



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
Department of French, Hispanic & Italian Studies

RMST 202

Romance Studies,
Modernism to the Present

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Paris Peasant:
Louis Aragon on
Everyday Time

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with Jon Beasley-Murray

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A “novel-that-was-not-a-novel,” “a new kind of novel that would break all the traditional rules governing the writing of fiction, one that would be neither a narrative (a story) nor a character study (a portrait)” (xii, xi).

Undermining modernity from within,
exposing the *frisson* of its eddies
and swirls, pointing to the rubble
that it leaves behind, Aragon outlines a
revolutionary nostalgia immanent to the
built environment that surrounds us.



THE TEMPORALITY OF THE AVANT-GARDE

The term “avant-garde” came to apply to the artists and writers who experimented most radically with both form and content.

In the early decades of the twentieth century they saw themselves as the shock troops of cultural innovation, issuing manifestos and declarations, waging war on bourgeois convention.

Surrealism is “psychic automatism in its pure state [. . .] based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected association, in the omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested play of thought.” (André Breton)

Aragon was at the very centre of this intellectual and aesthetic turmoil, a prime practitioner of heterodoxy and cultural sacrilege.

Paris Peasant, from its title on, draws on
the past as much as on the present
(or even the future).



Passage de l'Opéra, 1877

Passage de l'Opéra Boulevards des Français Impri. Baillat 1877

Paris Peasant, from its title on, draws on
the past as much as on the present
(or even the future).

The book is devoted to detailed description
of a world that was disappearing before its
writer's eyes.

How does Aragon view or depict the passage of time? What sense of time does the book present?

A close-up photograph of a glass filled with a dark amber liquid, likely whiskey, resting on a wooden surface. The glass is partially filled, and the liquid's surface shows subtle ripples and reflections. The lighting is warm, creating a rich, golden-brown glow. The text is overlaid in white, sans-serif font, centered horizontally and slightly to the left of the glass.

How does Aragon view or depict the passage of time? What sense of time does the book present?

This book's temporality does not depend on
plot or narrative.

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plot or narrative.

Here, another logic holds: contingency or
accident for the order of events, and
digression or distraction
for the order of their retelling.

“[I] lived a chance existence, in pursuit of chance, which alone among the divinities had showed itself capable of retaining its authority. [. . .] So I let myself go. The days glided by in this sort of baccarat game where the shoe passed constantly from hand to hand.” (112)

“Yet what was this need that moved me, this bent I felt like following, this detour that was more than a diversion and that so aroused my enthusiasm? I felt the great power that certain places, certain sights, exercised over me, without discovering the principle of this enchantment.” (113)

“It also seemed to me that time played a part in this bewitchment. While time lengthened in the same direction that I advanced each day, each day enlarged the influence that these still disparate elements exercised over my imagination.” (114)

The book's temporality is that of the *flâneur*,
the man of the crowd, the
urban connoisseur with nothing but
time on his hands.

“It is only today, when the pickaxe menaces them, that they have at last become the true sanctuaries of a cult of the ephemeral, the last ghostly landscape of damnable pleasures and professions. Places that were incomprehensible yesterday, and that tomorrow will never know.” (14)

The ruins of the modern, everything that escapes but also haunts it, reveal modernity's true shape. The avant-garde can be as much just behind as just ahead of the times, if this enables critical purchase on the present.



HYBRIDITY AND THE EVERYDAY

The ephemeral is also everyday: what is not built to last, what is taken for granted. As he wanders through the arcade, Aragon takes note of these scraps and detritus of ordinary life and commerce, often pasting them directly in the book.



Paris et Seine

Paris et Seine

Parc des Buttes-Chaumont, 1872

SQUARE DES BUTTES CHAUMONT

Vue du lac des grottes et du grand rocher avec le Temple de la Sibylle

“Do you not think that the mysterious purpose which guided the hand of the engraver [. . .] must have corresponded to some equivalent of the incomprehensibility and indecipherability of the cuneiform darkness, through which, nevertheless, one of your fellow creatures finally succeeded in making his way towards daylight?” (164)

“What on earth would the lawyers think if
by some misfortune they should read
your mishmash of inventions
and real facts?” (85)

This is a hybrid text that combines genres and aesthetic forms, discursive registers and affects, bringing them together with minimal mediation so that the reader may catch the trace of direct contact with the jumble that piles up in modernity's wake.

Aragon locates a *frisson* at the heart of modernity (111), a slight shudder that threatens to bring the entire edifice down.

This *frisson*, moreover, is hardly hidden or secret: it is in plain sight, and all that is required to recover it is to pay attention to the senses.

“Reverie imposes its presence, unaided. Here Surrealism resumes all its rights. They give you a glass inkwell with a champagne cork for a stopper, and you are away! Images flutter down like confetti. Images, images everywhere.” (81)

Here we are always in the middle of things, attentive to their enchantment and the vertigo that they induce. If this is nostalgia, it is a revolutionary nostalgia, aware that everything could disappear at any moment, and delighting in the possibility of change.



MUSIC

Pianochocolate,
“Romance”



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PRODUCTION

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