

H-France Review Vol. 8 (September 2008), No. 119

Angela Kimyongür, *Memory and Politics: Representations of War in the Work of Louis Aragon*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007. xv + 207 pp. Introduction, notes, bibliography, and index. £75.00/\$85.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-7083-2088-4.

Review by Richard D. Sonn, University of Arkansas.

When I received the request to review this book, I had just completed a study of the politics of the French Surrealists. There I had sought to modify the usual attribution of communism to André Breton, Louis Aragon, and their followers by emphasizing their early espousal of anarchist ideals. In the course of this research, I had read several of Aragon's works of the 1920s. I was particularly cognizant of the period in the summer of 1925 when, in reaction to French suppression of a revolt in Morocco called the Rif War, the Surrealists published an anti-war and anti-colonialist tract called "La Révolution d'abord et toujours" in the intellectual communist journal *Clarté*, and which later appeared in the communist newspaper *L'Humanité* (as well as in an anarchist journal called *L'Insurgé*, a fact that is much less well known). I also knew that Aragon, who along with the other Surrealists was furiously anti-patriotic in the 1920s, had a later incarnation as the national poet of the French Resistance during World War II. Being less knowledgeable about this later aspect of his political career, I was eager to learn more about how the Surrealist-turned-communist ended up as a French nationalist. However, it appears that most research on Aragon's career has addressed precisely these two most contentious and dramatic periods, with much less attention focused on his career as a socialist realist novelist. Angela Kimyongür has decided to turn her attention to the relatively neglected evocations and memories of war in Aragon's novels, including World Wars I and II and also the Cold War and, very briefly, the Indochinese and Algerian Wars. The prospective reader should thus be warned that if Aragon's career as either a Surrealist or Resistance writer interests them primarily, this book is not the place to turn for either theme. Readers interested in the literary evocations of war, and those who want to follow writers' responses to the twists and turns of Stalin's party line, may find this book useful.

The author devotes fewer than ten pages of her first chapter—in a concise text of 149 pages—a to Aragon's Surrealist years, because she maintains that Aragon refused to publish anything about his wartime experiences for at least fifteen years after the end of the war. She speculates that his wartime experience so traumatized him that he was unable to write about it, though she admits she has little evidence for such trauma or "shell shock," as PTSD was then known. She is able to produce statements by Aragon suggesting that he found dwelling on the war to be overdone as a literary theme and even passé. She also exhibits some confusion as to the timing of Aragon's wartime experience. In the opening sentence of the first chapter, Kimyongür claims: "Called up in April 1918, Aragon was just old enough to experience the last months of the Great War" (he was born in 1897). Yet on the next page, she writes: "A medical student at the time, he was called up in 1917, underwent training at the Val de Grâce (where he met Breton) and was sent to the front as *médecin auxiliaire* in June 1918" (pp. 13-14). This latter comment seems authoritative. However, in the introduction to the book, in the context of a discussion about Freud and the diagnosis of "traumatic neuroses," she writes, "It is not unlikely that Aragon, as a medical student, was familiar with his work, or at least with some of Freud's ideas. Before the war he worked in the psychiatric section of the Val de Grâce military hospital in Paris, along with his then close friend André Breton" (p. 9). We know, in fact, that Aragon passed his *baccalauréat* examinations first in Latin and the sciences, then in philosophy, in the early years of the war, and enrolled in a preparatory year of medical studies in 1916. He only met Breton at the Val de Grâce in 1917. [1] Presumably the

author meant to say that Aragon worked at the hospital before his own experience at the front in 1918; still, such mistakes in the opening pages do not inspire confidence in the analysis proffered in the introduction concerning Aragon and trauma. She suggests that even though there is no evidence that Aragon suffered from trauma, “it would appear that any trauma has been unproblematically directed into a rational, political response. The political narrative itself can therefore be seen as a response to trauma: a means of imposing order and meaning on traumatic events” (p. 10). It would make more sense for her to have argued in her subsequent analysis that the political narrative reflected Aragon’s communist adherence, especially since Kimyongür admits that there is no personal recollection of war experience in Aragon’s fiction until the novels written during World War II. Aragon’s silence during the 1920s and highly politicized writings of the 1930s regarding the First World War seem like weak evidence of trauma suppressed and then channeled rationally.

It is admittedly difficult to infer much about Aragon’s wartime experience during his Surrealist years, given his relative silence on the subject. Nevertheless, a more imaginative exploration that treats the Surrealists as a group has managed to tease out a variety of Surrealist responses to the trauma of war. In the recent book *Surrealist Masculinities: Gender Anxiety and the Aesthetics of Post-World War I Reconstruction in France*, Amy Lyford links the war experience of the Surrealists to “gender anxiety.” She devotes a chapter to the Val de Grâce hospital, which she connects to Hans Bellmer’s fascination with dismembered dolls, and argues that Aragon grasped the aesthetic of trauma and dismemberment in the final issue of *La Révolution Surréaliste*, which appeared in December 1929. Lyford claims that Aragon realized the link between the aesthetics of dismemberment and the power of the state to control subjects’ desires, and that the Surrealists had consolidated, not overturned, this political program.[2] Since Kimyongür limits herself to traditional textual analysis based on the author’s intentions and ideological considerations, and tends to consider Aragon in isolation, she can only theorize that Aragon experienced such anxieties. Yet it is hardly far-fetched to suggest gender anxieties in Aragon’s case, given his relationship in the 1920s with the gender-bending avant-garde heiress Nancy Cunard (who soon moved on to relationships with black American jazz musicians), or the reemergence of his homosexuality after the death of his long-time wife Elsa Triolet in 1970 (p. 147).

Aragon, Breton, and some other Surrealists joined the Communist Party early in 1927. Breton famously broke with the party in the 1930s, protested Stalin’s show trials, and became an admirer and colleague of Trotsky, whom he met in 1938 in Mexico. Aragon remained a lifelong communist, and broke with the Surrealists in the early 1930s, around the time that socialist realism was decreed to be the only appropriate leftist aesthetic style. Kimyongür suggests that Aragon may have needed the reassurance of belonging to the party as a surrogate family, since he only learned the truth about his illegitimate birth and parentage at the time of his military mobilization. His real father was the prefect of police Louis Andrieux; until he was twenty, he had thought his mother was his elder sister (pp. 14-15, 146). Not surprisingly, Aragon shared in the contempt of the Surrealists for the bourgeois family, which they connected to disdain for the *patrie* and Catholicism.

The bulk of Kimyongür’s book consists of a detailed analysis of the novels that Aragon published between 1934 and the 1950s. 1934 saw the official proclamation of socialist realism, and the appearance of Aragon’s first (anti-)war novel, *Les Cloches de Bâles*, set in the Belle Époque on the eve of World War I; he published his multi-volume novel *Les Communistes* in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and set it in World War II. Taken together, these novels were known as *le Monde réel*. Kimyongür makes it clear that Aragon never considered these to be genuine historical novels representing the past. Rather they reflected the current party line, and were meant as evocations of present concerns. *Les Cloches de Bâles* showed how war was inevitable in capitalist society, and offered Jean Jaurès and the German socialist Clara Zetkin as the heroic spokespersons of the Socialist International. As the Popular Front brought the Communist Party into the French government, Aragon turned more patriotic, and accepted nationalism in a way that would have been unthinkable to the Aragon of the 1920s. Kimyongür admits that only occasionally in these novels of the 1930s does the voice of Aragon the soldier break through

that of the communist (p. 42). Her summaries of these novels are not likely to encourage the reader to rush off to the library in search of these dated ideological tomes. They do provide evidence of the deep ambivalence felt by the French left toward war, as memories of the hated Great War receded before the need to combat the growing threat of fascism.

More interesting is the novel published in 1944, *Aurélien*, since the title character was modeled on Aragon's one-time friend Pierre Drieu la Rochelle. Aragon sought to understand how someone who had experienced World War I could become a supporter of the Vichy collaborationist government. Aragon himself was called up once more in 1939, served with distinction (he received another medal for valor, as he had in the first war), and was evacuated at Dunkirk. He soon returned to France, and he and his wife Elsa Triolet survived the war in the unoccupied southern zone, where they participated in the Resistance. As a foreign-born Jewish communist, Elsa was triply in danger. Since Kimyongür's book is not a biography, one will not learn much here about these experiences; the focus is resolutely on Aragon's literary evocation of war. *Les Communistes* is set at the beginning of the war and tries to justify the role of the communists during the time of the Nazi-Soviet Pact, which Aragon called an anti-war tactic. Despite the pact, the communists could now imagine a just war to stop Hitler. Not only were the communists not traitors, according to Aragon, but the war itself was a pretext for persecuting the working class as vengeance for 1936.

Aragon's literary reputation, which had reached a high point during the war as France's national poet, declined after the war. In 1947 he regained the editorship of the communist newspaper *Ce Soir*, and was a member of the Central Committee of the Party during the 1950s. He opposed the Indochinese War that the French fought against the communist Ho Chi Minh, and compared General Ridgway's arrival at NATO headquarters to the Nazi's occupation of France in the previous decade. While he tried to stem the tide of translations of American literature, he encouraged those from the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, he was somewhat disillusioned by the rise of anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union, on which his Russian-Jewish wife gave him an insider's view. Though he never broke with the French Communist Party, he did abandon socialist realism in the 1960s, and admitted the degree to which he had been blinded by his love for the party, which he called his new family and new father. His novels of the mid-1960s are freer in form and more overtly reflect—as one might expect of an author approaching seventy—what Kimyongür calls “the unreliability of memory and the gaps between memory and reality” (p. 142). Overall, however, it seems that politics overshadowed memory in Aragon's literary representations of the wars through which he lived. This moderately useful account of Aragon's novelistic evocation of his times shows the degree to which political ideology attenuated or filtered the representation of lived experience that one would have liked to encounter in these novels. The seventy-five year old Aragon seems to have been aware of the cost of his ideological blinders, as he wrote poignantly of “this life that I have utterly ruined” (p. 146).^[3]

NOTES

[1] Lucille F. Becker, *Louis Aragon* (New York: Twayne, 1971), “Chronology,” p. 9.

[2] Amy Lyford, *Surrealist Masculinities: Gender Anxiety and the Aesthetics of Post-World War I Reconstruction in France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), p. 79.

[3] All quotations from the French in Kimyongür's text are given in the original and translated in the endnotes.

Copyright © 2008 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172