

Louis Aragon

“Poet of the War”

HANNAH JOSEPHSON

IT used to be said, in the early twenties in Paris, that of all living French writers Louis Aragon was the most affable to visitors from abroad, and surely the sympathetic reception he granted to foreigners who had attempted in vain to overcome the shyness, indifference, or even hostility of other distinguished men of letters was like coming in out of the rain to sit before a bright fire. In those days Aragon was a risen sun in the literary firmament, illuminating everything he touched without scorching. Blessed by the elder French writers as a young lord of language, applauded by his contemporaries as a champion of youthful experiment, he was recognized everywhere for the boundless, already mature talent which so often shows itself in the French at an early age. His gaiety, then as now, was most infectious, and he was always willing to share an unexpected piece of good fortune—say a sum of money realized from the sale of a manuscript to a wealthy admirer—with his more impoverished friends of all nations. On one of these occasions, a few years after the First World War, I remember his taking about a dozen of us to Montmartre to celebrate the receipt of 150 francs that had unaccountably appeared in his morning mail. When the money ran out after each guest had drunk his very limited share of the champagne, Aragon simply shrugged his shoulders and sustained the spirit of intoxication by reciting innumerable verses of Victor Hugo. Then, the party over, there would be long walks through the darkened streets of Paris, with Aragon talking, talking about every conceivable problem of life or literature. This gift of his for speech he carried over directly into his writing. The French are naturally articulate, but the ability to reproduce in the written word the very tone and accent of common speech belongs particularly to Louis Aragon among his generation.

Born in 1897, Aragon was not slow to indicate his preference for a career of letters, for at the age of seven he had already written a complete novel, consisting of about fifteen chapters in as many pages, but containing the most remarkable complexities of plot and characterization. When it was published in *Littérature*, the monthly organ of the Dadaists, in 1923, it was impossible not to make the analogy

with the infant Mozart. Aragon finished his studies at the lycée, and had undertaken a year's work in medicine before he was called to serve in the army in the First World War. After his demobilization he returned to his medical studies, and before he realized that literature, and not medicine, was his proper calling, he had somehow found time to write four books. This was while serving his internship in a large Paris hospital, when he was still in his early twenties. “*Feu de Joie*,” a volume of poems, published in 1920, won instant attention and acclaim from the critics; “*Anicet*,” a novel about a Stendhalian hero among the anarchist bandits of Paris in 1911, one of the first books ever written in the cinematic technique, was published in 1921; “*Le Libertinage*,” a book of short stories of striking originality of form, several of which were translated and published in advance-guard American literary reviews, appeared as a collection in 1924; a second novel, “*Les Aventures de Télémaque*,” had been published the year before, and was distinguished; among other things, for containing one chapter made up entirely of a single word endlessly repeated, simply because Aragon liked the sound: “*Mirabelle, Mirabelle . . . etc.*”

Though the endless repetition of a single word had, from Aragon's point of view, been dictated by poetic necessity, it was still a trick calculated to win the admiration of his contemporaries. At the close of the war Aragon, together with André Breton, Philippe Soupault, and Tristan Tzara, had launched the Dadaist movement, which its originators termed “a state of mind,” rather than a school, and which was destined to attract a large part of the young literary talent in Europe then lying around and wondering where to go. By far the most prolific and talented of the creative writers in the group was Louis Aragon.

In the middle twenties, under the leadership of Breton, Soupault and Aragon, the Dadaist movement underwent a sea-change, and without dropping its iconoclasm, so far as the old schools were concerned, adopted a more affirmative program, emerging as Surrealism. Once again Aragon was in the forefront of the new trend, which explored realms of sensation and consciousness unknown before Freud, and asserted the supremacy of dream-life



Louis Aragon

over other forms of action and experience. It was at this period that he wrote “*Le Paysan de Paris*,” a “classical” work of the experimental era, which, more than any other previous work, established his reputation.

But as the world crisis approached, the atmosphere of the literary coteries proved too confining for him, in spite of the valuable elements in the Surrealist movement, which none had assayed more thoroughly than he, and Aragon's gifts sought a wider arena in which to deploy. The enormous dislocations of the world depression in the early 1930's brought home to him the plight of human beings as such, rather than as figures of speech. A period of travel, observation and study confirmed him in his abhorrence of the Fascist solution to the current problems. On his return to France he entered the field of journalism, in which he soon attained a position of prominence, helping to found the Popular Front evening paper *Ce Soir*—set up to compete with the conservative *Paris-Soir*—and becoming its editor-in-chief. The newspaper under his direction quickly reached a wide circulation, filling a long-felt popular need for a journal of pronounced anti-Fascist policy, for which M. Paul Bonnet, the appeaser of the Nazis, often felt called upon to denounce Aragon bitterly in the Chamber of Deputies.

It was while in the midst of a crowded schedule as editor of a large metropolitan daily that Aragon embarked on a form of writing new to him, for which all his talents and training had, however, prepared him, and which his newly awakened social consciousness had made imperative: the novel of social realism. His work in this form he refers to as “The Real

World," although each of the three novels that has appeared under this general title is complete in itself. "Les Cloches de Basle" (brought out in America as "The Bells of Basle"), his first effort in this direction, was published in Paris in 1934. This was followed by "Les Beaux Quartiers" (Residential Quarter), which appeared in 1937. Both books have run into many editions in France. His most mature and ambitious novel thus far, "Les Voyageurs de l'Impériale" is due to be brought out this year in Paris.

Rejecting the mode for the gargantuan novel that takes a lifetime to read, and of which Marcel Proust, Roger Martin du Gard, and Jules Romains are the most famous (if unequal) exponents, Aragon in "The Real World" has reverted to earlier models, that of Balzac in the "Comédie Humaine" and Zola in "Les Rougon-Macquart," who gave an exhaustive history of their own time in a series of separate panels. Like his great prototypes, Aragon describes a different milieu and a new set of characters in each novel, and in each novel the picture of life in France under the Third Republic is rounded out still further. "The Real World" is concerned with real people and the impact of actual events on their personal histories, a literal approach to which Aragon's earlier preoccupations with the world of images, dreams, and the subconscious have only given an edge. Of the present volume he has written that "it presupposes a detailed knowledge of the history of the French novel," and it is not surprising to find here suggestion of the romanticism of Constant and Hugo, the realism of Balzac, the naturalism of Zola, and the psychological complexity of Gide.

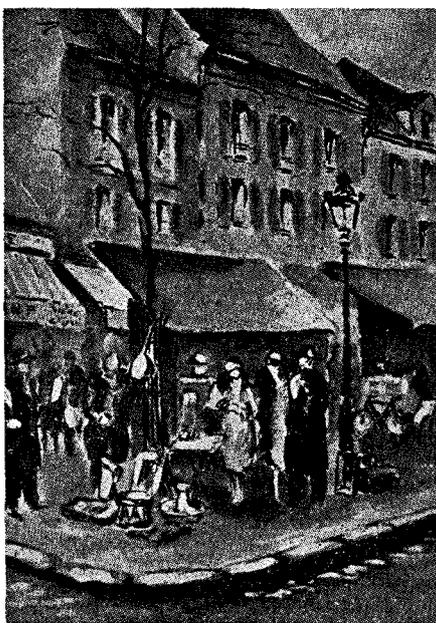
All of French life is to be found in these novels, the good as well as the bad, elegant society, the middle classes, the peasantry, workers, teachers, doctors, artists, politicians, industrialists, even the denizens of a brothel. To say that a novelist must have a deep understanding of people's motives is only a truism: Louis Aragon knows his people well enough to balance the conflict of motives to so just a poise that we can see the scales still quivering after the balance has been achieved. We can see too all the causes of the French defeat here, the corruption, the relentless individualism, the lack of unity and social purpose, and perhaps, in spite of momentary defeat, all the promise of that crushed and bleeding country as well: the fundamental intelligence of the French as a people, the realism and just self-appraisal, the spirit of high adventure not yet burned out in them. If we should ever be obliged to ask: "What was France?," "The Real World" will tell us.

In the summer of 1939 Louis Aragon had finished "The Century Was Young," and had outlined in his mind and for his friends the plans for a new novel, which was to be, quite simply, a love story. But in these times, when every man's life reads like an item in the newspapers, the fall of 1939 found him in uniform, like millions of his countrymen. Twenty years before he had seen service in the trenches, and had been decorated. Now, twenty years older, he was at first attached to a regiment of men of his own age, then transferred up toward the front to join a tank corps manned by youths. "Who knows where there is a better place for a man of my kind?" he wrote (in English) to friends in America. "I feel very sport-[ing] about it and rather happy, at 42, to be still counted as a young boy. . . . I am writing poetry like a devil: having two reasons to do it, the war and my wife. The second being the first, if I dare say. . . ."

"Time has found again her plodding pace," begins the first poem he sent back to his wife from the then quiet front in the fall of 1939, a poem whose nostalgic tone is set by the wry irony of the title: "Twenty Years After," taken from the novel of that name by Alexander Dumas the elder.

Time has found again her plodding
pace
In slow red oxen yoked to a rum-
bling cart
Autumn has come: the gilded leaves
embrace
Patches of sky. October sleeps apart.

These carolingian days find us dull
kings
Our dreams crawl forward with the
cows' slow tread
Unknown to us men die at the field's
fringe
And sunset knows not what the
dawn has bred.



When Paris was still Paris . . .

The time of platitudes is come again
We lay aside our pride. The tune we
know
And hum unchecked is that absurd
refrain
We heard so often on the radio.

A soldier's life, twenty years after
having said good-by to all that; once
more into battle, with a pencil and
paper in his knapsack along with
heavier and more deadly equipment.

Twenty years is but a child's life
span
And yet we see now all the innocents
The children of yesterday sent forth
again
To march with us their elders—cruel
penitence.

Ironic title: After Twenty Years
In which is written all that we have
lived. . . .

And now Aragon's own story takes on the quality of a nightmare, or of one of those improbable adventures recorded by Dumas himself: "In a few words," he wrote to friends in America after the Battle of France was ended, "this is what happened. I was among the first French troops to enter Belgium, and I went through the whole campaign in Flanders under extremely adventurous circumstances. Our army was one of those encircled, and it was only by the most miraculous good luck that we were able to reach the sea and embark at Dunkirk. After less than two days in England, we returned to France by way of Brest, and from Basse-Seine to south of Angoulême we were in constant contact with the German army. In Angoulême I was taken prisoner the last day of the war, but I succeeded in escaping with thirty men and six trucks."

We pick up after twenty years our
ways
Of old upon the threshold of obli-
vion. . . .

Decorated in the field with the Croix de Guerre (his second, since he had been cited for the same honor in the last war) Aragon later received a third, with palms, and the Médaille Militaire, whose citation required the signature of the Commander-in-chief of the army. But a decoration perhaps more highly esteemed, though less tangible, was to find himself, six months later, while living very quietly in the south of France on the narrow ledge of want where all the French are huddled today, referred to in the press not only as a war hero, but as "the only poet of the war," and to hear his verses read again and again on the radio "in the very accent of the Comédie Française."

This article constitutes the translator's Foreword from the new novel by Louis Aragon, "The Century Was Young," to be published in October by Duell, Sloan & Pearce.

R. P. Smith . . .

SO IT DOESN'T WHISTLE. By Robert Paul Smith. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. 1941. 234 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by PHIL STONG

THIS book contains about equal parts of Joyce, Saroyan, and Budd Schulberg; liquor, love, jazz music, and stream-of-consciousness reflections on death and such items are all inextricably mixed in a combination that is somewhat dizzying. The book is extremely funny in its more lucid passages. It is tougher, perhaps, than the recent "What Makes Sammy Run" in its exteriors because in addition to the fact that *all* of the men and women described are "loose," the scenes include one homosexual carnival and one masochistic love scene. Aside from these details the book is suitable for the *Christian Science Monitor* since the philosophies are not especially heterodox.

The story is almost indistinguishable. Four eccentric young Jews room together when they are not rooming with their mistresses who are, to a considerable extent, communal. Three of them choose the least bad of the coöperative harem and marry them, leaving "Dutch," the most voluble philosopher, alone. "Dutch" doesn't like it so he kicks a hole in a good but magnificently obscene painting and breaks his favorite phonograph record.

This bald synopsis hardly does justice to a book which is brilliant in the writing in some places and is deliberately and cunningly "screwball" in most. Perhaps the Yiddish legend from which the title is taken illustrates the manner of the book better than any attempted description.

The Old Jew attempts a riddle for the Young Jew. "What is it that is green and hangs on a wall and whistles?"

The young man gives up.

"A red herring."

"But it isn't green."

"So you paint it green."

"But it doesn't hang on a wall!"

"There is some law you shouldn't hang it on the wall?"

"But it doesn't whistle."

"Nu," says the old man sadly. "It doesn't whistle."

Anyone who enjoys a "screwball" story—and anyone with a sufficiently exquisite sense for the incongruous does—will probably enjoy "So It Doesn't Whistle."

Phil Stong, a frequent contributor to these pages, is the author of "The Princess."

C. P. Smith . . .



Chard Powers Smith

LADIES DAY. By Chard Powers Smith. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1941. 491 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by R. L. NATHAN

MR. C. P. SMITH has written a lengthy and vigorous historical piece about the 1880's when America was growing and kicking right out of its breeches. It is a novel quite sumptuously "furnished." Every brick, bow, and bustle is there, every prancing horse, croquet stick, flowery syllable. Byzantium, N. Y., the immediate scene, lives here like a well-preserved tinted print of the period. The protagonists, on the other hand, seem a little dusty. Chief among them is one Race Kirkwood, who can best be described as three parts Rhett Butler, and one Clark Gable. It is difficult not to feel him leering and twisting his mustache at us, as he should-ers his way about, bad and masculine and irresistible. Worse than that is his inspired second-guessing at history. When he cries out, "There's a young fella I know in Cleveland has already made the oil business into something about as big as the Roman Empire . . . young Scotchman in Pittsburgh is aimin' to do the same thing with steel . . ." we want to expostulate, "See here, Kirkwood, Mr. Smith told you all that!" Aside from high jinks and finance, there is the up-and-down love affair between Kirkwood and Sally Lathrop, a gentle lady, no Scarlett she but a dewy Melanie. They pursue their attachment to its bitter end, neatly achieving recognition of their difference without actual tragedy.

Wilson . . .

YESTERDAY'S SON. By William E. Wilson. New York: Farrar & Rinehart. 1941. 307 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by RICHARD A. CORDELL

THE Author of "The Wabash," one of the most readable of the Rivers of America series, now tries his hand at fiction and has ample reason to view his first novel with satisfaction. "Yesterday's Son" with admirable economy (it is an excellent single-sitting novel) tells the story of three adults and a youth who learn through harrowing experience that the dead past does not always bury its dead, and that what's done is not always done. A professor of English in a New England college is jolted out of his comfortable academic routine when he discovers that a sprawling, sullen freshman in his Survey class is his illegitimate son; then the mother learns of her son's knowledge of his parentage, and finally confesses to her husband her infidelity of eighteen years before. The situation is powerfully dramatic—in fact, "Yesterday's Son," like a short story, is concerned with a situation rather than with a march of events; but it is by no means merely a blown-up short story, for it achieves adequate fullness and expansiveness.

The excellence of this first novel lies not in its style, which rarely rises above the commonplace, but in its shrewd characterization. Wisely limiting his characters to a few, the novelist succeeds in making each plausible and—unusual in serious modern fiction—likable. His is a "Strange Interlude" about normal men and women, who entangle their lives and yet escape neuroticism and empty frustration. The author is fair to his characters. The husband, a New England Brahmin, is seemingly aloof and passionless, prim and meticulous; but we finally see him as shy and timid, still frightened by an ignominious childhood poverty, and yearning for affection. The boy is puzzling, for he is bewildered and stunned. The thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts, and sometimes length is their only dimension; but when Larry begins to understand himself and others, incongruities and paradoxes in his own thinking and conduct begin to disappear.

The backgrounds—rural New England and the college—are carefully done but not overdone. There is little humor except in some of the academic portraits and possibly in the many tiny jabs at Harvard, but there is little occasion for humor in this tense study of four people in a trap from which it is impossible to escape without wounds and suffering.