



## REVIEW and COMMENT

# THE RESISTANCE SINGS

By ISIDOR SCHNEIDER

A POETRY as remarkable as their heroism characterizes the resistance movements of Europe. Most of the poets being fighters, the deeds and poems were equal expressions of their devotion to the people. Both came out of an identification of the individual with the community that was spontaneous and complete. With it there returned to Western Europe a spirituality that, on such a scale, has been absent for generations.

Louis Aragon's poetry is infused with the elation and ardor of that identification, of which he gives a moving description in this passage from a letter to the Josephsons:

We had received orders *not* to do any local job, *not* to come in touch with local Party members, and so on. But we couldn't, after a certain moment, keep from helping the people around us: because that last year you can't imagine what France was like. My God, it was a repayment for everything in life! And people can slander and chitchat and loathe us, but we have seen that heroic moment when everybody was ready at every moment to die for anybody, people they didn't even know, provided that they were against the common enemy. You must believe me . . . that it is by no means a manner of speech if I say that in those incredibly long and bloody months life became a song for all of us: and you know, in the best of songs there are certainly tears, but how beautiful the voice and the eyes of the people appear when singing; they can't stop themselves crying!

It is natural that the fullest expression of this resurgence to appear in English should come from France and from Louis Aragon.\* Of all European literatures the French has the oldest and closest ties with the English and American; and of all contemporary French writers Aragon has had the most continuous personal ties with American and English writers during two periods of active mutual influence, the American "exile" twenties and the Left thirties.

In Aragon's case it is not a diversion from the poetry itself first to know the

man. His virile verse rings all the clearer and more sonorous for knowing him.

He first appears in the literary vanguard in Paris, after the First World War, by education a physician, by the fate of his generation a war veteran; by choice a writer. The war and the caricature of a world settlement made by the victors left his generation mutinous toward a culture that had produced such abominations. Among its expressions were the defiant, self-alienating cultural movements like Dadaism in which Aragon played a leading role.

Then came the capitalist crisis. A system that had sacrificed human values for its banks and stock markets proved incapable even of keeping its banks and stock markets going and was resorting to fascism, the most hideous protection racket in history. The tension of the emergency reached the alienated writers and artists. They saw Europe menaced by imminent barbarism, and the labor movement the strongest defender of human values. The literary significance of the change from Dada to the literary Left is characterized perfectly in a passage in another letter to the Josephsons:

First we worked over the problem of language so carefully that nothing seemed worthy of it; nothing seemed worthwhile saying. We said *nothing* magnificently and with the greatest freedom of expression. And now we have found what we had to say, more than we had ever dreamed. Can we ever say it well enough?

One of the most important productions of the Left thirties was Aragon's *Red Front*, a long poem whose excited rhythms and sweeping images showed the impact of Mayakovsky. A French court sentenced Aragon to five years' imprisonment on the pretext that the poem insulted the French flag. But, frightened by the public outcry, the government suspended the sentence.

In this period before World War II Aragon wrote two long novels that are among the outstanding achievements of social fiction; helped to organize and participated in national and international cultural conferences; and was one of the editors of *Ce Soir*, largest

newspaper of the Left, with a circulation approaching half a million.

World War II came. Aragon, then in his early forties, was drafted. The hysterical government of the French bourgeoisie sought to punish him for being a Communist by putting him into a labor battalion consisting of Czech and Spanish refugees. To these men, reliable and determined anti-Nazis, were given shovels instead of guns!

Succeeding in getting himself transferred to a combat formation Aragon won two *Croix-de-guerre*, one with a divisional and one with an army citation, and the *Medaille Militaire*, one of the two highest French decorations. This collection of medals had its use. The Vichy police could not lightly arrest a man who, in addition to his fame as a writer, had won such distinction as a patriot.

Aragon wrote as long as was possible under Vichy "legality"; then in semi-legality under transparent pseudonyms and in publications printed in Switzerland and smuggled across the border. Finally, in November 1942, when the Italians entered Nice, Aragon went "under the deep and pleasant cover of illegality."

Through difficulties before which hands like Gide's fell limp, Aragon, from the outbreak of the war to its end, finished a novel and published six books of verse and a First Aid manual for the Maquis. This would be staggering had he done nothing else; but he was active, also, in the military and political organization of the Resistance. The fecund energy of this physically unimpressive man filled the land with the pervasion of a legend. As many Americans were to discover and as Peter Rhodes reports in a valuable section of this book, Aragon's name, spoken anywhere in the country, brought a light into people's faces.

To us in America, beset by unctuous radio voices uttering matter mechanized to its last rehearsed scream, with a superabundant press whose most useful war service has been to provide waste paper, the importance of the literary phase of the Resistance may not be

\* ARAGON, POET OF THE FRENCH RESISTANCE, edited by Hannah Josephson and Malcolm Cowley. Duell, Sloan & Pearce. \$2.

clear. Let us bear in mind that in a country under occupation merely to raise the voice is to counterattack. Like the shot across a battle-line that brings an answering volley, the raised voice calls up against it all the enemy's machinery of repression. For the enemy recognizes, in the raised voice, the rallying cry of the subject people's counter-offensive; and knows that from it will issue the government and the army of the Underground.

**W**HY does that voice so generally speak in poetry? Because poetry is terse and therefore economic of precious paper and space; because it is mnemonic and can therefore be carried in the mind when papers must not be carried; but above all because it concentrates so much in allusions accessible only to the attuned mind. Senses within ambiguous lines that frustrate the enemy mind, vibrate in the patriot mind with enormous resonances of memory and tradition. That is why the bulk and the most effective portion of Resistance literature has been poetry.

Examining the examples given here, one can understand its power. The subjects are direct and personal; the beloved and the hated, the glorious patriot and the ignominious traitor, the place names for which the dislocations of war have created deep nostalgias. Comrade and enemy are both close; the struggle, with all its tensions, is immediate, the immense patience with which defeats are endured are balanced by the immense elation of victories. No one can raise his head from such poetry without a sense of the universal; but the universal is reached from the personal and local.

From this we can understand some of the reasons for the failure of our war poetry. From the personal and the local to the universal—this is the natural course; but we reversed it. We went from ready-made universals; and then we went from these to persons who were indifferent and to places where the OPA was a Roosevelt "tyranny." We presumed a unity that we knew did not exist and ignored evils that did exist. And our universals never emerged from abstractions that, to begin with, were only fractionally true. That is why I do not agree with Malcolm Cowley, of whose thoughtful and valuable comment this is not to be taken as a derogation, that the circumstances of the occupation is the chief explanation of the success of the Resistance poets, compared to ours. Nor can I agree with Mr.

Cowley's other explanation that attributes that success to the necessary solitude of the Resistance poets, on the grounds that "poets write best as lonely men." It is true that in the actual composition of even a political pamphlet the writer must be physically alone. But his mind must be with the group in whose name the pamphlet is issued and with the group to whom it is to be distributed. As underground work enforces physical separation, so in that very conditioning it intensifies spiritual unity. It would be unfair to Mr. Cowley to suggest that he entirely ignores this; but he weights his emphasis on the individual and away from the collective.

Moreover, Aragon's more than a decade of Communist activity has oriented him to the collective, and the sense of social responsibility appears to have become organic in his thinking. Nor should Cowley, or for that matter our own Left critics, ignore the collectivity of Aragon's former associations, the collectivity of the literary "schools," which characterized French literature. It was in these schools, too, it should be acknowledged, with their dedication to the perfection of forms and techniques, that the poets acquired the literary mastery whose reward is the fertile and seemingly effortless poetry that Aragon and the other Resistance poets, many of them his former comrades in Dada, brought to the people.

I have stressed the poetry in this volume because it is the major part of the book. But I should not like to give the impression of slighting its examples of Aragon's prose, the quality of much of which the reader may gather from the passages of the letters that I have quoted. The prose includes eloquent

tributes to the poet St. Pol Roux, whom the Nazis killed when he tried to prevent the rape of his daughter, and to a group of hostage martyrs; an introduction to a volume of sonnets by Jean Cassou composed in prison by an effort of the memory and borne out from the prison in the memory; a witty satire on a search operation by Vichy gendarmes; and an editorial celebrating the liberation of the area in which Aragon was active at the time.

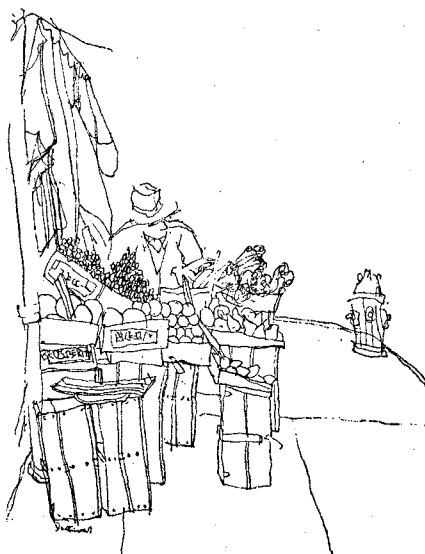
Our gratitude is due to all those who made this book available to us, to Rolfe Humphries, Louis MacNeice, Stephen Spender, Kenneth Muir, William Jay Smith, John Hayward, Grace Wallace, George Dillon, Helen Burlin and Eugene J. Sheffer, among the translators; to Peter Rhodes and Waldo Frank for their informative essays "Aragon: Resistance Leader" and "Aragon Between Wars"; and particularly to the editors, not only for bringing us the book and as translators, but for their part in making Aragon known to us, Mrs. Josephson in her introduction and Mr. Cowley in his essay "Poet of This War."

## Of Giant Stride

NORTH STAR COUNTRY, by Meridel Le Sueur. Duell, Sloan & Pearce. \$3.

**T**HERE are two kinds of patriotism: the jingoism that is an acid in the thought-stream of a people, that shrinks, withers, and acts like a vinegar spray; the love that springs from the people and their culture, that enriches the land and the world with its gift of a people's voice and laughter and strength.

The latter quality is woven through and through Meridel Le Sueur's beautiful book. More in poetry than prose, more in a song than a story, she tells the birth, the growing up and the coming of age of her own good land, the lake and river and city country of Northwest Wisconsin and Minnesota. Her hero is Paul Bunyan; for Paul Bunyan of the giant stride and the laugh that could be heard echoing and re-echoing across seven states is a symbol of the people: and where there swirled together the Swede, the Yankee and German and Czech and Pole and Lithuanian and Jew and Frenchman and Finn, and only a beginning there, when you list the nations, what other hero would be big enough for them, or broad enough? And the quality of the book is the quality of the land of wheat and the golden struggle, river, lake, prairie and masterpieces that rose from it. Astor at



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