

Les Communistes

Presented by: Aurore Peyroles

“When politics rears its head in a novel, we reject the book, certain that we will find nothing but clichés, stereotypes and conventional images,” Aragon observes in the afterword to his novel *Les Communistes*. This was indeed the fate of the author’s most criticised book. Perceived immediately as a propaganda tool, it was rejected by some critics as a caricature of socialist realism while being celebrated by the French Communist Party (PCF) — of which Aragon had been a member since 1927 — as an exemplary ideological weapon.

Les Communistes is a novel of over a thousand pages, bringing together hundreds of characters immersed in the turmoil of the early months of the Second World War, which was still very recent at the time of writing, in 1949. This lengthy novel has multiple narrative threads, making it difficult to summarise. The period covered ranges from the end of the Spanish Civil War to the first armistice negotiations with Nazi Germany (February 1939–June 1940). From the ‘*drôle de guerre*’ (‘phoney war’) to the actual conflict, Aragon provides a detailed account of each stage of the events, contrasting the frequently cynical and occasionally absurd political and strategic decisions of the chiefs of staff with the reality faced by the armies and populations on the ground. Negotiations between political parties and embassies featuring historical figures are intertwined with the stories of fictional protagonists embroiled in blossoming or ending love affairs, in their habits and hesitations. History thus intrudes upon the daily lives of all involved, providing opportunities for transcendence or cowardice.

Indeed, Aragon captures the moment when the German-Soviet pact is signed, plunging the militants at the heart of the novel into a state of utter incomprehension and exposing them to widespread hostility. Rather than addressing the problematic nature of the pact itself, Aragon focuses on the subsequent repression of the PCF carried out by a Third Republic on its deathbed and whose rulers and deputies are portrayed as being subservient to the bourgeoisie and its interests. In this way, he portrays the militants as victims rather than as traitors to the nation. Although distraught, they are nonetheless on the ‘right’ side.

Communists of all kinds and their supporters are by no means the only ones present in the story. The open, diverse and even disparate Party family is contrasted with the close-knit network of prominent bourgeois families, who are united by marital, social, financial and political alliances. The opposition between the communist family and their adversaries shapes the novel’s antagonistic structure, a feature that Susan Suleiman identifies as characteristic of the thesis novel (see 1992). Aragon also uses the structure of learning, which is another characteristic tool of authoritarian fiction according to Suleiman. Jean de Moncey, a young medical student, somehow stands out from the other characters as he undergoes a sentimental and political education. *Les Communistes* is undoubtedly a thesis novel, in the most literal sense of the term. By writing it, Aragon clearly intends to convince readers of the relevance of the Communist Party’s worldview, the moral righteousness of its activists, and its positive historical legacy. Published between 1949 and 1951, the novel takes part in a new chapter in the history of the PCF. At this time, defending ‘the country of socialism’ and

its doctrine was of paramount importance, given the ratification of the Atlantic Pact and the radicalisation of East-West antagonisms. Through recounting and reimagining the trauma of recent events, Aragon aims to convince readers of the righteousness of the communist struggle, both past and present, and of the necessity to continue fighting.

What makes this novel interesting is that, according to Aragon, the instrumentalisation of literature for political and historiographical purposes cannot be limited to illustrating an ideological line. Because *Les Communistes* is a novel with a thesis, it raises the question: what constitutes a communist novel? Aragon's gamble lies in the politicisation of the novel's form itself: the way it addresses the reader, the emotions it evokes, the literary means it deploys. In his view, political writing is not only about defending a position or worldview, but also about language and how it is used, disrupted and invented. The novelist ostensibly refuses to equate defending a political view with simplistic writing that relies on unambiguous narration and exemplary (or counter-exemplary) characters. Instead, he embraces all the elements of novelistic writing, including its characteristic ambiguity and openness, in an attempt to create a political novel in terms of both its content and its form. Two strategies seem to be at work to fulfil this intention. First, the immersion of the reader in a profusion of events creates a striking mimetic effect, particularly in the chapters recounting the battlefield of 1940. Second, the undermining of realistic writing dispels the sense of certainty and omniscience. The novel's political dimension is not conveyed through a confident narrative voice drawing conclusions from the recounted events, or through a linear plot demonstrating the validity of a political stance. Instead, it emerges from narrative conditions that encourage readers to connect and reflect on disparate threads, piecing together a huge, chaotic puzzle to reach the desired conclusion themselves. The novelist thus resembles a conductor rather than a director of conscience.

Les Communistes is a book of many battles. One of the few novels recounting the French army's defeat on the battlefield in 1940, it also saw its author battle against the tradition of associating political writing — and socialist realism in particular — with simplistic narratives and ideologies. However, *Les Communistes* also represents a battle between Aragon and the party to which he belonged until his death. Aragon resisted the PCF's attempts to reclaim his work by highlighting the challenges faced by politically engaged literature, and even rewrote his novel in 1966, toning down criticism and praise. His attempt to write a political novel was misunderstood, which probably explains why he subsequently abandoned direct political themes in his novels in favour of more experimental literary works, while continuing his political activities *elsewhere*.

LANGUAGE: French / Français

This title was not censored before publishing