of this conflict, in the zone where black and white clash.

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Love is made by two people, in different kinds of solitude. It can be in a crowd, but in an oblivious crowd.

Fear of error which everything recalls to me at every moment of the flight of my ideas, this mania for control, makes men prefer reason's imagination to the imagination of the senses. And yet it is always the imagination alone which is at work.

O reason, reason, abstract phantom of the waking state, I had already expelled you from my dreams, now I have reached a point where those dreams are about to become fused with apparent realities: now there is only room here for myself.

There are strange flowers of reason to match each error of the senses.