

**ROMANCE STUDIES:  
Readings in Excess and Betrayal, from Modernism to the Present**

<https://rmst202.arts.ubc.ca/>

Jon Beasley-Murray  
University of British Columbia  
jon.beasley-murray@ubc.ca

CC-BY-NC 2021.

### 3. *Paris Peasant*: Louis Aragon on Everyday Time

Louis Aragon's *Paris Peasant* (*Le paysan de Paris*, 1926) hardly feels like a novel. In his translator's introduction to the text, Simon Watson Taylor quotes Aragon describing it as 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). If this was his aim, Aragon surely succeeded, displaying the avant-garde impulse to seek the cutting edge of aesthetic experimentation. But he does not seek novelty simply for the sake of it, and at times this book is oddly nostalgic: interested as much in the ghosts of the past as in presentiments of the future, out to capture the fleetingness of what is already doomed to history, or what will soon be discarded for being too ordinary, too everyday. 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.

#### 1. *The Temporality of the Avant-Garde*

The name "avant-garde" is borrowed from the lexicon of warfare where it referred to elite units ("special forces" in today's parlance) deployed ahead of the main body of an advancing army to reconnoitre the territory ahead. Translated to aesthetics in the late nineteenth century, the term came to apply to the artists and writers who experimented most radically with both form and content. Sometimes organized into more or less coherent and self-conscious groups or movements (Cubism, Fauvism, Vorticism, Dada, Imagism...), in the early decades of the twentieth century they often saw themselves as the shock troops of cultural innovation, issuing manifestos and declarations, waging war on bourgeois convention. None of these broadsides is more famous than the *Surrealist Manifesto* published by French poet André Breton in 1924, which draws on Freudian psychoanalysis to declare that 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." Breton goes on to name Aragon as first in an alphabetical list of those who have "performed acts of ABSOLUTE SURREALISM" (20). Also a former member of Dada, Aragon was at the very

centre of this intellectual and aesthetic turmoil, a prime practitioner of heterodoxy and cultural sacrilege.

Yet *Paris Peasant*, from its title on, draws on the past as much as on the present (or even the future). The very notion of a peasant amid the vitality and transformation of the French capital city invokes an anachronistic perspective: it suggests urban modernity seen through the eyes of a naïve holdover from a vanishing and increasingly marginal rural domain. Moreover, fully half the book is devoted to an elegiac exploration of the “passage de l’Opéra,” a covered street or arcade that had been constructed in the 1820s and was demolished in 1925, shortly before Aragon’s text was published. The book is devoted to detailed description of a world that was disappearing before its writer’s eyes.

My question to you, then, is about the role of time or temporality in the novel. How does Aragon view or depict the passage of time, either on the grand scale of historical shifts from past to present, tradition to modernity, or on the smaller scale of how time is spent week by week, day by day, or even hour by hour? What sense of time does the book present? Pause the video, and write down some ideas, perhaps with a couple of specific examples. While you do that, I’ll have a glass of port, but I’ll be right back.

Writing of the Certa, Aragon says: “I wish to devote a long and grateful paragraph to this café’s drinks. And first of all to its port” (77). Port is a fortified wine (wine to which a spirit like brandy has been added) traditionally produced in the Oporto region of Portugal—hence the name. For well over four hundred years, the major market for port has been the UK: British merchants could rely on the supply from Portugal, while trade with France was frequently interrupted by politics or warfare; fortified wine weathered better the longer voyage around Galicia and past the Bay of Biscay. By the first half of the nineteenth century, 70% of British wine imports were from Portugal, while 80% of Portuguese port was destined for British shores. Even today, the best-known names in producing and shipping port are distinctly non-Portuguese: Sandeman, Cockburn’s, Taylor’s, Graham’s. For a Frenchman such as Aragon to drink port, then, could be seen as doubly perfidious: not only consuming the wares of a continental competitor, but also indulging the tastes of the old enemy across the Channel.

The first thing to note is that this book's temporality, unlike that of most novels, does not depend on plot or narrative. Most novels set out to tell some kind of story, which usually involves a sequential series of events—first this thing happened, then that—even if they may be told out of order, such as through flashback, memory, anticipation, or the narrator's intervention. Moreover, very often such a sequence is held together by some logical causality: this happened *because* that happened; events have both antecedents in the past and consequences for the future. Then the order in which these events is told is motivated by the effect that the telling should have on the reader: information is withheld to create suspense, for instance, or a back-story is provided for context. Here, however, for the most part another logic holds: contingency or accident for the order of events (in so far as they even are events), and digression or distraction for the order of their retelling.

The narrator describes himself as living “a chance existence, in pursuit of chance” for which “the days glided by in this sort of baccarat game where the shoe passed constantly from hand to hand” (112). Explaining the reasons why he has followed a “detour that was more than a diversion and that so aroused [his] enthusiasm,” he tells us “I felt the great power that certain places, certain sights, exercised over me, without discovering the principle of this enchantment” (113) and adds 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). In short, the narrative wanders, with no particular goal, much as city dwellers—at least those, such as artists or tramps, or even displaced peasants, who lack fixed occupation or timetable—may also drift purposelessly, led simply by curiosity or boredom to stop at one point of interest or another. The book's temporality is that of the *flâneur*, the man of the crowd, the urban connoisseur with nothing but time on his hands.

In his wanderings, however, Aragon is drawn less to the congregation of crowds than to isolated byways, hold-outs from an earlier stage of modernity that have been left behind or half abandoned, places that (in the case of the “passage de l'Opéra”) are about to be destroyed for the sake of a relentless desire for the new. In fact, rather than celebrating the modern, the narrator defends the unfashionable and the outmoded, which can belatedly be understood given the prospect of its imminent ruin. As he says of the arcades: “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). This is a liminal temporality, sandwiched *between* the past and the future, that unites and illuminates what has been and what is to come. This same "between" time anchors Aragon's "modern mythology," by which yesterday's modernity, suddenly at one remove, fleetingly acquires universal or transhistorical significance, like the "petrol pumps [that] take on the appearance of the divinities of Egypt" (117). *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.



Image 1: Passage de l'Opéra, 1877

## 2. *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, which is full therefore of bits of menus, newspaper cuttings, posters, and “placards which immediately send me into a reverie” (92). Likewise in the Parc des Buttes-Chaumont, which is the setting for much of the second half of the text, the narrator meticulously records the various inscriptions that have been carved into or affixed to the monument that overlooks it: the maker’s mark (“Bouillant, Metal Founder, Constructing Engineer” [160]); the bureaucratic statistics for the surrounding arrondissement, some of which were surely out of date the moment that they were set down (“Population: 117,885 Inhab<sup>ts</sup> [ . . . ] Houses: 3,162” [161]); the names of local dignitaries (mayor, deputy mayors, secretary); and the date (“14 July 1883” [167]), rapidly receding, at which all this was thought fit to be recorded. Aragon’s text ends up as a recording of recordings, an archive of archives that gain in sublimity as their utility fades. “Do you not think,” he asks, “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). Here Aragon claims to find the trace of what German critic Walter Benjamin, deeply influenced by *Paris Peasant*, calls “profane illumination” (“Surrealism” 179), an enlightening intoxication that depends on neither religion nor drugs, but on the ecstasy of the everyday, of what is otherwise taken for granted and ignored.

*Paris Peasant* collects and preserves many of these snippets, often keeping their original form—the fonts, the decorative motifs, the visual design—as though to say that this, too, is not redundant, but part of a mode of expression that depends upon imagery as well as on language. Alongside these fragments of commercial or administrative reason, torn out of their utilitarian context (for what good is it to know the price of a drink at a now bulldozed café?), Aragon includes snatches of poetry or song (“Once upon a time there was a reality / Who never could get to sleep at night” [56]), playscripts, philosophical discussion, and comments ventriloquizing the complaints of unhappy critics: “What on earth would the lawyers think if by some misfortune they should read your mishmash of inventions and real facts?” (85). But “mishmash” is the work’s organizing principle: this

is a collage, 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, at least until the wrecking ball comes to flatten it to the ground again.

Modernity and modernism are often identified with reason and rationality on the one hand, and clean lines or smooth surfaces on the other. Hand in hand with the imperative to improve transit and access by clearing out the old arcade is the design of the wide-open space of the new boulevard that will replace it. Modernization, in this light, promises streamlining in both the philosophical and the aesthetic senses of that term: form follows function, as the architects put it; this is the modernity of skyscrapers and ocean liners, the Bauhaus art school and Piet Mondrian. But an ocean liner churns up plenty of eddies, and the rubble left over from a skyscraper never simply disappears. 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.

Surrealism is famously drawn to the logic of dreams, to the unconscious processes that both drive and undermine waking reality: "the omnipotence of dream" in Breton's words. Hence Aragon renames the small corner of Paris that fascinates him the "Passage de l'Opéra Onirique" ("The Opera Dream Passage," 89), conjuring up a placard of his own in the process. But this book's dreams are daydreams, visions with eyes wide open: "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). The Surreal does not bypass, go beyond, or transcend the real: it *is* everyday reality, in all its exuberant excessiveness. None of this fits too well, perhaps, within the traditional confines of a novel, which imposes order by means of its devices of plot and character, beginnings and endings. 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.

*works cited*

- Aragon, Louis. *Paris Peasant*. Trans. Simon Watson Taylor. Boston, MA: Exact Change, 1994.
- Benjamin, Walter. "Surrealism." *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*. Ed. Peter Demetz. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. New York: Schocken, 1986. 177-192.
- Breton, André. "Excerpts from *The First Surrealist Manifesto*." *Surrealists on Art*. Ed. Lucy R. Lippard. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970. 10-21.
- Watson Taylor, Simon. "Introduction." *Paris Peasant*. By Louis Aragon. Boston, MA: Exact Change, 1994. vii-xiv.

## Image:

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Passage\\_de\\_1%27Op%C3%A9ra\\_1877.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Passage_de_1%27Op%C3%A9ra_1877.jpg)

Song: "Thrift Shop" (Macklemore and Ryan Lewis, feat. Wanz)