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ARAGON, ELSA TRIOLET: LOVE AND POLITICS IN THE COLD WAR

On October 13-14, 2000 at Columbia University's Maison Française an international and interdiciplinary conference was held on *Aragon, Elsa Triolet: Love and Politics in the time of the Cold War.*[1] Many conferences had been organized on Aragon and Triolet in Europe, particularly in recent years on the occasion of Aragon's anniversary.[2] However, the Columbia University conference was the first of its kind at an American university. In this way it was quite an unprecedented event. Yet the fact that it was so well attended, giving rise to lively debates among scholars of several different fields and successfully drawing audiences away from the bright sunshine of the New York Indian summer, was proof that it spoke to the public's concerns in a variety of ways.

I wish to retrace briefly how this project came into being. Louis Aragon (1897–1982) was arguably one of the most important and influential French writers of the twentieth century. As a novelist, a poet, an art critic, a member of the French Resistance, and an active member of the *Parti Communiste Français,* he was throughout his long life a major figure of the French cultural land-

1. I wish to extend special thanks to the Sterling Currier Fund, the Gladys Krieble Delmas Foundation, and the French Cultural Services for their generous support of the conference and subsequent proceedings. Hosted at Columbia University's Maison Française, the meeting was superbly managed by Eric W. Ormsby and Polly Rimer Duke, who oversaw all details great and small with endless competence, dedication and elegance. The poster was done by Ismael Valentin. Eric Matheis built the website, where the talks appeared pretty much in their original form just two weeks after the conference. Thanks to Alison James, Goran Blix, Kaiama Glover, and Véronique Gaultier for their translations of the abstracts.

2. A short list of these conferences and their proceedings includes:

Suzanne Ravis (ed.) *Aragon 1956* (Actes du colloque d'Aix-en-Provence, 1991; Presses de l'Université de Provence, Aix-en-Provence, 1992).

Suzanne Ravis (ed.) *Le Rêve de Grenade: Aragon et le Fou d'Elsa* (Actes du colloque de Grenade, 1994; Presses de l'Université de Provence, Aix-en-Provence, 1996).

Gavin Bowd et Jeremy Stubbs (éd.): *Louis Aragon. Du Surréalisme au réalisme socialiste, du Libertinage au Mentir vrai, des Incipit à la postérité.* A collection of papers given at the Eugène Vinaver International Colloquium, University of Manchester, 1997. *Digraphe*, no 82/83, Automne/hiver 1997.

scape.[3] In spite of his political, historical and cultural importance, Aragon remains insufficiently known in this country. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that Aragon is known here chiefly for his early Surrealist works, and to a lesser extent as a poet of the Resistance.[4] Thus Aragon deserves to be better known; this is even more true of his wife, writer Elsa Triolet (1896–1970), born Elsa Kagan, to a wealthy and assimilated Jewish family of the Saint Petersburg in-

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Suzanne Ravis (éd.): *Au Miroir de l'autre. Les lieux de l'hétérogénéité dans Le Fou d'Elsa.* Aix-en-Provence: Publications de l'Université de Provence, 1997.

Bernard Lecherbonnier et Jacques Girault (éd.): *Les Engagements d'Aragon* (Université de Paris XIII. Centre d'études littéraires francophones et comparées) Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998.

Hervé Bismuth, Élodie Burle, Suzanne Ravis (éd.) *Qui vraiment parle et D'où vient la chanson. Les Poètes d'Aragon.* Centre Aixois de Recherches sur Aragon, Aix-en-Provence, Publications de l'Université de Provence, 1999.

Aragon, Elsa Triolet et les cultures étrangères. Actes du Colloque de Glasgow, avril 1992. Sous la direction de Andrew Macanulty. Ouvrage coordonné par Corinne Grenouillet. Besançon : Presses universitaires franc-comtoises, 2000.

Mireille Hilsum, Carine Trévisan, Maryse Vassevière (éd.): *Lire Aragon. Actes du Colloque du Centenaire de la naissance d'Aragon, décembre 1997.* Paris: Honoré Champion, 2000.

3. Aragon's work is remarkably diverse. His fiction spans a vast range of literary styles. In the twenties he wrote Surrealist novels (arguably the part of his work best known in this country). In the thirties, partly under the influence of his wife, Russian born writer Elsa Triolet, he converted to Communism and produced a massive cycle of Socialist Realist novels, *Le Monde réel.* Late in his life he turned to writing difficult, self-conscious and post-modern fiction. The same diversity appears in his poetry, which took him on a journey from Surrealism to *poésie engagée* (complete with wooden odes to the Soviet regime) to a reinvention of medieval troubadour lyricism during the forties. Aragon was also very active as a literary critic, a journalist and an art critic throughout his career. As an editor and contributor of the enormously influential *Lettres françaises,* Aragon spent more than thirty years of his creative life at the heart of the literary, cultural and political scene of left-wing intelligentsia in Europe and France. He was a friend of some of the greatest artists of this century. He knew Matisse well and wrote about him, both in his fiction *(Henri Matisse, roman)* and in his art criticism. He was very close to Picasso and was particularly involved with the artist's political radicalization of the war and postwar years.

4. There exist for instance no fewer than three recent English editions of *Le Paysan de Paris*: *Nightwalker*; Translated by Frederick Brown (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970); *Paris Peasant*; translated and with an introduction by Simon Watson Taylor (London, Cape, 1971; Boston: Exact Change, 1994). The English translation of *Les Aventures de Télémaque* by Renee Riese and Judd David Hubert, *The Adventures of Telemachus* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988) was recently republished (Boston: Exact Change, 1997). Aragon's wartime poetry was translated, published and actively promoted by his longtime American friends, Hannah and Matthew Josephson and Malcolm Cowley (*Aragon, Poet of the French Resistance*, New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1945; *Aragon, Poet of Resurgent France*, London: Pilot press Ltd., 1946).

telligentsia. Elsa's sister Lili Brik had a long relationship with the poet Maiakovsky, and both eventually fell victim to the increasingly dictatorial Soviet regime. Elsa herself moved to France and later married Aragon, whom she helped turn away from Surrealism and into a staunch Communist militant. Elsa Triolet, who wrote most of her work in French, is becoming better known, and deservedly so, in part because her fiction (especially the later one) deals with modern feminist issues such as women's involvement in politics.[5] It is my hope that the New York conference, where several papers focused on her, will help build on this incipient interest.

In addition, Elsa Triolet's work is historically, thematically and formally inseparable from Aragon's. "Le Couple" (as they were known to the press in the fifties and sixties, at the height of their celebrity) decided, when they entered old age, that they wanted their works to be interwoven in a manner that would reflect and render permanent the bond that united them in life. Triolet's novels and Aragon's novels entered into a dialogue which was eventually formalized by the joint publication of their complete fiction in the *Œuvres romanesques croisées* in which his and her works alternate and respond both thematically and structurally to one another, and where the original texts are accompanied by new prefaces and lavishly illustrated.[6] This innovative publication venture, in addition to promoting each other's works, was an attempt to rethink the individualistic notion of Author.

Rather than on the celebrated Surrealist period, then, I thought it interesting to focus instead on a more recent, and politically much more problematic period of Aragon's long career. The succession of historical and political crises since World War II (the Cold War, the end of the Stalin era, the enduring Jewish question, just to name a few) was reflected in the Couple's personal and aesthetic crisis. It was also the time in which the project of interweaving their work began to take shape, in what would become the forty-two volumes of the *Œuvres romanesques croisées*. The extent to which their personal lives and their writing were inextricably bound up with the historical and political events was precisely the stuff of the New York meeting. Like other left-wing intellectuals, Aragon and Triolet were often led by their unconditional loyalty to the Communist Party to deny, misrepresent or even justify the repressive nature of the totalitarian regimes of the Eastern bloc. This political attitude was in part a legacy of the anti-fascist struggle of the thirties and the war years. For Aragon and Triolet, the post-war years (the fifties and sixties) were particularly critical, as the triumphant militancy of the war years gave way to a deepening sense of crisis, brought on by the revelations of the 20th Congress,

5. It is beginning to attract interest from large American publishing houses: Virago recently published Helena Lewis's edition of Triolet's wartime stories, *A Fine of Two Hundred Francs* (London: Virago Modern Classics, 1986).

6. Elsa Triolet, Aragon. *Œuvres romanesques croisées* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1964–74).

the invasion of Hungary, and what came to be known generally as the De-Stalinization. For both writers (although more acutely in the case of Aragon, who made several suicide attempts) the political crisis was inseparable from an emotional and artistic crisis. This was reflected in the dramatic changes in their writing, for example the painful rewriting of Aragon's enormous and ultimately unfinished novel *Les Communistes*, his renunciation of Socialist Realism, or Triolet's turn to the hermetically non-autobiographical, quasi-sociological fiction of the sixties. During those critical years, the fascinating interplay of doubt, guilt, confession and denial became a characteristic feature of their poetry, fiction and prefatorial writing.

This colloquium focused on the complex interactions of artistic achievements and political involvement during the few dramatic decades that include World War II, the De-Stalinization and the Cold War. Indeed, it became obvious to me that this particular writer couple in this particular period provided a kind of privileged lens into a variety of issues and areas attracting much recent expertise and interest. On one hand, there is an outstanding tradition of American scholarly interest in French intellectual history, while renewed historical interest in the Cold War, the history of Communism, and Communist artists and intellectuals, has produced a wealth of recent scholarship.[7] On the other hand, there exists an equally impressive tradition of art historical inquiry, and there has also been renewed interest in those very artists who were close to Aragon and Triolet—I mean of course Picasso and Matisse, to whom several papers were devoted, and whose artwork appears on the conference poster.[8] The relationship between cultural activity and political commitment has also attracted much critical attention lately.[9] Matisse's friendship with Picasso is also the focus of renewed critical attention, with

7. See in particular Irwin M. Wall, *French Communism in the Era of Stalin, the Quest for Unity and Integration, 1945–1962* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983); Tony Judt, *Past imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944–1956* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Jeremy Jennings (ed.), *Intellectuals in Twentieth-Century France: Mandarins and Samurais* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993); Herman Lebovics, *Mona Lisa's Escort: André Malraux and the reinvention of French culture* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999).

8. The poster featured the calligraphy which Matisse created for the inside cover of Triolet and Aragon's *Œuvres romanesques croisées*, and Picassos's portrait of Stalin, which sparked the notorious Portrait Affair. This was the first of a series of deepening crises in Aragon's political and artistic career, when he was denounced and publicly humiliated by the Communist Party for having dared to publish in *Les Lettres françaises* an "irreverent" portrait of Stalin by Picasso after Stalin's death in 1953.

9. Two remarkable examples of this would be the 1999 exhibition on Picasso and the war years at the Guggenheim museum, and the recent volume on *Picasso and Portraiture* edited by William Rubin following the MoMA exhibition (1996), which devotes an important section to Picasso's relationship with the Communist party.

major exhibitions.[10] Thus, this conference provided a glimpse into the circle of literary and political acquaintances around the artists after the political radicalization of the war and postwar years.

The purpose of this meeting, therefore, in its deliberately interdisciplinary approach to Aragon and Elsa Triolet's work —bringing together as it did literary critics, historians, and art historians—was to place the two writers' work in its broader political and cultural context, and so to shed new light on a question crucial to the 20th Century—the question of art and politics.

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The first day was devoted to artists, real and fictional. In the first panel, "The Artist in the Novel," panelists examined the relation of the writers' artist novels to contemporary events. First, however, an historical introduction was in order: since to understand the background in which Aragon and Elsa Triolet worked it is essential to understand the peculiarities of the French Communist party (PCF) during the Cold War. In the first of two contributions to the colloquium, **Irwin Wall** shows how the PCF, the most "Stalinist" of Communist parties of the era, arguably more so than even the Russian party itself, was riddled with contradictions. It aspired to unity at all cost but was plagued by factionalism, it claimed to be revolutionary and internationalist, but was deeply patriotic and yearned for integration and acceptance in the existing French political system. As a result, the de-Stalinization would prove particularly traumatic for the PCF.

Henri Mitterand analyzes Aragon's 1958 novel on Théodore Géricault, *La Semaine sainte*. Aragon's somewhat paradoxical statement on his novel, which was not, he insisted, a historical novel, makes sense if one remembers that the author tampered with the expected chronological unity of the narrative by inserting multiple references to the present, to recent history, to his own political trajectory, and added to the complexity of his character with a dizzying variety of literary and painterly allusions. The novel about a young artist who switches political allegiances in the middle of his flight to Belgium, where he set out to accompany the fleeing and aging king Louis XVIII, thus becomes a game of mirrors in which the novelist and his painter character gallop across history—whether it be the history of 1815, recent events of the Cold War, artistic and literary history, or Aragon's own political adventure.

Suzanne Ravis compares *La Semaine sainte* with Elsa Triolet's *Le Monument*, published a year earlier, and which also places its main character, an artist, in the middle of a critical moment of history. In Triolet's novel, Lewka, a sculptor from a fictional Communist country, is commissioned to build a mammoth monument to Stalin, but is unable to complete his work and com-

10. E.g. the 1999 "Matisse & Picasso: A Gentle Rivalry" at the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, Texas, and the upcoming "Matisse Picasso" at the Tate Modern, Grand Palais and MoMA.

mits suicide. The two novels reflect, in strikingly different ways, the unprecedented political and moral crises which shook the couple of writers in the 1950s, from the 1953 Stalin portrait affair, to the 1956 revelations contained in Krushchev's "secret" report.

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A second panel was devoted to the close but sometimes difficult relations between Aragon and Picasso. **Pierre Daix** explored the limits of Aragon's understanding of Picasso. Even if Aragon was the first among the future Surrealists to take an interest in the art of Picasso, he nevertheless, contrary to Breton, had no direct relations with him until Picasso's entry into the French Communist Party in 1944. His relations with Picasso remained essentially political, unlike the closely personal friendship with Matisse. What absolutely opposed the two artists was their incompatible conception of realism—for Aragon the ultimate goal of art, in its conquest of the external world; for Picasso, conversely, the expression of his own inmost truth.

Serge Gavronsky's analysis situates Aragon's art criticism mid-way between his ethical fidelity to the French Communist Party and his own aesthetic disposition. Aragon's complex understanding of "Socialist Realism" is set against a background which includes both the French tradition (philosophical, ideological and aesthetic) and shifting Soviet dictates. Aragon's notion of "le peuple", Gavronsky suggests, connects him to Michelet and invites us to reexamine the Stalin portrait affair in the light of this "French" version of *art engagé*.

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A major debate, in the form of a round table bringing together specialists of different fields (history, art history and literary criticism), focused on Aragon's theory of "*le mentir-vrai*" (lying truth) which encompasses all at once an art of fiction, a statement on historical truth, and a theory of realism in art.

Hilary Spurling explores Aragon's long and close friendship with Matisse. By his own account, Aragon identified passionately with the painter's work throughout his own formative years as a writer, and was seduced by him all over again when the two finally met during France's darkest hour in World War II. The friendship was still important long after the painter's death when Aragon set out to make sense of his own life in the two great volumes of truth and lies that he called *Henri Matisse, roman*.

Susan Suleiman analyzes the 1964 story titled "Le Mentir-vrai" from the point of view of autobiography. Is Aragon's story "true" autobiography? Who is narrating, exactly, and to whom? In this story, memory, fantasy, and fictional elaboration become so enmeshed that any attempt to distinguish among them is bound to fail. She relates this disquieting childhood narrative to Freud's theory of "screen memories," whereby a subject constructs a childhood memory retrospectively, out of fantasies occurring later that he then projects backward in time, "almost like works of fiction", Freud wrote. The Author's un-

reliability takes many forms in this text, but "Le Mentir-vrai" suggests that this very unreliability is the source of writing.

In his second contribution to the Aragon conference, **Irwin Wall** offers some speculation on *mentir-vrai* as a metaphor for the nature of Aragon's life-long commitment to the Communist party. The contradictions between the dogmatic party line (on literature and art, on women and sex, on science ...) and Aragon's personal convictions, preferences and opinions would appear to be irreconcilable, especially given that Aragon, as a quintessential party intellectual, and also as a frequent resident of and visitor to the USSR, knew much more of the Soviet reality, and of the party's own worst secrets, than most.

In her response to the previous round table panelists, **Dominique Vaugeois** explores how two texts from *Henri Matisse, roman*, "L'Apologie du luxe" and "Que l'un fût de la chapelle," reproduce the logic of *mentir-vrai* (even though the expression *mentir-vrai* is not explicitly used in the text) by redefining the relationship between literary or artistic productions and the various levels of political interpretations that can be assigned to them.

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Because so much of the political crisis that racked Aragon during the fifties is reflected in the dramatic changes in his writing, and most notably in his decision to forsake the strict soviet aesthetics of "Socialist Realism" in favor of an increasingly difficult and highly self-conscious fiction, one session was devoted to the issue of de-Stalinizing fiction. **Vincent Kaufmann** analyzes the themes of communism and nationalism in Aragon's "*Monde réel*" cycle and beyond. He suggests that Aragon's lifelong commitment to writing in order to commune and communicate—a desire so profoundly at odds with that of the majority of 20th-century writers, whose purpose generally, except perhaps for Sartre, is rather to isolate themselves as much as possible in their writing—can be understood as an attempt to compensate for the lost promise of community on which Surrealism failed to deliver.

Nathalie Limat-Letellier explores the new modes of fiction that Aragon turned to in the aftermath of the collapse of the Socialist utopia, as he felt compelled to denounce "*ce rêve mensonger que vous appelez l'avenir*" (*Blanche ou l'oubli*, 1967). The ideologically destabilized Aragon of the sixties, the author of *Le Mentir-vrai* (1964) and of *La Mise à mort* (1965) is often ironic about the Communist Party's dogmatic prescriptions and prohibitions. By substituting innovative models of realism—*mentir-vrai*, *roman-hypothèse*, or *réalisme sans frontières*—he strives to assert the rights of creativity and resist indoctrination.

In order to show how Aragon's later novels eschew the rigid, dogmatic codes of Socialist Realism, **Maryse Vassevière** focuses on his intertextual use of four canonical nineteenth-century writers (Balzac, Flaubert, Stendhal and Zola). While Zola and Balzac (notably after Lukacs's analyses) were long established as official writers of the Communist Party, Aragon's defense and promotion of the politically much less acceptable Flaubert and Stendhal, to whom he even

added the notoriously bourgeois and decadent Marcel Proust in the sixties, is analyzed here to show how Aragon uses intertextuality to question some of the major aesthetic and political dictates of the Stalinist era, replacing the mandatory historical optimism with the more ambiguous pattern of historical tragedy.

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Because this meeting was the first devoted to Aragon in this country, it was all the more important to focus on some repercussions of Aragon's life and works in the American continent. The friendship that Aragon enjoyed with some prominent left-wing American intellectuals, particularly Matthew and Hannah Josephson and Malcolm Cowley, is becoming better known thanks to the efforts of critics to publish correspondence and other documents.[11] **Jean Albertini** analyzes what he calls the two Americas, distinguishing between Aragon's praise of America as the defensor of freedom and democracy during the war years, a view expressed in his warm correspondence with his American friends, and the mandatory, dogmatic and declamatory anti-Americanism of the fifties, which demonizes America as the supporter of retrograde, dictatorial regimes that constitute a threat to world peace.

This journal is proud to present a previously unpublished document as an appendix to Jean Albertini's article: the two speeches that Aragon gave at the third Congress of the League of American Writers on June 2nd, 1939. The typed originals, kept in the *League of Writers* archive at U.C. Berkeley, have been edited and annotated by **Jean Albertini** and **David Griffiths** for the purposes of this publication. These speeches are forceful, moving, and poetic. As David Griffiths reminds us, in the midst of a strong anti-Communist and isolationist climate, Aragon's interventions at the Congress earned him a personal invitation from President Roosevelt. They are an unparalleled testimony of Aragon's role in securing American support in the antifascist coalition.

The ambiguity in Elsa Triolet's depiction of America and American characters is the subject of **Marie-Thérèse Eychart's** analysis. At the height of the Cold War Elsa Triolet published *Le Cheval roux*, a novel which lent its own

11. Aragon's friendship with M. Josephson and M. Cowley dates back to the Surrealist years when these American writers were living in Paris. In May 1939, at their invitation, Aragon and Triolet traveled to the USA and gave lectures at the third Congress of American Writers for the defense of culture against fascism. On this occasion Aragon was received by President Roosevelt. The royalties from Aragon's *Voyageurs de l'impériale* (translated by Hannah Josephson: *The Century was Young*, and published thirteen months before the French version in New York: Duell, Sloane & Pearce, 1941) helped the couple to survive in the early years of the war when they lived in hiding in Nice. Hannah Josephson also translated Aragon's wartime poetry. See in particular Daniel Bougnoux's notes to the Pléiade edition: *Œuvres romanesques complètes*, v. II, Gallimard 2000, p.1406 and ff.

strident voice to the chorus of left-wing anti-americanism. However, it departed from official communist fiction in two notable ways. Rather than a realistic novel with a contemporary setting, it was a science-fiction novel, set in the apocalyptic aftermath of a nuclear world war. Moreover, if America as a superpower was violently denounced as the successor of Nazi Germany, responsible for promoting war, the only positive character in the story was GI Henry, a victim of the Korean firebombings himself, who becomes the only trusted friend of the Narrator (Triolet herself, who has been monstrously disfigured by an atomic attack). Three years later, with illusions about Soviet Russia beginning to unravel, Triolet published *Le-Rendez-vous des étrangers*, in which the friendship between the Russian Olga Heller, persecuted by the Soviet bureaucracy, and the talented America painter Frank Mosso, destroyed by MacCarthyism, develops against the backdrop of and equal condemnation of both systems.

Another noteworthy aspect of Aragon's presence beyond the borders of France is Aragon's influence on a younger generation of francophone writers who used his *œuvre* and his authority in order to come to terms with a new definition of national poetry. **Maryse Condé** explores the way in which Aragon's 1954 *Journal d'une poésie nationale* and the response published in *Les Lettres françaises* from a young Haitian poet, René Depestre, gave rise to a passionate debate between Depestre, who favored allegiance to the PCF and to Aragon's leadership, and Aimé Césaire of Martinique who championed independence from and even indifference to the mainland's party line in all matters, including intellectual and cultural ones. The notion of national poetry thus became a francophone issue and grew into a polemic which opposed the principal French Caribbean intellectuals of the time.

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"Love, poetry and politics" was the title of the final panel. Poetry was the locus of celebration of Aragon's love for Elsa and his love of France, the two loves merging into one during the Resistance years. **Michel Murat** analyzes the function of rhyme in Aragon's poetry from *Le Crève-cœur* to *Le Nouveau Crève-cœur* (1939–1948) as the point of intersection between ideology and writing in a moment when Aragon's poetry undergoes a profound mutation, choosing rhyme as a hallmark of national poetry.

Poetry was also the vehicle of choice for the tortured interplay of self-doubt, confession and denial that marked Aragon's writing after the de-Stalinization crisis exposed the historical failure of Communism—whether in the great laments of *Le Roman inachevé* (1956) or the transposition of modern concerns into the fictional historic setting of the conquest of Grenada in *Le Fou d'Elsa* (1963). **Daniel Bougnoux** focuses on the love pain expressed in *Le Fou d'Elsa* ("Il n'est plus terrible loi / Qu'à vivre double") to explore the typical predicament of *dédoublement* (whether amorous or political, given the active support Aragon always felt obliged to provide his failing Party) in *Le Roman inachevé, Le Fou d'Elsa* and *La Mise à mort*.

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Several of the participants knew Aragon and Triolet personally. Biographical testimony was also given proper place at the conference, and two such presentations were offered by those who knew them well. Aragon and Elsa Triolet's celebrity was matched only by that of another couple, Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. "Le Couple" reigned over the French Communist counter-society of the post-war period. **Dominique Desanti,** who was herself a member of the PCF at that time, and who knew them well, offers an eyewitness's view of the ambiguities of this royal couple.

Jean Ristat, Aragon's testamentary executor, himself a poet and novelist, was Aragon's last friend. He had the task of giving the last paper at the conference and treated the audience to a beautifully moving homage to a friend, mentor and fellow writer who should be remembered less for his politics, Ristat said, stressing his desire to put an end to the critical Cold War, and more as a writer and a reader of encyclopedic knowledge and vibrant human empathy.

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