CAPONEU - The Cartography of the Political Novel in Europe

Georges Simenon

The President

Le President

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The President is a novel that examines the workings of power through the lens of a leader at the helm of a country and as an individual. The title itself refers to the main character and to the role of the President of the Council of Ministers in France *de facto*—formerly the head of government (now the Prime Minister).

The main protagonist, named Augustin, is at the heart of the narrative and is referred to by those around him as ‘Mr President’. His surname is not mentioned; this makes his story more universal. These two terms – ‘familiar’ and ‘official’ – capture the two facets of his present life and his life of yesteryear. They also refer to the public and private aspects of a person’s image, to its complex duality, and correspond to the two chronological strands of this highly refined and understated narrative: the present and the past.

Thus, the present is conveyed through the President’s internal monologues and his brief exchanges with his secretary, Miss Milleran; his chauffeur, François; his valet, Émile Beaufort; Miss Blanche – his nurse; and Dr Gaffé; Gabrielle – the cook; and Marie – the maid; as well as the President’s security guards and journalists. Mr President, a veteran of political struggles, has little to distract him in his retirement: reading or the occasional walk. He is very ill, gruff, misogynistic and curt. He lives with a sense of unease about his past, which seems to him to cast a shadow over the present.

The far more eventful past reveals certain aspects of the wider landscape of French politics, particularly through the memories of the elderly President, whose perspective is adopted throughout the novel. In the President’s account and the novel, we also meet Xavier Malate, a schoolmate and rather bohemian whose character is the opposite of the President’s and who, in adult life, plays something of the role of the troubled conscience, appealing constanely to his empathy. There is also Marthe Créveaux, who, like Pygmalion, shaped the President.

Augustin comes across as strong and clear-headed in the role of the President, as portrayed and recounted; yet as an old man, he lonely and physically frail. He realises the relativity of power, of importance and of merrits. Aged 82, he is a widower, the father of a daughter and the grandfather of a grandson. However, he no longer has contact with his loved ones. He lives in his country house – Les Ebergeues – where he retired following a political setback, surrounded by his devoted servants. He is authoritarian, tyrannical and deeply isolated. Augustin, who values his independence greatly and makes this clear to those around him, sets about writing the opus magna of his life (his memoirs) and recalls the significant events of his political career, which took precedence over his private life. Augustin’s daily life is governed by a monotonous routine, from breakfast to going to bed.

However, although he lives in seclusion from the political limelight and Paris, he is preparing to take

up his final battle against Philippe Chalamont, his former chief of staff and MP for Paris's 16th arrondissement. Faced with a government crisis, he considers revealing compromising information, particularly regarding Philippe Chalamont, who is implicated in the crisis and a large-scale national corruption scandal, thereby regaining some control over the country's political life. The reader then is a witness of a clash between the retired old man and the ambitious young politician. Ultimately, President-Augustin must realise that Chalamont, an influential man and political leader, has agreed to form a new government on his own, regardless of the threat Augustin poses to him.

Thus, the main protagonist must confront the issues of old age and annihilation, and the powerlessness to control his own life and the political landscape. The President, in full possession of his faculties, decides to burn the compromising documents, notably Chalamont's letter of confession, which he had hidden amongst the books in his library.

In its engagement with politics, the novel reveals to us the workings of great power, its potent and cyclical nature—and thus its changeability, its potential for improvement and its vulnerability to destruction. The novel explores political crisis in a universal way, just as it explores the dark and noble sides of politicians.

LANGUAGE: French / Français

CENSORSHIP STATUS: