Louis Aragon

Holy Week

La Semaine sainte

Presented by: Aurore Peyroles

Despite the warning to the reader “This is not a historical novel”, this novel recreates the week of March 19 to 26, 1815, when Napoleon, having escaped from Elba, landed at the Golfe Juan and headed for Paris to regain power (the episode known as the Hundred Days), and King Louis XVIII and his entire Household decided to flee Paris. The novel accompanies the king, his entourage and his army on a journey that borders on debacle and brings together many real historical characters; one protagonist stands out, however, that of an artist: the painter Théodore Géricault, who gave up his art to embark on a military career and accompany the king in his flight. Caught up in the difficulties of a chaotic and unpredictable present, he and several characters ask themselves a political and human question: to whom should one be loyal?

With a dazzling erudition and a monumental documentary work, this novel echoes the questions that plagued Louis Aragon, while the revelations in 1956 of the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the repression of the Hungarian uprising have strongly shaken the faith of the militants. A member of the French Communist Party since 1927, the writer delivers a great novel on loyalty and on commitment not only political but also artistic. To that purpose, he chooses a period marked by a very strong indecision: is the return of Napoleon definitive? Which side will win? The political instability is reinforced by the great narrative and enunciative complexity that characterizes the text. The kaleidoscopic vision is deployed through the practice of parenthesis: the narrative proceeds through the multiplication of micro-narratives, oscillating from one character to another, jumping from one space to another, also juggling with history since the narrated time is crossed by the time of the narration and the voice of Aragon sometimes appears. The multiple characters, whose historical biography is scrupulously observed, are not types, even less ideological caricatures (including the most reactionary): each one is crossed by doubt, in a seizing vertigo of the concerns. The scattering of points of view is not contained by a narrative voice that is sure of itself and its convictions. The linear motif of the road, the one on which the king and his retinue are fleeing but also the one of the debacle of the French army in 1940 that Aragon experienced, is constantly thwarted by swerves and detours.

However the narrative fragmentation serves a reflection on history and, more broadly, on the link between the individual and the collective. The question of “we” (“Qui, nous? [“Who, us?”]) runs through these 600 pages, but it remains open. What defines a just cause, in 1815 but also in 1958? What is the role of an artist when the world he believed in is in full collapse? La Semaine sainte shows the fragility of political choices as much as their necessity, and reminds of the strength of doubt. The author’s intrusions into the narrative thread break the referential illusion, force the historical novel to be linked to the present, and encourage reflection to be always updated. But if political certainty is unattainable, the future must remain desirable; it belongs to history, to politics, to the solidarity between human beings. Géricault discovers “an ignored world”, meets others he

didn’t know anything about, which opens to him the horizon of a multitude of subjects and paintings to realize. Chaos and disenchantment are replaced by a call to struggle, in the name of a humanism freed from bondage. “It's funny, the road is not the same at all with the sun”: the final sentence of the novel, a harmless remark attributable to Géricault, leaves the reader free to interpret it or not in a political sense.

La Semaine sainte was a huge success. The literary event of the 1958 season, it sold very well and the first edition was quickly sold out. Translated into several languages (English, German and Russian, but also Polish, Czech, Spanish and even Chinese), the novel was acclaimed by all critics, including conservative newspapers – a first for Aragon. On the right as well as on the left of the political spectrum, people were surprised by the choice of theme – 1815, the flight of the king, are not subjects that one expects from a communist writer – but they welcomed the break with an overly partisan writing style (Aragon’s previous novel was entitled Les Communistes). This novel marks the consecration of its author. It is probably because it is a novel that seeks less to convince of a political cause than it questions the foundations of personal and collective commitment.

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Storytelling

The Political Novel: A Palimpsest

By: Ivana Perica