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Louis Aragon and Pierre Drieu La Rochelle: Servility and Subversion

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**LOUIS ARAGON AND PIERRE DRIEU LA ROCHELLE:
SERVILITY AND SUBVERSION**

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of French Studies

by
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Abstract

This dissertation addresses the use of literature in support of political ideologies, starting from the cases of Louis Aragon and Pierre Drieu La Rochelle. Aragon and Drieu wrote extensively about man's alienation in the modern world and, more importantly, about the possibility of overcoming that alienation. Both argued for the creation of a new man who could erect a new world on the ruins of the old. Though Aragon was a communist and Drieu a fascist, they shared an apocalyptic view of the world and believed themselves to be living in the last stage of history, the prelude to a final revolution. Each designated himself a prophet and offered a formula for the salvation of the world. They were modern, secular Gnostics – believers in the infallibility of their own understanding, convinced that human hands could forge an age of perfection.

Treating Aragon and Drieu as modern Gnostics and secular millenarians allows me to explain their systems of belief and the ideological contradictions in their literary works. Aragon and Drieu overlooked the fallacies they advanced in their roles as political prophets, yet as novelists, they divulged their ambivalence and raised discomfiting questions about their own doctrines. My study reveals that the fictions Aragon and Drieu created in their political often fall apart in their works of fiction. Although their literature meant to embrace totalitarianism, it ended up contesting it. As literary figures, neither Aragon nor Drieu were “slaves” of communism or fascism. What ensured their freedom was their subversion of totalitarian ideologies through literature. Yet, their literary subversion ultimately proves their awareness of their ideological errors.

Introduction

The playwright and politician Václav Havel defines an intellectual as a person who “who has devoted his or her life to thinking in general terms about the affairs of this world and the broader context of things.”¹ Even though other people engage in similar activities, intellectuals differ, in Havel’s opinion, in that they consider the problems of the world professionally and offer solutions. By contrast, Sergio Luzzatto disparages intellectuals as those who have the bad habit of getting involved in matters that do not concern them.² Considering the extraordinary number of petitions French intellectuals signed during the 20th century, as carefully compiled by Jean-François Sirinelli,³ one is tempted to agree with Luzzatto.

Nonetheless, totalitarian regimes have often used arguments similar to Luzzatto’s to silence intellectuals protesting governmental abuses. Therefore, I would rephrase Luzzatto’s indictment: intellectuals often give solutions to problems they do not fully understand, usually because some matters are beyond human understanding. Such was the case with Louis Aragon and Pierre Drieu La Rochelle, two intellectuals who came of age in the tumultuous France of the 1930s. Men of their times, Aragon and Drieu passionately examined their society and offered what they thought were comprehensive solutions. Their scrutiny of the world was unsparing. Most of the fallacious theories they advocated stemmed precisely from overconfidence in the scope of their expertise.

¹ Václav Havel, “The Responsibility of Intellectuals,” *New York Review of Books* (June 1995): 36-7.

² Sergio Luzzatto, *L’impôt du sang: La gauche française à l’épreuve de la guerre mondiale (1900-1945)*, trans. Simone Carpentari Messina (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1996), 10.

³ Jean-François Sirinelli, *Intellectuels et passions françaises: Manifestes et pétitions au XXe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 1990).

Aragon and Drieu wrote extensively about man's alienation in the modern world and, more importantly, about the possibility of overcoming that alienation. Both argued for the creation of a new man who could erect a new world on the ruins of the old. Though Aragon was a communist and Drieu a fascist, they shared an apocalyptic view of the world and believed themselves to be living in the last stage of history, the prelude to a final revolution. Each designated himself a prophet and offered a formula for the salvation of the world. They were modern, secular Gnostics – believers in the infallibility of their own understanding, convinced that human hands could forge an age of perfection.

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In order to characterize modern Gnosticism, I must make a few remarks about its precursor. Ancient Gnosticism resists easy classification. One of numerous sects in the turbulent days of early Christianity, the original Gnostics were primarily concerned with the problem of evil and how to prevail over it. According to Alain Besançon, Gnosticism is first of all “an acute consciousness of the fallen state both of the world and of the self, combined with a revolt against that fallen condition.”⁴ In order to explain our imperfect and unjust world, most Gnostic sects pleaded for the existence of both a benevolent and a malevolent deity, the latter of whom had

⁴ Alain Besançon, *The Rise of the Gulag: Intellectuals Origins of Leninism*, trans. Sarah Matthews (New York: Continuum, 1981), 10.

fathered the world. Through an act of initiation,⁵ of *gnosis*, man can recognize the true God, the superior one, and ultimately escape the prison of this world. The appeal of the doctrine is rooted in the promise of “total explanation, resolving all problems, capable of integrating everything.”⁶

One of the earliest opponents of Gnostic “heresies,” Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyon, devoted to the topic “Five Books on the Unmasking and Refutation of the Falsely Named Gnosis.”

According to Irenaeus, the Gnostics erred in refusing to submit to the Lord and claiming absolute knowledge: “In trying to investigate things which are above us and at present beyond our reach, we become so arrogant that we treat God like a book to be opened and act as if we had already found the unfindable. We talk stupidly about emanations and claim that God, the Maker of all things, derived his substance from ‘degeneration’ and ‘ignorance,’ thereby using a godless argument against God.”⁷ Absolute knowledge cannot be achieved, as becomes obvious when examining the contradictions in Gnosticism, writes Irenaeus.

Hans Urs von Balthasar, a modern editor of Irenaeus’ text, finds the revival of Gnosticism only natural in more recent times.⁸ As tormented as his ancestors, modern man also hoped salvation was possible. The means to attain it had changed; he could take control over his destiny not through the grace of providence but by gaining consciousness of himself, by breaking the chains of private property, or by overcoming mass morality. In all cases, deliverance is contingent upon the destruction of the old world and the creation of a new one. It is through knowledge that man first becomes aware of his alienation and is then able to surmount it. In the

⁵ Albert Camus notes that: “A la grâce toute- puissante et arbitraire, les gnostiques ont voulu seulement substituer la notion grecque d’initiation qui laisse à l’homme toutes ses chances.” (Albert Camus, *L’homme révolté* (Paris: Gallimard, 1951), 53). This is obviously a phantasmagoric view of the world.

⁶ Besançon, *The Rise of the Gulag*, 15.

⁷ Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, ed. Hans Urs von Balthasar, trans. John Saward (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1981), 35.

⁸ Hans Urs von Balthasar, forward to *Against the Heresies*, by Irenaeus, 5.

same vein, in his book *The New Science of Politics*, Eric Voegelin contends that the “essence of modernity is the growth of Gnosticism.”⁹ Secularization and radicalization have been the hallmarks of Gnosticism's evolution from its ancient to its modern forms.

Joachim de Flora, an 11th century abbot, played an important role in the transformation of Gnosticism. In the 11th century, when Joachim, the first “futurologue de l’Occident,”¹⁰ made his discoveries public, the Scriptures were widely believed to have hidden meanings. “[T]raditional methods of exegesis,” notes Norman Cohn, “had always given a large place to allegorical interpretations. What was new was the idea that these methods could be applied not simply for moral or dogmatic purposes but as a means of understanding and forecasting the development of history.”¹¹ Through a deconstruction of the concept of the Trinity, Joachim conceived of the history of humanity as meaningful and divisible into three determined periods: the age of the Father (pre-clerical), the age of the Son (dominated by priests), and the age of the Holy Spirit (or the age of monks).

Each new age was superior to the last: times progressed from an age of fear and slavery through an age of faith and filial submission to a final age of love, joy, and freedom. Prophets and leaders (Abraham, Christ, and a *Dux e Babylone*) would prepare and reign over each period. After strenuous mathematical calculations, Joachim concluded that the age of perfect harmony and communities regulating each other without the need of institutions was to begin in 1260. This final age would be preceded by a three-and-a-half-year interregnum, during which the Antichrist would ravage and humiliate the Earth. What is striking in Joachim’s scheme is not his

⁹ Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1952), 126.

¹⁰ André Reszler, *Mythes politiques modernes* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1981), 51.

¹¹ Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 108.

willingness to reject one of the fundamental tenets of Christianity, nor even his hinting at being a prophet himself, but his claim of an ability to predict the course of history.

According to Voegelin, Joachim's influence cannot be underestimated. Cohn remarks that, "horrified though the unworldly mystic would have been to see it happen,"¹² Joachim's theory was appropriated by Hegel (Oriental, Greek and Roman, and modern stages), Auguste Comte (the theological, metaphysical, and positivist stages), Marx (primitive communism, class society, and final communism with the withering away of the state),¹³ and the Third Reich.

Of similar impact on posterity was Joachim's conception of leaders and prophets. Voegelin asserts that: "[I]n order to lend validity and conviction to the idea of a final Third Realm, the course of history as an intelligible, meaningful whole must be assumed accessible to human knowledge, either through a direct revelation or through speculative gnosis. Hence the Gnostic prophet or, in the later stages of secularization, the Gnostic intellectual becomes an appurtenance of modern civilization."¹⁴ Unlike Saint Augustine, Joachim endowed history with an intelligible meaning. In this light, the embrace of Joachim's revolutionary ideas by those looking for answers is easier to explain. According to Joachim, an understanding of human fate was possible here on Earth because of a foreseeable irruption of the spirit. In the 18th century, progress replaced the spirit in a phase that Voegelin refers to as "secularization."¹⁵

Voegelin identifies six features common to what he considers the modern Gnostic movements, such as progressivism, positivism, Marxism, communism, fascism, and National Socialism. First, the modern Gnostic, just like his predecessors, experiences acute disaffection.

¹² Cohn, 109.

¹³ "Dans les doctrines du socialisme, la notion de l'âge d'Or se confond avec le projet de société 'scientifique', industriel et organisateur qu'il propose." (Reszler, 89)

¹⁴ Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, 112.

¹⁵ Ibid., 119.

Instead of blaming the human condition, or a god, for his plight, he holds the world responsible. Human beings are perfectly adaptable; it is the world that is not as it should be. The Gnostic is reassured, though: it is possible to find solutions that are purely historical and depend on human will. The responsibility of the Gnostic is to find a blueprint for salvation.

Using the Puritans as an example, Voegelin traces the growth of a Gnostic movement. The essential device that sets any Gnostic revolution in motion is the “cause.”¹⁶ In order to promote this cause, those who proffer it criticize the evils of society, which are usually blamed on the higher classes and ultimately the government. Since only upright persons can discern the wrongs in a society, social criticism indicates moral probity. Moreover, the defenders of the cause also demonstrate their deep insight through the connections they draw and the attitudes they advocate.

The Puritan leaders understood that in order to strengthen their movement they needed to persuade their followers that they were among the elect. Thus they sanctioned only the biblical passages that reinforced this argument. It is important to note that only certain passages were recommended, and they were standardized, leaving no place for divergent interpretations or doctrinal contestations. Calvin, notes Voegelin, wrote his *Institutes* to provide the *only* guide to the Bible and to render any prior works obsolete. Calvin’s example was later on followed by Diderot, D’Alembert, Comte, and Marx¹⁷ (and later by Lenin and Stalin).

¹⁶ Voegelin bases his analysis of the Puritan movement on the work of Hooker, a contemporary of the movement. According to Hooker, the term “cause” was probably invented by the Puritans.

¹⁷ Voegelin follows Marx’s reasoning for the interdiction of questioning. Marx starts from the premise that man has created himself; if one started wondering about the creation of the first man, his argument would not be able to stand. In order to combat such a possibility, Marx recommends: “Do not think, do not question me.” Socialists do not, therefore, ask questions about the nature of their doctrine, because as Marx said, asking questions becomes a practical impossibility. This attitude leads Voegelin to label Marx an “intellectual swindler” (Eric Voegelin, *Science Politics and Gnosticism*, with an introduction by Ellis Sandoz Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books), 21).

The Gnostic revolutionary takes upon himself the changing of the world. Voegelin points out that the description of this new perfect world is usually vague: an antithesis of the present one, prosperous, free of coercion from governments, and embracing a possible punishment of the former ruling class. Marx and Engels, says Voegelin, realized this flaw and found it necessary to explain that it was impossible to describe the institutions of the new world, because human nature would change and there was no frame of reference for that. In this view, real problems are supposed to be solved by what Voegelin calls “magic operations in the dream world, such as disapproval, moral condemnation, declarations of intentions, resolutions, appeals to mankind, branding of enemies as aggressors, outlawing of war, propaganda for world peace and world government, etc.”¹⁸

The prophets of the new world consider involvement in the problems of the polity a moral duty, and as Voegelin remarks, it is with good faith that they “substitute their convictions for critical knowledge”¹⁹ or believe themselves to be masters of subjects they do not fully grasp. In the aftermath of the Great War, the Gnostic intellectual was not alone in his critique of society. From antiquity on, men of letters have always shown an interest in politics, always hoped to change the world. Better societies, better human beings, or a better prince have been a constant preoccupation. In spite of this long tradition, the intellectual of the postwar period is different from his predecessors, mostly in terms of what he construes his moral debt or duty to society to be. “Not only do French intellectuals,” writes David Caute, “regard one another as the guardians of an elevated vocation, the vocation of *l’esprit*, but society has tended to value them

¹⁸ Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, 170.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 175.

on their own terms, according their pronouncements an attentive, if sometimes skeptical, hearing.”²⁰

In order to understand the intellectuals’ position after WWI and what they thought was expected of them, one needs to go back to the 18th century. In his book *La naissance du Panthéon*, Jean-Claude Bonnet examines the most significant changes that occurred during the last decades of the *ancien régime*. Bonnet notes the precise date of the switch from “the father” to “the fathers” of the nation: “Mais c’est en 1758 qu’on peut dater précisément l’acte de naissance officiel, en quelque sorte, du culte des grands hommes en France, lorsque les anciens sujets du concours d’éloquence à l’Académie furent remplacés par l’éloge des grands hommes de la nation.”²¹

Paradoxically, the keeper of traditions, the French Academy, played a crucial part in making intellectuals as prestigious as monarchs, which failed to either preserve traditions or safeguard the absolute monarchy. For men of letters to enjoy the praise of the participants in the rhetorical competitions held by the Academy, they had to renounce solitary adventures and commit themselves to helping the public. Royal glory came with a price, Bonnet suggests, and if Voltaire was literally crowned at the performance of one of his plays, it was because his work was political and had above all a moral purpose. In these circumstances, an author devoted to the pursuit of art for art’s sake would have never enjoyed Voltaire’s prestige. “Alors qu’on assiste au déclin de l’autorité du monarque, du prêtre,” writes André Reszler, “celle du poète, du musicien génial, grandit. Interlocuteur privilégié du prince aux dernières heures de l’Ancien Régime, il

²⁰ David Caute, *Communism and the French Intellectuals: 1914-1960* (New York: The Macmillan, 1964), 11.

²¹ Jean-Claude Bonnet, *La naissance du Panthéon: Essai sur le culte des grands hommes* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1998), 10.

devient à son tour prince, empereur ou titan.”²² Considering the highly respected position intellectuals enjoyed, and thus their power to shape public opinion, their political choices had more than personal implications.²³

It is at this point, then, that we can place the beginning of what the French philosopher Julien Benda calls “the age of politics.” If Bonnet is mainly concerned with tracing a tradition and refrains from condemning or praising the competitions of the Academy and their effects, Benda is highly critical of his contemporaries. What Benda reproaches the intellectuals of his age, whom he calls “clerks,” most vehemently about is their abandonment of 18th-century ideals. Instead of being contemplative, the intellectuals/clerks serve the passions of the common man, which for Benda amounts to *The Great Betrayal*.²⁴ Modern civilization is at fault, in Benda’s eyes, as it “made the ‘clerk’ into a citizen, subject to all the responsibilities of a citizen, and consequently to despise lay passions is far more difficult for him than for his predecessors.”²⁵

It must be noted that Benda is not solely concerned with the neglect of universal values for elitist reasons; he considers it the foundation of the “*intellectual organization of political hatreds*.”²⁶ One social class hates another, which “justifies” the possession of some material advantages or the desire to acquire them; or, one group of men want to become conscious of themselves as individuals, hence the need to establish their distinction from others. Moreover, Benda argues, “anti-Semitism, Pangermanism, French Monarchism, Socialism are not only

²² Reszler, 172.

²³ Camus writes: “la tâche de l’artiste ne sera plus de créer un monde, ni d’exalter la beauté pour elle seule, mais aussi de définir une attitude. L’artiste devient alors modèle, il se propose en exemple: l’art est sa morale. Avec lui commence l’âge des directeurs de conscience.” (Camus, *L’homme révolté*, 77).

²⁴ Michel Winock describes Benda’s book in the following terms: “Jusqu’à nos jours, *La trahison des clercs* est resté un livre emblématique, disputable, discuté parfois avec véhémence, mais un objet de référence obligé dans toute réflexion et dans tout histoire concernant le rôle des intellectuels dans la Cité.” (Michel Winock, *Le Siècle des intellectuels* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1997), 195).

²⁵ Julien Benda, *The Great Betrayal* (London: George Routledge & Sons, Ltd., 1928), 127.

²⁶ Ibid., 21.

political manifestations; they defend a particular form of morality, of intelligence, of sensibility, of literature, of philosophy, and of artistic conceptions.”²⁷

If truth has lost its universality, political passions have acquired it. Thanks to the progress of communication, says Benda, political passions have attained not only universality, but also coherence, boiling down to one overriding emotion. “The condensation of political passions,” writes Benda, “into a small number of very simple hatreds, springing from the deepest roots of the human heart, is a conquest of modern times.”²⁸ Such is the work of the daily political newspaper, which although not a 20th-century invention, never attained such popularity in previous times.

I must add to Benda’s commentary that for intellectuals such as Aragon and Drieu, truth has lost its universality in their messianic view of the world. Since, as Camus remarks, “La vérité, la raison et la justice se sont brusquement incarnées dans le devenir du monde. ... Ces valeurs ont cessé d’être des repères pour devenir des buts.”²⁹ According to Camus, the authoritarian, coercive nature of the socialist utopia derives precisely from its replacing God with the future and identifying the future with morality.³⁰ Consequently, Camus argues, actions no longer have morality in themselves, but only in their potential service to a future society. Aragon and Drieu viewed human beings through the same restrictive lenses. Like the ancient Gnostics, for whom the present represented the evil in us, for Drieu and Aragon, man ceased to exist in the present.

²⁷ Ibid. , 22.

²⁸ Ibid. , 5.

²⁹ Camus, *L’Homme révolté*, 174.

³⁰ Camus points out that Marx refused injustice and quotes him: “Un but qui a besoin de moyens injustes n’est pas un but juste.” Yet Camus also notes that Marx’s “doctrine était restrictive et la réduction de toute valeur à la seule histoire autorisait les plus extrêmes conséquences. Quand le mal et le bien sont réintégrés dans le temps, confondus avec les événements, rien n’est plus bon ou mauvais, mais seulement prématuré ou périmé....” (Camus, *L’Homme révolté*, 264).

Contrary to the desired result – to grant man control of his destiny – liberation from divine predestination enslaved man even more. It made him a slave to the better future he had to forge.³¹

Since Drieu and Aragon expected their wishes to be fulfilled on this side of the grave, their messianism is not Christian. They do, however, share certain similarities with their religious predecessors. Jean Servier comments, “Plus qu’un acte de foi, les mouvements millénaristes ont exprimé la volonté des hommes de réaliser sur terre l’ordre nouveau que Dieu tardait à établir. Leurs vagues de violences se sont succédées pour hâter, par le sang répandu des réprouvés, la venue du Royaume.”³² Millenarianism and modern Gnosticism converge precisely in the faith that a better future can be willed into existence by man alone.³³

The inter-war period was, in the words of Lucian Boia, “une courte période de répit entre les deux guerres, entre deux crises de fin de monde.”³⁴ My study spans from 1930 to 1945. Even though Aragon joined the French Communist Party (PCF) in 1927, he rejected a Surrealist approach to revolt only after his first visit to the Soviet Union, in 1930. He made his contribution to the “world of the future” in 1934. Aragon, together with André Malraux, Paul Nizan, and Jean-Richard Bloch, took part in the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers in Moscow, where the doctrine of socialist realism was officially consecrated. Aragon became France’s staunchest “apologist”³⁵ for this doctrine and pledged to write literature that would bring about

³¹ “La pensée historique devait délivrer l’homme de la sujétion divine; mais cette libération exige de lui la soumission la plus absolue au devenir.” (Ibid. , 293).

³² Jean Servier, *Histoire de l’utopie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), 22.

³³ Reszler writes about Marx: “*il prodigue des certitudes*. Il confond le “il sera ainsi” de la prophétie, avec le “je veux qu’il soit ainsi” de la passion révolutionnaire.” (Reszler, 96)

³⁴ Lucian Boia, *La fin du monde: une histoire sans fin* (Paris: Editions La Découverte, 1989), 194.

³⁵ Cauter, 322.

the revolution.³⁶ In 1934, the French newspaper *Commune* published the statutes of the Soviet Writers Union, which define socialist realism as a “méthode fondamentale de la littérature et de la critique soviétiques, exigent de l’artiste la peinture véridique et historiquement concrète de la réalité dans son développement révolutionnaire. Ce caractère de la description doit s’allier au problème de l’éducation et de la transformation idéologiques des masses laborieuses dans l’esprit du socialisme.”³⁷

In the construction of communism, writers could play as significant a role as workers. Obviously, they could not engage in art for art’s sake nor in obsolete literary genres, which only perpetrated social injustices. Communist writers should try to follow Marx’s advice and not simply observe society, but transform it.³⁸ Unlike their predecessors, the communist writers of the 1930s could transform the world with the tools of socialist realism. This new realism’s main objective was to reflect the world in its essence and dynamics, not just its appearance. Thus, the writer was to explore the present society in order to unveil the elements that would give rise to the future society. According to Aragon, “le réalisme socialiste, c’est-à-dire ce réalisme de notre temps qui tient compte de la perspective historique de l’avenir ou du présent, suivant les pays, je veux dire du socialisme.”³⁹ The aim of socialist realism was to teach ordinary people to live in the manner of fictional heroes. Aragon published his first socialist realist novel, *Les cloches de Bâle*, the same year.

³⁶ Angela Kimyongür states, “The vital difference between critical and socialist realism is that in the latter the writer should be instrumental not simply in criticizing, but also in bringing about social transformation.” (Angela Kimyongür, *Socialist Realism in Louis Aragon’s Le Monde Réel* [Hull: The University of Hull Press, 1995], 22).

³⁷ Quoted in Kimyongür, 16.

³⁸ “Philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it.” Karl Marx, “Thesis on Feuerbach,” in *The Portable Karl Marx*, ed. Eugene Kamenka (New York: Penguin Books, 1983), 158).

³⁹ Louis Aragon, *J’abats mon jeu* (Paris: Les Editeurs Français Réunis, 1959), 80. Cited hereafter as *J’abats*.

After years of political hesitation during which he tried communism, radicalism, and socialism, Drieu La Rochelle became a fascist in 1934. According to his testimony, the antiparliamentary street riots of February 6⁴⁰ convinced him that fascism alone could solve the predicament of his time. The same year, he published *Socialisme fasciste*, where, in true Gnostic fashion, he put forward what he believed to be an alternative to the decadence of the world.⁴¹ In 1937, he joined the fascist party of Jacques Doriot, the Parti Populaire Français (PPF), and became its most eminent supporter. Even though he left the party a few years later, his public support for fascism did not subside until near the end of his life.

Given the latitude French intellectuals had in choosing their political affiliation during this era, the decision to become either a fascist or a communist was more revealing than it would have been in a communist or a fascist state. What sets France apart from Germany, Italy, Spain, and the Soviet Union is that, for 20 years, both the extreme Right and the extreme Left were legal. Even though Léon Blum outlawed the fascist leagues in 1937, forcing them to dissolve, the extreme Right itself was not outlawed. To take one example, the Croix de Feu was allowed to become a political party, the Parti Social Français. I have decided to extend my study to 1945,

⁴⁰ The February 6, 1934 crisis was the result of a financial scandal generated by Sacha Stavisky. Stavisky was notorious for his financial frauds. According to Philip John Stead, the author of *The Police in France* (London: The Macmillan Publisher, 1983) the police was powerless in dealing with Stavisky. Even though they reported Stavisky's frauds, Stead argues, nothing was done to prosecute him. When the extremist papers found that Stavisky's financial empire was about to collapse, they wrote virulent articles against the government. The prime minister, notes Stead, promised reforms. As for Stavisky, he fled Paris and was found dead by the police. There were many speculations as to his death; the police claimed it was a suicide, while the press accused the police of killing Stavisky. As a result, the government had to resign and a new government was formed under Edouard Daladier. The prefect of police, Jean Chiappe was fired. Socialist papers were in favor of this dismissal, while the extreme right protested. The far right leagues called for street demonstrations, on February 6, 1934 which finished in a riot on Place de la Concorde near the seat of the National Assembly. Confrontations between the police and the protestors resulted, according to Stead, in over 30 deaths. Drieu recalls the event in different terms. In *Socialisme fasciste*, he applauds the French for putting aside their differences and protesting the abuse of the French government. He rejoices as he hears both the *International* and the *Marseillaise* during the same demonstration.

⁴¹ After the publication of *Socialisme fasciste*, Julien Benda "le couvre de compliments." In other words, Benda did not recognize the "disease" he himself diagnosed and from which he would later on suffer as well. (Pol Vandromme, *Pierre Drieu La Rochelle* (Paris: Editions Universitaires, 1958), 25).

because even though the Vichy government banned the PCF in 1940, communists remained both active and visible during the German occupation. Yet after 1945, an intellectual could not openly be a fascist.

As representatives of intellectuals who choose political extremes, Aragon and Drieu allow the critic to analyze how the extremes viewed each other. Ultimately, Aragon and Drieu embodied intellectuals who define themselves by their political choices. As Tony Judt points out, “Left or Right: these were the terms in which intellectuals defined themselves and thus contributed to defining and confirming French public debate for most of the past century. The very idea of an *intellectual* who did not think in these terms, or chose to transgress them, or to disentangle from such public identification altogether seemed a contradiction in terms.”⁴²

To my knowledge, there have been two studies comparing Aragon and Drieu. The first, *L’illusion politique au XXe siècle: Des écrivains témoins de leur temps J. Romains, Drieu La Rochelle, Aragon, Camus, Bernanos, Malraux*, by Jean-Louis Loubet del Bayle, attempts to explain intellectuals’ incentives to become involved in politics. Loubet del Bayle contends, and I can only agree with him, that the personal plays an important part in intellectuals’ political affiliations. Aragon dedicated himself entirely to the communist cause only after a suicide attempt. He never left the party, Loubet del Bayle avers, because “ce que celui mettait dans la balance n’était pas la possibilité de sa rupture avec le Parti, mais la menace de son suicide.”⁴³ Drieu’s adherence to fascism was more the result of an instinctive and passionate élan than of deep intellectual consideration. Loubet del Bayle concludes that both men were searching for answers to questions that were not solely political. By contrast, my study will demonstrate that

⁴² Tony Judt, *The Burden of Responsibility: Blum, Camus, Aron and the French Twentieth Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 10.

⁴³ Jean-Louis Loubet del Bayle, *L’illusion politique au XXe siècle : Des écrivains témoins de leur temps J. Romains, Drieu La Rochelle, Aragon, Camus, Bernanos, Malraux* (Paris: Economica, 1999), 186.

Drieu made an informed and much-cogitated choice, even though to outsiders it may appear irrational. Both Drieu and Aragon were aware of the illusions they endorsed, but they persisted in error because of their will for power. They craved power over others, but more importantly, power over their own destinies.

Maurizio Serra's comparative study of Drieu and Aragon, *Les frères séparés: Drieu La Rochelle, Aragon, Malraux face à l'Histoire*,⁴⁴ is structured around the tormented friendship his three protagonists shared. The author pays particular attention to the moments when Drieu, Aragon, and Malraux's destinies converge, emphasizing their constant preoccupation with the lost friendship. Serra's work is by far the most balanced work on the three authors: he does not hesitate to attack an idol such as Malraux, lucidly analyze Drieu's fascism, or expose Aragon's servility toward the PCF. I find Serra's study extremely helpful, in part thanks to the personal testimonies the author records.

My study differs from Serra's first of all because it is not a comparative biography. Moreover, by inscribing Aragon and Drieu in the category of Gnostic intellectuals, I situate them in a tradition that ultimately contextualizes their hopes and confidence in the power of their own knowledge. I point out that the presumption to insights and achievements that actually lie beyond human reach was not a novelty in the 1930s, nor did it disappear with the decline of communism and fascism. Even though Aragon and Drieu's brands of extremism are specific to their epoch, the use of great intellect to rationalize a lust for power remains a problem.

Unlike Loubet del Bayle and Serra, I analyze in great detail the rapport between political commitment and its manifestation in literary works. My study reveals that the fictions Aragon and Drieu created in their political works often fall apart in their works of fiction. Although their

⁴⁴ Maurizio Serra, *Les frères séparés: Drieu La Rochelle, Aragon, Malraux face à l'Histoire*, trans. Carole Cavallera (Paris: La Table Ronde, 2008).

literature meant to embrace totalitarianism, it ended up contesting it. As literary figures, neither Aragon nor Drieu were “slaves” of communism or fascism. What ensured their freedom was their subversion of totalitarian ideologies through literature. Frédéric Grover comes to a similar conclusion and states that Drieu “confided in his fiction all the things he could not express as a public figure.”⁴⁵ Yet one can only ask what stopped Drieu from expressing his true thoughts. One always has the choice to at least keep silent when unable to speak the truth. There is no real defense for Drieu or Aragon. Their literary subversion ultimately proves their awareness of their ideological errors.

⁴⁵ Frédéric J. Grover, *Drieu La Rochelle and the Fiction of Testimony* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1958), 249.

Chapter 1: A Flawed World

La réalité ne s'invente pas, elle se découvre; mais ce que nous découvrons d'elle et que nous exprimons dans nos jugements appelés vrais, c'est cela qui est une invention, car c'est la nature de notre esprit, ce sont nos besoins, ce sont nos aspirations et nos tendances de toutes sortes qui déterminent le choix que nous faisons dans le réel, le découpage que nous opérons dans sa continuité et qui fait de nos conceptions de véritables œuvres d'art.¹

Henri Bergson

Louis Aragon and Pierre Drieu La Rochelle survived World War I, but war forever altered each author's perception of reality. Their assertion that the world was living the last stages of history was not entirely the projection of their paranoid imaginations, but rather indicative of their selective view of realities. Both authors focused on French society's negative aspects, on what was wrong with the world, with the declared intent to destroy that flawed world and to erect a new and better one. Individual experience played a crucial part in their "discovery" and subsequent articulation of that reality. A cursory glance at each author's biography will clarify why I consider them representative figures of interwar French intellectuals who embraced political extremes.

Drieu's discontentment with society emerged at an early age partly because of the milieu in which he spent his young life. In this respect, his first years resemble Aragon's. Drieu was born in 1893 to a bourgeois family of modest means, but just like Aragon's family, Drieu's was highly dysfunctional. A failed businessman and womanizer, Drieu's father never took responsibility for his failures, in life or business, and always placed blame elsewhere, most often the Jews. Drieu was obviously affected by his family's constant state of discord, and especially

¹A. D. Sertillanges, *Avec Henri Bergson* (Paris: Gallimard, 1941), 41-42.

by his mother's lack of courage and dignity in relationship to his father. Drieu's fictional bourgeois families all inherit the characteristics of his own family and they are all concerned with keeping up appearances no matter the financial or emotional cost. Although a brilliant student, Drieu failed his final exam at the *Sciences Politiques*, a failure that haunted him all his life. Following in his father's footsteps, Drieu considered himself too innovative for his professors and consequently held them responsible for his academic failures.

At the end of his college years, Drieu had no prospects. His academic failures closed the world of diplomacy to him and Drieu "welcomed" military service. Like Aragon, Drieu participated in WWI. Two major battles marked his service, Charleroi and Verdun; he returned from the front with a stiff arm. The war's importance in Drieu's judgment of contemporary realities can not be overestimated. One of Drieu's biographers, Dominique Desanti expresses the common shared opinion that Drieu's choice of political affiliation was a result of his participation in the war.²

Drieu began his literary career in 1917 with a volume of war poems, *Interrogation*. In the years following the war, he was sympathetic to the Dadaist movement and later moved on to Surrealism. A very close friend of Aragon, Drieu separated himself completely from André Breton's group, as he did not endorse their political involvement. As late as 1931, in *L'Europe contre les patries*, Drieu was writing as an anti-fascist, but after the antiparliamentary riots of February 6, 1934, he declared himself a fascist. This same year, Drieu published his *Socialisme fasciste* in support of his newfound political interests.

Drieu joined Jacques Doriot's fascist PPF in 1937 only to leave it in 1938; he rejoined for another short period in 1942. As might be expected, during the German occupation Drieu

² Dominique Desanti, *Le séducteur mystifié* (Paris: Flammarion, 1978), 115.

collaborated with the Nazis while in charge of *La Nouvelle Revue Française*. He also published in *Le Figaro* and in Robert Brasillach's *Je Suis Partout*. This collaboration is at times hard to grasp. On the one hand, he wrote anti-Semitic articles and was a close friend of Hitler's ambassador in Paris, Otto Abetz. On the other, he saved his first wife, a Jew, and Jean Paulhan from the Gestapo and godfathered André Malraux's son. His novel *L'homme à cheval* (1942) and *Les chiens de paille* (1944)³ reflect this ambivalence. At the liberation, he refused to leave the country and went into hiding for several months. After two failed suicide attempts in August 1944, he was finally successful in March 1945.

The illegitimate son of a famous political figure (Louis Andrieux, Préfet de Police of Paris), Louis Aragon was born in Paris in 1897. From his early childhood, Aragon's family structure was by no means straight-forward: his grandmother claimed to be his adoptive mother, his real mother just a sister. His father pretended to be a godparent and did not reveal his true identity until Aragon's departure for the front in 1917. Serra specifies that "dans ces années de formation, on voit bien que ce qui le rapproche de Drieu, autre paysan de Paris 'neurasthénique,' c'est avant tout la conscience, au fur et au mesure moins infantile, moins innocente, de ne pas correspondre à des rôles bien définis: père-fils, individu-collectivité. Voilà le péché originel qui provoque, chez l'un et l'autre, un élan de révolte encore dépourvu de connotations politiques."⁴

WWI had the same impact on Aragon as on Drieu. The writer Jacques Henric recalls a car trip with Aragon who wanted to locate an old WWI battlefield:

Il se tourne vers moi, me cite Joyce: "L'histoire est un cauchemar dont j'essaie de m'éveiller." S'en est-il éveillé, lui aussi, le poète aux cheveux déjà blancs, comme tous ceux qui, à peine sortis de l'adolescence, commencèrent leur vie d'homme en pataugeant dans la boue sanglante des tranchées ? "Tu comprends, p'tit, pourquoi mes amis et moi

³ *Les chiens de paille* was published posthumously in 1964.

⁴ Serra, 34.

[allusion à Breton, à Drieu, à d'autres proches de sa génération] on a fichu un beau désordre dans la littérature?"⁵

However, while a conscript in the French army, Aragon made the fortuitous acquaintance of André Breton. Aragon's literary career began shortly after the war with the volume of poems *Feu de Joie* (1920) and *Anicet ou le Panorama, roman* (1921). Together with Tristan Tzara and André Breton, he helped found the Dadaist movement and later on Surrealism. From then on, his literary reputation increased steadily, especially after the publication of *Le Paysan de Paris* in 1926. Although he started writing articles for Victor Crastre's communist magazine *Clarté* as early as 1925, he did not join the PCF until 1927.

After 1930, he worked as a journalist for *L'Humanité* and began a new literary career: namely that of a realist novelist. Following in the footsteps of Balzac and Zola, he devoted himself to the creation of a new Romanesque cycle, *Le Monde Réel*.⁶ During World War II, Aragon actively engaged in the French Resistance and wrote patriotic (even nationalist)⁷ poems. He maintained his commitment to communism after the liberation and supported Stalinist Russia without ambivalence. After Stalin's death and the Khrushchev rapport (1956), Aragon suffered deep depression and was on the verge of suicide. He nevertheless remained a member of the PCF for the rest of his life. He coped with his depression by devoting his time and energy to the

⁵ Jacques Henric, *Politique* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2007), 66.

⁶ The cycle contains: *Les Cloches de Bâle* (1934), *Les Beaux Quartiers* (1936), *Les Voyageurs de l'Impériale* (1939), *Aurélien* (1944), and *Les Communistes* (1949-1951).

⁷ Leon Trotsky and Stalin held opposing view on nationalism and internationalism. Stalin did not however wish to confine the revolution to the Soviet Union, even though he decided to concentrate his efforts within his own country. That is why he maintained the Comintern (founded by Lenin), which was responsible to spur the world-wide revolution. He dissolved it only in 1943. Critics (such as Carsten Holbraad, *Internationalism and Nationalism in European Political Thought* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 69) often argue that Stalin diverted the Comintern from its initial purpose and used it to promote the interests of the Soviet state. Contrary to Stalin, Trotsky argued for the necessity to foment perpetual revolution. Trotsky maintained that "revolution begins within national frontiers, but it can not be circumscribed by them. The circumscription of the proletariat revolution within a national territory can be nothing more than a transitory state." (Leon Trotsky, quoted in Robert Jackson, *International Trotskyism, 1929-1985: a documented analysis of the movement* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 6).

literary magazine *Les Lettres Françaises*. In 1956, he published a poetic autobiography, *Le roman inachevé*, followed by equally successful works: *La Semaine Sainte* (1958), *Les poètes* (1960), *Le Fou d'Elsa* (1963), *La Mise à mort* (1965), *Blanche ou l'oubli* (1967), *Les Communistes* (second version), *Henri Matisse, roman* (1970), and finally *Théâtre/roman* (1971). Aragon died in 1982.

Drieu and Aragon's revolt was not of a metaphysical nature. They revolted against what man did to man, a revolt which stemmed first of all from their conviction to be entitled to a better life, to happiness on this side of the grave. When they contemplated the world, they saw it as putrid, but at the same time, they believed in the possibility of its complete transformation, a transformation rooted in identifying the problem and its consequences. I subscribe to Jonathan Dale's conclusion that the "diagnosis is also an accusation;"⁸ Drieu and Aragon both came forward with what they believed to be incriminating evidence and gave a verdict at the same time. In the line of modern Gnostics, they wrote more on the malady of the present, than on the better society to come. In his *Notes pour comprendre le siècle*, Drieu even argues that, "... la construction de l'avenir est incluse dans la critique du passé et du présent."⁹

I agree with Aragon and Drieu that their societies could and had to be improved. I would apply this rule to every society, since in a society without critics, authorities and institutions most often abuse their powers. As Paul Hollander notes, the freer the society the more critics it counts: "In Western societies, which have historically provided the maximum freedom of expression and room to work for the intellectual, what comes most naturally is to assume the function of the

⁸ Jonathan Dale, "Drieu La Rochelle: The War as Comedy," in *The First World War in Fiction*, ed. Holger Klein (London: macmillan, 1976), 71.

⁹ Pierre Drieu La Rochelle, *Notes pour comprendre le siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1941), 188. cited hereafter as *Notes*.

social critic, ‘unveiler,’ ‘faultfinder,’ or ‘discrediter.’ ”¹⁰ At the same time, I would add that not every type of criticism is effective. Criticism that starts from the premises that utopia is an option can not solve the actual problems a society might face. In contrast, I believe that technical criticism, as defined by Raymond Aron¹¹ has the most chances to actually better a society. In Aragon and Drieu’s case, utopian hopes framed the entirety of their criticism of French society. Prosecutors of their historical milieu, Aragon and Drieu engaged in moral and ideological criticism, which Aron describes as follows:

Moral criticism raises up against things as they are the notion, vague but imperative, of things as they ought to be. It denounces the cruelties of colonialism, it denounces capitalist alienation, it denounces the antithesis of masters and slaves and the infamous juxtaposition of blatant luxury and dire poverty. Even if he has no idea of the consequences of his revolt or of the means of translating it into action, the moral critic feels incapable of not proclaiming it. Finally, there is *ideological* or *historical criticism*, which attacks the present society in the name of a society to come, which attributes the injustices which offend the human conscience to the very essence of the present order (capitalism and private ownership are inherently bound to produce exploitation, imperialism and war), and sketches out the blueprint of a radically different order, in which man will fulfill his true vocation.¹²

Moral critics are also vital to the good functioning of a society, even though Aron dismisses them altogether. It is laudable that Aragon and Drieu protested the injustices of their times. Less praiseworthy is the ideological criticism in which they both embarked. They held capitalism responsible for the flaws of the modern world, and thus “discovered” only one part of reality. Moreover, since Aragon and Drieu considered the Soviet Union, Germany or Italy countries on

¹⁰ Paul Hollander, *Political Pilgrims: Travels of Western Intellectuals to the Soviet Union, China, and Cuba (1928-1978)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 52-53.

¹¹ “By *technical criticism*, one puts oneself in the place of those who govern or administer, one suggests measures which might attenuate the evils one deplors, one accepts the inevitable constraints of political action, the immemorial structure of collectivities, sometimes even the laws of the existing régime. One does not base oneself on idealistic premises, on a theoretical idea of a radiant future, but on results which are accessible given more common sense or goodwill.” (Raymond Aron, *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, trans. Terence Kilmartin (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1962), 211).

¹² Ibid.

the path to utopia, they examined them with more indulgence. These double standards weaken considerably their often justified criticism.

Critique of Capitalism

a. Capitalism and War

The soldiers who fought in the trenches, like Drieu, systematically defined and countered the war's causes. In Drieu's case, this moral imperative derived from the guilt of having outlived his fellow soldiers. He expresses this remorse most poignantly through the protagonist from *La comédie de Charleroi*: "j'avais déjà éprouvé une sorte de honte à certaines minutes, comme si les jours dont je jouissais maintenant je les avais arrachés à ces jeunes hommes que j'avais laissés là."¹³ Here, the character, serves as Drieu's "porte-parole," clearly indicating Drieu's remorse. Despite this lament, Drieu does not reject all wars though, only modern ones that, in his opinion, debase soldiers and leaders alike. For Drieu, a war one does not fight standing up, a war of the machines bears no resemblance to the glorious medieval wars when soldiers measured their worth against other soldiers. As Vandromme explains, "Drieu ne dit pas qu'il est contre la guerre parce qu'elle tue mais parce qu'elle tue sans profit pour personne, sans permettre le défi et le combat. C'est au nom de la hauteur et de la chevalerie qu'il proteste."¹⁴ Therefore, in January 1940, Drieu deplored the return of modern war that denounces, "une science et une industrie perverses, une propagande égarée, les traits définitifs d'une conception des êtres et des choses dont il nous semble qu'elle nous a beaucoup trompés en nous séduisant beaucoup."¹⁵ In Drieu's view, capitalist society uproots people, keeps them at the mercy of machines, and forces

¹³ Pierre Drieu La Rochelle, *La comédie de Charleroi* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982), 32. Cited hereafter as *La comédie*.

¹⁴ Vandromme, 49.

¹⁵ Pierre Drieu La Rochelle, *Chronique politique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), 210. Cited hereafter as *Chronique*.

them to live in towns; hence capitalist society can only engage in an infamous war. Moreover, since capitalist war does not lead to revolution, one can not justify the need for it, argues Drieu.

Although Drieu admits that only “un grand capitalisme” actually benefits from wars, he fails to recognize that these profits emerge more from state intervention than from the market itself. Drieu’s regular soldiers return from war impoverished and lacking directions, while those that allegedly provoked the war in the first place enjoy even more financial privileges. In *La comédie de Charleroi*, Drieu describes a mother’s pilgrimage to Charleroi. M^{me} Pragen visits the battlefield where her son died along with her secretary, a veteran of WWI. Hungry for glory, and notoriety, M^{me} Pragen wanted her son, Claude, to be a hero, and in spite of his fragility, she insisted that he join the military. Unfortunately, Claude died during the first days of war, failing to fulfill the noble mission that his mother had forced upon him. Yet, M^{me} Pragen revels in the memory of her son’s death, as if she had won or fought in the war herself. The young secretary-veteran notices how proudly she walks through the train station and thinks to himself “L’horreur prévue commençait. M^{me} Pragen était costumée en infirmière-major, toutes décorations dehors” (*La comédie*, 24). The humble young man does not parade his prowess in war, and feels embarrassed by his employer’s ostentatious display of grief. In an attempt to stress that war is of no benefit to those who wasted their youth in the trenches, Drieu presents Belgian characters that stand in awe of M^{me} Pragen’s decorations and name dropping, while these same characters judiciously ignore the secretary-veteran. Moreover, once in Belgium, town officials welcome M^{me} Pragen with honors, and completely ignore the anonymous young man.

The narrator argues that M^{me} Pragen, of Jewish descent, had to show even more enthusiasm for war than the average French citizen. In M^{me} Pragen, Drieu couples a cultivated nationalism (the Jewish desire to fit into French society) with foment for war. M^{me} Pragen

becomes the caricature Jew, who happily sacrifices her own offspring, for the glory of France.

“Ils se sont donné du mal pour les Patries dans cette guerre-là, les Juifs” (*La comédie*, 77), writes Drieu, who does not wish to completely devalue the Jewish plight. Yet, Drieu’s evaluation of the Jews is, as usual, not without its ambiguities. Even though he does not contest Jews’ courage, he refuses them any citizenship. He finds it ridiculous for Jews to pretend to be French, or Germans, or Christians in the name of patriotism, like M^{me} Pragen so brazenly does. In fact, through M^{me} Pragen, Drieu specifically focuses his ethnic critique on the reasons behind Jewish participation in war. Drieu attempts to reveal that the Jews were motivated not by an adopted “patrie,” but by ulterior motives. By contrast, Drieu places the real hero of war, the young secretary-veteran in the background, and he chooses to remain in the shadows by refusing M^{me} Pragen’s proposal to run for office.

Drieu’s view of capitalism as fearing change and profiting from war, echoes the themes found in Aragon’s texts: even though war is not capitalism’s aim it is its inevitable outcome. Once the wealth and labor of a region have been fully exhausted, new lands with more resources must be exploited. Hence, capitalism, as presented by Aragon, manifests itself as a rampant consumer that accompanies and endorses war’s absolute consumption of resources. For example, in *Les Beaux quartiers*,¹⁶ the car maker Wisner is present in the Balkans and very interested in the progress of war: “Les dernières nouvelles sont excellentes. Vous savez les Bulgares sont battus sur toute la ligne. Les Roumains avancent. Et même il ne faudrait pas laisser aller les choses trop loin, de peur qu’il y ait une révolution à Sofia. Il faudra bien que Ferdinand mette les pouces. Cela fait pour nos affaires de jolies perspectives. Nos mines sont prêtes à l’exploitation...” (*Les beaux*, 527). Wisner utters no word about casualties or about the interests

¹⁶ Louis Aragon, *Les beaux quartiers* (Paris: Denoël, 1972). Cited hereafter as *Les beaux*.

of the people actually fighting the war. Small nations like Serbia and Bulgaria that fight for their independence from the Ottoman Empire matter only to the extent they serve Wisner's interests.

Another fictional businessman, Joseph Quesnel accepts war as well, and his assistant's comments confirm Quesnel's decided interest in war: "Je ne pense pas que Joseph Quesnel, par exemple, si on lui demandait s'il est pour la guerre, puisse répondre autrement qu'avec horreur, avec indignation. Oui... pourtant deux ou trois fois, j'ai senti qu'il n'était pas irréductiblement hostile à cette idée..." (*Les beaux*, 375). From Aragon's perspective, capitalism can not simply reject war on moral principles, since capitalism and war go hand in hand.

Aragon's view of the world, as the battlefield between antagonistic economic interests alone fails to acknowledge the complexity of human interactions. As Benda comments, "If, in accordance with current opinion, you think that pride is a weaker passion than self-interest, you may be convinced to the contrary by observing how commonly men let themselves be killed on account of a wound to their pride, and how infrequently for some infraction of their own interests."¹⁷ Yet, as far as Aragon is concerned, economic factors circumscribe all human actions. In the end, it is not only a simplistic world view but also a very comforting one. Capitalism is nothing but man's creation, and therefore it can be supplanted with another economic system that is more conducive to a human being's success and survival.

b. Capitalism and Nationalism

Drieu and Aragon converged again in their coupling of capitalism with nationalism. They contended that capitalism needed to foster nationalist sentiments in order to justify war. In opposition to the Italian fascism, Drieu embraced an internationalist type of fascism¹⁸ and

¹⁷ Benda, 12.

¹⁸ In their study, *Fascism: Critical Concepts in Political Science*, Roger Griffin and Matthew Feldman explain the relationships between nationalism and the different type of fascism. "Thus, for classical Italian fascism, the state

militated for a European federation. In this respect, David Carroll asserts convincingly that Drieu's fascism is "rooted in a radical critique of all nationalisms, in a refusal to accept the nation as the ultimate origin and end of either politics or aesthetics."¹⁹ In *Socialisme fasciste*, Drieu's most vehement indictment of capitalism, Drieu maintains that capitalism needs nationalism in order to defend itself against socialism.²⁰

Drieu was not consistent on this issue. While a member of PPF, his political writings echoed the party's nationalism, which aimed above all to strengthen France. A few years later, he abandoned this position and wrote: "La condition humaine ne souffre pas seulement du capitalisme, elle souffre du capitalisme dans son embrouillement avec le nationalisme. Ce n'est pas seulement l'abus du profit qui entrave et brise l'homme dans l'usine et le bureau, c'est la mauvaise répartition des matières premières et du travail entre nations" (*Notes*, 162). Holding a discourse similar to Aragon's, Drieu revolts against man's alienation through work and national economic disparities.

Drieu sees a solution to annihilate nationalist sentiments: through totalitarianism.²¹ As for Aragon, he is convinced that nationalism will disappear as soon as classless societies will develop. Just like Drieu, Aragon sees nationalism as a natural outcome of capitalism. In order to illustrate the antagonism between capitalism and internationalism, Aragon sets the first part of

was arguably an objet of worship in itself. For the Nazis, the Nordic or Aryan race mattered at least as much as the German nation. For yet, other fascist movements, religion – in most cases, Catholic or Orthodox Christianity – has been a vital source of identity, alongside and closely linked to the nation, but not identical with it. A good example is Corneliu Codreanu's League of the Archangel Michael, founded in Romania in 1927. A protofascist organization of almost the same name had appeared in Russia, another country of Orthodox culture, in 1908. Nazi sympathizers in India developed a Brahmin-Hindu variant of fascist ideology. Fascists may, finally, attribute meaning to cultural or "civilizational" constructs of continentwide scope, such as "Europe" or "Eurasia." The relative importance attached to nation, state, race, faith and civilization is a useful criterion for distinguishing one kind of fascism from another." Roger Griffin, Matthew Feldman, *Fascism: Critical Concepts in Political Science* (London; New York: Routledge, 2004), 284.)

¹⁹ David Carroll, *French Literary Fascism: Nationalism, Anti-Semitism and the Ideology of Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 127.

²⁰ Pierre Drieu La Rochelle, *Socialisme fasciste* (Paris: Gallimard, 1934), 175. Cited hereafter as *Socialisme*.

²¹ I will explore his "solution" in depth in Chapter 2.

his novel *Les beaux quartiers*, in a Provence town near the Italian border. The birth place of the two protagonists, Edmond and Armand Barbentane, Sérianne employs most of its workers in a chocolate factory. Since Sérianne is a border town, the factory owner, Emile Barrel hires a French and Italian main d'oeuvre. However, the Italians do not enjoy the same benefits as the French and receive only half the salary of their French counterparts. Moreover, Barrel fires the Italians first when he realizes that his business is falling to the competition, even though Italian workers performed better than the French. Barrel convinces himself that he acted out of patriotism, and declares that “au-dessus des intérêts, il y a les idées, la Patrie” (*Les beaux*, 74). Aragon obviously ridicules this misunderstood patriotism, which is nothing but a justification of the status quo.

The workers do not share Barrel's patriotism, according to another of Aragon's characters, Adrien Arnaud. Arnaud is a young officer who considers strikes a societal flaw and the strikers “des mauvais Français” (*Les beaux*, 96). Consequently, Adrien founds *Pro Patria*, a group meant to train young bourgeois men to operate certain machines in the event of a strike. Aragon has the group members corrupted, boasting of their patriotism without really experiencing it. The *Pro Patria* members actually contradict Aragon's argument: not driven by nationalism, they behave like regular teenagers, using any pretext to be outside of their parents' influence. Adrien Armand is the exception and not the norm. His preoccupation with the working class is anachronistic amongst the other young men who dream of romantic conquests and chivalric endeavors.

Yet Aragon, through the very creation of *Pro Patria* attempts to point to the workers' power. Just like Adrien, the bourgeoisie fears strikes and, by extension, the working class. By designating the revolutionary potential of the working class, Aragon departs from critical realism

and follows the prescription of socialist realism. He uses Adrien to illustrate the bourgeois hysteria and fear of social upheaval, and the repressive methods used to prevent any improvement for the working class. Adrien thus becomes under Aragon's pen, the quintessential hypocrite: he pretends to fight for his country, when in reality he only acts out of fear and for his own interests.

The capitalist state, as described by Aragon, repeatedly uses the police and military to repress any attempt to change the proletariat's working and living conditions. In spite his tendencies to exaggerate certain features of the bourgeoisie, Aragon is right on this issue. The economics professor, G.V. Rimlinger also notes that "the dominant attitude of French employers, even those who sympathized politically with republican radicalism, was that they were perfectly capable of handling relations with "their" workers, knowing that in case of trouble, they could count on the police, the army and a conservative inclined legislature."²²

Just like in real life, in Aragon's fiction, the strike declared in response to Wisner's implementation of timing work is stifled by the army. Wisner timed the best worker in his factory, and then required all the other workers to accomplish the same task in the same amount of time. In order to justify the use of the military against the "non patriotic" workers who refused to comply with Wisner's timing, the government declared Wisner's plant of national interest. Aragon wishes thus to illustrate that capitalism can not thrive without the help of the state and that the big industrials' interests always coincide with those of the government. The situation is far more complex than Aragon describes it. It is unquestionable that the state intervened on behalf of the employers, but at the same time, it also created laws on arbitration of industrial

²² G.V. Rimlinger, *The Cambridge economic history of Europe*, ed. M. M. Postan, E. E. Rich, H. J. Habakkuk, Peter Mathias, Edward Miller, C. H. Wilson (Cambridge: The University Press, 1976), 567.

relations.²³ More importantly, in an effort to coopt the unions and temper their radicalism, the French state also subsidized labor unions, either by offering them “rent-free buildings and small yearly cash budgets.”²⁴ Governmental subventions were one of the main issues of contention between various types of syndicalism. Aragon does not plead for a non interventionist state, for a state that will have no jurisdiction to send the army in the event of a strike. Aragon does plead for a state that *will* intervene but only to protect the proletariat’s interests.

In Aragon’s fiction, the representatives of big industry obviously do not recognize their privileges and even claim the opposite. Joseph Quesnel accuses the state of being against his class, and expresses a deep admiration for J. P. Morgan. Morgan, affirms Quesnel, understood the importance of trusts to survival in contemporary society. Aragon aligns the aspirations of an American and a French capitalist, since he considers that the capitalists’ drive for money and power moves beyond national borders. One might say that the trust owners are the true internationalists, and Quesnel does just that: “nous sommes, nous autres industriels, les vrais internationalistes, et non pas ces brailards du Pré Saint-Gervais, qui voudrait armer le peuple tout entier...” (*Les beaux*, 512).

Quesnel misappropriates the notion of internationalism, distorting even the purpose of the demonstration on the Pré Saint-Gervais. On this historical occasion, the Socialist Party and thousands of workers gathered on the Parisian outskirts to protest the mandatory three years of military service.²⁵ Their goal was to resist the militarization of civil society, and to counter world-wide war. Aragon does not deviate from actual events when he presents the military and

²³ As Val R. Lorwin notes, “The government’s earliest arbitral award arose out of the Carmaux miners’ strike in 1892.” (Val R. Lorwin, *The French Labor Movement* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1954), 26).

²⁴ Lorwin, 26.

²⁵ In 1913 the German Reichstag passed a law to increase the size of their military. In response, the French parliament increased the military term of service from two to three years.

the big capitalists as defenders of the three year's law. Ordinary young people instinctively understand that the law infringes on their personal freedom.²⁶ Wisner and the like however can only profit from forced militarization, both thanks to use of their products in war and to the access to natural resources military conquests insure.

c. Capitalism and Democracy

At the turn of the century, nationalism and socialism, claims the Israeli historian Zeev Sternhell,²⁷ discover a common enemy, namely democracy: “puisque démocratie et bourgeoisie sont imbriquées, puisque la démocratie constitue l’arme de combat la plus efficace que la bourgeoisie ait inventée, il faut pour briser la société bourgeoise casser la démocratie.”²⁸ Several decades later, fascism and communism blamed the bourgeoisie for using the democratic apparatus solely to their advantage. Unlike Drieu, Aragon does not reject the democratic principles per se, but rather the abuse of the electorate system by the French bourgeoisie.

Drieu indicts democracy on multiple counts. According to René Rémond, most former war combatants share Drieu's distrust of parliamentary regimes.²⁹ For Drieu, democracy inhibits authority, a necessary principle for any social advance, while also encouraging an isolationist

²⁶ Edmond for instance, expresses no desire to spend “trois ans de notre jeunesse à faire l’imbécile...” (*Les beaux*, 346) However, when Adrien explains to him that the law exempts students, Edmond changes his perspective and concludes that “alors ... c’est différent.” (*Les beaux*, 346) Edmond can not think outside of his personal interests, and does not oppose the law on moral principles and as long as he does not have to waste his youth, the law can pass. Through Edmond and later on through Pierre Mercadier, from *Les voyageurs de l’impériale*, Aragon attacks bourgeois indifference to social issues as well as their malefic individualism which ultimately can only lead to war.

²⁷ Sternhell's main contribution to the study of French fascism is that he considers it as an “indigenous school of thought: in no way, can it be regarded as a foreign importation.” (Zeev Sternhell, *Ni droite ni gauche: l’idéologie fasciste en France* (Paris: Seuil, 1983), 27). I agree with Sternhell that fascism was not necessarily imposed on France, but even embraced by certain factions of the population. However, even though there are protofascist elements in French society, fascism remains a foreign ideology as far as France is concerned. French fascists, such as Drieu, gave fascism a French interpretation, however.

²⁸ Sternhell, 33.

²⁹ “Les combattants de la veille gardent rancune aux députés d’une division des responsabilités qui maintenant souvent les uns à l’arrière, alors que les autres exposaient leur vie dans les tranchées.” (René Rémond, *La droite en France* (Paris: Editions Montaigne, 1968), 1:209).

foreign policy (*Chronique*, 67). “Il est impossible,” he writes “que le citoyen puisse satisfaire par le même geste deux besoins aussi différents: se donner des chefs et se donner des représentants qui contrôlent ces chefs” (*Chronique*, 72). Drieu rejects the idea that elected officials should bow to a superior authority. Instead, he focuses on strengthening the state and ignores the plight of the all-powerful state’s citizens.

Oblivious to parallels to his own political agenda, Drieu admonishes democrats for their millenarianism: “... comme les premiers chrétiens. Ils sont persuadés que tout le monde est démocrate au fond de son cœur et que tôt ou tard le diable sera chassé de la planète et que la Démocratie apparaîtra dans le ciel, un pied à Genève – et sans doute l’autre à Moscou. Mais autrefois ils pensaient qu’il fallait aider la grâce et ils envoyaient des armées à travers l’Europe pour hâter le triomphe de la foi” (*Chronique*, 138). Drieu does not misrepresent the ever-present messianic type of democracy; but the author fails to recognize himself in his description. He himself falls prey to millenarian hope and dignifies Doriot with the underserved honorific of France’s savior.³⁰ Drieu differs from the democrats he derides only in one aspect – his version of the perfect realm to come. This difference centers chiefly in the idea that, democrats, essentially non-revolutionary, will appeal to the parliamentary system.

The parliamentary system cannot work, from Drieu’s perspective, and as Géraldi Leroy writes, “The unrelenting criticism of the parties in *Gilles* is aimed at showing that any vital impulse emanating from the depths of the people [...] is quickly stifled by parliamentary compromises.”³¹ The parliamentary system dilutes the authority of elected officials, especially the President, which Drieu renders disempowered. His ineffective President, “du matin ou soir

³⁰ Doriot: “le salut de notre nation” (Drieu La Rochelle, *Chronique*, 78)

³¹ Géraldi Leroy, “Drieu La Rochelle and the Popular Front,” in *1936: The Sociology of Literature: Proceedings of the Essex Conference on the Sociology of Literature*, July 1978, ed. Francis Barker, Jay Berntin, John Coombes, Peter Hulme, David Musselwhite, Jenifer Stone (Essex: University of Essex, 1979), 259.

... paraphait à tirelarigot des décrets et des lois. C'était là que, de six en six mois, il regardait, impuissant, entrer et sortir la farandole des présidents du Conseil, démissionnaires et tôt ou tard réinvestis."³² Drieu's President lacks any prestige. A functionary without say in the changing of his administrative personnel,³³ he merely stamps official papers without actually participating in the law-making process. To Drieu, the consequences are disastrous: the President's lack of executive power and his impotent role in government corrode everyone's life. Drieu does not attack the centralization of French society; his diatribe aims at the center, i.e. the President. If the President were worthy, life would improve for the entire society. Drieu adheres wholeheartedly to the fascist leadership principle, wishing for a god-like head of state, whose life and presidency would set the example for an entire society. Unfortunately the corrupt bourgeois world and the corrupt parliamentary system can not produce a commendable President.

Drieu and Aragon's fiction unveil a similar critique of the parliamentary system. As I have mentioned, Aragon primarily attacks French plutocracy. In France, "les ministres s'en vont, mais les Barrel demeurent. La vie économique du pays, voilà où est la réalité" (*Les beaux*, 79).

The historian Alexander Sedgwick expresses an opinion different from Aragon's:

The concentration of economic power in the hands of a few financiers and industrialists appear at first glance to justify the Marxian claim that ultimately all power resides in the hands of a bourgeois oligarchy. This was not the case in France at the turn of the century because the economic and political interests of the *haute bourgeoisie* were often at variance with the interests of the Republic. Captains of finance and industry had become closely identified with Orléanism and Bonartism, and they only reluctantly followed Thiers in 1873 and Jacques Piou in 1893 to accept the regime they never succeeded in dominating.³⁴

³² Pierre Drieu la Rochelle, *Gilles* (Paris: Gallimard, 1939), 344.

³³ Drieu is wrong. In the midst of the February 6, 1934 crisis, the president of the republic, Edouard Daladier, fired the prefect of police, Jean Chiappe. In real life, presidents had a say in the changing of their personnel. Drieu is right, however, to remark upon the political instability of the interwar period when no government lasted more than six months.

³⁴ Alexander Sedgwick, *The Third French Republic, 1870-1914* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1968), 33.

As for Aragon, he always places the economically privileged above the elected officials. The rich he portrays never hesitate to use repressive measures to maintain their privileges. In *Les Beaux Quartiers*, a lengthy portion is devoted to the manipulations of elections by the bourgeoisie.

Sérienne, the microcosm of French society, becomes the set for the dramatic confrontation between the radical Barbentane, the moderate Delange and the socialist Vinet. Unlike Barbentane, Vinet is not intimately connected with the town. A lawyer from Marseilles, Vinet is simply a foreigner looking to make a name for himself: “c’était bien évident qu’il ne venait là que pour se faire une situation” (*Les beaux*, 158). The lawyer (one of the most despised professions in communist countries) cannot effectively represent the workers for the two parties have nothing inherently in common. Essentially, Vinet’s electoral platform stays within the confines of his critique of the three years law.

With the exception of his antimilitarism, Vinet resembles his opponents. He is from the privileged class, and holds a job usually reserved for the bourgeoisie. Consequently, he is oblivious to the needs of Sérienne’s working class. Another foreigner to the region, Delange attempts to seduce voters with empty promises, most often committing to help them move away. Neither Delange nor the native Barbentane show any interest in the actual people they wish to represent, partaking in the elections as if they were a game of strategy.

In the midst of the electoral frenzy, a member of the nationalist group *Pro Patria* mortally wounds a worker, an event able to affect the voting public.³⁵ The clash between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat culminates in the death of the wounded worker. Barbentane’s

³⁵ Barrel, as the *Pro Patria* financial supporter, feels responsible for the accident, but he does not respond appropriately. Instead of prosecuting the culprit, Barrel sends the victim’s family: “des choses absurdes, des gants fourrés. En juillet!” (*Les beaux*, 175) Even in the rare occasion when a bourgeois attempts to atone for the working class’s misfortune, he can not fully acknowledge his guilt. Sending gloves in the middle of summer is an empty gesture. Barrel does not try to correct the injustice before him, rather he seeks to soothe his own conscience.

calculated behavior in the few hours before the actual death incriminates the radical candidate further. As the dying victim's doctor, he has a moment of compassion for his patient and even considers allowing the family in at all hours. This unexpected favor towards the underprivileged class falls short when Barbentane realizes the potential impact of the man's death. Barbentane fears that spreading the news might jeopardize his chances in the campaign, so he asserts his authority as a doctor and forbids the family a final farewell. The doctor clearly believes politics leaves no room for sentimentalism, and that it requires an absolute disregard for human lives.

Thanks to his lying, Barbentane wins. The radical atheist republican doctor receives the votes of the bourgeoisie, the working class, the royalists, and the Sérienne Christians. Aragon describes the bourgeois who voted for Barbentane as "les hommes de progrès de cette ville, tous ceux qui ont conscience des responsabilités républicaines. Peut-être les meilleurs de cette bourgeoisie mesquine, mais animée de grande illusion autant que de petits intérêts" (*Les beaux*, 245). While admitting that the citizens of Sérienne elected the candidate that promised to protect their own welfare, rather than the common good, Aragon implies that such excess of corruption materializes solely in a capitalist system. Global problems interest the small bourgeoisie of Sérienne only on elections, and the worker only when he is dead.

Aragon pairs Barbentane's indifference to the grief of the victim's widow. She cannot grasp the new reality in which she finds herself. The dead man's individual importance takes shape in a very dramatic scene when the widow finally understands Barbentane's lie: "Soudain, elle comprit toute l'histoire, le monstrueux de toute l'histoire. Et pourquoi l'infirmier avait parlé des socialistes. Où sont-ils? Où peut-on trouver les socialistes" (*Les beaux*, 228)? The poor masses, the workers, also begin to understand the trick, although they are not aware of their own potential. The crowd fancies that it needs a leader to rightfully direct their anger and to hold

Barbentane to questioning. As for Vinet, he perceives his role in the working class's revolt more accurately: "jamais de sa vie il n'avait senti si directement à quel point il n'était rien par lui-même" (*Les beaux*, 245). Aragon's repeated efforts to undermine a leader's position in the communist movement – this time with the leader himself aware of his dependence on the people – conforms to the communist ideal. In theory, the communist leader is dependent on the people, but in practice, this is not the case. Considering Aragon's adulation for Maurice Thorez or Stalin himself, it is rather implausible that he actually believes in the possibility of a society without leaders.

Vinet is not a leader though. He does not walk towards the people but expects the people to search for him. When they do find him, he gives a speech that reveals the vast distance between himself and the working class. Aragon indicates this by his character's slip of the tongue. "Il y a dans cette affaire," Vinet asserts "quelques obscurités intolérables et que vous voulez, que nous voulons savoir..." (*Les beaux*, 245). Vinet instinctively separates himself from the workers he addresses, and as a respectable bourgeois, he encourages his audience to maintain the dignity of their protest. According to Vinet, "les responsables ne sont pas les hommes, mais le régime! le régime" (*Les beaux*, 247)! Of course, circumstances fostered by the current regime facilitated the confrontation between the members of *Pro Patria* and the workers. Nonetheless, that does not mean that the actual persons who engaged in violent, murderous acts are not 100% responsible. Aragon's Vinet blames the regime and exculpates the people and the author does not contradict him. Aragon aims for a complete reversal of the social order and not for the condemnation of ordinary murderers. Moreover, the condemnation itself, had it occurred, might have had an appeasing effect on the proletariat who would feel less compelled to fight for a revolution. Punishing one bourgeois young man might give the widow a sense of closure, but

would only camouflage the dire problems encountered by the working class. Aragon prefers therefore a momentary absence of individual justice to foster deeper questions of universal justice – the sacrifice of a single widow to put universal happiness in the spotlight. Individuals do not matter for Barbentane, and do not matter for the author, Aragon, either, in spite of his alleged humanitarianism.

Aragon and Drieu portray radicals similarly. Rhetoric dominates French politics, and real issues are always avoided. Politicians follow their self-interest and the good politicians, i.e. the corrupted rhetoricians, always disguise themselves behind patriotism and a misunderstood republicanism. In their discourse, France becomes an abstract entity, and so do the electorate they supposedly represent. Drieu faults democracy itself, which he sees as inherently flawed, while Aragon blames the capitalist system that ultimately governs elections. The French proletariat, as Aragon sees it, simply does not have any candidate for whom to vote.

d. Capitalism and the Police State

Aragon and Drieu argue that democratic institutions assisted by the police only hinder social development. Since entirely subordinated to bourgeois interests, the police do not either defend public order or protect citizens. It is important to mention that Aragon had a rather personal rapport with the French police. In his memoirs, *Souvenirs d'un préfet de police*, Aragon's father, Louis Andrieux, prides himself on the thoroughness of the surveillance system he instituted. Aragon's father lauds his own slyness in dealing with the press and even with his own agents. Even if his affirmation that, "Tout ce qui compte dans Paris par sa beauté, son élégance, son esprit, sa naissance, ses toilettes, *tout-Paris* enfin a son dossier"³⁶ might appear as a meaningless boast, it is actually quite relevant. The *préfet* might not have successfully spied on

³⁶ Louis Andrieux, *Souvenirs d'un préfet de police* (Paris: Jules Rouff et Cie, 1885), 30.

everyone of importance, but he did nonetheless make the attempt. Moreover, Andrieux was not hesitant to make public his goal of disrespecting people's right to privacy. Considering this background, Aragon's constant preoccupation with police intervention in private citizens' lives is not necessarily the projection of a paranoiac imagination.

In Aragon's fiction, the police primarily target the challengers of the status quo, such as communists, anarchists and even feminists. Every character in Aragon's fiction who deviates from established behavioral norms becomes a suspect. The police employ every tactic to discredit those who oppose "proper" behavior. They accuse feminists, such as Catherine Simonidzé from *Les cloches de Bâle*,³⁷ of prostitution and anarchists of being undercover agents. In other words, the police, aware of their bad reputation among the Parisian population, use that bad reputation to their advantage.

The police described by Aragon do not serve the people – not even the state – but the rich industry men. The inspector, Colombin, from *Les beaux quartiers*, represents the typical French policeman, portrayed by Aragon as utterly corrupted. Colombin does not hesitate to blackmail a young destitute mother, to rape her repeatedly and to abuse all the power with which the state empowers him. Colombin's stage is the gambling establishment known as the Passage Club, where he functions as the enforcer of the status quo: he needs to make sure money remains in the same hands, rather than protect the individual or put murderers behind bars. Even though Colombin appears all-powerful, he is not. Wisner needs to make one single phone call to the police to have Colombin arrested and the Passage Club closed. In Aragon's portrayal of the capitalist system, the police cannot accomplish their main purpose because law enforcement is responsible first of all to the rich capitalists.

³⁷ Louis Aragon, *Les cloches de Bâle* (Paris: Denoël, 1934). Cited hereafter as *Les cloches*.

Drieu similarly distrusts the police. He does not however argue that capitalists own the police, nor does he venture any hypothesis as to who might control them. The authoritarian Drieu criticizes the police mostly because the republic's President does not control the police. In *Gilles*, Drieu portrays a President so impotent that he cannot even stop a conspiracy against himself. By deconstructing the image of the President, thus demonstrating the consequences of his ineptitude, Drieu demands a strong and empowered leader who should have to answer to no authority. Of course, Drieu rejects the idea that the separation of powers is beneficial. To him, separation of authority only leads to debilitating decisions which freeze France in an inauspicious moment in time.

f. Capitalism and Individualism

From Drieu and Aragon's standpoint, the bourgeoisie uses all the means at its disposal to stifle change. It silences all challengers of the current order through the police or falsifies reality to gain political power. Moreover, Aragon and Drieu maintain that the capitalist system encourages social irresponsibility, under the form of the anti-communitarian, anarchic and selfish individualism. Consequently, a socialist realist writer can only write the type of literature that will overcome the allegedly nefarious influence of individualism. In 1967, Aragon defined true literature as "celle du bien, qui triomphera avec tous les hommes de la terre sur l'individualisme, ce monstrueux briseur-de-grèves, celle qui avec eux triomphera des ténèbres de l'oppression sociale" (*J'abats*, 194). Aragon never revised his view of individualism. A few decades earlier he devoted an entire novel, *Les voyageurs de l'impériale*,³⁸ to illustrating the results of placing oneself before a community.

³⁸ Louis Aragon, *Les voyageurs de l'impériale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967). Cited hereafter as *Les voyageurs*.

Pierre Mercadier, the protagonist of this socialist realist novel and the individualist par excellence, perpetuates social injustice by his deliberate focus on his own persona. Nathalie Piégay-Gros's remarks confirm this claim: "l'individualisme que dénonce Aragon dans les *Voyageurs de l'impériale* est donc essentiellement conçu comme une affirmation du *moi* par opposition à toute communauté, à tout engagement politique, au sens le plus large de cet adjectif."³⁹ Aragon's most individualist character, Pierre, refuses to follow current events, offending the novel's other, more savvy, characters.⁴⁰ In the novel, a clear example of Pierre's individualism or of his "analphabétisme social,"⁴¹ is his failure to counter anti-Semitic sentiment.

Pierre is the only teacher in his school to befriend the Jewish math teacher, Meyer. Of course, Pierre does not think in racial terms. For him, "un homme est un homme et un pianiste, un pianiste..." (*Les voyageurs*, 75). However noble, Pierre's sentiments might seem, Aragon ridicules his character because he is inert, complacently unwilling to exact change: "Wagner avait alors un petit goût d'interdit, à cause de 1871. Pierre, sans se le dire, s'assurait qu'il était, au fond, germanophile. C'était la forme tacite de sa protestation contre un monde médiocre" (*Les voyageurs*, 76). Pierre has good instincts, but he does not have the desire to assert his preferences in public. Justified protest must be heard and seen to make a difference – not tacitly exercised in the comfort of one's house (or mind) alone.

Even though he never hides his possibly dangerous friendship with Meyer, Pierre does not agree to publicly support his Jewish friend. In the midst of the Dreyfus Affair, the school's professors decide to sign a declaration in support of Meyer, send it to the minister and publish it

³⁹ Nathalie Piégay-Gros, *Les Voyageurs de l'impériale d'Aragon* (Paris: Belin, 2001), 146.

⁴⁰ The author repeatedly insists that Pierre deliberately avoids the newspapers that are ever-present in other character's lives. Moreover, Pierre is too individualist to act or sign petitions, even when he agrees with the cause.

⁴¹ Louis Aragon, Speech at the 2nd Congrès international des Ecrivains pour la défense de la Culture, quoted by Piégay-Gros, 156.

in the local newspaper. Pierre refuses to sign the declaration on principle: he feels that signing a petition for any cause, even a justified one, sets a dangerous precedent: “Si nous commençons ce genre de déclaration, c’est un dangereux précédent... il faudra en faire à tout bout de champ... On fait un abus singulier ce temps-ci des signatures, du prestige individuel... Je vois bien du danger à ces coalitions qui puisent, non dans la valeur de l’individu, mais dans la seule loi du nombre leur discutable autorité...” (*Les voyageurs*, 325).

In fact, Pierre is troubled by the most essential part of any cause, the group, for it threatens his individualism. Pierre believes himself unable to thrive in any group, even one that shares his ideas. People’s racist feelings should, according to Pierre, be changed through individual examples rather than common enterprises. This is only an excuse, because in reality, Pierre does not engage in common enterprises for he is too self-centered. Pierre can not even muster curiosity about those around him. Aragon places him in an extreme circumstance: Pierre is present when his banker recognizes Ferdinand Esterhazy’s penmanship, a discovery that reveals Dreyfus’ innocence. Pierre shows no desire to see justice served and confronted with his banker’s unbridled excitement, he wonders “Qu’est-ce pourtant que cela pouvait lui faire à celui-ci que le coupable s’appelât Dreyfus ou Esterhazy?” (*Les voyageurs*, 318). Indeed, the unveiling of the Affair’s real culprit likely did not change the banker’s life, but what about Dreyfus himself? Pierre is not only incapable of any selfless action but he can not understand anyone’s self-sacrifice either. As far as he is concerned, “il s’y sentait supérieur, il se foutait pas mal de la justice, des bordereaux et de l’île du Diable” (*Les voyageurs*, 318).

Yet, Pierre does not altogether lack compassion for those around him. When one of the Jewish children attacked during anti-Semitic riots seeks refuge in his classroom, Pierre does not hesitate to offer the young boy, aptly named Dreyfus, protection. Even though Pierre empathizes

with another's suffering, he still wishes not to hear the young boy's cry: "Pierre eût donné cher pour ne pas entendre cela" (*Les voyageurs*, 333). Pierre takes anti-Semitism as a given against which any action, even educating his own son, is useless, in part because he does not want to get involved. "Je suis un individu," exclaims Pierre in exasperation, "Tout cela ne me concerne pas. Moi d'abord. Que chacun s'aide" (*Les voyageurs*, 265).

Aragon wishes to establish the "individualist" Pierre as the norm, not the exception. The product of capitalism and a man "de son temps" (*Les voyageurs*, 32), Pierre believes in nothing but money. His respect for money is almost innate, and he sees the stock market as the barometer of social stability. Pierre has an insatiable taste for financial speculations just like his model, John Law. Appropriately, Pierre continually writes, but never completes, Law's biography.⁴² Pierre is a caricature of the greedy capitalist who sees currency's devaluation as a curse on humanity, due to his reliance on and love for money.

For both Aragon and Drieu, individualism equals selfishness. It is an obstacle in the way of social progress and revolutions. In *Gilles*, the Radical Party leader Clérences, based on the real-life politician Gaston Bergery, fails to fulfill the noble, yet unmanageable task assigned to him due to his staunch individualism. At the Radical Party's most anticipated meeting, Gilles orders Clérences to leave the function along with the most meritorious party members. However, Clérences' discourse reaches deaf ears. The public "résumait tous les publics français. Or il confirmait d'une façon exaspérante toutes les observations de Gilles. La France n'était plus que

⁴² John Law, a Scottish economist, is credited with the implementation of paper money. Law argued that money was only a means of exchange that did not constitute wealth in itself. For Law, national wealth depended on trade. Exiled in France, he became the director of the first national bank, La Banque Royale, created in 1718. Speculations into French Louisiana led to the ruin of most of its investors. Law himself, again exiled, died penniless. In his unfinished biography's preface, Pierre writes: "Je ne me suis rien proposé ici que de faire connaître la vie d'un génial introducteur de désordre. John Law qui inventa le papier-monnaie, ce qui est un fait infiniment supérieur à l'incendie de la bibliothèque d'Alexandrie, dans la hiérarchie des crimes et des délires humains." (*Les voyageurs*, 102)

sénilité, avarice et hypocrisie “ (*Gilles*, 557). Gilles believes that the public, although impassionate, does not bear responsibility for Clérences’ failure. In Gilles’ view, Clérences can not convince others of the need for a major break, for he is not entirely convinced himself: he is, after all, the product of the French educational system that supposedly focuses on individualism. Gilles’ flawed argument does not persuade somebody who is not already a committed fascist either. More likely, Clérences fails at convincing his audience that the world’s destruction is necessary because actually it is not necessary. The French educational system’s alleged insistence on individualism is not at fault. Rather, Gilles’ ideas, as conveyed by Clérences, fail. Nonetheless, Gilles asks himself rhetorically: “Que peut-on sur un peuple abruti par deux siècles d’enseignement rationaliste et individualiste, enseignement qui a anéanti toute résonance de l’univers dans l’homme, qui a privé les Français de leur âme comme de leur corps” (*Notes*, 181)?

Consequently, Clérences’ resignation from the Radical Party does not change anything. The radicals’ main leader ruthlessly invokes the “mission de la France,” and safeguards his position; the best rhetorician wins. Through Gilles, Drieu expresses his dissatisfaction with the radicals: “Gilles méprisait et haïssait de tout son cœur d’homme le nationalisme bénisseur, hargneux et asthmatique de ce parti radical qui laissait la France sans enfants, qui la laissait envahir et mâtinier par des milliers d’étrangers, de juifs, de bicots, de nègres, d’Annamites” (*Gilles*, 562). Drieu also believes that the French have stopped having children due to their selfish nature. The consequences, as he sees them, are catastrophic. France not only loses its French character but its meager 40 million people can not compete with considerably more populated countries like Germany, the Soviet Union and the United States. Drieu attributes battlefield victories and losses to the number of soldiers, as if he had not participated in a modern war, where manpower is insignificant.

Drieu does not omit the population equation in any of his political texts, but his simplistic explanations do not shed light on world affairs. He constantly adds and subtracts numbers, as he calculates how many more people France needs to fight and win the future war without the help of its allies. In true totalitarian fashion, Drieu argues that people should have children primarily for their country. His answer to a mother's protest is illustrative: "Vous n'avez pas mis un enfant au monde pour qu'il vive simplement, pour qu'il mange, pour qu'il fasse l'amour; vous l'avez mis au monde pour qu'il affirme quelque chose. Même dans son travail, ou dans l'amour ou dans la plus paisible vie quotidienne, il peut être appelé à tout instant à sanctionner du sacrifice de sa vie sa personnalité, même très modeste."⁴³ His assumptions are not only preposterous, but dangerous as well. For Drieu, the citizen is subject entirely to the state's will, and the state decides when and how an individual should sacrifice his life.

The bourgeois fails in Drieu's eyes inasmuch as his preference goes for "la petite vie" and not to sacrifice for future gain. The 20th century bourgeois completely embraced capitalism and forgot their common roots with the working class. Drieu accuses this "degraded" bourgeois class for "mettre la pensée du bifteck aux pommes avant tout autre pensée" (*Chronique*, 254). Quintessentially self-centered, Drieu's bourgeois can not find the resources to fight for an idea in himself, nor to sacrifice his own happiness for others. Drieu has company in his description of the bourgeois as unheroic. The Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter comments of the same feature, and states that: "The stock exchange is a poor substitute for the Holy Grail."⁴⁴ Unlike Schumpeter, Drieu condemns his contemporaries for their lack of heroism. Drieu wants his countrymen to embark on grandiose and glorious crusades, but instead they prefer to drink and

⁴³ Pierre Drieu La Rochelle, *Avec Doriot* (Paris: Gallimard, 1937), 98.

⁴⁴ A. Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1976), 137.

fish. Drieu views these seemingly harmless activities,⁴⁵ as destructive, for they consume energy that might be used toward the construction of a better future. Ultimately, this preference for “la petite vie” led to France’s loss of European supremacy and, more significantly, to a loss of vitality.

Drieu faults the doctrine of progress for France’s sorry state:

ceux qui parmi nous, à droite et à gauche, croyants ou non croyants, s’abandonnaient à une philosophie mal calculée, mal graduée de la paix à coup sûr dans la nature et dans l’humanité, continuaient à nous désarmer devant les nécessités de la vie et de la mort comme si de rien n’étaient. ... ils continuaient... à cultiver dans l’homme français et dans la femme française des dispositions qui auraient pu à peine maintenir debout cet homme et cette femme dans un âge d’or, dans un paradis terrestre absolument extraits de toute réalité (*Chronique*, 325).

Drieu knows that depicting life as linear and as necessarily going toward a better future is dangerous, so he strives to exclude himself from those intellectuals who advocate the religion of progress. Nonetheless, he remains one of them, and his acknowledgement of the flaws in the theory he supports makes him even more culpable in the modern reader’s eyes. For the moment, we will concentrate Drieu’s conclusions from what he deems as a faulty view of history.

For Drieu, the French bourgeois who has lost “le sens du tragique” (*Chronique*, 324) can not admit the possibility of unhappiness and even imagines that happiness can be purchased. However, when tragic events do occur, such as WWI, these events are easily forgotten, as “[l]a guerre ne marquait pas les hommes” (*Gilles*, 31). His contemporaries, argues Drieu, refuse to see the “big” picture and thus become prisoners of the immediate. By contrast, Drieu incarnates the

⁴⁵ “La France des scouts, des routiers, des skieurs n’était pas assez forte pour s’imposer à la France des assis, des pêcheurs à la ligne, des buveurs de pernods, des bavards de comités, de syndicats ou de salons.” (Drieu La Rochelle, *Notes*, 172).

intellectual who, as Richard Crossman observes, believes that, “material comforts are relatively unimportant,”⁴⁶ and who considers the present only through a future lens.

Critique of Rationalism

Under Drieu’s pen, 20th century France suffers also from the negative effects of rationalism, an all corroding doctrine.⁴⁷ In order to demonstrate the effects of rationalism, Drieu compares the man before 1750 a man still in touch with his inner self, to the man who followed him. The Middle Ages “une magnifique époque de jeunesse” and “de force physique” (*Notes*, 9) generated the peasant warrior, a man with a magnificent body, who translated his passion for life, his “joie de vivre, affirmation exubérante de l’immédiat” (*Notes*, 13) into magnificent cathedrals. For Drieu, the clown that dominates the painting *Gilles* (1718) by Jean-Antoine Watteau evokes the man before 1750.⁴⁸ This portrait features a life-sized *Comedia del Arte* character whose solemn posture contrasts sharply with his audience’s sneering faces. In Watteau’s clown, Drieu commends “quelle vigueur et quelle santé. Quelle sûreté d’enracinement, quelle certitude dans le jet, quelle tranquillité dans l’équilibre, quelle légèreté dans l’épanouissement” (*Notes*, 55)! Untainted by rationalism, this unlikely hero, “bon mangeur, bon buveur, bon amant, bon ami, bon soldat” (*Notes*, 57) was able, in Drieu’s speculation, to take upon himself the difficult task of leading the others.

By giving preeminence to reason, man has neglected his body, without realizing that the spirit feeds on the body. Consequently, continues Drieu, man lost “le sens de l’univers et du divin” (*Notes*, 59). Utterly unreasonable, rationalists stunt progress because they only attempt to

⁴⁶ Richard Crossman ed., *The God That Failed* (New York and Evanston: Harper Colophon Books, 1963), 6.

⁴⁷ Aragon did not critique rationalism

⁴⁸ By contrast, David or Ingres portrayed already altered bodies, men who have lost “le sens de l’univers et du divin.” (Drieu La Rochelle, *Notes*, 59)

answer easily accessible questions: “la raison des rationalistes, c’est une brusque réduction des possibilités humaines à l’aménagement des choses matérielles, c’est une systématisation néfaste des procédés les plus immédiats de cet aménagement” (*Notes*, 60). The neglect of the immaterial actually marks a regression, and even those who perceived its danger could not recreate the knot between reason and mysticism, like the romantics, writes Drieu.

Drieu makes the pertinent remark that the all-encompassing power of reason actually led to intolerance. Indeed, when reason is supposed to know no limits, the results are contentious: a clear thought becomes a true thought. Moreover, since reason is the expression of truth, then reason becomes universal, and so does truth. If reality contradicts reason, then reality is wrong, for reason is pure. Drieu perfectly seizes the damaging effect of rationalism on the way France perceived itself: “La Convention pousse plus loin que Louis XIV l’orgueil français, trop loin, et l’enchevêtrement des deux cultes, celui de la raison et celui de la France, fait aux Français une mauvaise conscience, un esprit trouble, une conduite désastreuse” (*Notes*, 63). Indeed, the 18th century marks the beginning of French cosmopolitanism: since French thought is superior (because it is guided by reason) then it must serve as model to the rest of Europe.

Unfortunately, Drieu does not limit himself to these remarks. For him, the last effects of rationalism is that “l’âme et le corps séparés s’en vont chacun à la dérive” (*Notes*, 99). Of worse implications, as Sébastien Côté explains, “On devine déjà que, pour Drieu, la figure du cérébral pur, étranger aux besoins du corps, syncrétise toutes les activités intellectuelles, et que le meilleur représentant de cette classe ne peut être autre qu’un Juif.”⁴⁹ The Jewish Myriam Falkenberg, Gilles’ first wife, represents for Drieu the result of more than a century of rationalism. She is a clumsy woman, who does not know how to walk, hold her hands or make

⁴⁹ Sébastien Côté, “Difficultés d’une lecture esthétique de *Gilles*, de Pierre Drieu la Rochelle: décadence, antisémitisme et roman à thèse,” *Etudes Littéraires* 36, no. 1 (2004): 38.

love to her husband. Her main fault resides in her inability to find the right balance between body and mind. In her portrayal, Drieu adds misogyny to anti-Semitism. The quintessence of modernity, Myriam works in a biology laboratory, another unnatural phenomenon that testifies to the woman's unbalanced rapport to her own body.

Modern debilitated bodies represent to Drieu a concrete social problem because they are removed from traditions and over-intellectual. A vacant spirit, like Gallant from *Gilles*, can easily embrace a "promise of absolute" and choose one idol (communism) after another (Surrealism) with no problems of conscience. Adhering to something only through studying (*Gilles*, 529) is a sign of clear fanaticism to Drieu who feels it is his duty to warn against rationalism's dangerous contempt for the body. Moreover, intellectuals, thus incapacitated, are unable to act, a problem he illustrates in *L'homme à cheval*.

While the accomplished warrior, Jaime captivates his entourage with extraordinary physical force backed by exemplary courage, the weak intellectual behind him, Felipe is at a physical disadvantage.⁵⁰ Unable to partake in the fight, Felipe expresses his impotence: "Les cavaliers d'Agreda se mirent au galop. Ah ! Agreda comme tu étais beau, et je n'étais pas avec toi. La fatalité m'avait ramené à ma disposition contemplative. Je souffrais."⁵¹ Conveniently, Felipe blames fatality for his outsider's position. Nonetheless, instead of fighting like the other men, Felipe looked for an elevated position to enable him to observe the fight. As for his suffering, it originates in his desire to share male companionship, a companionship that,

⁵⁰ The short civil war in which Drieu engages his characters serves him to contrast thought and action. Felipe has none of the qualities necessary for actual battle. Riding a disobedient mule, Felipe suffers one more humiliation: he develops scars on his posterior. Not only can Felipe barely ride, but now, he can barely walk as well. He tries to fight, but only manages to get hurt. His pitiful performance ends with Felipe in enemy hands.

⁵¹ Pierre Drieu La Rochelle, *L'homme à cheval* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), 51. Cited hereafter as *L'homme*.

according to Drieu, only danger makes possible. The pitiful intellectual with wounded buttocks can not share in the glory of beautiful men, because of his own contemplative nature.

Meditative by nature, Felipe fears the concrete. He wants Jaime to kill the President, so that Jaime seizes power, but when confronted with the act of murder itself, the gap between the plan and its materialization strikes Felipe in an unexpected way. The execution displeases and daunts Felipe, although he desired it. When the assassination plot is about to materialize, Felipe comprehends the difference between pure abstraction and an actual man's death. From this moment on, Felipe fears Jaime (*L'homme*, 60). It is not entirely the fear of the weak in front of the strong, although this is certainly an important facet. Felipe's fear originates in the confrontation with a man for whom words have real-world consequences and for a man who does not fear to exit the comfortable world of rhetoric: "Ce geste allait sceller toute notre vie de ces derniers jours, en faire une irrémédiable pensée" (*L'homme*, 61). Felipe tries to (re)transform action into thought in an attempt to remain in the realm of ideas. Even though he wishes to be the catalyst that accelerates the course of history, without being affected himself, he is: "le sang de don Benito était sur mes mains encore plus que sur les siennes" (*L'homme*, 76). Words have consequences. Yet, Felipe favors thought over action and thus, in his mind, wishing for the President's death prevails over the actual stabbing. By aggrandizing his own contribution in the President's murder, Felipe attempts to cope with his impotence to act.

Drieu despises his intellectual characters, whose impotence in the face of real events expresses the damage of rationalism. Drieu enumerates a series of unfortunate consequences that he believes result from rationalism: bodies and mind disjointed and then weak bodies who can not act. Even if 20th-century French were indeed weaker than those before 1750, a debatable statement anyway, rationalism is not necessarily at fault. Drieu wrongly assumes that since

rationalism chronologically preceded the allegedly weak 20th century, it therefore caused the weakening. Even though he never confesses it, Drieu criticizes rationalism above all for the equality it imparts on people. He saw himself superior to most human beings, and he thus rejected the claim that everyone had the same access to knowledge and truth. Drieu conceived of himself as a prophet who brought along the good news, a role he was not willing to concede to those he deems inferior.

The Impossible Couple

Drieu and Aragon both believed that in a world governed by finances, every relationship between people was tainted by the treacherous influence of money. In a world where everything can be bought, human beings can also be bought. Or at least, Aragon and Drieu's protagonists imagine this to be the case. Drieu's all too hedonistic character Gilles blames the bourgeois society for depriving him of his freedom, and consequently feels entitled to retribution. The bourgeoisie owes him money, simply because they have it and he does not. Nothing but a war profiteer, Gilles manages to capitalize on his relationship with the dead sons of a rich Jewish banker, Falkenberg. He leaves their house with money and with the idea to marry the heiress, Miriam Falkenberg. In this Jewish heiress, he sees the path to financial security, and an easy way out of the contingency of existence.

Through this example, Drieu criticizes the sense of entitlement French bourgeois manifest along with their disrespect of basic ethics. As the rich capitalists made their fortune by cheating, not necessarily the proletariat like in Aragon's novels but by transgressing moral laws, a young man like Gilles can not help but copy his elder's example. In an immoral world, Gilles thinks that no one can be blamed for taking immoral paths. Although he is a young man who has proven his courage in war and who does not have a bad nature, Gilles is the disoriented product

of French society. Drieu does not condemn Gilles alone, but the whole system that favors his behavior — a system in which, he considers, money plays an exaggerated role.

Instead of being valued for their human qualities, Drieu avers, people are mere commodities in the capitalist world. Myriam and Gilles are just one of the many couples doomed from the very beginning because of their financial iniquity. An inconsistent, yet unscrupulous money chaser, Gilles does not hide his intention to marry Myriam for her money and confesses to her: “Je ne suis pas celui qui vous croyez. J’ai peur de ne pas vous aimer... assez. J’ai peur d’aimer votre argent” (*Gilles*, 134). To complicate their relationship further, Myriam eagerly pays for the pleasure of Gilles’ company and even for the pleasures he finds away from her. In fact, she knows money is her only asset and makes the most of it: “Le fait que Gilles ne l’aimait pas était devant elle depuis quelque temps, mais elle avait attendu de l’accepter franchement. ... Elle voulait l’épouser pour qu’il reste auprès d’elle, pour qu’elle puisse jouir encore de sa présence et pour agir sur lui, avec son argent, sa vigilance (*Gilles*, 183-184). Money taints both protagonists: Gilles presumptuously assumes money to be due to him, and Myriam does not hesitate to treat Gilles as merchandise. Charlotte Wardi sees Myriam as,

Victime de la race et de la richesse qui la caractérise, Myriam devient la corruptrice inconsciente de Gilles. Aussi lorsque quelques semaines après l’horrible nuit de noces, il lui annonce qu’il aime une autre femme, cet ‘assassinat’ devient-il à ses yeux un acte de justice. Il symbolise sa révolte contre la décadence, contre ses réalisations: la république bourgeoise capitaliste, dont la jeune femme est l’expression la plus parfaite et en même temps le bouc émissaire.⁵²

Gilles victimizes Myriam, but her fortune does not. Just like Gilles, Myriam justly and lucidly appraises the advantages her money can buy. As Myriam’s case illustrates, simply having money does not protect one from suffering its corrupting influence.

⁵² Charlotte Wardi, “Décadence et rationalisme dans *Gilles* de Drieu la Rochelle,” *Travaux de Linguistique et de Littérature* 15, no. 2 (1977): 266.

Aragon favors the description of the “impossible couple” in a capitalist society as a means to criticize the society as a whole. When faced with reprimands that he devoted too much attention to love in his socialist realist novels, Aragon retorted: “Et si le roman sert à éduquer et à former, c’est souvent parce qu’il contient de belles et pures histoires d’amour. Oui, c’est l’un des grands mérites du roman que d’avoir si souvent exalté l’amour qui unit l’homme et la femme, et qui est la haute source de la vie “ (*J’abats*, 75). Since love can not exist in a specific social order, it is only natural to wish for the destruction of that social order. Every couple Aragon portrays instructs the reader on a moral issue. Each one teaches a life lesson and indicates the attitude one needs to embrace. Aragon’s couples generally fail either due to financial inequity between the two partners or because of women’s condition in capitalist society. However, in some cases different world views divide the couple irreconcilably.

Diane de Nettencourt from *Les cloches de Bâle*, a beautiful mother of 19, epitomizes the bourgeois woman seen as a commodity. Once divorced, Diane is forced to put herself on the market. She is ready to sell herself, i.e. to marry, to the highest bidder. Aragon parallels the cruel reality of the human market and the bourgeois claim that it does not exist. Diane’s own parents shamelessly exploit men’s lust for their daughter, while at the same time they try to keep up the pretense of her innocence. They have the typical bourgeois response: they are aware of their daughter’s conduct, and they recognize it as moral depravity. However, they decide to ignore it, so they can continue to profit from her with a clear conscience.

Through Diane, Aragon introduces his reader to the world of big capitalism, a world of corruption and sexual promiscuity. Diane’s second husband, George Brunel, an unscrupulous usurer, accepts Wisner’s undisguised interest for his wife, as well as his wife’s licentious behavior. Consequences of their conspicuous consumption are soon obvious. Diane’s spoiled

son, Guy is never taught the basic principles of living in a community. He develops early-on a sense of entitlement which ultimately results in a change of his personality. As he lives in the company of self-absorbed individuals, he never befriends anybody. Aragon contrasts Guy's selfishness with that of most proletarian children, most of whom recognize that sharing matters more than personal enjoyment. Upon viewing a group of boys roller-skating on one skate (they share the other skate with their less fortunate friends), Guy thinks to himself: "s'il avait eu des patins, lui, il aurait gardé les deux pour aller plus vite" (*Les cloches*, 50).

The propensity to act selfishly exists in every human being, and if not corrected it will eventually lead to Brunels and Wisners. Of course, Diane and her husband can not correct their son's behavior since, they themselves, are not able to recognize its flaws. However, the proletariat can. When Guy makes a deliberate effort to be slightly touched by a buggy a young boy was pushing down the street, Aragon has Guy receive "son premier coup de pied dans le cul; il venait de faire connaissance avec le prolétariat" (*Les cloches*, 47). Aragon's proletariat will not tolerate injustices. Even a boy, as young as Guy himself, has class consciousness and seizes the ridicule of Guy's position in the world.

Aragon's bourgeois are totally inept to prepare for the future and, in some cases, are even suicidal.⁵³ When in trouble, they abase themselves to the lowest degree: eventually Brunel can not pay his own debts to Wisner so he offers Diane to him. Wisner does not protest the selling of a human being, a wife above all, but the selling of a human being Brunel does not own: "Tu ne

⁵³ Pierre de Sabran, an officer in the military, who refuses to frequent the Brunel residence, on account of Diane's prostitution, chooses their house however to commit suicide. The episode takes on proportions and even the Action Française gets involved and develops its own scenario as to the reasons behind the suicide. This episode reveals Brunels' hypocrisy and most of all, their refusal to assume responsibility for their actions. In fact, Sabran killed himself because he could not pay the debts he incurred towards Brunel while playing poker. It is not clear why the reader should take Sabran's side. After all, he entered in a voluntary agreement with Brunel, assented to the rate of interest Brunel demanded; moreover, he borrowed money to satisfy his own pleasures. Yet, Aragon depicts Brunel as the exploiter of others' addictions, as a vicious capitalist with no regard for the lives of those around him.

manques pas de culot. D'abord je l'ai déjà ta femme, et puis de toute façon tu ne l'as plus" (*Les cloches*, 100). Just like Drieu, Aragon wishes to convey that, in a capitalist society, everything can be owned, even human beings. Neither Brunel nor Wisner hesitate to think of the women they love in terms of objects of exchange. In fact, neither Brunel nor Wisner love Diane; they are both too corrupted to be able to experience genuine feelings.

Carlotta, from *Les beaux quartiers*, constitutes one of Aragon's portrayals of unfortunate women. Reminiscent of Zola's *Nana*, Carlotta had no choice but to become a prostitute. She is not a powerless victim however, as she understands from a very early age how to use her sexual charms in order to make a fortune. Through her, Aragon stresses the abuses of power, and the double standards women are subject to in bourgeois society.⁵⁴ Aragon concentrates his social criticism on the miserable conditions of women like Carlotta – women who do not have the opportunity to refuse any man, for fear or simply to secure their basic needs. When the town mayor and doctor wishes to have Carlotta, she has no say despite her condition or her repulsion towards the specific man. Unlike most women who remain in a servile position, Carlotta will turn fate to her advantage and become the mistress of the rich and powerful Joseph Quesnel. She even gets the chance to get revenge on Barbentane when his son, Edmond Barbentane, falls in love with her.

The financial disequilibrium between Edmond and Carlotta, as well as Carlotta's past, jeopardize their relationship from the very beginning. Gilles found himself in a similar situation with Myriam, but Gilles felt overwhelming guilt, and he eventually chose poverty over remaining married to a woman he did not love. In Edmond and Carlotta's case, the corruption runs so deep that they both agree to be bought. Deeply influenced by the example of Guy de

⁵⁴ Carlotta is raped by the very doctor who performed curettage on her and the culprit is no one else but the corrupted radical, Dr. Barbentane.

Maupassant's hero, Bel Ami, Edmond's path to fortune accumulates as many dead bodies as his father's. The difference, as Angela Kimyongür⁵⁵ remarks, between Edmond and Carlotta is that Edmond has a choice, while Carlotta does not. As a medical student, Edmond has prospects for a good career that would have ensured his financial stability. His decision to sell himself to Quesnel is not made for a lack of alternatives. Edmond agrees to Quesnel's bizarre offer to share Carlotta's affection because he accepts Quesnel's point of view as truth: "sans moi, vous ne pourriez garder Carlotta, comme je la perdrais irrémédiablement sans vous" (*Les beaux*, 606).

In a society governed by money, love can not survive poverty. The three actors in this pitiful tragedy only find one way to escape the vicious circle, prostitution. Utterly corrupted, they all accept this compromise. Their arrangement is all the more appalling, for they all know that their pact is immoral, yet they seal it, in clean consciousness. Aragon presents the power of money as an irresistible draw that overrides all humane values. No part of human life remains untouched. As Kimyongür notes, in Aragon's view "true love can not flourish between individuals who accept the values of capitalist society or in a society where the primacy of financial gain is unchallenged."⁵⁶

Even the most sincere relationship collapses when money comes into play. Aragon recycles Zola's comparison of Nana to a fly who lays her eggs, spreading her corruption everywhere. Similarly, the corrupted Carlotta, infects not only her fellow amoral citizens, the Edmonds and Quesnels of society, but even the most devoted husbands. Aragon brings into light one exemplary bourgeois couple, the Grésandanges. Although the husband works for Quesnel, money does not interest this faithful man in the least. He is an honest man, solely preoccupied by the feasibility of using mathematical calculations in business. Even though presented

⁵⁵ Kimyongür, 32.

⁵⁶ Ibid. , 107.

sympathetically by Aragon, Grésandange is not beyond corruption, as he does not question what his speculations mean beyond his own experience and work. He remains on the micro level, never seeking to expand his ideas to the larger scheme of things. His corruption surfaces when he falls in love with Carlotta, and Aragon's message is clear: an honest man like Grésandange has no outlet in the capitalist society and ultimately becomes corrupt as well.

Love between a man and a woman is impossible even in the absence of financial disequilibrium. Two characters from *Les cloches de Bâle*, Catherine Simonidzé and the captain, Jean Thiébault, clearly illustrate this failure. They move in the same circles, enjoy relative financial stability but still can not engage in a successful relationship. Aragon uses the pair to make an important distinction: the antagonism between men and women is not intrinsic. Aragon writes, “comme *homme* comprenez-vous bien, il n'était pas son adversaire à elle, *femme*” (*Les cloches*, 159). Rather when men and women do not view the world through the same lens they become adversaries: “L'amour de l'homme et de la femme dans le couple,” writes Aragon, “trouve son harmonie précisément lorsque l'homme et la femme s'élèvent simultanément à une même conception du monde, où leur aventure s'élargit, et l'amour au devenir humain s'identifie.”⁵⁷ Catherine and Jean never experience this harmony.

In fact, their relationship is doomed from the beginning. Due to Catherine's hatred of the military, her relationship with a captain only increases Catherine's antagonism towards capitalist society. Chance takes the unlikely couple to Cluses where they witness a street demonstration. Due to his military training, Jean acts like an automaton and without thinking acts like a captain. With no hesitation, he attempts to prevent the workers' only means of resistance — setting fire to the factory. Aragon insists on the young man's good nature, and describes Jean as an exceptional

⁵⁷ Louis Aragon, *Chroniques du Bel Canto*, quoted in Kimyongür, 100.

man who always treated Catherine as an equal. Nonetheless, what Jean conceives to be his duty to the factory owner prevails over that good nature. According to Catherine, even when “il vit l’abîme ouvert” (*Les cloches*, 169), he behaves as a mindless soldier.

In a less than subtle move, Aragon describes the military’s senseless murder of an 18 year old boy. This young innocent provided support to his widow mother, and Catherine, who attends the wake, is appalled by the tragedy. In spite of his love, Thiébault can not comprehend the motives behind Catherine’s unrest, nor the distance between them. Aragon channels all his antimilitarism in Thiébault’s character; he has him so brainwashed by the army that he can not conceive a thought by himself or manifest any empathy for other’s suffering. After Cluses, the revolutionary Catherine can not engage in a meaningful relationship with the docile Thiébault. In fact, no man will now please her, for “le plaisir qu’elle avait d’un homme ne pouvait lui en cacher la vie, les idées, l’asservissement social” (*Les cloches*, 197). If a man and a woman do not share the same social aspirations, love is impossible.

If one cheats in the public life, it will reverberate into the private one as well. Love is thus impossible between Jean and Catherine, because a divorce between public and private life is also impossible. And yet, the rich Quesnel fancies the opposite: “Nous sommes, comme les autres, des êtres doubles. Nous vivons à une époque historique qui se caractérisera peut-être un jour par là: le temps des hommes-doubles. J’ai fait toujours deux parts de ma vie...” (*Les beaux*, 354). There can indeed be two sides of one’s life, but if one is corrupted the other one will be too. This explains why all the bourgeois couples in Aragon’s novels are dysfunctional. Aragon is as critical of the bourgeois sexual depravity as Drieu. All married men frequent brothels where they humiliate women, and when they return home, they assault their wives and children. Not even

the working class women enjoy a better treatment from their husbands. The working class men are not beyond the bourgeois influence of the bourgeoisie, even in their private matters.

Aragon and Drieu's conclusion that men and women can not find love in a capitalist society actually reassures both author and reader. If there is no satisfying "capitalist" rapport between the two sexes, human nature is at fault only in a capitalist system. In a communist or fascist regime, human nature will be different, and free men and women of these perfect societies will face no obstacles. Aragon finishes *Les Cloches* on a very optimistic note and describes the future as belonging to the communist Clara Zetkins of the world: "Ici pour la première fois dans le monde la place est faite au véritable amour. Celui qui n'est pas souillé par la hiérarchie de l'homme et de la femme, par la sordide histoire des robes et des baisers, par la domination d'argent et de l'homme sur la femme ou de la femme sur l'homme. La femme des temps modernes est née, et c'est elle que je chante. Et c'est elle que je chanterai" (*Les cloches*, 438). Yet, Aragon never portrayed the flawless couples of the future. Neither did Drieu.

Involvement

Bleak realities loomed over Drieu and Aragon's fiction, in part because their writing served as the projection of their own personal dissatisfaction. The rampant pretense of their childhoods predisposed them negatively against the French bourgeoisie and, consequently, they extrapolated their own experience to a whole society. At the same time, Aragon and Drieu considered it their moral duty to engage society's problems. As for those who decided to stay "on the side," they saw them as either cowards or blind to crude realities.

According to Drieu and Aragon, in the "age of politics," it was undesirable, and even unadvisable to stay uninvolved. As Frédéric Grover points out, even "abstention became a

choice.”⁵⁸ We find several indications in both Aragon and Drieu’s works. In *Aurélien*, for instance, Aragon depicts reality as too overwhelming for the individual to be able to avoid it: “C’est trop joli de se dire qu’on restera en dehors de certaines choses. Elles vous prennent à la gorge sans que vous ayez rien fait pour ça. Ainsi la politique.”⁵⁹ In Aragon’s view, the one who can resist the “strangulation” of reality is an anomaly, and yes, a coward. Only those who are deaf to others’ suffering, like Pierre Mercadier, refuse to get involved. The consequences of his individualism in the particular case of the Jewish professor have already been discussed. Aragon moves beyond this specific circumstances and illustrates the impact of his non-involvement for the country as a whole.

Even the old Sainteville, an impoverished aristocrat and Pierre’s uncle through marriage, blames Pierre for his absenteeism: “Pas de politique! Surtout la peur de la politique, de la responsabilité” (*Les voyageurs*, 70). For the old aristocracy, involvement in the problems of the polity came along with privileges. Even though Sainteville and the like ultimately had their own interests in mind, just like Pierre, they still felt responsible for the fate of the less privileged. By contrast, Pierre does not feel indebted to his less fortunate fellow men. He strives to keep as far as possible from them, so he declines any social responsibility. Aragon and the old aristocrat agree in their coupling of politics with responsibility.⁶⁰

In an attempt to justify his position, Pierre invokes prudence:

Cette façon de se jeter, pour des hommes comme nous, dont la fonction est limitée, spéciale, brusquement dans la politique, dans ses passions, je conviens qu’elle est tentante... que des facteurs sentimentaux, humanitaires nous y poussent... Mais c’est la voie de la facilité: notre profession même nous engage à plus de retenue, à une réserve critique... Le monde politique est extrêmement complexe: notre place n’y est point... Est-

⁵⁸ Grover, *Drieu La Rochelle and the Fiction of Testimony*, 19.

⁵⁹ Louis Aragon, *Aurélien* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 710.

⁶⁰ Consequently, a person who joins a party proves their civic responsibility and, eventually, their moral superiority.

ce que l'étude de l'histoire ne nous montre pas combien les réactions contemporaines sont sujettes à l'erreur ? Est-ce qu'elle ne nous enseigne pas la prudence (*Les voyageurs*, 326-327) ?

Reticent and unwilling to commit errors, Pierre deems realities too complex to grasp – an excuse lacking any power of persuasion. Pierre correctly appraises Meyer's situation, but, out of lethargy, he resorts to a comfortable prudence. Pierre uses the profession of historian in part as a shield against others' reproaches, yet reserves it primarily as a pretext to do nothing.

Pierre remains on the fringes of "real" life because of his arrogance. His misanthropy, but also his desire to preserve the status quo, dictate his passive behavior. Always obsessed with the self, Pierre sees the rise of the working class as a tangible threat to his own freedom: "Pierre en oublia ce qu'il allait dire des ouvriers, de la menace croissante des ouvriers contre la véritable liberté, avec leurs syndicats, leurs grèves, leurs prétentions toujours nouvelles" (*Les voyageurs*, 405). To the communists, and thus to Aragon, *real* freedom equals human solidarity, and independence from the chains of private property. Through the individualist Pierre, Aragon wishes to ridicule what he deems to be misunderstood freedom: the freedom of the egoist who cares solely about his own rights.

Pierre is a product of bourgeois education, and he is enslaved by money even when financially destitute. Pierre can never overcome his disadvantage:

Je pensais que cette impériale était une bonne image de l'existence, ou plutôt l'omnibus tout entier. Car il y a deux sortes d'hommes dans le monde, ceux qui pareils aux gens de l'impériale sont emportés sans rien savoir de la machine qu'ils habitent, et les autres qui connaissent le mécanisme du monstre qui jouent à y tripoter... Et jamais les premiers ne peuvent rien comprendre de ce que sont les seconds, parce que de l'impériale on ne peut que regarder les cafés, les réverbères, les étoiles; et je suis inguérissablement l'un deux (*Les voyageurs*, 626).

Pierre divides society into involved and non-involved citizens and construes his non involvement as a disease of sorts. Therefore, his hatred of the working class emerges from his inability to

know them. What seems a vantage point is in fact a barrier between different classes. Although he admires the people who are not simple travelers, like John Law, he does not have the courage and the power to “get off the imperial.”

However, Pierre does start reading the newspaper, but once again, his reasons are not the right ones: utter boredom drives Pierre to gaze upon the turmoil of the world. Aragon takes his revenge however and punishes the cowardly, irresponsible Pierre with paralysis. In a bitter twist of irony, the only word the paralyzed Pierre can still pronounce is “politics.” The man who ran from politics all his life ends up as its prisoner. In the modern world, it is impossible to escape politics.

Nonalignment has, in Aragon’s eyes, repercussions for society as a whole. Aragon’s moral accusations reverberate powerfully through Pierre’s son. Unlike his father, Pierre’s son fights the war without a thought for himself. “Ce sont eux qui nous ont menés là, nos pères, avec leur aveuglement, leur superbe dédain de la politique, leurs façons de se tirer des pieds toujours, en laissant les autres dans le pétrin. Ah! ils en ont fait du joli” (*Les voyageurs*, 693)! Obviously, no individual alone can change the course of history, but also, no individual has the right, according to Aragon, to stay on the side.

Bérénice from *Aurélien* mirrors Aragon’s own involvement. When asked by Aurélien, the reasons behind her support of the communist Spaniards, Bérénice responds without hesitation: “Leur malheur...” (*Aurélien*, 749). For a compassionate human being, like Bérénice, the unhappiness of others is all she needs to become politically involved. Like Bérénice, Aragon could not ignore the suffering of his fellow men. “Je joue.” he writes, “Oui. Dans un monde où toutes les cartes sont faussées, où je suis du côté de ceux qui perdent toujours, et en ont assez de perdre. Mon jeu est le leur. Je joue pour leur donner des armes. J’ai choisi dès ma jeunesse, le jeu

d'écrire. Je l'ai joué de bien des façons, j'ai appris lentement à perdre. Ma vie, mon âme" (*J'abats*, 8). This is one of the many instances when Aragon insists on the disinterest of his political commitment. He wants his readers to understand that he had nothing to gain from joining the communist cause. On the contrary, Aragon claims, he had everything to lose.

Just like Aragon, Drieu persuaded himself that he adhered to the fascist cause because of his love for humanity and his desire to help it. Yet in the 1920s, Drieu held a different opinion about political involvement. Although never an official member of the Surrealist movement, Drieu separated himself completely from the group after the Surrealists gave their revolution a social dimension. In three open letters to the Surrealists, published by the *Nouvelle Revue Française* (1925) and by his own journal *Les derniers jours* (1927), Drieu repeatedly expresses his disagreement with the group's political involvement. In the first letter to the Surrealists, Drieu argues that "écrire est une action"⁶¹ and blames Aragon and his companions for having abandoned the sacred mission of searching for God. Two years later, Drieu goes even further and reprimands his former friends: "vous êtes résolus à souligner, à doubler, à récrire votre pensée par des actes quotidiens. Mais alors vous ne penserez plus" (*Sur les écrivains*, 53). Drieu fears above all the debasement of ideas in conjunction with concrete and base actions, for he believes that the responsibility of intellectual men far surpasses that of men of action.

Surrealists, according to Drieu, joined the PCF out of fear: fear of solitude and most importantly, fear of their own weak ideas. By 1927, life still appeared to Drieu "comme une particularité qui tient à mon individu" (*Sur les écrivains*, 64). In this regard, he was in no way different from a Pierre Mercadier, who never let go of his individualism and regarded the world from one single perspective. After the events of February, 6, 1934, Drieu abandoned what he

⁶¹ Pierre Drieu La Rochelle, *Sur les écrivains* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 46.

calls the “point de vue commode” of neutrality, renouncing “la marge nécessaire à l’intellectuel pour assurer sa liberté d’observation et sa considération des ensembles” (*Socialisme*, 230) and declared himself a fascist. Serra considers that “l’illusion de l’esthète persuadé qu’il doit s’armer pour que le monde soit sauvé et reconquis par la créativité de l’artiste est une des formes du mal moderne. Elle lui permet de régler ses comptes avec cette décadence qui le suit comme une ombre.”⁶² Drieu wanted to avenge himself on those responsible for his failures as well as those who have caused France to lose its prestigious place in the world.

At the beginning of his political militancy, Drieu acknowledged the possibility that his intellectual freedom may suffer. Considering neutrality impossible, he presents two possible attitudes for a writer: “Ou bien l’intellectuel se corsète vraiment dans une attitude. Si c’est un écrivain politique, c’est fort naturel, et c’est la seule façon de nourrir son talent. Si c’est un artiste, ou bien il devient médiocre, il avoue qu’il était médiocre, et écrit des sonnettes pour la propagande, ou bien il triche avec sa foi officielle, il la traduit dans son œuvre” (*Socialisme*, 241). Only established artists, such as Anatole France or André Gide, can escape according to Drieu this catch 22.

Several factors triggered Drieu’s change of position. His intensified discontent with society predisposed him to conclude that it was his moral duty to implicate himself in worldly matters. In 1934, he writes in *La Lutte des Jeunes*, “Nous sommes toujours devant des gens qui ont peur de se mouiller les pieds” (*Chronique*, 25). Unlike the French moderates and the conservatives of the 1930s, Drieu appraises himself, and his associates, as valiant and ready to face public opprobrium. The superior man has the moral obligation to act when those weaker than him can not. Thus, his fictional alter ego, Gilles, embraces humanitarianism and strives to

⁶² Serra, 59.

prevent the innocent and vulnerable from degradation. Gilles' self-righteousness, and Drieu's for that matter, reveals a disturbing feature of the intellectual who endorse totalitarian doctrines.

Alice Kaplan attributes Drieu's change in perspective to the preeminent place fascism conferred on artists. Fascist intellectuals, she writes, "hate communism because it threatens to strip them of their identity as artist, and they hate capitalism because it appreciates money over art. Fascism seems to be about making life into art- a transformation that promises to give artists an enormous role."⁶³ This is not the whole story, however, since communism promises artists an equally important role. The difference is that, less centralized, fascism had no *one* body of doctrine. For a writer like Drieu, this distinction was of crucial importance.

Both Drieu and Aragon inscribed themselves in a small category of elected intelligences with access to superior knowledge and also with a charitable disposition. They could choose to remain untouched by the world's filth, but refuse to. Just like Aragon, Drieu repeatedly stressed the superior man's disinterest in achieving personal gain through political endeavors and disregarded social prestige, political power, and self-esteem.

⁶³ Alice Kaplan, *Reproductions of Banality: Fascism, Literature and French Intellectual Life* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 32.

Chapter 2: The “Poetry of Revolution” and the “Prose of Reform”

Il faut prendre garde aux rêves des hommes. D’eux naissent inventions et folies, crimes et grandes actions.

Louis Aragon¹

Aragon and Drieu deemed their society too corrupt for reform. Revolution alone could eradicate evil, while reform could only temporarily alleviate social problems. Friedrich Hayek maintains that most intellectuals naturally choose revolution over reform since “speculations about the possible entire reconstruction of society give the intellectual a fare much more to his taste than the more practical and short-run considerations of those who aim at a piecemeal improvement of the existing order.”² Aragon and Drieu certainly fit Hayek’s description, for they had more grandiose plans than merely improving man’s lot.

According to Aragon and Drieu, society was following a disastrous path. Each writer felt morally obliged to inspire change by offering a new possibility for tomorrow’s society. In true Gnostic fashion, they firmly believed in revolution’s power to effect change. Victor Crastre poignantly describes the Surrealist intellectuals’ view of revolution: “La Révolution, à leur sens, pouvait vaincre n’importe où et n’importe quand par un miracle de la volonté de l’homme.”³ Aragon, as a Surrealist, certainly embraced this philosophy. Crastre’s remark applies to Drieu as well, though Drieu only flirted with the Surrealist movement. Both Aragon and Drieu speculated

¹ Louis Aragon, “Introduction au numéro spécial de la revue *Europe* sur la littérature soviétique pour la 40^e anniversaire d’octobre 1917,” quoted in *J’abats mon jeu*, 234.

² Friedrich A. Hayek, “The Intellectuals and Socialism,” *The University of Chicago Law Review* 16, no (1949): 430.

³ Crastre, 49.

incessantly about future societies for which they advocated the present world's destruction, the loss of individual freedom and the use of violence.⁴

The French political philosopher Jean-Claude Milner clarifies how revolution eventually became the only feasible course of action for intellectuals like Aragon⁵ and Drieu. Milner asserts in *Constats* that the classical intellectuals, i.e. pre-eighteenth century intellectuals, viewed revolution as suspect. By contrast, “Après 1789, un être pensant sera par l'éthique convoqué à penser maximalement, mais cela, c'est être révolutionnaire et être révolutionnaire c'est pousser la politique à son maximum; un être agissant sera par l'éthique convoqué à agir maximalement, mais cela, c'est être un rebelle, et un rebelle ne s'accomplit comme rebelle que par une pensée maximale. Or, une pensée maximale est, à l'horizon de la Révolution, une pensée politique”⁶ If there is no ethics without politics, and if there is no politics without rebellion, then there is no ethics without rebellion. Moreover, modern rebellion can only be political;⁷ *a rebellion à l'antique* (out of love, for instance), writes Milner, is ineffectual. Milner's connection of ethics and rebellion is crucial to understanding what Aragon and Drieu conceived to be their duty toward society.

⁴ In the foreword to *Chronique Politique*, Drieu confesses that “Avide de spéculation, passionné de cet art périlleux et trompeur qu'est la philosophie de l'histoire, intimement entraîné au risque nécessaire de la prophétie, j'ai dit beaucoup de vérités et beaucoup d'erreurs.” (Drieu La Rochelle, *Chronique*, 9-10) In the frenzy of his collaboration, Drieu makes a deliberate effort to signal to his readers that he justly appreciates his own conjectural conclusions and past mistakes, but in his personal journal he does not abstain from the same conduit. Nor does he tire of expounding the need for a world revolution.

⁵ Moreover, as a communist, Aragon *had* to reject reformism. The Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière (S.F.I.O.) could become affiliated with the Comintern, and thus be a Communist Party only if they rejected the former socialist reformism. Those who in 1920 separated at the Tours Congress, agreed not only to this condition but to much harsher and more humiliating ones. Lenin wanted to make sure the old socialists had no control over the PCF, and thus he demanded their removal from leading positions as well as periodic purges of petty-bourgeois elements. Lenin also imposed that the PCF supported the Soviet Republic and accept all Comintern decisions. A decade later, when Aragon became a member, the PCF held the same position towards reforms and the Soviet Union. And yet, communists and socialists united again in 1936 and formed the Popular Front. Communists construed this union not as a return to reformism and thus to the past, but as the only means to fight against the fascist menace.

⁶ Jean-Claude Milner, *Constats* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), 29.

⁷ To the Surrealists, revolution, because it is a revolution of the mind, will lose its validity.

If humanity can only survive by breaking with the past, then intellectuals like Drieu and Aragon had only one ethical option: to champion this schism. However, discarding the past leaves no foundation on which to build the future. Camus, in *L'homme révolté*, warns: “Celui qui rejette tout le passé, sans en rien garder de ce qui peut servir à vivifier la révolution, celui-ci se condamne à ne trouver de justification que dans l’avenir et, en attendant, charge la police de justifier le provisoire.”⁸ Aragon and Drieu evaluated every aspect of their present reality based solely on future results. Therefore, they supported all actions that supposedly would realize that better future. They applauded the Russian or the German revolutions inasmuch as these revolts opened the way to a radiant future despite the atrocities concurrent with these rebellions.

Failed Revolutions

a. Surrealist Irresponsibility

Not all revolutions, even when they aim at reshaping the whole of humanity, can actually materialize their goals. Drieu illustrates this hypothesis in *Gilles*. The protagonist Gilles encounters the group *Révolte*, a fictional representation of the Surrealists. In *Gilles*, Drieu obviously attempts to justify his association with the avant-garde literary movement and his controversial break with Aragon, yet he also has a greater goal in mind. He wants to prove the futility of the Surrealist type of revolt – a self-destructive endeavor that accomplishes nothing but only increases social disorder. According to Julien Hervier, Drieu’s presentations of the Surrealists, “quitte le terrain de son expérience réelle pour altérer la vérité dans le sens de son ressentiment, ce que ne saurait excuser une quelconque fidélité à la ‘loi de son monde

⁸ Camus, *L'homme révolté*, 205.

intérieur.”⁹ Drieu’s description echoes his acrimony after the break with Aragon, but it is still a relevant depiction especially since it mirrors Aragon’s own critique of the Surrealists.

The diverse characters that appear in *Gilles* are unsympathetic to the group *Révolte*. Gilles’ caustic comments concerning the group are no exception: “Le groupe de Caël vivait dans une incroyable fainéantise. Sans argent, sans femmes, refusant le travail, avec la pauvre éducation de leur temps, attachés à quelques idées extrêmes et obscures, ils étaient toujours une vingtaine sous la domination étrange de Caël” (*Gilles*, 256-257).¹⁰ Gilles has plenty of company. For Sarrazin, a socialite musician, the delirious Surrealists are impostors who make unsubstantiated claims to genius. The PCF member, Lorin, accuses Cyrille Galant (a double for the real-life Aragon) of betrayal. For Lorin, Marxism goes beyond politics, and groups such as *Révolte* cannot foster revolution.

With irony, Drieu describes *Révolte*’s *modus operandi*:

Caël et ses amis avaient donné deux ou trois séances mémorables dans certain petit milieu composite où se coudoyaient toutes sortes de mendiants de l’esprit: ahuris du gratin, juifs énervés, bourgeois studieux, jeunes clochards de la littérature et de l’art. La grande trouvaille était de simuler un procès, où l’on mettait en accusation tel ou tel homme célèbre. Des diatribes emphatiques avaient été vociférées contre Anatole France, le maréchal Joffre et d’autres (*Gilles*, 265-266).

Drieu himself had put society on trial. Consequently, Drieu’s character, Gilles, agrees with *Révolte*’s choice of accused but, just like Drieu, Gilles questions the efficiency of the Surrealist

⁹ Julien Hervier, “Drieu et l’image des Surréalistes dans *Gilles*,” *Roman 10/50: Revue d’étude du roman du XX^e siècle* 24 (December 1997): 102.

¹⁰ This description could just as well fit Gilles: he “pretends” to work in the Minister’s office, he has no money, no wife, and he hates work. He nonetheless does not pretend to be somebody else. Galant on the other hand, constantly calculates the effect of his actions and makes a deliberate effort to retain control of himself at all times. Crastre, although a close friend of Aragon and a former member of *Clarté*, gives a more sympathetic rendering of Aragon’s character while at the same time remarking upon similar traits: “Je ne veux pas parler de pose, mais plutôt note la difficulté à découvrir, sous les masques divers, l’individu authentique: n’est-ce pas pour cacher le véritable Aragon que cet enchanteur irréel fait pleuvoir sur nous ce bouquet fleuri de mots aimables et de gestes heureux?” (Crastre, 41).

methods. Nonetheless, Gilles joins Galant's group for lack of a better choice, even though he deems their revolt childish and ultimately futile: "Ce qui lui plaisait le moins, c'était de ne pouvoir rien faire que de médiocre dans une entreprise aussi médiocre. Il se joignait à ces destructeurs par désespoir, parce qu'il ne voyait autour de lui un peu de force que dans la destruction" (*Gilles*, 267). Lorin militates for revolution as well, but, in true Marxist fashion, he does not believe in the necessity to hasten history's course. Gilles has no patience to wait for a self-emerging occasion; together with *Révolte*, he hopes to create it. Lured by friendship and dreading solitude, Gilles answers Galant's repeated invitations to participate in one of *Révolte* trials/banquets – an attack of Boniface Saint-Boniface (Saint-Pol-Roux). Maurice Nadeau's description¹¹ of the real-life banquet comes surprisingly close to Drieu's satire.

Drieu retells the narrative through different perspectives to place special emphasis on this scene. Gilles' American lover, Dora, accompanies him, and at the banquet, he encounters his old tutor, Carentan. Drieu craftily presents the scene through different lenses: the young man, partly sympathetic to the movement, the foreigner, and the old man, steeped in tradition. Moreover, Drieu casts Carentan as anti-*Révolte* and as Boniface's personal friend. To Dora, the members of *Révolte* remind her of the "poor whites" (*Gilles*, 307) from the South of the United States, who let themselves be dominated. The "old France" sees Caël's followers, as: "menus, tout menus. Ils sont aux romantiques ce que les radicaux sont aux Jacobins. C'est tout dire. Tout cela, c'est de la menue monnaie de ce vieux 89. Beaucoup de talents, mais guère de couilles. Ce Caël, c'est un Robespierre, sans la moindre guillotine, sans le moindre canif... Ton époque me paraît assez plate" (*Gilles*, 305). Carentan sums up the aspirations of every generation after 1789 – to repeat the glorious revolutionary experience while simultaneously correcting its mistakes.

¹¹ Maurice Nadeau, *The History of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Collier Books, 1965), 113.

Gilles explains the Surrealists' failure to achieve this goal through one of his author's leitmotifs, the absence of virility. "De tous côtés," observes Emmanuel Mounier, "[Drieu] est amené à diagnostiquer le mal politique français d'avant-guerre comme une maladie de la volonté, du ton vital."¹² Drieu firmly believed that only "true" men can accomplish something worthwhile, while "castrated" intellectuals were inefficient to the point of mockery. Moreover, from Gilles' perspective, the *Révolte* banquet's debauchery results from the presence of Galician immigrants – Jews and others who "se gâtent à Paris et ils gâtent Paris" (*Gilles*, 307). Drieu did not admit that "inferior" beings had the potential to forge a better future. Thus, the homosexual Galant and his Jewish collaborators resemble yapping dogs (*Gilles*, 306). Moreover, their attacks are as futile as those of hens flapping their wings (*Gilles*, 306).

The repulsive banquet freezes the fatalist Gilles. Unlike his pupil, Carentan reacts and physically forces one of Boniface's accusers to explain himself. Although in the right, the new France, *Révolte*, has no intelligible answer to the old France, Carentan. The young man simply goes on stage and sticks out his tongue. In contrast, Carentan alone keeps his composure in the midst of the general folly. The young man's childishness reinforces Gilles' unfavorable opinion: the destruction of the old leads to nothing if not replaced by something better. Drieu depicts the fictional Surrealists as trapped: they negate everything while, at the same time, they strive to affirm something. In this regard, Drieu expresses an opinion similar to Victor Crastre's who writes: "le 'drame' du Surréalisme [...] est le drame de l'homme moderne. Il est nécessaire sans doute de rechercher des moyens de défense contre l'adversaire, mais il faut, auparavant, définir ce que l'on veut défendre."¹³

¹² Emmanuel Mounier, "Sur Gilles de Drieu La Rochelle," *La Parisienne* (October, 1955): 1024.

¹³ Crastre, 123

Révolte offers no alternative to the status quo, and when asked to do so, its representatives are speechless. The young man's gesture reveals the movement's immaturity and inadequacy. In the end, *Révolte*'s members chant anti-French slogans. Obviously, these slogans do not advance the French cause and are thus futile gestures. When asked by a policeman about the banqueters' political orientation, Gilles answers, "c'est le syndicat des nains qui se bat contre les syndicat des culs-de-jatte" (*Gilles*, 312). Despite Gilles' harsh comments, he has also failed. He could have been the giant primed to confront the others. Gilles should have given this justified protest a meaningful direction, but he did not. Carentan excuses Gilles' silence: "Il faut former sa pensée avant de la divulguer ou de la donner à d'autres pour qu'ils la divulguent. Gilles prend son temps, il a diantrement raison" (*Gilles*, 313). Galant and his friends speak before their ideas are properly formed and quickly find themselves without logical arguments.

Révolte's inconsistency reflects the entire social structure. Caël hates tyranny, yet he acts despotically in his own little universe. Moreover, when confronted with authority figures, such as policemen, Caël behaves as a frightened child and does not have the moral strength to stand by his political convictions. Caël is more bourgeois than he would like to admit, hence he does not accept Galant's bisexuality: "Il avait toujours soupçonné son disciple de certains écarts et, tout prophète libertaire qu'il fût, il les condamnait avec une sévérité égale à celle du bourgeois le plus normal" (*Gilles*, 335). The importance here does not rest with the real Caël's (Breton's) homophobic sentiments. Through this episode, Drieu joins in other "exiled" Surrealists and points out that Breton committed primarily to the poetic cause. In Drieu's version, Caël reprimands Galant, "Je n'admets pas que le caractère essentiel de notre révolte puisse être masqué par de pareilles vétilles: la drogue ou la pédérastie. Ce sont des diversions, comme la

politique. Notre seul but, c'est la révolte de l'homme contre tout l'ensemble de sa condition” (*Gilles*, 337).

According to Gilles, Caël's metaphysical revolt is misdirected; thus it is destined to fail. Attacking a weak President who can not control his own police has no real impact on the human condition. It can not even uproot French society's fundamental evil. Even though Galant and his friends recognize the problem, they lack the means to solve any social crisis. In Gilles' opinion, their moral depravity prevents the rebellious group from offering a viable solution. The arrogant Gilles condemns his friends and absolves himself. Although Gilles is immoral, he, unlike the others, has not lost sight of morality. Moreover, Gilles believes words have consequences. This belief explains his reluctance to proclaim social theories simply because they sound engaging.

Unlike Gilles, Caël bravely advocates violence but wavers as his words materialize into action: “Caël, qui avait souvent, dans ses écrits, parlé de meurtres, de revolvers, qui avait voué à un massacre théorique toute la bourgeoisie, l'armée, le clergé, le gouvernement, le corps enseignant, l'Académie et bien d'autres entités, considérait avec des yeux hagards la brusque possibilité du sang” (*Gilles*, 420). For Gilles, Caël's discourse empties itself of meaning. Later on, Gilles loses all respect for his friends who are all thought and no action and who are more resentful than rebellious: “Vous êtes de lâches et des impuissants, de misérables petits clercs, des petits moines en robe. Incapables de risquer quoi que ce soit vous-mêmes [...] Vous êtes tous d'une lâcheté monstrueuse, immense; mais surtout les deux chefs (*Gilles*, 486). A genuine rebel fights for what is rightfully his and that includes human freedom and dignity. Envy does not consume him. Drieu refuses to award the fictional Aragon, Galant, the title of rebel, and has him live in the shadow of better men, Caël and Gilles. Furthermore, Galant incessantly plots to bring them down. His undignified behavior, his immorality, sleaziness, sexual “perversion,” and his

willingness to step over people corrupt all those he encounters. Drieu places in Galant all the evils Gilles will fight later on. Hervier notes in Drieu's defense: "Mais, si Drieu est si féroce envers Aragon et les Surréalistes, cela ne tient peut-être qu'à l'ampleur des espoirs qu'il avait mis en eux. Il a redit à maintes reprises que dans la France morte de l'après-guerre, les Surréalistes lui paraissaient les seuls vivants."¹⁴ In *Gilles, Révolte*'s actions are inadequate for Drieu wished to convey that in order to transform the world, it was not sufficient to simply call attention to the world's injustice. As man's service to society measures one's worth, man needs to transform himself and prepare for the transcendent sacrifice.

Despite being one of the Surrealist movement's founding members, Aragon ultimately rejected Surrealism for reasons similar to the fictional Gilles' – Surrealists failed to assume responsibility for their writing. While the first signs of Aragon's deteriorating relationship with André Breton manifested as soon as they decided to give their revolution a social dimension, the break occurred only after the *Front Rouge* episode. Aragon became interested in politics around 1925. His position on the communist movement before that year is worth mentioning. In his *History of Surrealism*, Maurice Nadeau cites a letter Aragon wrote to Jean Bernier, one of the *Clarté*'s editors:

You have chosen to isolate as an attack a phrase which bears witness to my lack of enthusiasm for the Bolshevik government, and with it for all communism. ... If you find me closed to the political and even violently hostile to that shameful pragmatic attitude which permits me to accuse those who ultimately have accepted it of ideal moderantism, you may be sure that this is because I have always placed, and place today, the spirit of revolt far above any politics. ... *The Russian Revolution*? Forgive me for shrugging my shoulders. On the level of ideas, it is, at best, a *vague ministerial crisis*. It would really be more prudent of you to deal a little less casually with those who have sacrificed their existence to things of the mind.

¹⁴ Hervier, 108.

I want to repeat in *Clarté* itself that the problems raised by human existence do not derive from *the miserable little revolutionary* activity that has occurred in the East during the course of the last few years. I shall add that it is only by a *real abuse of language* that this latter activity can be characterized as revolutionary.¹⁵

Aragon wrote this letter because Bernier deleted the following portion from the pamphlet *Cadavre*: “It delights me that the man of letters [Anatole France] hailed today by both the tapir Maurras and *moronic Moscow* should have written...”¹⁶ In 1924 when *Cadavre* was published and Aragon wrote the letter to Bernier, Surrealists held that revolution was solely a matter of the mind. The rejection of the bourgeoisie, present in Aragon’s work at this time, is the only indication of his future political orientation. André Thirion claims that Elsa Triolet, Aragon’s wife, held an equally unfavorable opinion of the Russian revolution. “How can you be a Communist, Thirion?” Triolet allegedly asked him in 1929. “Revolution is a dreadful thing. Perhaps you’d change your mind if you’d lived through a revolution as I have. In 1917, I despised the Bolsheviks, and I am not much fonder of them now.”¹⁷ Even though Triolet fled her country because of communism, she revised her view about her countrymen’s politics. By 1930 she was a communist partisan.

When the possibility of a new war (Guerre du Rif,¹⁸ 1924) loomed on the horizon, the Surrealists and Aragon decided to give their revolution a social dimension: no longer a revolution of the mind, but anchored in the present. Several years later, five group members

¹⁵ Louis Aragon, quoted in Nadeau, 101. Italics mine.

¹⁶ Ibid., 100.

¹⁷ Thirion, 155.

¹⁸ The War with the Riff (or the Moroccan War) is a colonial war that opposed the Riff tribes to the Spanish and French Army. The French intervened only in 1924, when the Riff tribes, under the leadership of Abd-el Krim, forced the Spanish troops to retreat to the Moroccan coast. The French also wanted to prevent the anti-colonial rebellion to further extend onto the Moroccan territory that was under French protectorate. The French Academicians and other official men of letters supported the war and wrote the manifesto, *Les intellectuels aux côtés de la patrie*. The Surrealists, together with the communists sided with Abd-el Krim.

joined the PCF: Benjamin Péret, Louis Aragon, André Breton, Paul Eluard, et Pierre Unik.¹⁹ At first glance, Surrealism and communism seem antagonistic. Surrealism's automatic writing that is entirely subject to the unconscious contrasts sharply with the communist doctrine, which rejects the existence of the uncontrollable, of the unconscious. However, the way Surrealists practiced automatic writing shows their desire to control the unconscious. One cannot sit down at a specific moment in time and write down what the unconscious dictates. The unconscious can not be invoked at one's whims. Conversely, it manifests itself unpredictably.

Yet, this is not the similarity Aragon saw between Surrealism and communism. In 1930, Aragon and Georges Sadoul co-wrote *Aux Intellectuels Révolutionnaires*,²⁰ a short pamphlet in which they described the psychoanalytic method Surrealists used as: "cette arme, entre les mains d'hommes qui se réclament du matérialisme historique et qui entendent l'appliquer, permet notamment l'attaque de la famille, malgré les défenses que la bourgeoisie multiplie autour d'elle."²¹ Aragon and Sadoul argue that it was precisely thanks to psychoanalysis that Surrealists abandoned their individualist position. In the same pamphlet Aragon and Sadoul address Freud's potential criticism. They claim that it is Freud who abandoned the true method of psychoanalysis in order to defend the status quo. Furthermore, they compare Freud to Hegel, who, in his old age, also deviated from his former philosophy. Aragon and Sadoul have no real answer to Freud's possible criticism, and thus respond by accusing Freud of senility and counterrevolutionary activities.

¹⁹ Caute comments on the Surrealists' joining the party: "Intellectuals abandoned the Party before 1927 as Trotskyists. Surrealists joined the Party in 1927 often as semi-Trotskyists, while the Trotskyists denounced them as irresponsible idealists. One generation had come to understand the trends within the International and the meaning of Stalinism, while another was ready to disregard such questions in its attempt to find a social solution to essentially personal problems." (Caute, 98).

²⁰ They wrote this address in order to correct the declaration they signed in Moscow.

²¹ Louis Aragon, Georges Sadoul, *Aux Intellectuels Révolutionnaires*, 1930.

Communists and Surrealists shared another common feature. Just like communists, Surrealists had to obey a very strict discipline. At the smallest deviation from the “norm,” André Breton would expel them from the group. Jacques Lecarme attributes Drieu and Malraux’s hesitance to become full members of the Surrealist group to Breton’s tyrannical attitude: “Si Drieu et Malraux ont été si réfractaires au groupe surréaliste, c’est qu’il leur était impensable d’accepter le type de magistère qu’André Breton n’a jamais cessé d’y exercer; ils ne pouvaient se concevoir qu’en hommes seuls ou en chefs de groupe.”²²

Communists, who counted among their ranks more preeminent authors such as Anatole France and Henri Barbusse, did not hold the Surrealists in high esteem. Anatoly Lunacharsky²³ characterizes the avant-garde movement in negative terms: “Ce que le Surréalisme, écrivait Lunacharsky en 1926, il est difficile de le comprendre. D’un côté, c’est un subjectivisme extrême, dans le genre de l’expressionisme allemand le plus poussé; d’un autre côté, c’est le refus de création que le milieu étouffant de la bourgeoisie rend impossible. Enfin c’est une proclamation d’anarchisme politique et culturel.”²⁴ Lunacharsky is as difficult to understand as he claims Surrealism to be. It is relevant, however, that the communist official Lunacharsky and the fascist Drieu both insist on the disorderly conduct typical of Surrealist manifestations, and focus on Surrealists’ incoherence and inconsistency.

Communists, like their bourgeois contemporaries, were ready to embrace neither the Surrealists’ way of life nor their revolutionary methods. Moreover, communists must have realized, just like Nadeau, that the Surrealists’ ties to the PCF were partly for show: “it had only the value of a manifestation, sincere and deliberate of course, but by which the party, while

²² Lecarme, “*Moi l’intellectuel*, signé Drieu,” in *L’intellectuel et ses miroirs romanesques (1920-1960)*, ed. Jacques Deguy (Lille: Presses Universitaires de Lille, 1993), 132.

²³ The Soviet commissar for education.

²⁴ Anatoly Lunacharsky quoted in Winock, 213.

admitting them into its ranks, was not deceived. When it asked them to abjure what it regarded as a heresy (the Surrealist attitude...) they were to rebel and withdraw.”²⁵ The communists were right to question Surrealists’ allegiance: Breton never conceded his leader position, nor did he ever agree to allow the party to control his writing. Unlike his communist companions, Breton did not fight for an earthly paradise since he did not believe in the possibility of salvation. According to him, revolution could not offer human beings “l’abominable confort terrestre,” but could at the most, “empêcher que la précarité tout artificielle de la condition sociale ne voile la précarité réelle de la condition humaine.”²⁶ Breton viewed human destiny as beyond the social realm – a philosophy that constituted heresy for any communist

Among the Surrealists, Aragon’s dedication to the communist cause stands out.²⁷ Aragon was aware of the discrepancy between his own commitment and that of his colleagues, so he wrote in the journal where Surrealists were supposed to keep track of their revolutionary activities:

Je comprends à merveille, je sens parfois, à quel point toute activité collective est blessante pour les individus qui s’y soumettent, je sais à quel point la désinvolture de ceux qui négligent d’envisager le désir de solitude de chacun peut entretenir de tous. Je n’ignore pas que chacun a le droit de conserver sa zone d’ombre, ou plutôt que cette question ne saurait se poser. Je prie cependant mes amis de considérer que leur attitude risque de compromettre à jamais une entreprise, du dérisoire de laquelle on ne me fera que trop aisément convenir.²⁸

²⁵ Nadeau, 135.

²⁶ André Breton quoted in Camus, *L’homme révolté*, 127.

²⁷ According to Pierre Daix, Aragon’s efforts were finally appreciated in 1933 (almost seven years after he joined the party) when the magazine *Commune* was created, and PCF named Aragon editor. Thanks to Maurice Thorez, the new leader of the party, the prosecution of the Surrealists ended. Thorez, writes Daix, “ne pouvait qu’être sensible à ce qu’apportait Aragon, à son immense bonne volonté, au besoin de l’enfant illégitime de fraterniser avec des compagnons de combat, de s’intégrer à un groupe puissamment structuré.” (Pierre Daix, *Aragon: une vie à changer* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1975), 293)

²⁸ Louis Aragon, *Bureau de recherches surréalistes. Cahier de la permanence* (Archives du Surréalisme, 1), éd. Paule Thévenin (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), 91-93.

Aragon attributes the journal's sparse entries to the incongruity between individualism and communism. Additionally, he cites the Surrealists' reluctance to efface themselves in a common enterprise. Unlike most of his friends, Aragon readily abandoned his intellectual independence and devoted himself entirely to the communist cause.

Vincent Kaufmann's interpretation of Surrealism illuminates the differences between Aragon and Breton. Although the Surrealists would not admit to being *littérateurs* and wanted to write in the service of the revolution, "Il ne saurait donc être question, malgré les déclarations d'intention ou les titres de revue, de mettre le Surréalisme au service de la révolution, de le diluer dans les impuretés de l'action politique."²⁹ Ultimately, Breton's allegiance to literature became evident in his defense of Aragon's *Front Rouge*. Upon returning from the 1930 Kharkov Congress of Writers, Aragon wrote an incendiary poem against the Popular Front and actually called for Léon Blum's murder. When confronted by the police, Aragon separated himself from the Surrealist group and took responsibility for his poem. Breton, on the other hand, did not consider the poet responsible for his automatic writing, and found Aragon's behavior (that of claiming responsibility) out of tune with Surrealist ethics. In the *Front Rouge* incident, Denis Benoît sees the consequences of Breton's exclusive conception of literature: "un poème militant, poursuivi pour sa portée subversive, se trouve finalement défendu non pour les idées qu'il véhicule, mais au seul nom de la poésie et au motif que celle-ci ne relève pas de la juridiction de la société générale. La visée et l'efficacité politique de l'œuvre s'en trouvent annulées et le poète renvoyé à l'innocuité impuissante de sa pratique. Le révolutionnaire de l'avant-garde aboutit ainsi à un cul-de-sac."³⁰ Benoît is right and certainly Aragon would have agreed with him.

²⁹ Vincent Kaufmann, *Poétique des groupes littéraires (Avant-gardes 1920-1970)* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997), 115.

³⁰ Denis Benoît, *Littérature et Engagement de Pascal à Sartre* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2000), 236.

Therefore, in a press release published by l'*Humanité* in 1932, Aragon labels, “les positions défendues par Breton [...] esthétisantes, petite-bourgeoises, son révolutionnarisme n’est que verbal.”³¹

The *Front Rouge* episode is very important not only because it caused Aragon’s break with the Surrealists, but also because it is emblematic of his relationship to the Surrealists in 1932. Aragon’s critique of the Surrealist movement parallels Drieu’s. To both Drieu and Aragon, Breton was guilty for remaining in the realm of theory. Breton’s commitment to revolution was not only verbal and thus *de parade*, but also inefficient. More importantly, both Drieu and Aragon reproached Surrealists for imagining their words as having no real-world consequences.

The Kharkov congress marked a turning point in Aragon’s life. At André Thirion’s suggestion, Georges Sadoul accompanied Aragon, and together they formed the French delegation to the Russian congress.³² Once in Kharkov, together with George Sadoul, Aragon admitted guilt on the following counts:

- Their literary activity had not been supervised by the Party.
- They had not been consistently militant in the rank-and-file organizations of the Party.
- Aragon had attacked Barbusse and Robert Caby outside the organs of the Party.
- Sadoul had adopted a joking tone in an insulting letter to the valedictorian at the School of Saint-Cyr.
- They had allowed criticism of the Party press to appear in Surrealist reviews.³³

When finally confronted by André Breton, Aragon signed yet another document canceling the first one, and actually lied to the Surrealists. Aragon falsely claimed that the communists forced him to reject Surrealism altogether. In spite of the lies, the vacillations, and the lack of courage to stand by his opinions, Aragon emerged from this episode a staunch communist. In *Pour un*

³¹ Louis Aragon quoted in Kaufmann, 119.

³² It is argued that Aragon took his first trip to the Soviet Union primarily for personal reasons. Elsa’s sister had been Maïakovski’s companion for a long time, although she was married to a high Soviet official. Elsa wished to see her and offer her solace after the poet’s suicide.

³³ Thirion, 272.

réalisme socialiste, Aragon confessed that these hesitations were the last vestiges of his old self.³⁴

By contrast, André Thirion avers that Aragon left the Surrealist group because he desired to gain access to a larger public by writing novels. Several facts support Thirion's assumption. First of all, Aragon wanted to write novels all along, and actually wrote a pornographic one, *La défense de l'infini*. Surrealists prohibited novels, so Aragon partially burned *La défense* in 1927. A surviving passage was published anonymously with the title *Le con d'Irène* in 1928, but Aragon never claimed the work.³⁵ Thirion's accusation is also supported by the series of fairly long novels Aragon writes immediately after his break with André Breton.³⁶ Aragon's version of his conversion to communism contradicts Thirion's theory. Aragon claimed to have become a communist after his first trip to Russia where he was impressed by the Russian people's suffering and sacrifice. In Aragon's words, this suffering made him sign his famous repudiation of surrealism.

There are several circumstances Aragon never mentions when he addresses his break from Surrealism. His and Elsa's financial situation for instance. As a Surrealist, Aragon was popular and appreciated, but he never sold many books. As most Surrealists, Aragon published his works in de luxe editions that were inaccessible to the large public. Before he became a journalist for *L'Humanité*, Aragon and Elsa lived from the money Elsa made designing necklaces. Aragon himself was in charge of selling these necklaces to Parisian fashion houses.

³⁴ Louis Aragon, *Pour un réalisme socialiste* (Paris: Denoël et Steele, 1935). Cited hereafter as *Pour un réalisme*.

³⁵ As a Surrealist, Aragon was not permitted to write novels; as a communist, he could not write *pornographic* novels.

³⁶ The French literary critic Maurice Rieuneau proposes an explanation more indulgent of Aragon's preference for novels: "Seul le roman permettait d'analyser ses causes [de la guerre], de montrer que l'horreur et le massacre n'étaient point le fruit d'un brusque et absurde accès de démence de l'humanité mais ceux d'un ordre social et d'un système économique dominés par le capital." (Maurice Rieuneau, *Guerre et révolution dans le roman français de 1919 à 1939* (Genève: Slatkine Reprints, 2000), 394).

Once he started working for the PCF press organ, Aragon enjoyed financial stability but also social prestige. Furthermore, as Thirion remarks, Aragon gained access to an international public. Lastly, the party offered him direction in life, a cause he considered bigger than himself and that made him proud.

b. Anarchist Rebuttal

Drieu “flirted” with the Surrealist movement and then criticized their type of revolt; Aragon sympathized with the anarchists, and then he berated them in his fiction. Both Aragon and Drieu’s works feature protagonists who have potential to transform their nature in conjunction with secondary characters who are inefficient or dangerous rebels. The texts’ hero or heroine needs to have ideological points of reference, so when they join the communist or fascist cause, they make an informed decision. Consequently, Aragon has the disillusioned Catherine Simonidzé chance upon an anarchist poster: “L’Electeur, voilà l’ennemi” (*Les cloches*, 203)! Both antimilitarist, Catherine and the anarchist movement’s leader, Albert Libertad,³⁷ find common grounds immediately – they both see revolution as the only escape from the prison of this world. Libertad proposes a class war, “qui ne jettent pas les hommes aux frontières – la révolution n’en connaît pas – mais qui les dresse contre l’oppresseur de tous les jours, en tous les pays” (*Les cloches*, 204). Catherine pushes for a war of the sexes. In Catherine’s view, in a society where men are both the soldiers who fight the wars and the electors who ratify unjust laws, men are the oppressors. In this respect, Kimyongür concludes, “Her involvement with the

³⁷ Aragon’s fictional Libertad does not deviate from his real-life model. Joseph Albert called Libertad (1875-1908) was raised by l’Assistance Publique. After a childhood disease, he became incapacitated, forced to walk with crutches. As early as 1896, he was under police surveillance for his anarchist activities. A year later he moved to Paris and became a correspondent to newspapers such *Le Libertaire*, *La Lanterne*, *Le Journal du Monde*. His fame came after interrupting a sermon at the Sacré-Cœur, which cost him two months in prison. In 1905 he founded *l’anarchie*. Afterwards, he political involvement increased: he organized public interventions, conferences, balls. Due to his intransigence (he critiqued everybody, even the victims) Libertad was feared by everyone. He broke away with all social conventions of his time, practicing the daily revolution. He died after a violent confrontation with the French police.

anarchists in Paris is motivated much less by her desire to overthrow capitalism than by her determination to hasten the end of man's dominance over women."³⁸ In tune with the other anarchists, Catherine acknowledges that violence is the only means to overcome the everyday "oppressor's" social injustices.

Libertad hopes to instill in his readers and followers confidence in their own power to change their destiny, just like the communists do. Libertad is a very seductive character who dominates the anarchist movement in spite of his physical infirmity. He attracts Catherine like a magnet thanks to his original theory of social classes. As Loubet del Bayle concludes, "En bon marxiste, appliquant les thèses du matérialisme historique, Aragon souligne ici que cet individualisme anarchiste tient au recrutement sociologique de ses militants dans des couches sociales imprégnées d'idéologie petite-bourgeoise."³⁹ According to Libertad, there are two antagonistic classes: those who fight for the destruction of the present social mechanism and those who try to preserve it. Libertad argues that both bourgeois and workers can belong to any of those classes. Catherine, who cannot change class and does not view herself as an exploiter – in spite of the oil wells her father owns – embraces Libertad's class ideas, on account of the "confort intellectuel" (*Les cloches*, 211) that it offers her.

Aragon castigates Catherine for her interpretation of reality – an interpretation that mitigates her guilt while perpetuating social favoritism. In accord with communist ethics, Aragon indirectly offers his readers a *mea culpa* by critically exposing his previous fascination with anarchy. Therefore, he examines the intellectual discomfort a bourgeois intellectual like himself experiences when he embraces communism. Both Aragon and Drieu stress time after time that

³⁸ Kimyongür, 33.

³⁹ Loubet del Bayle, 161.

they embraced communism or fascism solely for humanitarian reasons. That is not to say that idealism does not occur or that people do not ever act altruistically. However, this is not the case with Aragon and Drieu. Even if we ignore the material advantages Aragon and Drieu enjoyed after 1934 (Aragon's were more substantial than Drieu's), we have to acknowledge the sense of moral superiority they felt as a result.

Aragon's Catherine participates in the anarchist movement since she did not have the power to embark on the exam of consciousness that communism requires of its followers. Weak and uncritical, Catherine partakes in Libertad's diatribes against socialist leaders. Aragon satirizes Libertad and makes him the most eloquent when angry with the socialists. However, Libertad does favor one socialist, Paul Lafargue, Marx's son in law.⁴⁰ Aragon uses Paul Lafargue and his partner's suicide to further undermine the anarchists' agenda: Libertad admires the one unworthy socialist writer who selfishly departs from the world.

By paralleling the two competing ideologies and by focusing on the anarchists' critique of the socialists, Aragon demonstrates their complex of inferiority and, more importantly, their actual inferiority to the socialists. Although the anarchists reject "les revendications immédiates" (*Les cloches*, 212) and claim that their supreme goal is human freedom, they actually advocate freedom solely for themselves. Libertad is careful to distinguish his doctrine from the one presented by "les libertaires" or "les libérâtres." Libertad argues that the libertarian anarchism stems from the faulty premise that freedom already exists and humans are born free. This is a dangerous deviation from Libertad's "true" anarchist philosophy. Libertad scorns those who mistakenly assume to be fighting for what is rightfully theirs and refrain from using violence. The cynical Libertad publicly declares the measures he will take in order to achieve his goal:

⁴⁰ Paul Lafargue was never legally married to Karl Marx's daughter.

“Parce que je veux être libre, moi, je sais que j’aurai à en opprimer d’autres. La Révolution est un acte d’autorité de quelques-uns contre quelques-uns” (*Les cloches*, 213). Unlike the libertarians he slanders, Libertad dismisses formal freedom, or the absence of coercive restraints on one’s peaceable electivity. Libertad believes that formal freedom does not lead to actual liberty like effective freedom does. He aims above all to create circumstances that permit him to act as he wishes. However, Libertad admits that effective freedom entails the violation of others’ rights and this is precisely where he diverges from communism. To Libertad’s defense, he never engages in any act of violence, other than verbal.

Libertad’s conception of revolution calls for the destruction of those considered unproductive. He condemns both bourgeois and worker, but the worker above all. According to Libertad, the worker has sufficient reason to expedite the revolution but does nothing. Unions, such as the C.G.T., try to improve the workers’ lot and delay the revolution’s advent. Consequently, Unions become the big capitalists’ accomplices. Aragon fails to note Lenin adopted similar tactics before the Russian revolution. Lenin did not want the Red Cross to help the starving Russian peasantry, because he wanted his countrymen on the brink of starvation so that they would overrule the tsar: “The source of Lenin’s revolutionary passion,” writes Richard Pipes, “was thus non sympathy for the poor; indeed, when famine struck the Volga region in 1891-92, he alone among the local intelligentsia opposed humanitarian assistance to the starving peasants, on the grounds that famine was progressive because it destroyed the old peasant economy and paved the way for socialism.”⁴¹ Both Libertad and Lenin saw social reforms as sabotaging revolution.

⁴¹ Richard Pipes, *Communism* (New York: The Modern Library, 2001), 29.

Aragon never acknowledges these similarities. In contrast, he compares anarchism to a drug that causes Catherine to experience both exaltation and despair. Just like Gilles who frequents the group *Révolte* because he had no other rebellious friends, Catherine attends Libertad's political gatherings to soothe her guilty conscience, for she is unable to dissociate herself from class prejudices. Nonetheless, drugs, even philosophical ones, only camouflage the real problem and never cure it. For Catherine, abandoning the anarchist cause will necessitate an act of real moral strength and the rejection of Libertad's programs. The same pattern appears in *Gilles*. Both Gilles and Catherine have to make their own decisions and move beyond knee-jerk reactions to outside stimuli.

Aragon attempts to dismiss the anarchist revolution primarily for its individualist character which, in the end, can only oppress the community. Aragon illustrates this point with Pierre Mercadier from *Les voyageurs de l'impériale*. Trapped in a loveless marriage, Pierre runs away from his family in a moment of revolt. His flight is selfish though and only serves Pierre's interest in freedom. When he abandons his family and takes all their money, Pierre acts like Libertad: in order to ensure his own freedom, he oppresses others: "L'homme moderne, pense Mercadier, n'a le choix qu'entre l'esclavage et le mépris. Aussi ne s'était-il pas satisfait de la vie qui lui était offerte. ... Il comprend que dans la solitude comme dans la vie de famille, un seul dérivatif lui est encore permis: tricher... Comme il trichait sur les pensées, professeur, éducateur de la jeunesse, comme il trichait, chef de famille, sur le commun avoir des siens. Tricher: la véritable morale de l'individu" (*Voyageurs*, 372). Pierre is even more reprehensible than Libertad since the "others" he represses and cheats are his own children and wife. In tune with his individualistic personality, Pierre's "revolt" entails cheating the rest of the world of its due, be it freedom or the right to a childhood.

Even though Pascal, Pierre's son, claims to understand his father's gesture, he also accuses Pierre: "Sa liberté a fait ma prison" (*Voyageurs*, 607). Pascal experiences the same frustrations in life as his father. However, Pascal is more responsible, and he refuses himself the leisure to think about his own personal happiness. Pierre's type of revolt, and Libertad's as well, advances their own cause at another's expense. Hence, it is nothing more than a sheer selfish act, and selfishness, in all its forms, must be eradicated.

The Socialist "Alternative"

Yet Aragon did not rebut the anarchist type of revolt with the firmness PCF demanded and received severe criticism.⁴² By contrast, his portrayal of the French socialist reflected his party's position. From 1927 to 1933, French communists adopted Stalin's assumption that social-democracy was a wing of fascism, which resulted in political isolation for the PCF.⁴³ With Hitler's 1933 rise to power, communists realized that, in order to fight fascism, they needed to ally with the former "fascists," i.e., the socialists. Political efficiency mattered more in this case than ideology. Weather vane, Aragon's novels reflect these shifting alliances. Three years after *Front Rouge*, famous for its plot to murder Blum, Aragon found himself in the same camp with the former social traitor. Consequently, in *Les cloches de Bâle*, he engages in a defense of the French socialist movement, and of their prewar leader, Jean Jaurès.

During the public funerals of Paul and Laura Lafargue, the leaders of the socialist movement play a Chopin march, obviously unaware of the march's possibly negative connotations. Catherine rejects this music choice, since she is offended that the same funeral

⁴² I will discuss this issue in Chapter 4.

⁴³ M. Arendth, *The French Communist Party: A Critical history (1920-84) from Comintern to the "colors of France"* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).

march, present at all bourgeois obsequies, is played at the communist couple's as well. However, Victor, who represents the new communist position, does not inscribe music in any social class. "Qu'est-ce qu'elle a, cette musique? Elle est triste, tout à fait ce qu'il nous faut..." (*Les cloches*, 310). exclaims the more tolerant Victor who transcends trivialities and evaluates an artwork for its intrinsic merits alone and for the cathartic state it inspires. By contrast, Aragon ridicules Catherine who sanctions musical performances based on the authors' political views: "Catherine se heurtait à une des difficultés habituelles avec le socialisme. Un morceau de musique remettait pour elle tout en cause, elle doutait d'un parti qui enterre les siens au son de la marche de Chopin" (*Les cloches*, 311).

Jaurès' discourse has the same impact on Catherine as the Chopin march. Catherine considers his speech grandiloquent, and Aragon adds that "il l'était, de fait" (*Les cloches*, 313). Jaurès inscribes Lafargue in the French context and never mentions Marx's name. "Lafargue avait hérité de la pensée des philosophes français du XIII^e siècle... Voilà plus de cent ans, depuis notre Babeuf, que le socialisme est en route..." (*Les cloches*, 313), intones Jaurès. Catherine finds Jaurès' use of the possessive insulting and convinces herself that Jaurès forgot to name Marx in his speech because of Marx's German nationality. Nonetheless, Jaurès seduces Catherine. Just like the crowd, Aragon states, Catherine cannot resist Jaurès' Mediterranean charm, despite the few distortions of his intervention.

A less crafty rhetorician, Lenin follows Jaurès, and Aragon writes that "on l'écoula poliment" (*Les cloches*, 314). Although Lenin's eulogy surpasses Jaurès', the French public has more appreciation for Jaurès' pompous metaphors about great men of history. The mourning crowd can not accept Lenin's indirect admonitions and can not detach from meaningless rhetoric and objectively examine itself. However, Lafargue appreciates Lenin, "sut défendre la cause du

socialisme, de la révolution et de la démocratie, malgré l'indécision et les fluctuations de la bourgeoisie libérale..." (*Les cloches*, 314). Catherine in no way differs from the rest of the crowd. And Aragon makes no mention of what she feels or thinks while listening to Lenin

With the tightening of the communist and socialist alliance, Aragon's view of Jaurès improved. Two years later, in *Les beaux quartiers*, Aragon heralds Jaurès as a hero. The workers at the Saint-Germain de Pré demonstration carry Jaurès to the tribune and give an antimilitaristic speech. Aragon mentions "le poing levé de l'orateur... marque de la grandeur de son geste, de la dignité de sa protestation, une époque entière, sauvegarde l'honneur d'un parti pourrissant où s'entendait déjà les paroles lassées des traîtres" (*Les beaux*, 436-437). 1930s communist rhetoric characterized the Socialist Party as infested by traitors, yet socialism redeems itself through Jaurès' leadership. Aragon treats Jaurès' anti-war protest with outermost respect. Nonetheless, in response to the participants' acclamation that raises Jaurès to a heroic stature, Aragon notes that without the crowd's support, Jaurès amounts to nothing. Jaurès only gives voice to the crowd's sentiments.

And yet, just like Catherine, the young protagonist of *Les beaux quartiers* is charmed by Jaurès. Armand feels an instinctive fraternity with the workers in the crowd and yet, his eyes always end up searching for Jaurès. Just like Catherine, Armand does not absorb the implications of Jaurès' speech, for Jaurès' remarks are obscure and filled with rhetorical persuasiveness. Even though Jaurès castigates Poincaré for trying to force French youth into the obligatory three years of military service, Jaurès does not reject all wars. His pacifism ends as the need for a war against all oppressors (of any race or nationality) arises. Aragon identifies with Jaurès and inscribes him in the lineage of revolutionaries: "Oui, Jaurès, comme toi, nous ne sommes pas contre toutes les armées, fils et frère de Kléber, de Flourens, de Galan, de Marty" (*Les beaux*,

441)! Unlike the reformists from his party, Aragon writes Jaurès as a communist *avant la lettre*. Jaurès is a herald to the October revolution, to the Chinese soviets, and to all the future communist heroes. And yet, Jaurès was a moderate and always pleaded for reformism. Aragon rewrites history, so that it suits contemporary political necessities.

“Viable” Revolutions

a. The Fascist Enterprise

In *L’homme révolté*, Albert Camus distinguishes between communist and fascist efforts to recreate a new world and refuses to describe the German and Italian undertakings as revolutions:

A vrai dire, les révolutions fascistes du XX^e siècle ne méritent pas le titre de révolution. L’ambition universelle leur a manqué. Mussolini et Hitler ont sans doute cherché à créer un empire et les idéologues nationaux-socialistes ont pensé, explicitement, à l’empire mondial. Leur différence avec le mouvement révolutionnaire classique et que, dans l’héritage nihiliste, ils ont choisi de déifier l’irrationnel, et lui seul, au lieu de diviniser la raison. Du même coup, ils renonçaient à l’universel.⁴⁴

Unlike his German and Italian counterparts, Drieu adduced a revolution of another genre, an *internationalist* fascist one. Drieu believed this the only revolutionary type able to change the world. As late as 1931, in *L’Europe contre les patries*, Drieu was still writing as an anti-fascist. However, at the time of the February 6th street riots, while he was finishing *Socialisme fasciste*, he had already chosen the extreme right. In the text, Drieu’s first concern is to distinguish the fascist type of socialism from the Marxist one.⁴⁵ Although Drieu believes the two ideologies share the same starting point (the conviction that a new social order needs to replace capitalism), he rejects the main Marxist postulates. According to Drieu, any society has more than two

⁴⁴ Camus, *L’homme révolté*, 228.

⁴⁵ Drieu also attempts to distinguish fascism from other political movements on the right, such as the Action Française and the Leagues, national but not social.

antagonist social classes, and the proletariat alone cannot accomplish the revolution without the elites' help. Moreover, the alienated proletariat cannot even conceive the need for revolution unless the elites formulate it. It is a leader's responsibility to give direction and purpose to masses, replacing old religious gods: "Et ces gens, à quoi croient-ils? On les a faits croire à eux-mêmes; c'est idiot. Il faut leur donner un dieu. Puisqu'il n'est plus de dieu dans le ciel, donnons-leur un dieu sur la terre. Les dieux naissent sur la terre, puis montent au ciel" (*Socialisme*, 111). Self-confident, Drieu includes himself in the "nous" that selects the leader but provides an unsatisfactory explanation for the necessity of leaders. At this stage of his life, he does not admire either Hitler or Stalin, for he still hopes for a "god." Drieu compares the two totalitarian leaders to gangsters and monsters that are worse than any past dictators.

However, Drieu has no contempt for the masses, as critics have often claimed. In this regard, Marie Balvet writes that Drieu "croit qu'un homme peut à lui seul modifier le destin d'une nation, comme le croient tous les chefs fascistes."⁴⁶ A leader can indeed redirect the course of history, avers Drieu, but never without popular support: "Un individu ne peut que prendre en mains un élan collectif, le serrer et le projeter. ... Un chef est la récompense d'une suite nombreuse d'efforts individuels" (*Socialisme*, 129). Moreover, when Drieu returned from his German trip of initiation into fascism, he dedicated true odes to the fascist masses, which he saw as necessary but insufficient factors in a revolution.

Socialist and authoritarian, as Drieu sees them, the revolutions of the 20th century stem from the ruins of capitalism and from the failure of democratic society in general. Drieu ironically characterizes himself as "l'éternel libertaire" (*Socialisme*, 102) who does not shy away

⁴⁶ Marie Balvet, *Itinéraire d'un intellectuel vers le fascisme: Drieu La Rochelle* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1984), 158.

from revolutions that will not beget a freer society. On the contrary, Drieu upholds that freedom, which had been illusory from the start, was no longer possible in the 20th century. As usual, Drieu manifests no real concern for consistency: it is logically impossible for something that never existed to be exhausted. Moreover, just because freedom has never existed does not preclude it from existing at some future time. Drieu does away with such logical considerations. Drieu draws from another faulty hypothesis (what he sees as the aged body of the French people) a conclusion à la Rousseau that “individus épuisés, ils ne peuvent plus jouir que des grandes figures de l’esprit dessiné par les corps social” (*Socialisme*, 104). Totalitarian, Drieu discounts the individual and only values human beings for the use society gets of them. Moreover, in his view, human beings are meant to be satisfied by fulfilling assigned social functions. In practice, totalitarian regimes poignantly illustrate the consequences of such thinking.

Critics have always reproached Drieu for his elitism, for he asserts, yet again without a thorough argumentation, that, in the future society, “La qualité se retrouvera, le jour où la quantité sera limitée” (*Socialisme*, 104). Nonetheless, an elitist stance does not constitute a crime. Drieu’s confidence in the fascist state’s ability to make the selection alarms the reader especially as he presents the ever-increasing power of the state as imminent. Moreover, in Drieu’s opinion, fighting the state is futile combat. And anyway, Drieu sees no reason why anyone concerned with the common goal might counter a fascist state.

Stemming from communism, fascism combines the national and the social and is, according to Drieu superior to all political alternatives. At first, fascist regimes can not do away with nationalism.⁴⁷ On the contrary they need nationalism in order to force the capitalist system

⁴⁷ His short outburst of nationalism during his 1936-1938 association with Doriot’s PPF was partly motivated by international turmoil. Raymond Aron explains that, “c’est dans un climat de déclin national et d’exaspération

to become socialist. The nationalist stage is only important as long as it exhausts capitalism. Once the state coopts capitalism, nationalism comes to an end in order to avoid excessive militarism and eventual war. This nationalistic period mirrors the dictatorship of the proletariat in the communist doctrine. They are both necessary evils that fade away. Drieu counts on this fading away without elaborating how it will come about. His certainty emerges more from his wish for the dissipation of nationalism than from any verifiable fact. In the end, Drieu fantasizes that borders will collapse and a fascist European federation, with no particular hegemony, will live its golden age.⁴⁸

Just like Aragon, Drieu views internationalism (of a different type) as a task: the only path to a peaceful world. Drieu is not a pacifist, however, even though he never endorses modern war either. Hannah Arendt draws a pertinent picture of this way of thinking:

The survivors of the trenches did not become pacifists.... They clung to their memories of four years in the trenches as though they constituted an objective criterion for the establishment of a new elite. Nor did they yield to the temptation to idealize this past; on the contrary, the worshippers of war were the first to concede that war in the era of machines could not possibly breed virtues like chivalry, honor and manliness, that it imposed on men nothing but the experience of bare destruction together with the humiliation of being only small cogs in the majestic wheel of slaughter.⁴⁹

In *La comédie de Charleroi* (1934), Drieu recalls his war experience in the terms mentioned by Arendt. Nonetheless, in *Socialisme fasciste*, he sanctions the “esprit de guerre” (*Socialisme*, 153) that is essential to the survival and regeneration of societies. Only the “esprit de guerre” can lead to revolution according to Drieu. However, actual war is not necessary to maintain that state of

partisane que le ralliement d'un Bertrand de Jouvenel ou d'un Drieu La Rochelle au mouvement de Jacques Doriot devient intelligible.” (Raymond Aron, *Mémoires* (Paris: Julliard, 1983), 150).

⁴⁸ In 1942, he manifests the same confidence in his ideal and states that, “Le socialisme allemand par la guerre brise le cadre des capitalismes nationaux.” (*Notes*, 163) The socialist aspect of German National-Socialism determines, above all, Drieu to collaborate with the German occupants. To Drieu, Hitler holds the promise of European socialism and the end of capitalism.

⁴⁹ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1973), 329.

mind, since true wars, i.e. wars of the past, can no longer occur in the age of machines. Drieu thus proposes that sport should supplant wars, in order to create a “jeunesse guerrière et non guerrière” (*Socialisme*, 154)! Consequently, Drieu’s texts abound with praise of the virtues of sport in which he sees a restorative power able to reestablish the old equilibrium between body and soul.

Although a fascist, Drieu does not embrace the fascist ideology as a whole. His main critique targets the exaggerated demands fascism imposes on people, and condemns them to “une mort hideuse et sterile” (*Socialisme*, 153). The reader is left to wonder how can one espouse a political doctrine and write a manifesto in support of it while at the same time admitting to its deadly consequences. Drieu again adopts an irreconcilable position and anticipates attacks on his many contradictions: “Mais disons-nous que seuls les imbéciles et les lâches ne voient pas, n’admettent pas la contradiction dans laquelle doit s’engager tout élan; les sincères et les courageux voient dans cet élan même le moyen de sortir du tragique défilé par où il faut d’abord passer” (*Socialisme*, 154). Drieu does not redeem his political platform by simply acknowledging its shortcomings, and certainly not by accusing his readers of dishonesty and cowardice if they cannot ignore those weaknesses. If the “passing through the tunnel” entails a sterile and hideous death, then it seems useless to advocate it in the first place. My analysis of *Gilles* will demonstrate that Drieu did not only address these comments to the death of others (as facts proved, fascists had no moral issues to inflict death on others), but one’s own death as well. By the time he wrote *Gilles* though, Drieu reconsidered his view on death: no longer sterile, but followed by rebirth, no longer hideous, but glorious.

For the time being, he criticizes both existing fascist regimes for their nationalist policies and for their favoring of political inertia. Of special interest is Drieu’s analysis of Hitler’s

eugenic project. Hitler, writes Drieu, is mistaken in adopting the defense of casts purported by Nietzsche. Moreover, in this case Nietzscheism becomes a “prétexte à l’inertie” (*Socialisme*, 75). Such a statement would not invite further commentaries from the pen of a political thinker less concerned with the evolution of societies. When the author insists repeatedly that societies would collapse without a changing of the status quo, his summons to inertia shows the complexity of his political agenda. The still relatively reasonable Drieu does not welcome any change, even when a fascist regime attempts to implement it. At this point, Drieu genuinely sympathizes with the Jewish population. He portrays them as the most abandoned human beings, always at a crossroads (*Socialisme*, 112). Regrettably, his opinion changes with time. As for Drieu’s initial embrace of fascism, Loubet del Bayle’s claim that “le fascisme de Drieu a incontestablement des aspect racistes et antisémites, mais [...] leur faible cohérence conduit à douter que ce soit là une explication déterminante de son choix politique”⁵⁰ is certainly valid.

At its inception, Jacques Doriot’s PPF was not anti-Semitic either: it received financial support from three major banks,⁵¹ whose owners were Jews, and counted among its leaders Alexandre Abramsky. Shlomo Sand contends that the PPF version of fascism was never accompanied by radical racism: “National identity as reflected in their [Drieu’s and Jouvenel’s] writing was typically Jacobinist. Remarks on Jews and foreigners did not exceed the common negative stereotypes inherent in French culture. Similar to those of Italian fascists, the movement’s membership did not exclude Jews. In fact, Alexandre Abramsky, a PPF leader, never denied his Jewish origin”⁵² It was only after Abramsky’s 1938 death that Doriot turned

⁵⁰ Loubet del Bayle, 116.

⁵¹ Rothschild, Lazard and Worms.

⁵² Shlomo Sand, “A Flirt or Love Affair ? French Intellectuals between Fascism and Nazism,” in *The Development of the Radical Right in France: From Boulanger to Le Pen*, ed. Edward J. Arnold (London: Macmillan Press LTD, 2000), 91.

anti-Semitic, in order to increase his electorate. Drieu did not join PPF because of its anti-Semitism, but because it promised to accomplish the fascist revolution. When Drieu joined the PPF, he no longer considered that political party membership meant an “institution volontaire” (*Socialisme*, 56). Consequently, he did not remain faithful to his laudable 1934 pledge:

Mais ne suis-je donc enfin enchaîné, moi l’intellectuel ? Voire. Le fascisme comme tendance c’est une chose; mais les formes particulières et inévitablement triviales que montre fascisme ici et là, c’en est une autre. Je travaillerai peut-être, j’ai sans doute travaillé déjà à l’établissement d’un régime fasciste en France, mais je resterai libre vis-à-vis de lui demain comme hier. Ma fatalité d’intellectuel, qui m’aura mêlé intimement, à la conception, me séparera dès la mise au monde, dès les premiers pas du nouveau régime dans le siècle (*Socialisme*, 235).

Previously Drieu argued that he did not join the PCF due to his bourgeois upbringing, an upbringing which barred him from knowing the proletariat. However, considering his socialist program, he could have followed the same path as Aragon. Two major factors determined his political choice: the communist movement’s popularity and the discipline the PCF imposed on its members. For Drieu, a nation’s best men fight against everyone else (*Socialisme*, 114). This is a duty he could only fulfill through fascism. As most 1930s intellectuals counted themselves members or “fellow travelers” of the PCF, Drieu could not carry out his “duty” to society by siding with the popular Aragons and Malraux.

Joining Jacques Doriot’s PPF in 1936 certainly ensured Drieu’s “distinction” from the majority of French intellectuals. Drieu, at the time 43, did not let himself be carried away. His decision to formally adhere to PPF was wrong, but to his credit, this move was well planned and the result of years of meditation on France’s fate. For a brief period of time, the PPF offered Drieu all the answers he was looking for, and the only solution to the crisis he thought France

experienced. In 1937, Drieu defined PPF as the “parti du corps vivant,” and essentially revolutionary (*Chronique*, 48).

To Drieu, Jacques Doriot achieved the perfect synergy between left and right, a fusion Drieu maintained to be necessary as early as 1934 in his *Socialisme fasciste*. Moreover, Drieu considered Doriot the only politician who provided any feedback to the 1934 rioters. Elected to the Chamber of Deputies as a communist, Doriot turned fascist in retaliation for his expulsion from the party. Doriot took a path well travelled, notes Sternhell, as “en France le fascisme prend ses sources, et ses hommes, aussi bien à gauche qu’à droite, très souvent plus à gauche qu’à droite.”⁵³

After the events of February 1934, Doriot militated for the communists and social democrats to join forces in the fight against fascism. Doriot paid for his ill timing. A few months later the Comintern and, by extension the PCF, adopted Doriot’s strategy, but by this time, Doriot had already been expelled. Some historians, sympathetic to the right, argue that the Comintern did not appreciate Doriot’s rebellious nature and preferred the more subdued Maurice Thorez. A former PCF member, Pierre Daix⁵⁴ seems to agree. According to him, Doriot was too astute a politician not to understand Stalin’s power. Doriot knew that it was not wise to oppose it. Daix writes: “Il est fort peu vraisemblable, je le répète, que Doriot se soit fait dès 1932 le champion d’un front unique plus réaliste avec les socialistes sans pouvoir compter sur une approbation officieuse minimale au Comintern.”⁵⁵ Whatever the truth might have been, it is most important that Drieu saw Doriot as a courageous politician, able to stand by his ideals and able to prompt the fascist revolution.

⁵³ Sternhell, 29.

⁵⁴ Daix left the PCF only in 1974, after he had been a member for thirty-five years. He resigns from the party after the publication of Alexandre Soljenitsyne’s *The Gulag Archipelago*.

⁵⁵ Pierre Daix, *Les hérétiques du P.C.F.* (Paris: Editions Robert Laffont, 1980), 115.

Drieu assembled the articles he published in l'*Emancipation Nationale* in the work, *Avec Doriot* (1937). Just like *Socialisme fasciste*, this new text imparts the same sense of urgency; Drieu wishes to convey to his countrymen that unless they wake up from their political slumber, they will be annihilated by other nations. For Drieu, revolution is now a matter of life and death (*Avec Doriot*, 79) and everyone's political decisions have a bearing on the country's destiny as a whole. In the foreword, Drieu summarizes the party's agenda: "Le parti Populaire Français existe, avant tout, pour redresser une nation qui se laisse envahir par des propagandes, qui se laisse embrouiller par le jeu des idéologies étrangères. Nous voulons rétablir dans leur pleine mesure l'originalité et l'autonomie de la pensée française" (*Avec Doriot*, 8). Drieu wants to protect France from the foreign ideology of communism; thus the PPF is fascist to the same degree that it is anti-communist.

Idolizing Doriot, Drieu even eulogizes his physical appearance: "grand, gros et fort; il sue beaucoup. Il a des lunettes, ce qui est regrettable, mais quand ils les retire on voit qu'il sait regarder. Il a beaucoup de cheveux.... Il a de la santé... Quand on le voit, on se dit qu'il y a encore des Français costauds et qui peuvent dominer la situation" (*Avec Doriot*, 20). Drieu uses Doriot's physical traits to craft the image of a strong and vigorous man, whose manhood impresses and increases the superior man's aura. In his ode, Drieu even applauds Doriot's communist past: "J'aime les gens qui reviennent de loin: ils ont des histoires à nous raconter" (*Avec Doriot*, 20). Drieu insists that Doriot is a formal metallurgist, and not a "flimsy" intellectual, afraid to act. By contrast Doriot reassures Drieu with his ability to act when necessary and with his power to seize all those individual élans and guide them in the same direction. To Drieu, Doriot is a perfect leader, and those under his guidance inevitably have to respect, obey and follow him blindly. As Jacques Lecarme notes, "Pour Drieu, c'a été Doriot, par

à-coups; pour Morand, Laval; pour Malraux, de Gaulle; pour Aragon, Staline ou Moscou; pour Sartre, durant une décennie, le parti communiste. Les intellectuels les moins contestables ont connu le goût de se vassaliser et de s'humilier, auprès du maître qui était souvent le plus loin de leurs préoccupations.”⁵⁶ Lecarme did not wish to exculpate Drieu, but to provide a historical context for intellectuals' servility.

Thanks to Sigmund Freud's analysis of group psychology, Aragon and Drieu's political servility can be elucidated. Because man is not a “herd animal but rather a horde animal, an individual creature in a horde led by a chief,”⁵⁷ he fancies that the group's leader loves everyone in the group equally, and so man accepts the leader's presence. As far as the selection of the leader goes, Freud remarks, “he need only possess the typical qualities of the individuals concerned in a particularly clearly marked and pure form, and need only give an impression of greater force and of more freedom of libido; and in that case the need for a strong chief will often meet him half-way and invest him with a predominance to which he would otherwise perhaps have had no claim.”⁵⁸ Doriot might embody crass opportunism to the outsider, yet Drieu viewed him as the only man who could restore dignity to France. His desires for a principled man with a strong personality pushed Drieu to give Doriot true messianic powers. Drieu even calls him “notre champion contre la mort” (*Chronique*, 59). Drieu was not the only French intellectual to bestow such underserved qualities upon Doriot. Desanti recalls Alfred Fabre-Luce, Bertrand de Jouvenel, and Jacques Benoist-Méchin who confessed to her the same belief that Doriot was a Messiah.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Jacques Lecarme, “Moi l'intellectuel, signé Drieu,” 125.

⁵⁷ Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, vol. 18, *Group Psychology* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1955), 121.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 129.

⁵⁹ Desanti, 320.

Drieu emphasizes the leader's burden through his characterization of Doriot as a serious leader who cannot escape his position. "C'est tragique que d'être un chef," a sympathetic and admiring Drieu writes, "un vrai chef, un homme qui se sent entraîné par une fatalité irrésistible, continue, toujours égale à elle-même" (*Avec Doriot*, 209). Drieu's Doriot does not obey his emotions, for he has none. He only obeys the call of his destiny, a call that urges him to fight to the last breath.

Thanks to the PPF and to Doriot, France will succeed and become a stronger country. Eventually, it will deal with Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin as equals. Drieu writes to give his countrymen confidence in France's rebirth: "Vous avez oublié que le salut dépendait de vous-mêmes et qu'il n'est de vie pour tous que celle qui sort du cœur de chacun" (*Avec Doriot*, 40). Regarding Drieu's faith in the powers of politicians, Lecarme quotes the Radical Party leader, Gaston Bergery: "Drieu ne comprenait rien à la politique. Il croyait toujours que les hommes politiques allaient faire des choses merveilleuses, accomplir des miracles. C'était un intellectuel qui n'avait à aucun degré le sens des réalités dont on doit tenir compte en politique: tout ce qui résiste dans l'application aux plans les mieux conçus."⁶⁰ By describing Drieu, Bergery describes the modern Gnostic as well, whose discourse leaves no room for further hesitations nor does it allow a negative image of the future. Drieu is at the height of his Gnostic confidence; he thinks he knows how the future should be and how to get there. As for possible factors that might prevent the glorious future from happening, those factors are all avoidable because they can be predicted. Redemption depends on each and every French person's decision to follow Doriot, and this redemption can result from proper political choices.

⁶⁰ Lecarme, "Moi l'intellectuel, signé Drieu," 127.

Drieu is not a hypocrite when he rhetorically asks how Gide, Guéhenno “peuvent-ils nier, ignorer le despotisme asiatique de Staline” (*Avec Doriot*, 56)? However, his comments on Aragon and Malraux lay bare Drieu’s resentment. Drieu claims that they have “dans leur tempérament quelque chose qui admet la violence et la ruse. Le sens de leurs œuvres n’exclut pas les terribles réalités démoniaques dont est faite la politique stalinienne” (*Avec Doriot*, 56). As if to reassure himself, Drieu attacks Aragon every time he has the opportunity. When he does not have the occasion to criticize Aragon, Drieu invents it while displaying his insecurity. Therefore, Aragon’s name appears frequently in Drieu’s political writings, matched in *Avec Doriot* only by Maurice Thorez’s. Like a faithful admirer, Drieu makes Doriot’s nemesis his own as well and strives to settle old scores. Drieu always admonishes against intellectuals on the far left for their subordination to Moscow. For Drieu, communists, with whom he compares himself obsessively, behave “womanly” and visit the Russian Embassy to ask permission and directions, while the PPF members act as real men, fully responsible for their decisions.⁶¹

Of a comparably bad taste, and of more severe consequences, Drieu accuses communists of having declared war on fascism: “Ce sont les communistes qui ont engendré les fascismes. Ce sont eux qui ont tiré l’épée” (*Avec Doriot*, 176). Drieu blames communists for their use of violence, but at the same time, he justifies the fascist use of violence. He solves this contradiction by asserting that the only effective answer to violence is violence (*Avec Doriot*, 102). Drieu’s inference anticipates the equally unconvincing reasoning of Merleau-Ponty, an apologist of communist violence: “Nous n’avons pas le choix entre la pureté et la violence, mais entre différentes sortes de violence. La violence est notre lot en tant que nous sommes

⁶¹ In reality, just like French communists received money from Moscow, Doriot cashed Mussolini’s checks regularly. Thanks to the Italian money, PPF could support *l’Emancipation Nationale*. Doriot kept it a secret though, and Drieu was not aware of this situation. Critics speculate that Doriot’s dependency on the Italian fascists played an important role in Drieu’s decision to resign from PPF.

incarnés.”⁶² Excuses such as Drieu’s and Merleau-Ponty’s invited immoral actions because as it turned out, fascists and communists did not only respond to actual violence, but they perpetrated violence against imagined enemies.

As far as Drieu is concerned, communists, bourgeois, Jews, liberals, people without children, intellectuals, and foreigners assault France; it is only natural, to answer to their “violence” likewise. Paradoxically, Drieu’s closest friends were communists. His first wife was a Jew and his second Polish. He never had children, and he was an intellectual of bourgeois origin. One might say Drieu needed to fight against himself and everything that was close to him. As time progressed, Drieu’s racism deepened and it mainly originated in his disappointment with the PPF and France in general. In spite of his propagandist articles from *L’Emancipation Nationale*, Doriot deceived him. In his letter of resignation Drieu criticizes Doriot: “Vous nous avez trompés, vous n’avez pas voulu sauver la France.”⁶³ As for the French, they did not rise to his expectations and did not they unchain themselves. The defeat France suffered at the beginning of WWII confirmed Drieu’s biased feelings towards his countrymen.

Drieu consequently collaborated with the Germans because they were the revolutionaries Europe and France needed. Drieu supported his claim by mentioning the dissatisfaction German capitalists expressed towards the current fascist regime and the proliferation of social programs (*Chronique*, 23). Disenchanted with the other European countries, Drieu again argued for a European federation. However, this time he supported German hegemony as well. Since Hitler advocated a racial type of revolution, Drieu endorsed it as well: “Le socialisme allemand en posant le racisme pose une notion qui lui permet de corriger le déséquilibre qu’il crée et de

⁶² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Humanisme et terreur: essai sur le problème communiste* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), 213.

⁶³ Pierre Drieu La Rochelle quoted in Desanti, 338.

rétablir sur une base valable pour tout le développement de sa révolution. Le racisme en Europe, c'est l'aryanisme. Or tous les éléments ethniques d'Europe sont aryens, à l'encontre des Juifs, des métis sémites et négroïdes. De ce point de vue, le germanisme n'est que la pointe de l'européanisme" (*Notes*, 164). Drieu's justification of eugenic policies stands out considering he previously denounced them. To conclude that Drieu had lost the ability to discriminate between moral and immoral would entail exculpating him and that is not the goal here. Drieu recognized Hitler's ethnic epuration was reprehensible, but still tried to legitimize it. In *Le malheur du siècle*,⁶⁴ Alain Besançon determines that attempts, like Drieu's, to sanction genocide had disastrous consequences. In order to avoid possible consciousness of wrongdoing in those in charge with carrying out the genocide, they had to be convinced that their actions were moral. Murder became a process of purification and a necessary, moral step for the advent of the radiant future. Drieu willingly contributed to the reappraisal of evil⁶⁵ and never denied the totalitarianism of his imagined future society: "Nous revenons à un totalitarisme comme au Moyen Age, c'est-à-dire à une convergence puissante de toutes les passions, de toutes les idées dans tous les plans dans une même direction" (*Notes*, 170). Drieu revels at the German's progress in war. He justifies his revelry with a comparison to the Middle Ages. Nonetheless, the Middle Ages Drieu exults never existed and certainly never exercised this centralization of forces towards any goal, not even during the crusades. Paradoxically, Drieu accuses communists of rewriting history so that it fits their dialectical materialist ideology, oblivious of his own participation in a similar effort.

Drieu's prime concern was that revolution materialized, heedless of the specific agencies that foster revolt. Towards the end of war when Hitler's efforts declined, Drieu favored Stalin. In

⁶⁴ Alain Besançon, *Le malheur du siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 1998).

⁶⁵ And so did Aragon.

September 1943, he wrote in his journal: “Faute de fascisme et d’ailleurs au contact des Allemands, j’ai vu à quel point le fascisme était insuffisant aussi bien contre la démocratie que contre le capitalisme- le communisme seul peut vraiment mettre l’Homme au pied du mur et lui faire admettre de nouveau et comme il ne l’avait pas admis depuis le Moyen Age le fait qu’il a des Maîtres. Staline mieux qu’Hitler est l’expression de la loi d’airain” (*Journal*, 353). Lecarme credits this change in Drieu to his newfound religiousness and to his anticipatory belief that Stalin would put an end to the practice of literature. Drieu does not wish to put an end to his own profession for masochistic reasons only. At the time, Drieu supported Stalin he had already taken the decision to commit suicide. He saw the end of literature as a punitive measure against the writers he considered more talented, and with whom he compared himself incessantly.

However, there is another dimension to Drieu’s adoption of Stalinist totalitarianism. He joined the fascist cause because he saw it as resourceful and well-equipped to destroy the present society. When fascism failed, Drieu turned his hopes towards communism for the same reasons he adhered to fascism. However, Drieu kept his new political faith to himself.

b. The Communist Triumph

As mentioned earlier, the *vague ministerial crisis* became Aragon’s perfect solution to the problems of the world. In his view, the Russian revolution happened because the Russian proletariat willed it into existence:

Ils ont rendu l’homme à la terre
Ils ont dit Vous mangerez tous
Et vous mangerez tous

Ils ont jeté le ciel à terre
Et ils ont dit Les dieux périront
Et les dieux périront

Ils ont mis en chantier la terre
Ils ont dit le temps sera beau
Et le temps sera beau

Ils ont fait un trou dans la terre
Ils ont dit Le feu jaillira
Et le feu jaillira

Parlant aux maîtres de la terre
Ils ont dit Vous succomberez
Et vous succomberez

Ils ont pris dans leur main la terre
Et ont dit Le noir sera blanc
Et le noir sera blanc

Gloire sur la terre et les terres
au soleil des jours bolcheviks
Et gloire aux Bolcheviks ⁶⁶

Aragon suggests in this passage that the Bolsheviks' performative prowess and their power to reshape reality should be emulated by all the nations in the world. Unlike Drieu who thought the German and Italian revolutions needed to be amended, Aragon never questioned the Russian revolution. The Bolsheviks used violence when they seized power, but that did not constitute an abuse as far as Aragon was concerned. In *Front rouge*, he condones the French proletariat to "connais ta force/connais ta force et déchaîne-la."⁶⁷ Aragon states that the time for vengeance has come and everybody guilty of perpetuating social privileges should be punished. Aragon is sure to specify that these instigations to violence and murder do not originate from him alone, but from Lenin as well. The Marxist revolution became obsolete, and one needed to facilitate the advent of the revolution, in the Leninist tradition. Above all, Aragon cherishes the image of the

⁶⁶ Louis Aragon, "Hymne, Hourra l'Oural," *Œuvres poétiques complètes*, ed. Olivier Barbarant (Paris: Gallimard, 2007), 573-574.

⁶⁷ Louis Aragon, "Front Rouge," *Œuvres poétiques complètes*, 496.

violent Lenin, the Lenin “du juste moment,”⁶⁸ who did not let any obstacle interfere with the pursuit of his goal. After all, Lenin advised others to: “être prêt à tous les sacrifices, user s’il le faut de tous les stratagèmes, de ruse, de méthodes illégales, être décidé à celer la vérité, à seule fin de pénétrer dans les syndicats... et d’y accomplir malgré tout la tâche communiste.”⁶⁹

Aragon insists on numerous occasions on the French proletariat’s tumultuous state, ready to start the revolution at any moment. This social unrest manifests as strikes, which illustrate the potential for transformation and threatens the status quo. Unlike Drieu who vouches for the proletariat’s ignorance, Aragon views it as politically conscious. The workers from Cluses (*Les cloches*) seized work when the owner of the factory prevented them from putting workers on the ballot in the municipal elections. The matter is so important for the Cluses workers that they prefer to live without an income and eventually risk their lives rather than lose their opportunity to vote. The workers do not strike out of resentment; they only wish to exercise their political rights. By contrast, the owner of the factory cares exclusively about profits, and in order to preserve them calls in the army. The bourgeoisie’s response, violent and panicked, testifies to the concrete danger strikes represent. The army gets involved not only to protect private property, but also to maintain order. The workers have greater numbers and justice on their side, and they are ready to sacrifice everything. Just like the workers from Cluses, the participants in the communist revolution would willingly efface themselves in favor of the community and the common goal.

Aragon attempts to illustrate that every faction of the population is aware of class antagonisms and thinks exclusively in terms of class. In his fiction, children as young as five acknowledge their class affiliation and, if they belong to the bourgeoisie, they recognize

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Vladimir Ilych Lenin, quoted in Camus, *L’homme révolté*, 284.

instinctively the instability of their social privileges. Portrayed as a volcano ready to erupt at any time, the French society is only waiting for the right moment. Aragon and Drieu meet once more in their attempt to create this moment and thus hasten the advent of the final realm of perfection.

Aragon's imagined post-communist revolution world is as exclusive and tyrannical as that portrayed by Drieu. Thus, Aragon sings "la domination violente du Prolétariat sur la bourgeoisie,"⁷⁰ with the final goal being to entirely annihilate the bourgeoisie. Aragon reserves a destiny similar to those who sabotage the quinquennial plan, to those who imprison people in religious webs, to doctors and even engineers, etc. Aragon convinces himself that he possesses absolute truth and grants himself the right to dispense of others' lives. Prey to a delirium, from which he strives not to awaken, Aragon condemns to a death sentencing all those who do not share his political views. Under his pen, the USSR becomes an earthly paradise for workers and artists as well. "Ce ton messianique," writes Daix, "se fonde sur l'idée que ce qui se construit en URSS est exemplaire, parce que c'est la science du socialisme mise en pratique."⁷¹

However, this paradise was paradoxically still in the making. Only materialist dialectics could legitimize this contradiction. Aragon is in accordance with the communist doctrine and does not reject contradictions. On the contrary, he embraces them. In fact, according to him, the antagonism between these contradictions is the machine that moves the communist world forward such as the Red Army, which Aragon describes as the incarnation of the materialist dialectics. Yet again, Aragon has no moral issues with the enslavement of a certain category of people, since that category needs to be enslaved in the first place. At the same time, the sweeping progress that the USSR experiences leaves no one behind, except for those who were already annihilated.

⁷⁰ Louis Aragon, "Front Rouge," *Œuvres poétiques complètes*, 497.

⁷¹ Daix, *Aragon: une vie à changer*, 276.

Such progress becomes possible thanks to the changing perception of work in the Soviet Union. Aragon claims that work is no longer shameful; rather, it is a matter of honor.⁷² Every minute a worker spends behind his machine reiterates the civil war, and “Octobre renaît chaque jour.”⁷³ The Soviet worker does not feel alienated from the products of his work, since he now works for himself and his own future. This explains his enthusiasm and the countless hours he is ready to devote to working. The diligent workers are not the only category that receives Aragon’s praise. Stalin and his secret police join their ranks:

Je chante le Guépéou qui se forme
de France à l’heure qu’il est
Je chante le Guépéou nécessaire de France
Je chante les Guépéous de nulle part et de partout
Je demande un Guépéou pour préparer la fin d’un monde
Demandez un Guépéou pour préparer la fin d’un monde
pour défendre ceux qui sont trahis
pour défendre ceux qui sont toujours trahis...
Vive le Guépéou figure dialectique de l’histoire...
Vive le Guépéou véritable image de la grandeur matérialiste⁷⁴

Aragon was, likely, aware of the actual role performed by the GPU (a section of the NKVD).

The former communist Daix disagrees. For Daix, Aragon could not have been aware of the Stalinist terror considering the guided tours visitors received in Soviet Russia. Based on Aragon’s protest against the Siniavski-Daniel trial in 1965, Daix asserts: “Et s’il avait eu le sentiment d’avoir, en 1935 frôlé sinon connu la terreur, il l’aurait dit.”⁷⁵ There are several factors that contradict Daix’s defensive statement. Aragon and Elsa Triolet were not simply tourists. They spent months in the country and they were not standard foreign tourists visiting Soviet Russia. The length of their visits is in no way trivial because they could not have experienced

⁷² In Chapter 3, I will return to the role working played in the transformation of the human being.

⁷³ Louis Aragon, “Ce que répond le camarade Fideleiev,” *Œuvres poétiques complètes*, 382.

⁷⁴ Louis Aragon, “Prélude au temps des cerises,” *Œuvres poétiques complètes*, 537-538.

⁷⁵ Daix, 284.

strictly guided visits for almost three years without finding an opportunity to wander on their own. Moreover, since it was Elsa's native country, and since she had family in Stalin's administration, it is safe to assume that she and Aragon enjoyed a different treatment. And yet, they might have considered Russian realities in a manner similar to Arthur Koestler's: "I learned to classify automatically everything that shocked me as the 'heritage of the past and everything I liked as 'seeds of the future.' By setting up this automatic sorting machine in his mind, it was still possible in 1932 for a European to live in Russia and yet remain a communist."⁷⁶

It is laudable that Aragon protested totalitarian practices in 1965 (without ever leaving the party). However, he did not voice the same protest in 1935. He kept silent because he considered the people who died or went to prison guilty. They were the saboteurs of the Revolution after all. In *Pour un réalisme socialiste*, Aragon applauds one of the most infamous Soviet labor camps, because to him, it was not a camp but a human reeducation facility. His silence was not a result of ignorance to the atrocities happening in the Soviet Union. A few years later, in an attempt to respond to criticism of his defense/apology for the Soviet police, Aragon wrote:

Et on aura mille fois raison de m'en jeter au visage, sans doute, le dernier poème *Prélude au temps des cerises*, surtout pour le tintamarre de ses dernières pages, cette apologie du Guépéou, ce violent appel à ce que naisse chez nous un Guépéou... dont l'absurdité doit s'entendre, plus encore qu'à l'esprit de provocation, à la volonté même de m'emparer de ce qui était l'injure, l'argumentation de l'antisoviétisme, pour m'en réclamer à corps perdu, couper derrière moi les ponts [...] Prendre en main ce qui était proclamé le pire pour en faire le meilleur... Vous me direz que j'étais fou, eh bien, j'étais fou, au point d'être fier de ma folie.⁷⁷

Aragon does not claim ignorance although he wrote the poem before he ever visited the Soviet Union. He invokes folly, but expresses no remorse for having endorsed one of the most

⁷⁶ Arthur Koestler, *The Invisible Writing* (New York: Macmillan, 1954), 53.

⁷⁷ Louis Aragon, "L'an 31 et l'envers de ce temps," quoted in *Œuvres poétiques complètes*, 1376.

oppressive state institutions that ever existed. Aragon does not apologize to its many victims either. Aragon claims to embrace the many-sided totality of the Soviet regime in an effort to separate himself from everything that was convention and his old self. Yet, a huge gap remains between embracing the totality of a specific society and pressing his contemporaries to emulate its worst feature. Aragon made the leap because the destruction of the old world mattered more to him than people's lives. Paradoxically, Aragon claimed that the destruction of the old world would bring happiness to those same people. Therefore, Aragon, with a clean conciseness, could vouch for GPU to exist in France as well,⁷⁸ since he sees it as the main agent that could precipitate the end of the old world.

For a similar "progress" to occur in France as well, Aragon ventures to claim that assassinating a political leader does not suffice. The civil society's foundation needs to be uprooted as well:

Il ne servirait à rien de tuer Aristide si
l'on ne détruisait pas du même coup
la famille l'armée
la religion la patrie
la propriété les propriétaires
Ah fusillez fusillez-moi ça⁷⁹

The constructors of the future had to destroy every institution and every form of human association that could presumably demand more allegiance than the communist cause. In order to reach his ideal, Aragon ends up welcoming violence. In this respect, Camus notes, that "Dieu mort, restent les hommes c'est-à-dire l'histoire qu'il faut comprendre et bâtir. Le nihilisme, qui au sein de la révolte, submerge alors sa force de création, ajoute seulement qu'on peut la bâtir

⁷⁸ In fact, Aragon questions the presence of a real desire for a French revolution: if the French proletariat wished to escape capitalist exploitation, they would not need a repressive state machine to force them. Just like in tsarist Russia, the revolution will not occur spontaneously or without the help of a military apparatus in France either.

⁷⁹ Louis Aragon, "Je ne sais pas jouer au golf," *Œuvres poétiques complètes*, 508.

par tous les moyens.”⁸⁰ Drieu uses the same discourse when he encouraged mothers to sacrifice their sons to fascism. The individual cannot engage in any endeavor that does not have the common goal in mind. The quoted passage holds another dimension: the rejection of the nation. A few years later, when Stalin saw the benefits of instilling national sentiments in his countrymen, the PCF followed his lead and so did Aragon.

The Party as Family

The parties of the revolution, the PCF and the PPF, offered Aragon and Drieu more than the promise for a better tomorrow. These parties became the family that neither of them had. Finally, both of them could enjoy the support of a community. Drieu called Doriot’s party an asylum, where he felt protected from outside attacks and where his voice gathered more persuasive courage. Freud remarks that individuals usually join a group because their “private emotional impulses and intellectual acts are too weak to come to anything by themselves and are entirely dependent for this on being reinforced by being repeated in a similar way in the other members of the group.”⁸¹ Drieu confirms Freud’s postulate. In the foreword to *Gilles*, Drieu himself attests to the vulnerability of the person not associated with any political group: “Je n’appartenais à aucun groupe politique susceptible de me défendre et je ne jouis qu’à de rares moments d’attendrissement le jeu littéraire de la rhubarbe et du séné” (*Gilles*, 9). In such circumstances, an author has to confront literary critics on his own, even literary critics that are more ferocious once they realize the susceptibility of the “prey.” Drieu’s friends and collaborators also noted his susceptibility to criticism. Jean Bernier’s described Drieu as: “Affreusement modeste, il devenait presque défaitiste devant la moindre opposition, un jugement

⁸⁰ Camus, *L’homme révolté*, 135.

⁸¹ Freud, 117.

trop dur, très affecté des critiques qu'on pouvait faire à ses livres, tellement il était sensible à l'opinion qu'on pouvait avoir de lui.”⁸²

In this light, the joining of political parties can be interpreted as a quest for protection and human solidarity.⁸³ Always prone to extremism, Drieu goes even further and avers that nothing can be done outside of a group. No longer oppressive, a party becomes a community for Drieu who craves human solidarity and solidarity in his fascist faith. As Marie Balvet notes, that if Drieu, “peut se sentir à l'aise parmi les membres de ce parti –du moins jusqu'à la fin de 1937-, c'est parce qu'il retrouve enfin l'atmosphère fraternelle connue dans les tranchées.”⁸⁴

In this new family, Drieu assigns the leader a paternal role. Drieu holds a very traditional view as to the duties and rights of a perfect father: he is the main provider for the family and also the one who decides on all family matters. The strong father figure clashes with the ingenious citizens Drieu wanted Frenchmen to be. Moreover, in the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century, the realization of Drieu's ideals led to the atrophy of initiatives of any sort. Drieu never acknowledged this possibility, and he never foresaw that citizens who owed absolute obedience to strong leaders could become easily manipulated populations, acting as herds. Drieu's commanding leader, Doriot, did not curtail the PPF members' entrepreneurial spirit, and Drieu did not acknowledge that things could change if Doriot had actual power.

The persecution that Drieu claims the PPF members endured increases the feeling of unity and family, and Drieu rejoices as this pseudo-persecution is a clear sign of the PPF being a menace to the status quo. In his usually contradictory fashion, Drieu finds a family not among

⁸² Jean Bernier, “Entretien avec Jean Bernier,” *La Parisienne* (October, 1955): 1006.

⁸³ “Cette communion, Drieu l'a cherchée partout, à travers son œuvre, dans les sports, parmi les fantassins de Charleroi, dans les milieu N.R.F., chez les surréalistes, chez Doriot, chez les Allemands, et il ne l'a trouvée nulle part.” (Paul Morand, “Ascension de Drieu,” *La Parisienne* (October 1955): 1020.

⁸⁴ Balvet, 165.

intellectuals like himself, but among fascist proletarians. In his words, he identifies with people who have not lost touch with their own body. He explains this unlikely association:

“l’importance des démarches politiques accomplies par les intellectuels et les artistes... est faible” (*Avec Doriot*, 85). Yet, as a party member, in a “party of men,” Drieu fancied he could reach thousands of ordinary people thanks to the party’s newspaper. Pierre Andreu recalls that Drieu used exactly this argument when trying to dissuade him from leaving the PPF:

Ou, me disait-il, vous vous tenez à l’écart de tout, vous ne mettez vos mains dans rien, et comme tous ces intellectuels que nous connaissons, vous publiez des revues que personne ne lit et vous renoncez à jouer tout espèce de rôle, ou bien vous acceptez de tenir votre place sans le grand ensemble d’une formation politique qui va dans le sens de ce que vous voulez, et si vous le voulez vraiment vous devez accepter sa discipline. “Regardez, avec mes articles, ajoutait-il, je touche toutes les semaines des centaines de milliers de personnes que je n’atteindrais jamais si je n’étais pas du parti.”⁸⁵

Far from stunting the intellectual’s freedom, the party furnishes Drieu with vital sources of inspiration, without which a political writer such as himself amounts to dilettantism. The party also provides the public for which he incessantly craves. Only in his last novel, *Les chiens de paille*, can Drieu conceive of a protagonist who is not passionate about politics, Constant. Constant, who mirrors Drieu’s pre-1936 philosophy, considers any political affiliation enslaving. Such a position astounds everyone from Constant’s entourage. The Gaullist Préault, for instance, “était extrêmement déconcerté et choqué. Cependant, Constant lui parlait sur un ton si tranquillement jovial et il lui paraissait si impossible qu’on ne se passionnât pas pour ce qui le passionnait, alors qu’on était passionné comme visiblement l’était Constant Trubert...” (*Les chiens*, 28). As I will examine in Chapter 4, it took the disappointment of a new war and the collapse of all his ideals, to push Drieu to openly express his disenchantment with political

⁸⁵ Pierre Andreu, “Socialisme fasciste avec Drieu,” *La Parisienne* (October 1955): 1002.

parties and political involvement in general. In other words, to resuscitate his old self before the outburst of Gnosticism.

Aragon's passage from the Surrealist group, seen as a community, to the Communist Party, also seen as a community, can also be construed as a quest for human solidarity. Crastre's analysis of *Le drame du Surréalisme* helps us better understand Aragon's itinerary from Surrealism to communism. The editor of *Clarté* describes the Surrealist group as, "une communauté des biens comme celle des idées puisque le Surréalisme est la conquête de tous."⁸⁶ Followers of Lautréamont's conception of poetry as a communal enterprise, Surrealists hoped to unite their forces in order to free language and create a new language that would allow everybody to express everything they wished. If poetry cannot be defined by an individual alone, neither can revolution. Aragon wrote in 1925 that, "Aucune définition individuelle ne peut être donnée par aucun de nous sur le terme de révolution."⁸⁷

Eternally grateful, Aragon claimed the PCF opened up new universes for him. Aragon considered himself blind before he became a member. He came of age under communism's guidance: "Mon parti m'a rendu mes yeux et ma mémoire/ Je ne savais plus rien de ce qu'un enfant sait."⁸⁸ As the faithful member that he was, Aragon, "saw" reality through his party's eyes. He became, in the words of David Caute, "the court poet of the new dynasty."⁸⁹

Aragon privileged the party over his intellectual freedom because the PCF was perceived as a community in which every member enjoyed the same rights. Since every member allegedly

⁸⁶ Crastre, 59.

⁸⁷ Louis Aragon, *Vers l'action politique (Archives du Surréalisme 2)*, ed. Marguerite Bonnet (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), 62.

⁸⁸ Louis Aragon, "Du poète à son parti," *Œuvres poétiques complètes*, 1031.

⁸⁹ Caute, 221.

partook in modifying the official party doctrine, the PCF could count among its ranks enslaved artists who still thought of themselves as free. Thirion comments on this aspect:

Total submission to the Party brought Aragon (like so many other weak minds) a cozy spiritual comfort. Aragon has always preferred having others choose for him, but the most important thing for him was that, by renouncing all exercise of the intelligence and critical spirit, by replacing cynicism with love of good feelings, he was acquiring the freedom of the *littérateur* that Surrealism refused to any of its practitioners... Loyalty to the Communist Party was to take the place of thinking and conscience; in return, it offered him an audience, the entire public, any public.⁹⁰

A disgruntled, expelled communist, Thirion had many reasons to try to discredit his former friend, Aragon. However, his analysis cannot be rejected on this basis since Aragon himself confesses his own submission to the party. Additionally, once he had claimed communism, Aragon's novels were translated into Russian and widely distributed. The more Aragon praised the party, the more support he received from the party that guided his perception of the present and the past.

The PCF alone could sanction the new type of literature since it originated from its struggle against social inequalities. "Mes livres," writes Aragon, "sont des livres du Parti, écrits pour lui, avec lui, dans son combat" (*J'abats*, 198). Artistic productions partaking of socialist realism do not stem from the aspirations of one individual alone, but from the international community of workers' voice, which the author appropriates. Aragon refuses his fellow writers the right to disobey the communist line: "les intellectuels communistes doivent connaître les principes d'organisation du Parti et s'en tenir strictement à ces principes. C'est la condition première d'un travail sain, profitable au Parti, de tout travail de parti, pour passer ici dans le domaine qui est celui de la création" (*J'abats*, 203).

⁹⁰ Thirion, 308.

Unwilling to accept reform as a means to improve the world, Aragon and Drieu opted for a more drastic solution – for the revolution that promised society’s complete transformation. Paradoxically, both authors held a catastrophic world view and an undaunted optimism about the future. However, the present was not as bleak as Aragon and Drieu imagined it, and the future was certainly not as glorious as they envisioned it. As mentioned earlier, their disappointment stemmed from a return to a lifestyle they believed led to WWI. Their confidence in a better tomorrow originated in the same disappointment and in their faith that the structure of the world could be changed. Because the world was living the last stages of history and because revolution, in their minds, would eventually sweep away the past, the earthly paradise was within human reach. Like true prophets, Aragon and Drieu showed the path towards the “promised land,” towards which only new men could march. In order to accomplish a revolution, be it fascist or communist, new men were needed. In the following chapter I will identify what Drieu and Aragon thought were the necessary steps in the transformation of the human being.

Chapter 3: The New Man

[T]he present generation resembles the Jews whom Moses led through the wilderness. It must not only conquer a new world, it must also perish in order to make room for the people who are for a new world.¹

Karl Marx

A New Philosophy of History

Revolution can “only love a man that does not exist yet,”² a man that paradoxically both creates the revolution and is its product. As Camus notes, this type of love ultimately admits the murder of the man who lives in the present. Both Aragon and Drieu willingly sacrificed the corrupt man of the present for the better man of the future. Apostles of the future, Aragon and Drieu dreamt of new worlds and argued that man could metamorphose into a new man, entirely dedicated to his collectivity, a man who did not know what solitariness meant. Their contemporaries did not expose the fallacies of this view of history, since they themselves shared the same confidence in man’s power to alter his future.

This interpretation of history with man and human reason as its main agents had been long in the making and eagerly embraced. When Voltaire³ advanced that progress, not providence, directed the affairs of humankind, he only answered the expectations of the bourgeoisie and his contemporaries’ confidence in the Enlightenment ideals. Yet, as Karl Löwith⁴ remarks, Voltaire did not break away from all conventions, even though he assigned human beings full control over their destiny. A secularized form of the Christian hope of salvation still breathes in Voltaire’s works, Löwith maintains. Voltaire did not adhere entirely to

¹ Karl Marx, *The Class Struggles in France: 1848-1850* (New York: International Publishers, 1964), 114.

² Camus, *L’homme révolté*, 299.

³ Voltaire published *Essay on the Manners and Mind of Nations* in 1756.

⁴ Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1949), 111.

the “religion of progress,” but contended that through periods of reasonable progress, followed by periods of regression, man could improve his lot on earth.⁵

Condorcet, Turgot and Saint-Simon followed in the footsteps of Voltaire. For them, progress entailed the perfectibility of knowledge which ultimately would lead to an increase in happiness. Similarly, the father of positivist philosophy, Auguste Comte put his faith in the idea of progress. In this regard, Servier notes that “De même que l’utopie exorcise l’image de la Cité de Dieu pour renouer avec la cité des civilisations traditionnelles, la science de l’Occident retrouve son rôle de gnose rendant clair pour l’homme le schéma du monde, un schéma d’où est exclus l’ombre de la mort et l’incertitude de l’aventure humaine.”⁶ Consequently, positivism aimed to answer only answerable questions, within the realm of human understanding. Marx’s theory of history conforms to the same pattern: the history of mankind moves forward towards world revolution and world reconstruction. The new world begotten by the emancipation of the proletariat has to necessarily be better. Thus, socialism becomes for Marx the “kingdom of freedom,” with man mastering the social environment. Karl Popper remarks that Marx: “conceived of socialism as a period in which we are largely free from the irrational forces that now determine our life, and in which human reason can actively control human affairs.”⁷

While moderns rely on the progress of history and expect to triumph over evil by its simple rejection, writes Löwith, their ancestors did not concede to similarly unsustainable theories. Ancient Greeks and Romans realized the futility of asking questions about the meaning of existence; if they tried to assign meaning to the events in their lives, the meaning did not

⁵ Anti-Christian – one could not gradually become worthy of the Kingdom of God whose advent was both indefinite and imminent – Löwith concludes.

⁶ Servier, 368.

⁷ Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1966), 2: 201.

transcend the actual event. Moreover, historians like Herodotus and Thucydides considered the things of the past when they examined history and thanks to the periodic conception of time they thought possible to predict the future. However, although predictable, the future remained for them untouchable.

Similarly, the Church fathers believed man had a predetermined fate, predestined by God himself. If God did not reveal this future to him, man could not glimpse it. Modern man dissociates himself from both ancients and Christians and “fancies that the future can be created by himself and provided for by himself.”⁸ This new view of history reassures humanity about its purpose on Earth, Löwith advances, serving man as a compass in the labyrinth of the future. But how can the world be organized by human forces? Imprecation, writes Camus, does not avail: “il faut des armes et la conquête de la totalité.”⁹

Voegelin describes the three possible Gnostic approaches of how to bring about the dream world.¹⁰ Progressive thinkers such as Diderot and D’Alembert concentrate on the movement itself, on the improvement of the human lot, without a clear picture of the end to be attained. In contrast we have utopian thinkers, whose focus is on the end itself and not on the means. The third category, the active mystics concentrate on the change in man’s nature to attain the state of perfection.

Labeling Drieu and Aragon as active mystics clarifies the many contradictions within their works. Neither of them wanted the transformation of the human being for human beings’ sake, but for their potential service to this future society. Of more ominous consequences, it also reveals the utter disinterest for actual human beings behind their alleged humanitarianism. They

⁸ Löwith, 10.

⁹ Camus, *L’homme révolté*, 142.

¹⁰ Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, 120-121.

primarily saw man as an instrument, able or not to achieve the revolution, and consequently replaceable and thus disposable. When revolution is the last value, writes Camus, “il n’y a plus de droits, il n’y a que des devoirs.”¹¹ This is usually noted only about Drieu whose openness and cynicism attest his real goals. By contrast, most critics do not contest Aragon’s humanitarianism.¹²

The fascist vision for humanity, to which Drieu adheres, is unquestionably more restrictive than the communist one. Drieu does not depict the self-transformation of both women and men. He furnishes only a single example of such change, and that is a man, Gilles, from the novel of the same title. Drieu never sees women as powerful or resourceful enough to shed their old, corrupted selves; most often, Drieu’s fictional female characters impede men from fulfilling their destinies. Only after they have undergone their transformation, could men “save” their wives and mothers. If Drieu’s women are mere obstacles to be overcome, in Aragon’s fiction, everyone can prepare for the new world, regardless of their class, race or gender, as long as they join the proletariat. Generous, the communist goal contrasts with the fascist attempt to beget the supremacy of the Aryan race. Moreover, Aragon’s new communist man does not become a superman like Gilles, and although he is required to give up his individuality in order to serve the revolution, his life is spared. As Mircea Eliade¹³ notes, communism does not condemn its heroes to death, heroes that appear thus within human reach.

¹¹ Camus, *L’homme révolté*, 210.

¹² Camus insists that it would be unfair to identify the final goal of fascism and communism. Fascism did not want to free all men, but only some, while communism wished to free all men, even though after a provisory enslavement of all. At the same time, “il est juste au contraire, d’identifier leurs moyens avec le cynisme politique qu’ils ont puisé tous deux à la même source, le nihilisme moral.” (Camus, *L’homme révolté*, 308).

¹³ Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries: The Encounter Between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Realities* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1961).

New Communist Literature

From the conception of socialist realism in 1934, French communist writers found themselves at an impasse: since France was a capitalist country, was it possible to write a national socialist realist literature? The main supporter of a French socialist realism, Aragon argued in its favor, and gave the prescription: “le réalisme socialiste était possible en pays capitaliste, si seulement l’artiste, l’écrivain, ayant fait sienne l’idéologie de la classe ouvrière montante, savait pratiquer avec cette perspective un art réaliste, basé sur la connaissance historique, scientifique de son propre peuple, de sa nation” (*J’abats*, 182). Aragon aspired to a scientific knowledge of his countrymen, a knowledge that could not therefore be contested, and from which derived the authority to decide for others.

Literature pursues above all, avers Aragon, to forge the new man. In *J’abats mon jeu*, he asks rhetorically: “Et, en fait, de quoi s’agit-il, camarades, sinon de ce triomphe de l’homme à venir” (*J’abats*, 194)? In order to insure the triumph of this future man, the man of the present needs to undergo a process of transformation, of reeducation. In 1935, Aragon delivered an illuminating speech on writers in the Soviet Union and particularly addressed the question of “la science prodigieuse de la rééducation de l’homme” (*Pour un réalisme*, 7). The consequences of naming human reeducation a science can not be underestimated: it has a claim to objectivity and more importantly to truth. Human beings can be comprehended and explained in totality, and their reeducation, i.e., their improvement can be verified by repeating the experiments.

What part could a writer play in this grandiose plan of changing the human being? Aragon quotes Stalin’s famous directive: writers should be “les ingénieurs des âmes” (*Pour un réalisme*, 11). The profession of engineering has the advantage of combining intellectual endeavors with concrete realizations. A savant and a working man, an engineer could operate a

machine but could also perform complicated computations. As Lucian Boia notes, the engineer as the one who transforms and builds a new reality, was omnipresent in communist regimes.¹⁴ Writers naturally aspire to the prestige of engineering, of writing the type of literature that is scientific and transformative.

Writers, states Aragon, have always been able to influence human beings, but they were simply not aware of it. As soon as they consent to their social responsibility, they can progress from simple alchemists to real engineers, “au sens scientifique du mot ingénieur” (*Pour un réalisme*, 11). All writers can create unsuitable human beings, therefore not progressing from the alchemist stage; the “right human beings” can emerge only if one follows a scientific, thus rigorous method. Thanks to socialist realism, the writer can discover amidst the multitude of human beings, the one that will become a new man.¹⁵

In order to reeducate the other, a writer must first reeducate himself. Only thanks to this process can writers stop being “les amuseurs de l’ancienne classe dominante” and become “les pionniers de la société sans classes aux côtés du prolétariat” (*Pour un réalisme*, 14).¹⁶ Aragon makes an example of himself and describes his own evolution towards communism. He thus confesses to his past struggles, and even to his past efforts to ignore Soviet realities. Even after his first voyage to the Soviet Union, Aragon avows, he still tried to deny the change he experienced. He explains the contradictions in his past with the help of dialectics: any man who evolves faces inescapable incongruities. As any intellectual, Aragon asserts, he himself had a

¹⁴ Boia, *Mitologia științifică a comunismului*, 148.

¹⁵ Boia points out that “scientific” does not mean “sophisticated” as science is accessible whilst art is complicated. Thus the language of social realism had to be direct and transparent, even didactic, and the message easy to grasp. As for the imagined, perfect world, it had above all to seem authentic. (Ibid. , 152).

¹⁶ Aragon allows himself to be seduced by what he pretends/imagines to be the new societal status writers enjoyed in the Soviet Union. He was however a friend of Vladimir Mayakovsky, censured by the Communist Party for criticism of the regime, attacked by the Federation of Proletarian Writers, and even accused of supporting the advent of Trotskyism. One can not contend Aragon had no first hand knowledge of the real problems soviet writers faced.

system of belief, constantly under siege by facts he simply could not ignore. Moreover, “il est de la dignité d’un homme,” he writes, “de soumettre ses conceptions à ces faits-là, et non pas de faire entrer ces faits-là par un tour de passe-passe dans ces conceptions, si ingénieuses qu’elles soient” (*Pour un réalisme*, 21). Determined to prove his own theory, Aragon recognizes the temptation to have real, undisputable evidence contradict a theory and then in response forfeit the facts, but he does not recognize that he gave in to the same temptation.

Drieu’s Exuberant Fascism

Resisting irreconcilable facts was as difficult for Drieu as for Aragon. Although not a consistent supporter of Germany and Italy, Drieu still asseverates that the new fascist man appeared “entre la Russie, l’Italie, l’Allemagne” (*Notes*, 151). Only a totalitarian regime that addresses the whole of human existence – or in more honest words, controls it – can generate Drieu’s new man. Drieu describes his itinerary in the following terms:

cet homme qui ne s’embarrassait plus des lourdes doctrines compactes du XIXe siècle ou qui, se décidant à les vivre, avait vite fait de les disloquer et de n’en garder que les éléments praticables. Cet homme refit le chemin de Nietzsche. Partant de l’excès dernier de l’intellectualisme, après un plongeon vertigineux dans les livres qui aurait pu être mortel mais qui, ne l’étant pas, le trempait pour la vie, il se trouvait nihiliste devant une table rase où étaient abolies toutes les catégories et les restrictions vétustes de la raison tournée en rationalisme et de la morale tournée en hypocrisie. Dans une époque où les vieilles normes ont épuisé entièrement leur vertu, les hommes les plus immoraux sont les plus moraux (*Notes*, 151).

Morality transcends time and political regimes, but Drieu refutes this principle, as he views it as yet another sign of modern decadence. Thus the justified revolt against bourgeois hypocrisy turns Drieu against morality itself.

Drieu’s new fascist man wishes to reshape the world to his own aspirations, and old definitions of old concepts will not arrest him. Following Nietzsche, the new man fights the

established order not because he does not believe in anything, but because he does not believe in what is. The new man has above all faith in himself and his own body. Creative, courageous, and ready to act, the new man “rejette la culture” (*Notes*, 160) and joins the military: “le moine et l’athlète, le saint et le héros se retrouvent dans le soldat” (*Notes*, 167). Drieu does not glorify war, but he extols soldiers and indirectly suggests the changing of the world through a revolutionary war. Drieu’s version of the new man becomes even more oppressive as he argues that “Le type de l’homme fasciste ou hitlérien ... s’accomplit dans le cadre du parti, de l’Etat, du peuple totalitaire” (*Notes*, 167). Accordingly, it seems that the new man does not emerge by himself but is created by an institution, preferably of a totalitarian sort. Drieu’s new man can arise only with the help of external forces, hence the need to provide the cadre for such a transformation, a totalitarian state.

In spite of his customary pessimism, when Drieu became a fascist in 1934, hopes for a better tomorrow and confidence in humanity’s power to change itself and thus the world filled his works. Yet critics such as Côté maintain that “Drieu ne croit pas du tout à la perfectibilité de l’homme,”¹⁷ and refuse to admit that Drieu put forward what he believed to be an optimistic alternative to the decadence of the world. Maurice Martin du Gard also comments on Drieu’s pessimism. He writes: “Dans ce dandy brûlait la sourde amertume d’un prolétaire de 48 qu’éveille encore, confuse et vengeresse, l’idée du progrès social indéfini et de la fédération des peuples; mais un pessimisme l’inhibait, celui de la vieille droite à laquelle Drieu appartenait de naissance et qui joue si souvent perdante.”¹⁸ Indeed Drieu belonged to the traditional and conservative right by birth; by choice, he did not. On the contrary, PPF stood out among the

¹⁷ Sébastien Côté, “L’apprentissage par la désillusion chez Drieu la Rochelle: *Gilles*, un Bildungsroman en trompe-l’œil,” *Lettres Romanes* 57, no. 3-4 (2003): 306.

¹⁸ Maurice Martin du Gard, “Interrogation,” *La Parisienne* (October, 1955): 1016.

other right wing parties, especially through its confidence in their wherewithal to influence the future.

Drieu's faith in man's ability to overcome individualism and realize the perfect synergy between body and soul explains his embrace of fascism. To disregard this faith means to completely misunderstand Drieu. In this regard, Pol Vondromme comments, "Quelle équivoque rêverie de demander à une politique – action et doctrine tout ensemble – de transformer l'être, de le *récréer*! Drieu a conféré au fascisme un rôle démiurgique."¹⁹ To outsiders, fascism appears to be a gloomy political doctrine, but to its adherents, it was the only hope for a better tomorrow. For Drieu, fascism represents "le mouvement politique qui va le plus franchement, le plus radicalement dans le sens de la grande révolution des mœurs, dans le sens de la restauration du corps – santé, dignité, plénitude, héroïsme – dans le sens de la défense de l'homme contre la grande ville et contre la machine" (*Chronique*, 50). Moreover, the future collaborationist argued that the modern predicament could only be solved by fascism, which he happily championed under no duress.

Drieu believed redemption depends upon knowing what is wrong with the world; from this knowledge proceeds the cure. For man to prevail over his weaknesses, he must first become cognizant of them. Explaining the fascist revolutions that Italy and Germany have already experienced, Drieu concludes that the salvific "prise de conscience" happened as well: "L'homme perdu au fond des villes a pris conscience de sa misère physique dans le même temps qu'il a pris conscience de la misère de son âme, sans comprendre d'ailleurs le lien qu'il y avait entre elles" (*Notes*, 131).

¹⁹ Pol Vondromme, *Pierre Drieu la Rochelle* (Paris: Editions Universitaires, 1958), 112.

The physically unfit accomplished the first step toward complete transformation through a return to the countryside. Forced to live in towns man saw himself compelled to “se méfier” of his own body (*Notes*, 33). Towns, writes Drieu, drain people of their last resources, with ruinous results: “On a commencé de voir dans le corps surtout le lieu de la vie sexuelle. L’excès sexuel a attiré la suspicion sur le corps. Suspicion sociale. Le corps, source de toute vie, est apparu aussi comme la source de l’anarchie, de la mort de la société” (*Notes*, 33). In this regard, the Spanish Pauline of *Gilles* serves to illustrate the corroding influence of Paris. Although a former prostitute, Pauline is now an honest woman, and as Gilles’ second wife, she enshrines love. Her misplaced idealism evaporates in Paris where she befriends bourgeois women and loses her soul’s innocence.²⁰

Only far away from the turpitude of towns and their malefic influence can the new man emerge and “retrouver la vie totale dans la fusion du corps et de l’âme” (*Notes*, 132). Drieu recognizes the duality of the human being, the inter-conditioning between body and soul. For him, to recognize one’s body, one’s materiality, is nothing but the affirmation of one’s spirituality. The perpetual recognition of the soul by the body is a sine qua non for the soul’s existence. Thanks to sports, which can facilitate his salvation, man can “redevenir entièrement maître de son corps, de toutes les ressources et profondeurs de l’espace et du temps” (*Notes*, 134). A “total” man, master of himself, once existed, according to Drieu, but he lost his emprise because of the emergence of rationalism, the all-corroding doctrine. Drieu offers next a typical racist exposition:

A travers les Anglo-Saxons, c’est toute la race nordique qui par l’athlétisme, jamais tout à fait oublié par elle, réaffirme sa prééminence dans le monde... On y voit non seulement comme autrefois un marchand, un marin, un soldat ou un prédicant, mais aussi une figure

²⁰ Consequently, when she gets pregnant, the doctors discover a cancer that ultimately kills her. Two corrupted souls can only engender an aborted fetus. This fetus is only one of Drieu’s deformed bodies.

désintéressée qui se hausse aristocratiquement au-dessus de ses moyens conquérants et mercantiles, qui vit par lui-même de ses vertus subtilisées et sublimées (*Notes*, 138).

Since race can not be obliterated, the new fascist man can not belong to what Drieu deems to be an inferior race. In his political texts, Drieu subscribed to the fascist propaganda about Aryan superiority; in his fiction, however, Drieu abandoned such prejudices, crafting complex characters from diverse origins. Jaime, from *L'homme à cheval*, is one such example. Of mixed racial ancestry, the revolutionary warrior gainsays racial purity and stereotyping. A true leader, Jaime fulfills Drieu's prerequisite for success: "La pensée et l'action doivent être conjuguées dans les mêmes hommes et non point séparées entre des intellectuels d'opposition et des praticiens de gouvernements entre Maurras et Blum d'une part, on ne sait quel Doumergue de l'autre" (*Socialisme*, 131). Unlike the "incomplete" French politicians, Jaime needs no one to provide him with ideas, and he has the courage to fight for his ideals.

Drieu habitually concentrates numerous negative attributes in a single character, often leading to one-dimensionality. Such is the case with Camilla Bustamente, the aristocratic woman who falls in love with Jaime. Among her many faults, her racism draws Drieu's severe reprimand. Drieu explains in detail how Camilla received Baudelaire's *Les fleurs du mal* from a diplomat who, in turn, had received it from Joseph Arthur Comte de Gobineau. Camilla's indirect association with the founder of modern racist theory deepens the gap between her and Jaime. In this fictional text, Drieu does not limit genius to a certain race or social class; on the contrary, he provides Jaime, the perfect leader, with the "worst" possible background. Moreover, Drieu's Felipe, a pure Spaniard, is enamored of Indian music, a natural outcome of them sharing the same physical space: "ils se sont liés à cette terre, et moi aussi je suis lié à cette terre, et il y a des complicités entre tous les esprits d'une terre, autant qu'il y a d'hostilités" (*L'homme*, 86).

Before his conversion to fascism, Drieu has expressed similar ideas. In *L'Europe contre les patries*, he contends: “Celtes, Germains, ce sont des mots pour désigner des groupes presque semblables où depuis déjà des millénaires, les races primitives sont mélangés. Les races, ça n'existe pas déjà en ce temps-là, à plus forte raison aujourd'hui.”²¹ Once a fascist, occasions when Drieu undermines the bulk of his racist theories through characters such as Felipe and Jaime are exceptional. Yet, such “transgressions” reveal Drieu's deformation of reality: he dreams of a perfect world, and while aware of the fallacies in his dream, he militates for the revolution that would bring it to fruition. Similarly, when he attests to the Aryan supremacy in order to bring about his fascist utopia, he knowingly proceeds from faulty premises.

Drieu thus vouches for Nordic man, with his supposed aristocratic disinterest in material profits. Yet this unrivaled athlete can also venture into debauchery or anarchic competition. To avoid such “catastrophic” outcomes, Drieu recommends team sports, where synchronization with others is necessary to win. Drieu's advice is not altogether malign or unfounded: he believes people should practice sports so that they feel better and grow stronger. However, Drieu does not wish for people to become physically fit for their own benefit but for their future contribution to society. As Carroll notes, in the fascist ideology, “if the individual body is weak, badly functioning, divided against itself, so will the body politic, the people and the nation. [...] The fascist cult of the body was thus not just an eccentric curiosity; it was at the very foundation or center of fascist aesthetics and politics. In fascist discourse the body functions as a metaphorical concept in physical form, the spiritual embodied in flesh and blood.”²² In Drieu's new, perfect

²¹ Pierre Drieu La Rochelle, *L'Europe contre les patries* (Paris: Gallimard, 1931), 61.

²² Carroll, 161.

world, those with perfect bodies and minds are not to be left unorganized; they must belong to “teams.”²³

Like all ages, the new age of the supermen has its prophet, Nietzsche, whose main contribution, indicates Drieu, is that he “remet le corps – et ses passions et ses résistances et ses exigences, ses disciplines et ses rigueurs propres, son ascétisme indispensable – à sa place au milieu de la vie de l’esprit.... Nietzsche est le saint qui annonce le héros” (*Notes*, 143, 144). Drieu insists yet again on the ascetic nature of the hero, who disciplines his healthy body, which becomes the vehicle of ideas alone. The true hero can indulge his desires but chooses to abstain, as reflected in the parallel between Jaime and Felipe from *L’homme à cheval*.

An ugly theologian, Felipe suffers from the austerity imposed on him by both his physique and his profession. His relentless sexual frustrations reveal the weak soul behind his weak body. In order to find consolation, Felipe trains himself to despise the same women he covets: “Je savais tenir mon regard et je m’y étais exercé avec une merveilleuse cruauté auprès de Conception. Je méprisais les femmes autant que le faisait le Père Florida” (*L’homme*, 72). Yet he never succeeds; he only loathes women because they reject him, not because of their supposedly vile personalities. Felipe is neither a saint nor a hero, just a sexually frustrated intellectual.

Jaime, the true misogynist, disdains women even though they worship him. Drieu does not place the heroic Jaime in an encounter with an honest woman or a woman who might share his socialist ideals. On the contrary, Jaime forms relationships with a sleazy nymphomaniac (Conchita) and an adulterous woman who plots against him (Camilla): in other words, women

²³ Reszler notes that upon visiting Germany, Robert Brasillach “est frappé avant tout [...] par le développement harmonieux du jeune nazi, mais ce développement est en fonction de son intégration parfaite au sein d’une nation “une.” Exactly comme est *une* l’équipe sportive.” (Reszler, 150)

who confirm his sense of superiority. Like most of Drieu's characters, Jaime loses interest in his own corporeality and, as he realizes his destiny, becomes ascetic.

Just like the ancient Gnostics, Drieu recommends “un ascétisme d’orgueil. C’est par haine du Créateur qu’il faut mépriser les biens de ce monde: donner le moins de prise à sa domination c’est l’idéal de Marcion²⁴. De là l’ascétisme le plus extrême. Et si Marcion prêche l’abstinence sexuelle c’est parce que le Dieu de l’Ancien Testament a dit: Croissez et multipliez.”²⁵ Drieu’s hero can not depend on others, so if he is to master the world he first has to master his own body. Jaime needs to defy human nature, with its intrinsic weaknesses, in order to prove his superiority. Only when he rises to the level of gods will people follow him blindly.

Conscious of his own superiority and duty towards the commoners, Drieu’s new totalitarian man “cherche cette seule liberté qui est puissance et plénitude, dans la discipline de ses passions et le renoncement gradué de l’une à l’autre, jusqu’à un sommet évanescent” (*Notes*, 169). Gilles, the protagonist whose metamorphosis Drieu describes in *Gilles*, will be able to reach that “summit” only by disciplining himself, and ultimately by renouncing his individualism. He will transform himself from a juvenile conscript in WWI, obsessed with sex and the self, into a fearless Falangist warrior in 1930s Spain, ready to sacrifice his own life for the salvation of all. The only way he can become a new man, a superman, and change the world is to first wallow in society and then rise above it.

a. Gilles

The absence of family facilitates this conversion. In Drieu’s view, only a free man who is not tied down by a family (“il était libre, il pouvait aller partout” *Gilles*, 25) can control his

²⁴ Marcion was one of the most noteworthy figures in ancient Gnosticism.

²⁵ Albert Camus, *Métaphysique chrétienne et néoplatonisme*, in *Œuvres Complètes*, ed. Jacqueline Lévi-Valensi and Raymond Gay-Crosier (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), 1029.

future. Jean-François Domenget compares Gilles to “l’enfant trouvé des contes, dans le labyrinthe du monde,”²⁶ a child Drieu places in the care of the free-spirited Carentan. A proud Norman, Carentan infuses Gilles with idealism, with attachment to all human beings but to no one in particular. In spite of his unusual education, Gilles blends in the amorphous mass of the soldiers who debark upon Paris at the end of WWI.

He is, however, convinced of the superiority of his own Nordic race, and he blames his wife’s race for the failure of their marriage: “Gilles se demanda soudain avec une violente curiosité ce qu’il pensait du fait que Myriam était juive, et quel rôle ça avait joué dans leurs rapports. Il sentit avec étonnement que ça avait joué un rôle” (*Gilles*, 138-139). Surprised by his own feelings, Gilles puts himself, in the words of Côté “dans la position d’impuissant spectateur à ses propres réactions.”²⁷ Gilles does not clarify what role Myriam’s race has played in their relationship; one can only guess.

Carentan’s anti-Semitism can shed light on Gilles’:²⁸

Je ne suis pas antisémite parce que j’ai horreur de la politique. La politique, comme on la comprend depuis un siècle, c’est une ignoble prostitution des hautes disciplines. ... Eh bien! moi je ne peux pas supporter les Juifs, parce qu’ils sont par excellence le monde moderne que j’abhorre. ... Les Juifs sautent de la synagogue à la Sorbonne. Pour moi, provincial, bourgeois de campagne, qui, par instinct et par l’étude, me rattache à un univers complexe et ancien, le juif, c’est horrible comme un polytechnicien ou un normalien (*Gilles*, 158-159).

²⁶ Jean-François Domenget, “Fascisme et paternité dans *Gilles*,” *Roman 10/50: Revue d’étude du roman du XX^e siècle* 24 (December 1997): 78.

²⁷ Sébastien Côté, “Difficultés d’une lecture esthétique de *Gilles*, de Pierre Drieu la Rochelle: décadence, antisémitisme et roman à thèse,” *Etudes Littéraires* 36, no. 1 (2004): 39.

²⁸ Gilles was not only marrying a Jew, he also chose as his witness to the marriage an Algerian Jew, Benedict. In fact, Jacques Lecarme remarks, “Gilles, comme Drieu lui même, trouve auprès de la grande bourgeoisie juive l’accueil qui lui refuse une bourgeoisie chrétienne qui n’aime pas les enfants trouvés des parents inconnus.” (Jacques Lecarme, “Drieu et Céline: les deux permissions,” *Roman 10/50: Revue d’étude du roman du XX^e siècle* 24 (December 1997): 89).

For Carentan, and we can assume for Gilles too, Myriam represents the modern world, an utterly corrupted world, where money has replaced all values. Seen as rationalist and individualist, Myriam can not prevail over her husband's moral imperative to desert her. Carine Trévisan postulates that Gilles returns to the front in order to "réassurer une identité sexuelle mis à mal."²⁹ Even though sexuality³⁰ plays an important part in Gilles' decision, his guilt over allying himself with what his wife stands for is the determining factor. At this stage of his life, Gilles runs away from society but anticipates his return to it. Although Gilles leaves Paris for the front, it is a shallow gesture: while on the front, he has Paris sent to him through parcels. The bourgeois Gilles craves the fine things Myriam's money can secure. Still obsessed with the self, Gilles returns to Paris, untouched by this new war experience and more avid for money than ever.

Gilles has to convince himself of the trivialities of the things he pursues and renounce them voluntarily. He also has to understand that a superior man has the moral obligation to act when those weaker than him can not. Thus, Gilles embraces humanitarianism and strives to prevent the innocent and vulnerable Paul Morand from moral degradation: "Il fallait avant tout empêcher que Paul se dégradât. D'autres part, Gilles répudiait à parler à demi-mot, à jouer les providences cachées derrière les nuages. Il lui parut brusquement d'une grande prétention et d'une grande inhumanité de vouloir rester en dehors du jeu. La pitié l'engageait à se salir avec les uns ou les autres de ces humains. Se salir avec les humains, c'est ce qu'on peut faire de plus gentil (*Gilles*, 434). Throughout this episode, Drieu anticipates Gilles' future involvement in the Spanish Civil War. Drieu has Gilles act on account of his superiority, because the ineptitude of

²⁹ Carine Trévisan, "La part du feu. La guerre et la différence des sexes en *Gilles*," *Roman 10/50: Revue d'étude du roman du XX^e siècle* 24 (December 1997): 62.

³⁰ Gilles never feels any sexual interest for his wife and makes an effort to consummate his marriage. Meanwhile he has several mistresses, and frequents brothels on a regular basis.

those around him necessitates his actions. Driven by commiseration, the protagonist willingly deserts his ivory tower; moreover, it is the only humane thing to do, even though this entails his getting “dirty.”

Consequently, Gilles quits his comfortable and lucrative career in the French government and founds a newspaper. He gives it the alarmist title *L'Apocalypse*.³¹ Convinced he is living in the last days of history and experiencing reality acutely, Gilles argues that there is no more time for dilettantes,³² for excited and ineffective intellectuals to try to change the world. Deliverance from the chains of modernity depends upon the destruction of the old world and the creation of the new, and Gilles wants nothing less than to “détruire le monde actuel” (*Gilles*, 521).

b. The Hybrid Party

Yet a man of thought who has no ambition for himself and who still cherishes the luxury of being alone can not ever be a leader. He can not ever destroy the world by himself. Gilles judges that “un intellectuel ne sera jamais un chef, ce sera tout au plus un président, un monsieur qui aura pour vous tout autant d’indulgence que vous en aurez pour lui” (*Gilles*, 549).³³ An intellectual can, however, be the brain behind a politician: “il était devant un Clérences qui muait et commençait à faire figure de chef de mouvement comme un père devant un enfant étrange, comme un père qui a engendré un galvaudeux intéressant. Il se disait que c’était pourtant lui, homme de rêve, qui le mettait au monde par ses lentes et insidieuses objurgations; il ne pourrait pas le laisser en route et il faudrait tout lui préparer pour une véritable transfiguration” (*Gilles*,

³¹ Drieu himself created a newspaper with Emmanuel Berl with an equally eschatological title: *Les derniers jours*.

³² Desanti writes that Drieu “se jettera dans la fascisme pour en finir avec le dilettantisme politique et dans la collaboration pour expier d’avoir prêché dans le désert.” (Desanti, 133).

³³ “On n’a jamais vu un écrivain devenir un vrai chef politique. . . . Chateaubriand a été ridicule en face de Napoléon I^{er} et de Villèle et Lamartine et Hugo vis-à-vis de Napoléon III. Dans la lutte effective car sur le papier, ils se sont rattrapés.” (Pierre Drieu La Rochelle, “La Fin des Haricots,” *Nouvelle Revue Française*, December 1942)

534). The party Gilles wants Clérences to found is the fictional version of Jacques Doriot's PPF: "un parti qui sera national sans être nationaliste, qui rompra avec tous les préjugés et les routines de la droite sur ce chapitre, et un parti qui serait social sans être socialiste, qui réformerait hardiment mais sans suivre l'ornière d'aucune doctrine" (*Gilles*, 537). For Gilles, this party constitutes a concrete alternative to the decadence of the world, unlike the abstractions most intellectuals propose.

This hybrid party could destroy the world, whose end is imminent: "Il se sentait l'envie passionnée de détruire ce tardif marché aux bestiaux, ce sordide tripotage d'écus, anachronique. Mais pourquoi vouloir anticiper sur la gigantesque mort mécanique qui allongeait déjà son ombre sur cette farce bourgeoise et paysanne d'un autre siècle" (*Gilles*, 551)? The question remains rhetorical. Clérences fails at the noble task assigned to him, and, desperate, Gilles has to turn toward communism, in which, at this stage of his ideological evolution, he sees "non pas une force, mais une faiblesse qui pouvait coïncider avec celle de la France" (*Gilles*, 568). He approaches communist sympathizers because they count among their ranks healthy and vigorous men whom he can show the right path. Sadly, Gilles soon discovers that, just like the radicals, best represented by Clérences, the communists are impotent: "Il n'y avait rien dans les foules ouvrières de cet élan naïf et prompt qui allait vers le jovial Jaurès d'avant guerre. C'était une foule brisée par des années d'un rite artificiel et monotone, soumise à des ordres venant de trop loin ou de trop haut. Elle se levait, s'asseyait, pour chanter l'*Internationale*, par un ressort mécanique, en se complaisant dans l'inanité sonore du chant comme les cléricaux dans leurs cantiques" (*Gilles*, 573). Gilles fancies himself able to see, thanks to Nietzsche, the fallacies in Marxism. For Gilles, Marxism is nothing but a doctrine with false pretenses to science which barely hides its "volonté de puissance" (*Gilles*, 525). Gilles is not opposed to dictatorship and

thus does not reproach communists for seeking power or using force to implement their program of change. He does, however, abhor the hypocrisy he sees inherent in communism, though he admits to sharing the same starting point. Gilles also faults communist leaders for the uncomfortable position they reserve for intellectuals: “Caël écrivait des brochures subtiles où d’ailleurs, ayant l’air d’admettre la nécessité de l’intellectuel aux mots d’ordre communistes, il marquait bien plutôt l’impossibilité de cette adhésion” (*Gilles*, 524). Gilles, who longs for words as powerful as swords, finds the communists’ fixation on language debilitating. They can not satisfy his appetite for action, his desire to surpass the condition of intellectuals who remain in the realm of theory. Though in the shadow of the politician, an intellectual should, according to Drieu, police the politician, not humbly sanction his actions.

Even though Clérences does not emerge as the savior of humanity, he plays an important role in the economy of the novel. He indicates to Gilles the existence of a French branch of fascism. It is for Gilles a revelatory moment: “Cependant en gros, il pensait que fascisme et communisme allaient dans la même direction, direction qui lui plaisait. Le communisme était impossible, il l’avait vérifié dans ces derniers temps par le contact qu’il avait eu, en compagnie de Clérences, avec des communistes français. Restait le fascisme. Pourquoi ne s’était-il soucié davantage du fascisme” (*Gilles*, 578). Previously, Gilles joined the group *Révolte* because of common aspirations; several years later, he can choose between communists and fascists. The practicability, not the ideological superiority, of a doctrine influences his decision. Camus identified the problem of the futuristic mind set: just like Drieu, Gilles opts for fascism because he sees it able to forge the new future, a future he identifies with morality.

In spite of his customary shortsightedness, Gilles pertinently concludes that fascism emerged from “des gens de gauche qui réinventaient ingénument les valeurs d’autorité, de

discipline et de force” (*Gilles*, 578). As previously noted, thus runs the actual story of the main fascist party in France, Jacques Doriot’s PPF. Unlike Doriot, Clérences lacked the courage to stand by his opinions, to defend what, in Gilles’ eyes, was right. More preoccupied with preserving his electorate than helping it, Clérences does not grasp the importance of February 6. Gilles, by contrast, is soon conquered by the élan of the popular movement. Politicians remain skeptical and fail to grasp Gilles’ sense of urgency. As if to confirm Drieu’s distrust of political elites, the masses march for change, not the crippled Clérences of French society:

Ce peuple n’est pas mort, comme nous le croyons tous au fond de nous-mêmes, ce peuple s’est relevé de son lit de torpeur. Ce peuple qui a quitté ses villages et ses églises, qui est venu s’enfermer dans les usines, les bureaux et les cinémas, n’a pas perdu tout à fait la fierté de son sang. Alors que le vol et l’exaction suaient, s’avouaient, criaient de toutes parts, il n’a pas pu résister à la fin à une si imposante sollicitation d’Erynnies, et il est descendu dans la rue. C’est le moment pour vous, hommes politiques, de vous précipiter dehors, au-devant de lui. Sortez de vos couloirs. Que les chefs se mêlent comme se sont mêlées les troupes. Car les troupes se sont mêlées, Clérences sur cette place, j’ai vu les communistes côtoyer les nationaux; les regarder et les observer avec trouble et envie (*Gilles*, 597).

Drieu, like all fascist elites, scorns inert masses, but never masses in movement, masses that can generate change. As the people of Paris put aside their political divergences and demonstrate together, Drieu can not contain his enthusiasm. Balvet’s conclusion simply contradicts Drieu’s text: “Mais il n’y a pas dans l’idéologie marxiste ce mépris des masses, du moins de la classe ouvrière. Or dans la pensée de Drieu comme dans celle des chefs fascistes, le chef commande parce que le peuple est incapable d’agir par lui-même.”³⁴ The insurgents acted by themselves, and Drieu does not disdain them; nonetheless, their actions led to nothing because they did not have the guidance of a leader.

³⁴ Balvet, 179.

For the calm reader of the present day, the reaction of the elites reassures, considering Gilles' frightening suggestions. When asked by Clérences what conduct he should adopt, Gilles advises him to "Attaque Daladier ou défends-le, mais par des actes qui soient tout à fait concrets. Envahis coup sur coup un journal de droite et un journal de gauche. Fais bâtonner à domicile celui-ci ou celui-là" (*Gilles*, 599). Action for action's sake, change for change's sake. The passage is all the more important as it is not meant as a criticism. Since history can only progress, in Gilles' reasoning, a changed world is necessarily better than the present one.

Gilles tries in vain to turn Clérences into the Messiah who will usher in the age of perfection. Desperate, Gilles confesses he would follow any leader, under any condition, as long as that leader replaces the present regime (*Gilles*, 600). His exasperation reaches its limits. Nothing can come out of something that is already dying. His second wife's last days coincide with the February events. The actual cancer that is eating Pauline's good cells and the metaphorical cancer that paralyzes France propagate too fast and can not be stopped. It is too late for both Gilles and France; they both have to die and be reborn again.

c. The Spanish Civil War

"To remain a fascist," writes Alice Kaplan, "Gilles must leave the country."³⁵ I argue that Gilles can remain a fascist in France as well, but he removes himself from the corrupted French atmosphere so that he can develop to his full potential. He does not follow the itinerary Drieu prescribed for the new fascist man; Gilles does not take up sports, returning instead to the front a second time. He is not the soldier he was in WWI, but rather a saint and an ascetic hero. The reader departed from a disillusioned Gilles only to encounter a new man, a man of action, Walter. Nothing can be preserved from the old man, not even his name. Everything has changed:

³⁵ Kaplan, 106.

“Tout avait changé: le monde et lui” (*Gilles*, 615). Walter’s set is no longer the bourgeois, corrupted Paris, but Civil War Spain, or a version thereof that Drieu, according to Richard Golsan,³⁶ crafted as a counterweight to Andre Malraux’s depiction in *L’Espoir*. In *L’Espoir*, the Republicans were noted for their cosmopolitanism; in *Gilles*, the Falangists hailed from all corners of the Catholic world. Writers on both the Left and Right recast the Spanish conflict to fit their own political agendas. Moreover, Christopher G. Flood notes,

in the discourse of Catholic pro-Nationalists, the political and the socioeconomic were often infused with the religious, hinting at a utopian sacralization of social life, so that it would not be too much of an exaggeration to suggest that in the distant background of the imagination, the millenarian narrative of temporal and spiritual glory following apocalyptic battles against the forces of the Antichrist may have unconsciously overdetermined those stories of the future Spain with its own structure of crisis-judgments-salvation.³⁷

Indeed, Drieu uses Spain as the setting for the apocalyptic struggle from which the fascist new man will emerge. Spain, is the place, as notes Francine Dugast-Porte, where “le clerc peut devenir guerrier.”³⁸

Although Walter does not hesitate to kill in order to save his own life, fear of death still enslaves him. It will take some turns in the narrative to place Walter on the front so that he can transform from a “clerc” into a warrior. Focused on the fate of humanity as a whole, Walter realizes he can not waste any energy on individuals: “Pourquoi le serrurier avait-il été fusillé et non pas le charcutier? Mais il avait bien d’autres chiens à fouetter. Et il savait qu’il ne s’intéresserait plus à toutes ces futilités individuelles. Son intérêt pour les autres individus était

³⁶ Richard J. Golsan, “Countering *L’Espoir*: Two French Novels of the Spanish Civil War,” in *The Spanish Civil War in Literature*, ed. Janet Pérez and Wendell Aycock (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1990), 46.

³⁷ Christopher G. Flood, “Crusade or Genocide? French Catholic Discourse on the Spanish Civil War,” in *The Spanish Civil War in Literature*, ed. Janet Pérez and Wendell Aycock, (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1990), 61.

³⁸ Francine Dugast-Porte, “Drieu La Rochelle; la parabole espagnole,” *Recherches et études comparatistes ibéro-françaises de la Sorbonne nouvelle*, vol. 3 (Paris: Université Paris III, 1981): 60.

mort avec son intérêt pour son propre individu. Cet intérêt avait-il jamais existé” (*Gilles*, 646)?

Gilles comes to believe that he is not in Spain to save the Falangists from the Republicans, but to save all mankind from its decline.

In order for Walter to fulfill his destiny, he must disregard such trivialities as death – his own or others’. An Irish comrade of Walter’s places the Falangist effort in a global context: “Je suis catholique et je défends la civilisation catholique.” To which Walter adds: “Le catholicisme mâle, celui du Moyen Age” (*Gilles*, 658). If these statements make sense in the framework of the Spanish Civil War, with Franco wanting to reestablish the supremacy of the Catholic Church, they are set against the German version of fascism. As Charlotte Wardi explains, “on peut difficilement comprendre comment Drieu prétendait concilier racisme et christianisme. Il oublie que Rosenberg, théoricien du nazisme, avait noté l’Eglise comme une force à détruire après les Juifs et les Francs-maçons. A plusieurs reprises Drieu confond religion et racisme et parle du Christ comme du grand ‘Christ blanc de notre religion aryenne.’”³⁹ Walter and his brothers in arms engage in an illuminating discussion about fascism and the church. If asked to choose sides, the Irish, the Pole, and the Spaniard would fight against the church. “Le Fascisme,” says the Pole “a plus besoin de nous que l’Eglise. Si l’Eglise erre politiquement comme elle l’a souvent fait, nous la laisserons momentanément tomber. On peut en prendre et en laisser avec l’Eglise, elle est éternelle” (*Gilles*, 673).

Because it is eternal, the church does not need every available “soldier”; the same can not be said about nations. Gilles asks his companions one more difficult question: their nations or fascism? He solves this riddle as well: he sees fascism as universal, not nationalistic. The branch of fascism that favors one national hegemony marks a mutation: “Mais le triomphe du Fascisme

³⁹ Charlotte Wardi, “Décadence et rationalisme dans *Gilles* de Drieu la Rochelle,” *Travaux de Linguistique et de Littérature* 16, no. 2 (1977): 274.

ne peut pas se confondre avec le triomphe d'une nation sur une autre nation" (*Gilles*, 674). Gilles expresses the faith of his author that Germany will realize the need to abort its nationalist policies in order to unite the people of Europe. In *Socialisme fasciste*, Drieu blames Germany: "Au fond ils vont vers une conception spirituelle, esthétique de la société. Il faut travailler pour faire de l'Allemagne un tout harmonieux, un ensemble limité, clos, qui se satisfait lui-même, qui se complait dans lui-même. Chacun ne vit que pour jouir de l'ensemble. C'est bien la civilisation qui peut se développer sous le signe du cinéma. C'est un idéal statique" (*Socialisme*, 211). In this, Drieu echoes Leon Trotsky, albeit from a fascist perspective. Stalin confined the communist revolution to the USSR alone, prompting the internationalist Trotsky's scorn; in the same vein, Hitler, according to Drieu, errs and inhibits social progress.

The purpose is not, as Jean Servier remarks, to create one happy nation but a happy world:

Le citoyen des utopies fait partie d'un peuple élu ou mystérieusement 'éclairé.' A aucun moment, il n'a le sentiment d'appartenir à l'humanité ni le désir de donner sa cité à l'univers, pas plus qu'un enfant ne souhaite partager les tendresses de sa mère... Il est donc différent de l' «homme moral», le saint ou le héros qui choisissent leur voie difficile par amour de l'humanité. Les guides des mouvements millénaristes ont presque tous accepté avec sérénité les persécutions et les supplices qui ont marqué la fin de leur mission. ... on pourrait parler du nationalisme utopien opposé à l'universalisme millénariste.⁴⁰

Gilles fits Servier's description of the "moral man." Old sins absolved, the once anticlerical hero becomes a practicing Catholic who, because he lacks time, sins no more. Drieu offers his character the circumstances to reveal all his possibilities. In this sense, Loubet del Bayle concludes that Drieu leads his characters to participate in war because what interests him, "ce n'est pas la guerre en elle-même, mais l'épreuve qu'elle constitue, les vertus qu'elle contribue à

⁴⁰ Servier, 356, 357, 359.

révéler et à susciter, les caractères qu'elle permet de tremper.”⁴¹ In Gilles' case, this new war experience empowers him so that he can prevail over supposedly pointless individualism.

d. Final Sacrifice

Gilles emerges as the new fascist man. He always had a good nature, but unfavorable circumstances cloaked it from him. Now, when he realizes his call, he becomes the man of an idea: “sur le chemin de Jeanne d’Arc, catholique et guerrière” (*Gilles*, 677). Ultimately, Gilles sees himself like most Gnostics, as the prophet with access to God whose duty is to show the way to commoners. Yet even “prophets” hesitate, even “prophets” wonder if their sacrifice is worth it. “Pourquoi être là?” Gilles asks himself, as “lui n’était pas officier espagnol et il n’avait pas besoin d’être dans cette idiote guerre. Et en tout cas, pas la guerre dans le noir. Il fallait filer” (*Gilles*, 684).

Eliade's comparison of the communist and fascist eschatons elucidates why Drieu believes Gilles' death to be necessary and why he decides to have his hero stay in Spain. In *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, Eliade contrasts the essentially optimistic communist eschaton to the fascist one, which entails a calamitous end of the world. Unlike philosophers of history such as Croce and Ortega y Gasset, who see the problems of the world as given, Karl Marx uses the Judeo-Christian eschaton to his advantage. Marx assigns the proletariat a prophetic and salvific role: saving humanity from the alienation inherent in capitalism. Eliade concludes,

For whatever we might think of the scientific claims of Marx, it is clear that the author of the *Communist Manifesto* takes up and carries on one of the great eschatological myths of the Middle Eastern and Mediterranean world, namely: the redemptive part to be played by the Just (the “elect,” the “anointed,” the “innocent,” the “missionaries,” in our days by the proletariat), whose suffering are invoked to change the ontological status of the world.⁴²

⁴¹ Loubet del Bayle, 130.

⁴² Eliade, 26.

At the opposite pole, the fascist eschaton derives from what Eliade calls a pessimistic German mythology. In the final battle between good and evil, evil will at first triumph, but later the world will be reborn, regenerated.⁴³

Even though Drieu has initial reservations about the sacrifice fascism required from its adepts, by 1939, when he writes *Gilles*, he is convinced that the perfect new world can only emerge from the ruins of the old. Although Gilles attempts to leave, to abandon his “noble” mission, he stops. He decides to stay on the battlefield because life has no appeal to him anymore:

Là-bas, au loin, la vie pouvait-elle être encore délicieuse? Les femmes, il ne les désirait plus. Il avait horreur, désormais, de lui parlant à une femme. Tout cela n’avait été que mensonge de part et d’autre. Il n’avait pas su. Revoir Florence, Chartres? Il les avait si bien vues. Il en emporterait l’image gravée d’un trait de diamant dans l’âme. Dieu? Il ne pouvait l’approcher que par ce geste violent de son corps, ce geste dément le projetant, le heurtant contre une mort sauvage (*Gilles*, 686).

Gilles has done and seen everything; no new experience is possible for him. Free of attachments, Gilles controls his emotions and accepts death as it is. He might seem disillusioned, but he is not, because he understands what is required of the fascist hero. He can thus sacrifice his life confident that nothing can be accomplished without blood and sure of the rebirth following the eschaton: “Les dieux qui meurent et qui renaissent: Dionysos, Christ. Rien ne se fait que dans le sang. Il faut sans cesse mourir pour sans cesse renaître” (*Gilles*, 687).

Most literary critics consider the epilogue to be in stark contrast with the rest of the novel. For instance, Kaplan considers it a pastiche, Rima Drell Reck calls it a “parody of scenes

⁴³ It is a puzzling position for Eliade, giving his own flirtation with the same ideology. Nonetheless, his observation remains pertinent.

from Malraux's *L'Espoir*,⁴⁴ and Paul Renard says it partakes of the absurd.⁴⁵ Expecting the end of the world and even fighting for it rings of anachronism. Yet, as my analysis demonstrates, the end harmonizes with the rest of the novel. We agree with I. Diene, who concludes, "Un tel parcours narratif est similaire à la vision eschatologique du fascisme, qui noircit la réalité sociale et, après l'apocalypse nécessaire au mythe du renouveau, suggère la redécouverte du paradis perdu."⁴⁶

Through Gilles, Drieu advocates not simply a return to a more glorious past, but the creation of a future unequalled by any moment in history. Even though Drieu believes the fascist superman can learn from his better predecessors, he also implies that Gilles and the like will surpass the heroes of the past. For Drieu, the novelty of the fascist hero consists in his power to synthesize socialism and internationalism, but more importantly in his acceptance of personal sacrifice. The fascist superman can be born only when fascist man welcomes death. When, in the final scene, Walter begins gunning down the Republicans with no regard for self-preservation, he has no doubt that he is among the elect – who, like Christ, will return to rule a new world.

Drieu has Walter embrace religion not out of humility but for its empowering effects. God does not govern the universe in which Walter evolves, man does, a man that has taken on God's prerogatives. As Camus notes, "Mais qu'est-ce qu'être Dieu? Reconnaître justement que tout est permis; refuser toute autre loi que la sienne propre... devenir Dieu, c'est accepter le crime."⁴⁷ Walter has transformed his fantasies and his will to power into universal rules: blood

⁴⁴ Rima Drell Reck, *Drieu la Rochelle and the Picture Gallery Novel: French Modernism in the Interwar Years* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1990), 160.

⁴⁵ Paul Renard, "Le 6 février 34 ou comment Gilles devient fasciste," *Roman 10/50: Revue d'étude du roman du XX^e siècle* 24 (December 1997):121.

⁴⁶ I. Diene, "Histoire et littérature révolutionnaire. Le traitement paratextuel de la guerre d'Espagne chez Drieu la Rochelle (*Gilles*) et chez Louis Aragon (*Les Communistes*)," in *Littérature et Révolutions en France*, ed. G.T. Harris and P.M. Wetherill (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1990), 234.

⁴⁷ Camus, *L'homme révolté*, 83.

(or the murder of others) becomes for him a necessity without which nothing can be accomplished. Ultimately, by deciding upon others' lives, he is a nihilist. He is also a nihilist, à la Nietzsche, for his contempt for life. "Ce nihilisme," postulates Camus, "malgré les apparences, est encore nihilisme au sens nietzschéen, dans la mesure où il est calomnie de la vie présente au profit d'un au-delà historique auquel on s'efforce de croire."⁴⁸ Gilles left Paris and a past life that had nothing to offer him; all degenerate, his contemporaries could not answer his call, a mistake Gilles can not pardon. He is thus ready to sacrifice them all in the name of a future he can only imagine more glorious.

Aragon's Bourgeois Communism

Aragon will never elevate his protagonists to Gilles' apotheosis. Nonetheless, even though Aragon maintains Catherine Simonidzé and Armand Barbentane in the realm of reality, their transformation remains heroic. To abandon one's class and join the proletariat require the same discipline as Gilles' sacrifice did.⁴⁹ Aragon wishes to convey that the French bourgeois need to follow the same steps Armand and Catherine go through, or they will self-destruct. Just like Drieu, Aragon lends his characters numerous elements from his own biography. Aragon flirted with anarchy just like Catherine, considered suicide as did Armand, and grew up in a household without a father as did Armand and Catherine. Not surprisingly, his fictional alter egos revolt against the order their fathers want to secure. Aragon and his protagonists could not be farther from the Préfet de Police, Louis Andrieux. As the Parisian keeper of public safety, Andrieux fought anarchists with every legal and illegal means available to him. It is safe to

⁴⁸ Camus, *L'homme révolté*, note 187.

⁴⁹ Aragon describes the itinerary of two *bourgeois* protagonists, whom he offers as examples for the French public to emulate. Aragon indirectly admits to his public's class affiliation. Aragon, the "former" bourgeois does not write socialist realist novels for the working class, but for the bourgeoisie.

assume Andrieux would have used similarly repressive methods against socialists and communists had he remained in office.

a. The Break with Tradition

Aragon does not reject the notion of parental authority per se; as Serra notes, Aragon “conteste les pères pour exalter des pères meilleurs, non pour nier la paternité; se déchaîne contre la bourgeoisie pour prêcher un ordre social plus équitable, pas le désordre.”⁵⁰ The family as the cell of society needs to play its part in the construction of socialism, but the absent or almost absent fathers⁵¹ in *Les cloches de Bâle* and *Les beaux quartiers* can not fulfill their duty. Aragon attempts to establish Catherine and Armand’s fathers not as anomalies, but the byproduct of capitalist society.

In both instances, mothers function as filters for the image protagonists construct of their fathers. Traumatized by her mother’s marital abuse, Catherine convinces herself of men’s superficiality and their propensity to treat women as objects. Aware from an early age of sexual discrimination, Catherine resents the education she receives as a woman. Wanting to be more than a wife and mother, Catherine soon becomes an outsider in her milieu. She thus revolts at an early age against the slavery into which she believes women are forced to live, and does not hesitate to call Diane de Nettencourt a victim.

As for Armand, he wholeheartedly embraces religion during his early childhood in part because of his father’s atheism. Faced with the choice between an almost absent father and an adoring mother, Armand does not defy his mother’s resolution: “M^{me} Barbentane s’était promis de garder son second fils, Armand, dans la voie de la religion, et elle se tint parole... Armand,

⁵⁰ Serra, 74.

⁵¹ Catherine’s only contact with her father betides thanks to the monthly check the well owner sends. By contrasts, Armand sees his father weekly, but he endures painfully the doctor’s scattered attempts to win his son’s love.

c'était son fils à elle" (*Les beaux*, 102-103). Armand's religious fervor is thus the direct response to his father's indifference and to the suffering he causes his mother.⁵² When during a trip with his father Armand forgets to say his prayers, he blames himself: "il avait pactisé avec l'Antéchrist, car le docteur était nommément l'Antéchrist, et voilà où cela le menait: tout droit à l'apostasie, à l'enfer" (*Les beaux*, 111). Unloved by his father, Armand can only find solace in religion; loved by his father, Armand departs from religion, needing nothing but the doctor's company. The father as monster, seems to be a necessary if not sufficient condition for Aragon's heroes to revolt against their lot and consequently against the world.

Yet, as Roselyne Collinet-Waller comments: "Dans le règlement des comptes imaginaire avec le père dans ou par l'écriture, le père joue pour Aragon comme ces modèles de Matisse, dont il a indiqué le sens profond: il est nécessaire de partir d'eux, mais pour en partir. Ecrire contre le père, c'est écrire en partant de lui."⁵³ In Aragon's socialist realist novels, the hero must indeed fight against the father, but not by becoming religious, like Armand, or by devouring men, like Catherine. In order to become new men/women, Aragon's heroes must learn to stop thinking in terms of their individual oppression and alienation, or as Collinet-Waller put it, to "depart from the father."

This "departure" entails the protagonists' lucid self-analysis. After having critically examined his religious sentiments, Armand concludes: "Il ne pouvait plus se dissimuler, par exemple, que dans sa vocation ecclésiastique, il entraînait cinquante, soyons francs, soixante pour cent du désir de prêcher, de diriger les âmes, de faire en un mot les gestes du prêtre, plutôt que

⁵² His socialism is also "a means of voicing his rebellion against his father, and is a false start to his political development." (Kimyongür, 77)

⁵³ Roselyne Collinet-Waller, "L'écriture du secret: présence de la figure paternelle dans les romans d'Aragon," *Recherches croisées Aragon/Elsa Triolet*, 8 (2002): 25.

d'être profondément un prêtre" (*Les beaux*, 121).⁵⁴ Although childish, Armand's aspirations to be a leader of men shed light into his future metamorphosis. The young man who lives into a fabricated world, into a dream world where all obstacles separating him from his wishes disappear, can only wake up to reality by meeting the proletariat.

Following the advice of his priest, Armand joins the local group *Pro Patria*. An outcast in the midst of the town bourgeois youth, Armand painfully undergoes his training. Forced to learn how to drive a tramway, Armand respects the driver's hostility, since "il avait comme une espèce d'idée de l'injustice sociale, à cause du Christ, des Vendeurs du Temple, du charpentier Joseph, et il n'était pas très sûr du rôle qu'il jouait" (*Les beaux*, 127). Religion played a beneficent part in Armand's evolution by making him object to the present state of affairs for the first time. Catholicism, well understood,⁵⁵ did not blind Armand, even though it would have been in his interest, considering his privileged background. Had he not immersed himself in religion throughout his childhood, he would have probably behaved as the rest of the Sérénne's youth, accepting the existence of the *Pro Patria* group, and viewing it as a socializing opportunity.

In contrast, Armand seems open to new ideas and more importantly, ready to exit his comfort zone and enter a new world. Even though Armand does not hesitate to consider his own

⁵⁴ In the communist context, with the writer aiming to be an "ingénieur des âmes," Aragon's critique of priesthood might appear hypocritical. In this case, Aragon accuses priests to do exactly what he himself wishes to do: just like priests, Aragon posits that human beings should be "directed," or better said "redirected toward the right path." Obviously, Aragon disagrees with the church on what the "right path" implies. He thus has Armand avow to his inner desires as well as to his lack of modesty, all the result of his religious education.

⁵⁵ 1936, the year Aragon published *Les beaux quartiers*, is also the year of the "politique de la main tendue" initiated by Maurice Thorez. In an effort to gain the support of the French Catholics, Thorez and the party reevaluated their view of religion. According to the new interpretation, Marxist philosophy was not anti-Christian; it only claimed that the root of all religions is unhappiness on Earth. People sought comfort in the heavenly father only because of their poverty and the insecurity of their lives. The task of the communist revolutionary is not to destroy religion but to make this type of escapism unnecessary. Furthermore, PCF claimed that a secular state was not necessarily anti-religious, but one that tolerates all religions without officially supporting any. Conceived before 1936, *Les beaux quartiers* reflects solely the embryonic stage of "la politique de la main tendue."

world superior to the tramway driver's, he becomes aware of the difficulty to couple spirituality with literally having the brains shattered by the tramway every day, all day long. Moreover, in spite of the driver's unfriendliness and his mockery, Armand sympathizes with him and ultimately comprehends why the abbot urged him to enroll in *Pro Patria* "c'était contre ces vingt-quatre sous que l'abbé Petitjeannin l'avait envoyé travailler à *Pro Patria*" (*Les beaux*, 130).

Armand can depart from religion only after he understands the abbot's true intentions, and, by extension, the role played by the church. Having decided to keep the working class impoverished so that he can control them, the abbot equates "l'anarchie socialiste" with "la damnation éternelle" (*Les beaux*, 130). According to the priest, socialism leads to anarchy and ultimately denotes the refusal to obey God's word. Moreover, xenophobe, the priest labels the France's enemies as God's enemies. Unlike lost Christians who aspired to perpetual and universal peace, real Christians, argues Petitjeannin, should not indulge in that illusion, but even welcome war. Just like Job, the priest continues, human beings should accept their fate on Earth, thanking God for his grace. Aragon does not exaggerate certain features of the priest to make him morally reprehensible; in fact, the French abbot does not deviate from the defense of capitalist exploitation in which the Catholic Church engaged.⁵⁶ In order to become a new man, Armand will have to free himself from the religious indoctrination he was subject to since childhood. He will have to first of all believe human beings deserve a better lot, here on Earth, and not accept whatever is given to them with resignation and even with gratitude.

⁵⁶ In this respect, a representative of the Church, Joseph Townsend wrote: "Hunger is not only a peaceable, silent, unremitted pressure but, as the most natural motive of industry and labor... In Christian world order, everything depends upon making hunger permanent among the working class," since helping the hungry "tends to destroy the harmony and beauty, the symmetry and order, of that system which God and nature have established in the world." (Joseph Townsend, *Dissertation on the Poor Laws, by a Wellwisher of Mankind* (1817), quoted in Popper, 200).

Moreover, the transformation from the simple receiver to the agent of one's destiny requires Armand's humanizing the religious figures of Christianity. He thus wonders whether the Virgin climaxed before giving birth to Jesus. Questioning the virgin conception and by extension the existence of the Holy Spirit leads Armand into real apostasy. Aragon is the first critic of his young protagonist. He displays no sympathy when Armand, who hides under ritualistic practices, can not muster the courage to confess having lost religious faith. Even when Armand expresses antimilitaristic sentiments, Aragon notes he was only playing a part: "Il avait commencé à jouer le rôle de l'antimilitariste, et ça y était: il s'était pris au sérieux" (*Les beaux*, 169). Armand follows the same pattern of behavior: the more his ideas meet resistance from his entourage, the more he adheres to them. He buys *L'Humanité*, and *La Bataille Syndicaliste*, "pour se prouver son indépendance" (*Les beaux*, 172), independence assumed half-heartedly as he never reads the socialist magazine in front of his family. The reader can not even conjecture that the young poser who plays a religious zealot, a patriot, an antiwar militant, or a socialist, convincing everybody and even himself that his feelings were genuine, would actually become a new communist man. And yet he does, but only after he had stopped looking at the world through his eyes only.

At first, Catherine revolts against her father by freely asserting her sexuality. Defiant, the young woman disregards the prohibition of premarital sex, with no interest in a future marriage, which she judges as "cette honte, ce marché" (*Les cloches*, 153). As Corinne Grenouillet notes, "ce refus du mariage apparaît comme un point de jonction entre l'anarchisme et le féminisme. Prônant l'autonomie de l'individu, l'anarchisme ne pouvait qu'être favorable à celle de la femme et hostile à l'idée de mariage."⁵⁷ In spite of his evident sympathy for Catherine, Aragon throws her in a paradoxical situation: in her first act of breaching the traditional bourgeois mentality,

⁵⁷ Corinne Grenouillet, "Catherine ou le féminisme, roman. La représentation de la question féminine dans *Les cloches de Bâle* d'Aragon," *Recherches croisées Aragon/Elsa Triolet* 8 (2002): 122.

Catherine ends up in the arms of a military man, Jean Thiébault. Also, ironically, in the company of the preserver of social order Thiébault is, Catherine establishes her first contact with the working class. Aragon emphasizes repeatedly the sinuosity of the road to self-discovery: although in the army, Thiébault is not a monster, and Catherine needs a real act of will to resist him and the order he defends.

The fascist hero does not need to meet the working class: it is he that will lead the masses and not vice versa. By contrast, the future communist can not advance without the help of the proletariat. Nonetheless, neither Armand nor Catherine pursue this first encounter, but are thrown into it surreptitiously. These accidental meetings serve Aragon to advert to the ubiquity of the working class and subsequently to its power. Catherine and Jean literally stumble upon a street demonstration in the town of Cluses. It is for Catherine the first opportunity to establish contact with somebody outside of her class and to reexamine her life. The emptiness of her future dawns on Catherine while she assists the mother of a dead worker during the vigil. Catherine can only see a desert of countless, fruitless love affairs and intelligent conversations, while in the towns of France workers will continue to be exploited, persecuted for self-defense and often even killed.

In both Armand's and Catherine's cases, the first encounter with the proletariat leads to no direct action. It only made them appreciate the futility of their individual revolt. Armand can not support Catholicism, yet another tool used by the bourgeoisie to perpetuate its privileges. In spite of her revelations, Catherine misdirects her revolt against society one more time. As expected, her short association with the anarchist movement can not fill the void in her life either. In Libertad's entourage, Catherine repeats the same experience all over again, an experience that can not generate anything new. Death and sterility loom over her life that marks

no progress, and from where she chases all illusions. Aragon portrays vividly the despair of a woman who understands as early as 1908 that redemption does not come from love alone: “sa part d’illusion avait été bien courte” (*Les cloches*, 220). Outside of a home and a relationship with a man, there is no place for a woman in early 20th century French society. For Catherine to become a new woman, it entails the creation of a place for herself, a place where she, independently, means something. It also implies breaking out of the cage that holds every human being captive and reaching “l’immense pays ouvrier qui dépasse toutes les frontières, et au-dessus duquel se jouent les comédies mondaines. La vraie force à laquelle, femme, elle croyait. La certitude un jour de voir sauter ce monde” (*Les cloches*, 235). Her intuitive faith in the workers’ force stems from her womanly condition; both victims in the capitalist world, the woman and the workers, understand each other without the need of actual communication.

b. The Crucial Event

Tragic events punctuate the protagonists’ itinerary. With didactic purposes in mind, both Aragon and Drieu favor innocent people’s death. In Gilles’ case, Paul Morand’s suicide determines him to “dirty his hands” with the humans. Catherine gains a new perspective on life after she witnesses the Cluses worker’s death. As for Armand, he finds the body of a young woman, Angélique,⁵⁸ and feels that a “monstrueuse injustice” (*Les beaux*, 255) has occurred. A witness to Angélique’s desolate and short life, Armand can not yet contextualize the meaning of her suicide. “Quel était le lien, le sens de toutes ces choses épouvantables?” he wonders, “Il ne pouvait le dire. Il ne tenait pas le système. De tout cela seulement se dégageait le sentiment

⁵⁸ Angélique’s story counts numerous clichés: forced to work from a very early age, she is sexually abused by all the men in whose service she finds herself. She believes to have finally found true love, in Armand’s friend, Pierre, although the young bourgeois is solely interested in her sexual favors. Her employer discovers her liaison with Pierre and chases her; Pierre himself, already in love with another woman deserts her. When Angélique learns of her lover’s betrayal, she hangs herself.

d'une monstrueuse injustice, d'une injustice triomphante et sans corps saisissable, à la merci de laquelle on se trouvait à proportion qu'on était pauvre, ou simplement sensible" (*Les beaux*, 255). Angélique's death impresses Armand, but it does not result in Armand's resolution to actually work so that such injustices do not recur.

A more publicized double suicide, Paul and Laura Lafargue's, marks a turning point in Catherine's itinerary by facilitating her involvement in syndicalism. Catherine, who had been diagnosed with tuberculosis and given only two years to live, assents to Marx' daughter and her partner's decision to take their own lives. Aragon admonishes Catherine as she does not acknowledge the contradiction between Marxism and his followers' selfish gesture. Still in between anarchy and socialism, Catherine considers that Paul and Laura's suicide humanizes them, bringing them closer to her. On the verge of her own attempted suicide, Catherine reconsiders her life, and for the first time, she feels guilt for her monthly alimony. An early walk during which Catherine sees workers hurrying to their jobs awakens the protagonist: she finally comprehends that she is herself an exploiter and Aragon sets the stage for Catherine's attempted suicide.

Catherine summarizes her life, a life of disappointments where she sees herself as a traveler, with no attachments and no real relationships. Aragon presents her inner turmoil in terms of class struggles: Catherine the bourgeois has tried to reach her own class but did not succeed, and when the break happened she did not capitalize on it. Nothing ensued from her freedom, she exercised it solely in choosing not to work; and furthermore, the oil wells provided for her wasted freedom. The image of the dead worker from Cluses occupied her final thoughts before she ventures into the Seine. From Aragon's standpoint, the alienation inherent in capitalism cankers every aspect of life and every member of society. The bourgeoisie Aragon

portrays resembles a serpent that bites its own tail and can not step out and objectively analyze itself. Only an outsider, someone well aware of its own alienation can prevent the world from its plummeting and find an answer to the societal crisis.

It is up to a taxi driver's strong arms to seize Catherine's destructive élan. Aragon assigns the proletariat a salvific function: even though Catherine does not call for help, her gesture is a cry for help that no one hears except Victor, the strong proletarian. Victor takes upon himself rescuing Catherine and metaphorically, the world in decline, displaying no hesitation. His initiative distinguishes him from Drieu's proletariat; Victor does not need elites to point him in the right direction. In *Gilles*, the fascist new man approaches the masses and instructs them that they needed to be saved; by contrast, Victor, the man of the masses erects himself as the elite's savior. Victor's humanitarian gesture does not stop when he takes Catherine in his arms, but also decides to correct her life.

Aragon chose to evade literary subtlety when he crafted Victor, an "aesthetically unsatisfactory"⁵⁹ character. More than transparent, Victor is a cliché and his whole evolution from early childhood to his communist "prise de conscience" follows the patterns dictated by realist socialism.⁶⁰ Thanks to Victor, Catherine enters the world of the working class and thus of the viable revolt. For the first time in her life, Catherine feels understood even though Victor does not approve of suicide. Moreover, Victor critiques not only the position adopted by *L'Humanité* on Laura and Paul's suicide, but the leaders' decision as well. In accordance with

⁵⁹ Kimyongür, 49.

⁶⁰ An orphan who never met his father - who died in a strike - Victor, grew up in poverty but outside religion. Instead of spending his formative years in school, Victor had to work and became a perfect worker never complaining about the hardships he endured. However, while in the army, when his regiment sided with the wine makers on strike, Victor "découvrit cette solidarité des travailleurs qui transforma pour lui totalement le sens même du travail." (*Les cloches*, 281) This revelatory experience determined the once ignorant Victor to reconsider his own past and to get acquainted with the history of the working class struggles. Aragon uses yet another common place in socialist realism and has the conscripted soldiers read socialist newspaper in hiding. Once returned to civilian life, Victor unionizes and enrolls in the Socialist Party.

communist ideology, criticism must arise from the bottom up, with the leader always exposed to potential scrutiny. This fictional humanization of the communist leaders, portrayed as the equals of the other communists, contrasts with the deification of fascist leaders.⁶¹ A fascist protagonist would not question his commander's decisions but would confide in his infallible judgment.

By contrast, Victor demurs to what he sees as Paul and Laura's lamentable act. Phrases such as "Proletarians of all countries unite" should not allow anyone who believes in them to kill themselves, argues Victor. Paul Lafargue gave his life to the communist movement, but, "il ne nous a pas donné sa mort. Sa mort n'a rien à voir avec la lutte des ouvriers. Sa mort n'a rien à voir avec sa vie..." (*Les cloches*, 284). In Victor's opinion, suicide equals surrender before an obstacle, or in other words allowing the bourgeoisie to win since only the bourgeois kill themselves. Unselfish, a communist man owes his life and death to the working class. Since his contribution to society measures his worth, the communist man can find no place for individualist undertakings such as suicide, acts that serve no one. Paul and Laura as follower and daughter of Marx should have understood this basic principle. Victor assumed they did, but decided to act against it, on account of their distancing from the working class. Aragon has set the stage for Paul Lafargue's suicide: from all the leaders of the socialist movement, *l'anarchie* only published Lafargue's articles. He associates thus suicide and anarchy, two individualist ways of revolt that do not advance the common cause. Moreover, it also incites others to similarly egocentric behaviors: Catherine risked her life because she followed the couple's example.

⁶¹ "The cult of Thorez was mechanically fostered in step with the cult of Stalin. 'I say to myself that nothing is impossible to the communists when they are led by a man of genius,' wrote Aragon. (*L'homme communiste*, 251) Thorez, he said, was the literary hero of the new generation, the Rastignac or Robinson Crusoe of the proletariat. 'The great French people, and its fighting *avant-garde*, the proletariat, have found in Maurice Thorez the real and heroic expression of their historical destiny.'" (Caute, 220-221).

c. Learning the Language of the Working Class

Even though the proletariat can save the bourgeoisie from its plummeting, it is ultimately left up to the bourgeoisie to approach the proletariat and learn its language. Aragon distinguishes between the sentimental writer of capitalist times “qui va vers le peuple,” and “l’écrivain soviétique qui va vers ses héros, vers les héros de l’humanité nouvelle” (*Pour un réalisme*, 29). In her desperate quest for meaning, Catherine understands that only the heroic working class can provide her with real answers. Aragon makes it clear that the drivers do not need Catherine but that she needs them, and has her supplicate Victor to allow her to help with the strike. As outside the proletariat’s effort to create a just future world, meaning is absent, the proletariat does not yearn to reach the bourgeoisie. At the most, it heeds to Catherine’s implorations with unreserved apprehension.

Both Armand and Catherine will have to leap over the daunting gap that separates them from the working class. Aragon leads Armand into a meeting organized by the Socialist Party in protest of the law of the three years. Aragon insists that Armand does not recognize any of the socialist leaders, that he does not understand the élans of the workers surrounding him, or the orators’ discourses. Moreover, Armand must be explained the simplest references as if he had no previous contact with the socialist movement. With stupefaction, he wonders why the crowd chants a hymn to the 17th infantry, the heroic regiment that fascinated Victor from *Les cloches de Bâle* as well. Yet, Armand left his parents’ home because he had spurred his father’s anger, for reading *L’Humanité*. There is however a big difference between reading about the people and actually being amongst them on the Pré Saint-Gervais, Aragon suggests. Armand soon finds out that the official history he studied at school differed from the working class’ history. The bourgeoisie simply forgot to record “unpatriotic” events such as the military unit’s

insubordination. By contrast, the working class knew they led a parallel existence with the bourgeoisie, and preserved the event in the popular memory.

Catherine faces similar difficulties in communicating with the taxi drivers, but she does not hold herself responsible: “Cela se masquait derrière des difficultés de langage, de vocabulaire, en imposait à Catherine pour une infériorité de leur part. Elle ne voyait pas que bien souvent, tout était à l’inverse: c’était elle qui avait encore à discuter ce qui n’était en réalité que vestiges d’un autre siècle, et c’est peu dire, d’un autre monde” (*Les cloches*, 287). The future world belongs to the new class, who reinvents the rules and even the language. Aragon reserves no place for the bourgeois in this new world, unless they change; thus Catherine prefigures the bourgeois that needs to familiarize and adapt to the new conditions.

d. The Final Conversion

The communist protagonist’s metamorphosis can not occur in the heat of the moment. Gilles became a fascist during the February riots, and thus answered more his impulses than his reason. By contrast, Armand does not transform himself during the Socialist Party meeting. As Suzanne Ravis-Françon signals, the meeting at the Pré-Saint-Gervais does not have any “répercussions immédiates sur l’action et à certains égards se contente de semer une graine pour l’évolution idéologique d’Armand.”⁶² Highly impressionable, Armand could resist neither Jaurès’ messianic and seductive discourse, nor the audience’s response: “Et si cent cinquante mille hommes le croient à ce point, Armand va-t-il en douter, dont le cœur bat avec le cœur de la foule?” (*Les beaux*, 441). One can only wonder what feelings Armand would have displayed, had he chanced upon a meeting of the Action française. Aragon does not gamble with such a possibility however, and has Armand influenced by the good crowd. As destitute as the working

⁶² Suzanne Ravis-Françon, “Des discours de Jaurès au discours d’Aragon dans *Les Cloches de Bâle* et *Les Beaux quartiers*,” *Recherches croisées Aragon/Elsa Triolet* 2 (1989): 115-116.

class and facing the same menace of war as the workers surrounding him, Armand does not need to force himself, writes Aragon, to sing along with the crowd.

The epithet Aragon confers upon his young hero, “le malléable Armand,” (*Les beaux*, 442) deserves further consideration. Aragon teases his character one more time, and implies he should not have followed the crowd without questioning its élan. Yet, Aragon judges the meeting favorably and even though he condemns leaders and followers for not doing more, he excuses them: “Parce que c’est encore tout ce qu’ils savent dire, eux qui n’ont pas encore compris l’exemple de 1905, et la grande leçon des jours de la guerre russo-japonaise. *A bas les Trois Ans!* pourtant résume à merveille la grande volonté pacifique du peuple de France, et son désir fou de vivre, et de vaincre ses maîtres, les faiseurs de tempête, qu’il ne craint pas moins que ses ancêtres gaulois, les dieux manieurs du tonnerre” (*Les beaux*, 442). It is only 1913, and the French people can not conceive the horror of the war to come, nor do they have the Russian revolution’s example. Aragon criticizes Armand for his tendencies to adhere to a cause impetuously, without examining all the consequences of his own actions. When Armand will have joined the working class’ cause, he would have not only responded to exterior stimuli, but would have acted calmly and weighed all his options.

There is no single event that triggers the protagonists’ transformation. On the contrary, they receive a series of outside stimuli, and progressively they learn how to react appropriately. They can learn because they have the example of the working class who serves as guide. Human reeducation can be implemented everywhere in the world, regardless of the specific historical and cultural background, because capitalism creates the same type of realities and the same responses from the proletariat. It is also a science, first inaugurated by the Soviet Union, Aragon maintains. Aragon’s apology appalls modern readers:

L'extraordinaire expérience du Canal de la mer Blanche à la Baltique, où des milliers d'hommes et de femmes, les bas-fonds d'une société, ont compris devant la tâche à accomplir, par l'effet de la persuasion d'un petit nombre de tchékistes qui les dirigeaient, leur parlaient, les convainquaient, que le temps est venu où un voleur, par exemple, doit se *requalifier* dans une autre "profession," parce que je vous demande un peu ce que serait la place d'un voleur dans une société socialiste! – cette extraordinaire expérience joue par rapport à la nouvelle science le rôle de l'histoire de la pomme qui tombe devant Newton par rapport à la physique (*Pour un réalisme*, 8).

Unlike many communist writers who denied the existence of the Soviet camps, Aragon admits to their presence, in clear consciousness, by implying that the incarcerated people needed to be incarcerated. Communist camps differ from the Nazi camps, Aragon will later on condemn, rightfully so, because of their noble purpose. Educating thieves through "harmless conversations" and forced labor was not only excused but offered as a model. Borrowing a metaphor from Engels, Aragon compares the present to the moment in time when monkeys became human beings. Engels made the argument that the old human beings were products of the work they performed, and work alone separated them from monkeys. It was only natural, then, Engels concluded, that work create the new man as well.

As the most social of all human activities, work will foster a collective mentality. Boia⁶³ explains that, according to the communist ideology, individualism is not inherent to one's individuality, but actually represents a conflicting state between an individual and society. Getting rid of individualism does not in any way prejudice one's personality; on the contrary, it becomes a necessary condition for its affirmation. A man free of individualism actually enjoys a stronger and richer personality than the old man. Only inside and through a community can man realize his potential. Achieving the paradoxical man with a strong will but bereft of individualism requires following a universal recipe, focusing on intense socialization and

⁶³ Boia, *Mitologia științifică a comunismului*, 135.

privileging the most social of human activities: work. As for Aragon, he considers that the URSS already began the “transformation du singe social de notre temps en l’homme socialiste de l’avenir” (*Pour un réalisme*, 8).

Consequently, in order for Catherine and Armand to stop thinking and acting as bourgeois – selfishly – they have to accept the load of work. According to Aragon, it is work that irremediably separates the bourgeoisie from the working class. Moreover, the proletariat’s superiority stems from working, praxis with the miraculous outcome of developing class consciousness. Before they can renounce their financial privileges, Catherine and Armand need to change their perception of work. Educated, as the entire bourgeoisie, “dans l’horreur chrétienne du travail” (*Les beaux*, 319), Armand abhors work as much as does Catherine. Catherine resigns from her position with the labor union after only two weeks because she finds it too difficult to wake up in the morning. Armand himself wonders “Est-ce que vraiment, il faut travailler? Est-ce que nous sommes faits pour ça? Est-ce qu’il n’y a pas moyen de tricher” (*Les beaux*, 406)? Armand’s father, as a doctor, never avoided work, and actually enjoyed the appreciation of the town; he did not however perform “genuine” work, the only force capable to change human beings. The doctor, as most bourgeois, never worked with his hands, hence the young man’s repulsion and intention to “cheat” by avoiding it as well. Catherine’s own mother never worked and when the well owner’s check became sparse, she preferred to go without the bare necessities rather than work. Catherine and Armand lack positive examples in their own families, so it is only natural for them to lack discipline as well and to think of themselves first.

Once again, it is Victor who explains to Catherine what work means for the proletariat. Not yet a new woman, Catherine conceives of work as a malediction; the slave or the proletariat needed to work to provide for his own basic necessities but especially to increase the wealth of

others. Victor explains to the incredulous Catherine that “on ne se battait pas pour supprimer le travail, mais pour supprimer l’oisiveté” (*Les cloches*, 376). Victor loves his work,⁶⁴ work being for him a moral necessity, and even more, a second nature. As long as Catherine does not accept her share in the common work, she would continue to feel an outsider, and waste her life on meaningless quests. Aragon insists that the working class is not an exclusive milieu, anyone can join it, if they managed to depart from their own class and undergo work’s transformative effects.⁶⁵ Catherine will not fully accomplish her self-transformation voyage and Aragon deplores her vacillating parcourse. In spite of Victor’s advice, she does not approach the working class through work, but through studying. Only after an intensive study of Marx can Catherine engage in a common goal, that of antiwar protest, socialist leaders organized in Basle.

Aragon does not repeat the same “mistake” with Armand. Although he insists on the young man’s hesitations, at the end of the novel, Armand stands out as a communist new man. Unlike Catherine, Armand accepts the load and views work no longer as a load, but as a privilege. The same way harsh realities force the working class’ children to mature before time, his break with his family, hunger, and fear of the police speed up Armand’s development. Without his family’s protection and their money, the former spoiled bourgeois who abhorred work gains a new perspective: in the capitalist world, employment represents a privilege that society grants sparingly and arbitrarily.

⁶⁴ “il aimait ce qui le faisait vivre” (*Les cloches*, 376).

⁶⁵ Boia comments on the type of work valued by communist regimes. The new society supposedly enjoyed an unprecedented scientific, technological and cultural advancement; work should therefore be less and less “physical” and more and more “intellectual.” He notes two obstacles; one of a material nature: technology was not as advanced as needed and a moral obstacle in the form of prejudices against intellectual work. Boia explains the seeming contradiction; on the one side the supremacy of science and at the same time, the supremacy of manual labor. Communist man worships science, not abstract science however, he values the science rooted in the concrete. (Boia, *Mitologia științifică a comunismului*, 137).

Just like Catherine, Armand feels tempted by suicide, and even though the circumstances differ, the culprit is the same: capitalism. Neither Catherine nor Armand can find a place in the unjust world they are coerced to live in, and by themselves, they can not come forth with any solution. More subtle this time, Aragon does not have Armand saved by a Victor figure. In search of an alternative to the Seine, Armand accosts the former founder of *Pro Patria*, Adrien, through whom he finally finds employment.

Armand will have to face one more dilemma: to continue to work once he realized he was a scab or to join the strikers' effort. In the comfort of his room, a room he appreciates all the more after sleeping in the Parisian streets for a month and a half, Armand examines his options: "Que pouvait-il faire tout de même? Allait-il retourner à la rue, à la mendicité parce qu'il ne voulait pas rester un briseur de grève? Jamais il n'aurait eu de travail, si ce n'avait été le mot d'Adrien Arnaud, et *L'Entr'aide mutuelle*. Fallait-il recommencer la vie du dernier mois, n'avoir plus de chambre, coucher sous les ponts, chassé par les flics" (*Les beaux*, 621)?

Armand's dilemma coincides with that of the French parliament over the law of the three years. The elected representatives do not make the right choice, however, and out of a misunderstood patriotism they "vote" the French youth into the carnage of war. WWI, as Aragon sees it, had multiple causes, among those the decision to enlarge the military. In the midst of confused and ill-intended parliamentarians, stands the voice of Jaurès again, who gives the final, apocalyptic verdict: "Alors la France finit là..." (*Les beaux*, 622). Jaurès' sentencing has a special resonance for the yet again confused Armand, for whom "tout à coup tout s'éclaire" (*Les beaux*, 623). Armand experiences an almost religious conversion, instant and irreversible, with Jaurès playing the part of a prophet. Armand sees the light, a light pointing him in the proletariat's direction, a proletariat that knows no borders and accepts no lies. "Aragon projette

ici sur Jaurès,” writes Ravis-Françon, “l’analyse politique communiste de 1934-1936, d’après laquelle le prolétariat, moteur de l’histoire, prend la relève de l’intérêt national.”⁶⁶

By joining the workers’ union, Armand reiterates Jaurès’ gesture and in Aragon’s view, “[i]l commet ce soir-là un acte vraiment *patriotique*” (*Les beaux*, 624). Armand, now a man, does not obey his youthful exultations when he quits his job. He has thought his actions through and through, and is perfectly aware of the hardship his decision entails. Loving France means above all loving its people, and loving its people means helping them when in need. That is what true patriotism means to Aragon. Aragon ends his novel on an even more promising note; Armand, who arrives after the strike ended in failure, rekindles the union members’ hopes: “Camarades, dit-il, camarades... Vous voyez bien qu’il ne faut jamais désespérer” (*Les beaux*, 625)! Armand, a new man, a communist man, has found in himself the resources to bury his past and to disentangle himself from his class prejudices. As a new man, he has renounced his own self, ready to affront physical and moral pains, all for the common cause. He is no longer an individual obsessed with the trivialities of the self, but a part of a community. I do not agree with Kimyongür who remarks that even though he joins the workers’ cause, Armand remains so ignorant of the mechanisms of capitalist society that he “conveys no explicit ideological message.”⁶⁷ His message, maybe not as explicit as socialist realism demanded, is that once fighting for a good cause, hunger and homelessness will not be an issue.

An antithesis of the old man, the new communist and fascist men triumphed over individualism through voluntarism. Gilles, Catherine and Armand first had to break from traditions that locked them in a corrupt present. Subsequently, they had to convince themselves of the material gains’ trivialities. Once money played no role in their lives, they could fully give

⁶⁶ Ravis-Françon, 117.

⁶⁷ Kimyongür, 49.

of themselves. Obviously, they advanced through different stages: the fascist new man had to discipline his own body, then embrace religion so that he could welcome the final sacrifice. More accessible, the itinerary for the communist man did not result in the protagonist's death. In order for Catherine and Armand to open up to the proletariat, they had to renounce their social and material privileges, and join its ranks.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong in the desire to make human beings better and masters of their own body; what strikes in fascist and communist rhetoric of the future new man is the allusion to artificial selection.⁶⁸ The weak will have no place in the future fascist world, and neither will those who refuse to move in synch with the rest. The communist world reserves no place for those who refuse to absorb the new language of the proletariat and who will not choose a collectivity over their individuality. There is no room for differences in either society: the citizens of the new worlds have to live by the rules of a social contract that no one actually signed.

I asserted that neither Aragon nor Drieu were interested in actual human beings and that they considered them disposable. Moreover, they gauged their worth by the service they provided the new societies. And yet, the three protagonists I examined seem satisfied once they find the right path. Communism "saved" Catherine and Armand from suicide, the same way it saved Aragon. Gilles found human companionship alongside Falangist combatants, with whom he could fight for fascism and the church. And yet, Drieu and Aragon were not the humanitarian they claimed to be: the perfect worlds they imagined are so restrictive that human beings can only adapt to it, but never realize their full potential. As Reszler notes, "Etre abstrait, collectif et

⁶⁸ The ways of achieving it differ; the Nazi regime obviously outdid the communist ones in violence and methods. Communists preferred an indirect method: the persons with handicap, mental or physical, simply did not exist. This non-existence meant they were kept away from the public sphere, in quasi medical centers.

anonyme, l'homme nouveau est issu de l'imagination organisatrice de l'esprit utopique. Entièrement socialisé, il est conçu en fonction de la machine sociale dont il est le simple rouage."⁶⁹

For most part, Drieu and Aragon refused to accept man's limits and indulged in fantasies that proved fatal for millions. Even the presence of the millions of dead victims seemed easier to cope with than the very essence of human nature. Ultimately the motor behind their fantasies was the will to power. They wished to set in motion the wheels that would bring about the age of perfection. And yet, ambivalence towards the possibility to achieve this fantasy surfaces in Aragon and Drieu's works.

⁶⁹ Reszler, 143.

Chapter 4: Ambivalence

Drieu, the Disillusioned Gnostic

Wars had the most prevailing impact on Drieu's political choices. WWI biased him against modernity and turned him towards fascism. WWII allowed him to discover oriental philosophies and turn away from fascism. Moreover, Drieu's disappointment with the Nazi war effort translated into questioning the fascist ideology as a whole. Yet, as Jacques Lecarme asserts, "Drieu semble ne jamais être sorti de cette illusion que le fascisme détruirait la bourgeoisie et serait l'axe d'une révolution profonde; ou il n'en est sorti que pour croire à l'extension à la planète de la révolution soviétique."¹ Impressed by Stalin's military prowess, Drieu assumed indeed that the communist leader would do away with intellectuals and the entire bourgeoisie. He did not fall prey to the communist illusion though, and saw in the Russian victory nothing more than a promise of revenge.

In spite of his disappointment with fascism, he did not acknowledge it publicly. He did quite the opposite. In 1942, for instance, Drieu rejoined Doriot's party while in his own *Journal*, he wrote: "Je rentre au P.P.F. aussi pour marquer mon ironie à l'égard de la politique allemande à Paris qui essaie désespérément de se rattacher à la démocratie."² The more Drieu disapproved of the German occupation, the more he flaunted his relationship with Hitler's ambassador, Otto Abetz. Drieu's fiction reveals a different side of the collaborationist: a subversive and ambivalent

¹ Lecarme, *Drieu la Rochelle ou le bal des maudits*, 33.

² Pierre Drieu La Rochelle, *Journal: 1939-1945* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), 300.

one.³ Furthermore, in his fiction, Drieu dispels the web of lies with which he previously surrounded himself.

a. The Failed Empire

In his 1943 novel, *L'homme à cheval*, the now disheartened collaborationist excoriates the intellectual who claims to predict and control history's course, and who desires to be the world's artificer. Moreover, Drieu also "dismounts" the Hitler figure, who fails lamentably at restoring the old Incan Empire. Like all Drieu's intellectuals, Felipe fancies he can mold the people around him, but claims to despise power for himself. In reality, Felipe is more avid for power than Jaime, whom Felipe wishes to manipulate.

Jaime's physical force lures Felipe, and Felipe's decision to influence Jaime – to have him fulfill his destiny – is initially motivated by his curiosity to test Jaime's charisma on a national scale. Moreover, Felipe is also weary of his life's dullness and craves more excitement: "Certes la guitare suffisait à me faire de la vie un enchantement, mais j'avais envie d'introduire de périlleuses figures dans l'intime cercle de moi-même" (*L'homme*, 12). Felipe does not want to change the world like Gilles did. He has no particular dissatisfaction with the current Bolivian President, Benito Ramirez. He even admits he would have supported Ramirez had he met him before Jaime. Felipe's fickleness can therefore shed light on intellectuals' commitment to politics, or at least on Drieu's association with the fascist cause.

Grover pertinently points out that Drieu "seems to take pleasure in ridiculing and humiliating the intellectual aspect of himself."⁴ Consequently, Drieu has Felipe support Jaime for entirely arbitrary reasons. In light of the current president' tyrannical regime, supporting Jaime's

³ In 1937, Drieu wrote to his friend Victoria Ocampo: "Je pense rester un esprit libre dans mes romans, c'est-à-dire garder une 'marge large' entre mes idées qui ne sont qu'une partie de moi et la totalité de moi." Quoted in Pierre Andreu and Frédéric Grover, *Drieu La Rochelle* (Paris: Hachette: 1979), 389-390.

⁴ Grover, *Drieu and the Fiction of Testimony*, 215.

ascension to power seems a sensible endeavor for anyone who values human freedom. Yet, Felipe does not desire a regime change because of his attachment to individual rights or his disdain for the President's corruption. He is simply bored and can not satisfy his taste for adventures all by himself. Very cynical, Felipe understands that he wishes Ramirez's death, "pour le remplacer par un autre tyran" (*L'homme*, 31).

To Felipe, one leader is as good as another. Hazard alone explains Felipe's support of Jaime, especially since a leader can never represent people's interests. Felipe holds opinions similar to those expressed by Drieu in *Socialisme fasciste*. In his 1934 work, Drieu argues against Marx's postulates that the bourgeoisie exercised political power. Drieu proposes that the bourgeoisie, in fact, only enjoyed political privileges. A class, as a whole, can not govern, writes Drieu; elites from a certain class govern instead. The same rules applied to the aristocracy and would eventually apply to the proletariat. In the ten years between the publication of *Socialisme fasciste* and that of *L'homme à cheval*, Drieu grew even more cynical. In 1943, his character, Felipe disputes the very feasibility of political representation. Elected officials do not represent even the elites that elected them, Felipe bitterly concludes; at the most, they represent themselves.

A case in point is Ramirez, the leader of the party supported by the nation's landlords. Although Ramirez was supposed to be their instrument, he is not because as Felipe soon discovers, Ramirez acts against their wishes: "Tout instrument dans la main qui s'en sert est rebelle et dangereux" (*L'homme*, 21). Also, Felipe remarks that, "Ainsi en était-il de ma guitare même, qui souvent encore après des années d'exercice se dérobaient à la supplication et à l'appel extrême de mon cœur et rendait un son d'une sournoise indifférence" (*L'homme*, 21). The guitar often disobeys the guitarist; likewise, human beings rebel. Drieu indirectly admits that even

though an artist might wish for his fellow men to be made of clay he soon has to awaken to the crude reality and admit to his unrealizable aspirations.

Just like his guitar, Jaime frustrates Felipe's demiurgic pursuits. Felipe bitterly notes that Jaime's personality is mostly independent of his ascendancy: "Après tout, Jaime aurait été Jaime sans moi. Quelle vanité était la mienne? L'espèce de vanité qui occupait aussi Florida"

(*L'homme*, 117). Felipe is full of contradictions. He desires to control Jaime but, at the same time, he claims power repulses him. In order to solve these contradictions, Felipe persuades himself that he does not instill his own ideas or desires in those around him. Jaime, for instance, lusted for absolute power, but remained oblivious to his hidden desire for power. Felipe's music allowed him to reveal that already existing desire, nothing more. Furthermore, Felipe contrasts the influence he can exercise on a "virgin" territory to modeling a dancer's body that is already formed: "Moi qui avais horreur de tout pouvoir et qui aurais détesté d'agir sur l'esprit du jeune homme le mieux doué, de le pénétrer des idées qui m'étaient chères sur la venue du Saint-Esprit dont le Christ n'est que le précurseur, je me laissais aller à la joie de moduler ce corps innocent qui se pliait sans effort aux accents spécieux de la mélodie" (*L'homme*, 22). Unlike his author, Felipe does not want to be a proselytizer; while he believes strongly in the arrival of the Holy Spirit, he assents to the potential impact of his ideas and claims to forbear from spreading them.

He does not refrain, however, from provoking a coup d'état or from using Jaime to get his revenge on women: "N'avais-je pas voulu ce rapprochement pour des raisons étroitement personnelles, pour me délivrer de mon désir pour Camilla? Ne me servais-je pas toujours de Jaime pour combler mes désirs impossibles, désir du pouvoir, désir d'une femme? Désirs impossibles à cause de mon détachement de théologien ou de ma profonde infirmité" (*L'homme*, 115). These conclusions terrify Felipe, who realizes for the first time the reasons behind his

support of Jaime. He convinced himself he did not want power because he was a man of thought. Similarly, he convinced himself he did not want women because he was a theologian. Yet, in spite of Felipe's wishes, intellectuals crave power and theologians lust for women. Through Felipe, Drieu generalizes about intellectuals who compensate for their own inability to act, or satisfy their sexual desires by using men in power.

Just like Drieu's, Felipe's itinerary is nothing but a quest for love. Felipe turns to religion because women do not love him; he then turns to politics because he does not believe his superior, father Florida, loves him either (*L'homme*, 212). Jaime is the only one who embraces Felipe and gives him the recognition he craves. Consequently, Felipe idolizes Jaime: "Mon amour pour Jaime était fait d'action. L'aimer, ç'avait été le faire.... Mais aimais-je son âme? Je ne la connaissais pas et elle me surprenait à chaque sursaut. Mon action avait aimé son action, comme entre deux amants la passion aime la passion" (*L'homme*, 106). As Felipe's mirror image, Jaime attracts him with his ability to act, and ultimately, completes him. Drieu reiterates his idea that two souls can not communicate with each other unless they experience danger together. Consequently, the relationship between a man and a woman is always doomed to fail as women neither engage in wars, nor desire to comprehend what wars entail. Since Drieu believes that one's courage determines one's essence, and since wars (or their substitute) offer the only opportunity to unveil one's courage, women can not ever know their true essence. Thus, there is only one happy couple in Drieu's fictional works: Jaime and Felipe. Even the name "Jaime" invokes the notion of love as it resonates with the French speaking public Drieu addresses.

Despite the many personal benefits of his involvement with Jaime, Felipe's art suffers. The dancer Conchita blames Felipe that "il s'est aussi trahi lui-même, il a préféré le politique à sa guitare" (*L'homme*, 173). In Conchita's eyes, Felipe became less of a guitarist since one can

not distinguish himself in both politics and art, two mutually exclusive fields. Coming from a fellow artist, Conchita's accusation carries even more weight. Felipe does not contradict it; on the contrary, he concedes to having renounced his art, a move which allowed him to woo Jaime in the first place. Upon listening to Conchita's new accompanist who is a true guitar virtuoso, Felipe remarks upon his lack of jealousy: "Ma jalousie ne jouait que dans l'ordre de la politique" (*L'homme*, 151). Felipe does not regret his choice to pursue politics, maybe because his guitar did not "obey" him in the first place. Felipe shifted his attention from music to politics because he did not consider himself a great artist. As for Drieu, he repeatedly deplores the quality of his literature. Does he then obliquely confess, through Felipe, to have become involved in politics because he was not satisfied with his art? In my view, this is a reasonable conclusion.

Representative of the mediocre artist, unsatisfied and looking for adventures, Felipe throws himself into the public sphere alongside Jaime. However, once Jaime seizes power, the inconsistent Felipe loses all interest for Jaime's use of that power. Instead of remaining in Jaime's entourage and actually try to influence him, Felipe dedicates his time to the study of Indian culture. Later on, Felipe blames himself: "Je n'aurais pas dû le quitter depuis qu'il était au pouvoir comme je l'avais fait; j'aurais dû m'élever près de lui. Mais je n'étais habile qu'aux idées ou à l'action seulement dans ces moments de l'action qui sont si intenses que celle-ci s'épure et devient aussi prompte et simple que la pensée" (*L'homme*, 158). But at the same time, Felipe exculpates himself: the world of abstractions alone permits him to reach his full potential. Just like before Ramirez's murder, Felipe once again carries out a dangerous permutation: he (re)transforms action into thought. The consequences of such a transgression are obvious. Felipe previously conspired for Ramirez's murder because killing a man remained solely a mental image for him. When faced with the concrete, Felipe feared it at first. But then, he

(re)transformed action into thought again and went along with the murder. As long as Felipe remains in the realm of theory, the door to unethical actions remains open as well.

To his credit, Felipe tries to take the decisive step towards action, but he later confesses: “Je n’étais destiné qu’à voir. J’avais fait piètre figure dans les coulisses de la révolte indienne; toute cette matière humaine, épaisse et fuyante comme du poisson s’était tout à fait offerte et dérobée à moi selon son seul caprice. J’étais comme un dieu à qui sa création échappe de plus en plus” (*L’homme*, 185). For the second time, Felipe realizes the impossibility of controlling the “machine” once in motion. For the first time he compares himself to a god. Felipe does not pretend to dislike or even abhor power any longer; he wants to be a god who can control his creation. Others’ free will scares the increasingly cynical Felipe. According to him, it can only lead to complete chaos. When he finally accepts he can not govern others, Felipe argues that action is actually foreign from the thought that generated it:

Et moi, retrouvais-je dans ce que disait Jaime ce que je lui avais parfois murmuré? La pensée devenue action, trempée de sang, forgée comme une arme d’acier est étrangère au penseur.

Mais comme est peu sage cet étonnement des hommes de pensée devant la rapidité d’assimilation des hommes d’action, car les hommes d’action ne sont importants que lorsqu’ils sont suffisamment hommes de pensée, et les hommes de pensée ne valent qu’à cause de l’embryon d’homme d’action qu’ils portent en eux. J’avais apporté l’action à Jaime, et petite serait restée ma pensée sans lui (*L’homme*, 191).

Thought and action are yet codependent, even though a thinker might not be pleased with the materialization of his ideas. Felipe refuses to admit this codependence, because he can not cope with the violence his ideas generated.

It is up to Jaime to force Felipe to face the consequences of his words. As a great leader, who understands the rivalry between Florida and Felipe, Jaime has Felipe determine Florida’s fate. It is the perfect opportunity for Felipe to surpass the “caractère d’amateur” (*L’homme*, 207)

that he selfishly granted himself. Although apt to act, Felipe does not kill his nemesis. He understands for the first time what it actually means to take someone's life: "J'avais fait parfois la petite bouche devant ces mouvements d'homme d'action, et il me revenait que j'avais l'air de désapprouver son indulgence pour ses ennemis, quelques heures plus tôt. Il avait voulu me faire prendre la pleine conscience de la condition humaine chez les chefs" (*L'homme*, 216). Felipe and Jaime are both human beings, with appreciation for human life, too human actually to accomplish Jaime's dreams. Previously Felipe, in true Gnostic tradition, ranked Jaime as high as his lust for power demanded: "Le ciel, nous ne l'avions guère regardé tout ce temps. Mais les hommes ont bien le droit d'oublier la nature, alors qu'ils sont la nature même" (*L'homme*, 199). A more lucid Felipe descends from the clouds and admits to Jaime's humanity, and ultimately, to Jaime's possible failure.

Drieu never expresses any sympathy for intellectuals and even refuses to consider himself one. He portrays most intellectuals as weak, unable to act, and sexually frustrated. The fascist intellectuals, like Gilles, form a category of their own: they are never afraid to act on their ideas, for which they can sacrifice their very lives. Felipe's portrait does not all together deviate from Drieu's gallery of fictional intellectuals. The novelty of *L'homme à cheval* lies in the defective relationship between the fascist leader and the intellectuals. Drieu has the fascist leader involuntarily attract feeble intellectuals, who nonetheless fancy having power over the leader. Drieu equips the fascist cohort with crippled human beings, who live entirely in a dream world. Moreover, the leader himself has lost some of his luster. I have already noted that Jaime is not even aware of his potential power until Felipe reveals it to him. When Jaime does become the leader he was meant to be, he can not communicate his innovative ideas to others.

Even though Jaime aims at a reversal of social and racial hierarchies he can not disseminate his program of change. The Indians themselves, the people whom Jaime wishes to free do not comprehend him either. “Comment cela a-t-il pu arriver?” wonders Jaime, “Tout ce que j’ai fait au gouvernement a été d’améliorer le sort de ces pauvres gens. Est-ce cela qui les a tentés? Je suis contraint de les réprimer. On ne peut pas composer avec la folie: ils sont fous, ils détruisent tout, ils se détruisent eux-mêmes. Ce que je suis obligé de faire ici est atroce” (*L’homme*, 146). Folly alone can explain the Indians’ deficient perception of Jaime’s policies. Jaime does not factor in the possibility that a leader is not all-knowing. Because Jaime loves the Indians, he must also know what they need/want; and when they act as crazy people, they must be stopped. Jaime’s anger proceeds not only from a sense of duty but from his love as well; as a parent, he can not let his “children” destroy themselves simply because they do not know better. Furthermore, Jaime suffers from parental anguish when he must administer the “well-deserved” punishment. We encounter here yet another Gnostic attitude: Jaime envisages himself as a spiritual leader who does not deem it necessary to reassess his own politics.⁵

Drieu has prepared the reader for Jaime’s imminent downfall; he is a hero, but, ultimately, he remains human. Jaime tries to justify the collapse of his ideals: “D’autres que moi ont échoué dans ces derniers temps: Lopez, au Paraguay, a succombé sous la coalition de l’Argentine, de l’Uruguay et du Brésil. Et Rozas n’avait pu empêcher auparavant la séparation de l’Uruguay et de l’Argentine. Les temps ne sont pas mûrs, peut-être ne le seront-ils jamais” (*L’homme*, 220). By comparing himself to other South American political figures, Jaime

⁵ Jaime and Felipe adopt a second premise: the Indians are not the architects of their revolt. Their assumption is not unfounded; as the story progresses the reader finds out that Camilla, Belmez and Florida plotted the insurgency.

downgrades his status: he is no longer *the* leader but a leader among others. Like any leader, he can be defeated. Nonetheless, Jaime exculpates himself and blames “the times” for his failures.⁶

Jaime’s recognition of his untimely efforts weighs considerably against Drieu’s previous Gnostic agenda. A true prophet or true foreseer of the future, whom Drieu claims fascist leaders to be, could not miscalculate the time for action. Most of Drieu’s texts abound with alarmist statements about the necessity to act, lest the world collapse. There is no hesitation in his writing: the moment to act is now. In *Gilles*, Drieu satirizes Clérences because he chose prudence over revolutionary force, as he did not understand the gravity of the situation. Gilles, however, followed his instincts and took matters into his own hands. Similarly the protagonist Jaime follows suit. And yet, *L’homme à cheval*, Drieu’s novel of failures, ends with Jaime’s sad conclusion that the times were not ready for him and for change.

While Jaime speculates that maybe the times will never be ready, he later contradicts this notion, in the same conversation: “Mais le temps reviendra des grandes actions, des actions impériales” (*L’homme*, 221). Neither Jaime nor Drieu are ready to abandon their dreams altogether. Jaime’s last statement lacks the assurance with which Drieu customarily placated his readers and appears to Felipe in a completely different light: “Pour la première fois, je voyais un Jaime que je n’avais jamais connu, un Jaime qui n’était plus au milieu de ses hommes, un Jaime religieux. Ou plutôt je comprenais que ce soldat avait toujours été éminemment religieux. Un grand soldat est toujours un grand ascète” (*L’homme*, 223). In *L’homme à cheval* we have the reversal of the epilogue in *Gilles*. Gilles carried out his destiny only after he disentangled himself from the world, only after he became religious. At the time of his pilgrimage to Lake Titicaca,

⁶ Hitler, by contrast, blamed the Germans for his failures.

Jaime has severed all ties with the world, but the only sacrifice he will make is that of his horse.⁷

It can be Drieu's admission that sacrifices are indeed futile, as he characterizes them in

Socialisme fasciste.

If Drieu admits to the impossibility of his characters' imperial dreams, he does not concede to the dream itself being degraded:

Dans un certain ordre, il y avait les meilleures raisons du monde pour que Pérou et Bolivie se séparassent, comme cela se fit sous le regard triste de Bolivar. Raisons violemment et exquisément sensuelles, raisons qui signifient les puissances particulières de la vie. Mais dans un autre ordre, quel magnifique désir que de le vouloir les réunir, de tenter l'impossible! Un impossible qui fut au temps des Incas. Nous étions de ces hommes, Jaime et moi, qui ont besoin de leur patrie et d'autres patries encore. Ce sont les impérieux, ce sont les impérieux (*L'homme*, 223)!

Drieu mentions one reason why Peru and Bolivia should have been a federation: Jaime and Felipe had a dream, and their dream was imperative. It is safe to imply that the countries themselves did not need a union; but rather a dictatorial leader supported by a similarly dictatorial intellectual. As early as 1922, in *Mesure de la France*, Drieu argued that the times of small counties had passed and that their only means of survival was a European federation. In *L'homme à cheval*, Drieu does not advocate this federation with the same conviction. The best reasons in the world are against it; and yet, tempting the impossible still remains laudable.⁸

As for the country who fought Jaime's unsuccessful wars, it "n'avait pas su mauvais gré de ses défaites à Jaime, qu'il avait suivi avec ardeur et qu'il n'avait jamais désavoué" (*L'homme*, 220). The text does not provide any explanations for this implausible situation; the critic can only speculate. One wonders thus what determines "the times." Bolivians wanted to help Jaime in his

⁷ "Drieu cherche à actualiser, par le rite du sacrifice du cheval de guerre, l'image de la vie qui renaît éternellement de ses cendres." (Hines, 28).

⁸ Moreover, according to Felipe, it is only human to search for the absolute on this side of the grave: "ce que nous appelons révolutions, pronunciamientos, coups d'Etats, Protecteurs, tout cela n'est-ce pas dans le sang des Espagnols comme des Indiens, la même recherche incessante et inépuisable de l'absolu terrestre?" (*L'homme*, 225)

conquests and never lost confidence in their leader, so they do not receive the author's blame. The other nations, however, resisted Jaime's federation. Thus, when Jaime laments about his ill-timed strategy, he actually speaks about the international context. I can extrapolate and argue that Drieu feels the people of Europe resisted Hitler's unification and caused the results of the war. In his *Journal*, however, Drieu denounces Hitler whom he holds accountable for not prompting a world-wide fascist revolution.

Yet Jaime did attempt what Hitler supposedly did not. Consequently, Jaime attributes his political failure to his association with Felipe: "Ah pauvre de moi, ah propre à rien! Felipe, je te hais, tu es moi, je ne suis que toi. Regarde. Je ne suis qu'un rêveur comme toi et un assembleur de mots. Je n'ai pas pu conquérir le lac Titicaca. Je ne suis qu'un voyageur de rêve comme toi. Je n'ai pas pu conquérir le Pérou, le joindre à la Bolivie. J'ai failli à ma mission, qui est de rendre les mots vivants, de donner forme" (*L'homme*, 227). Felipe's contemplative nature, his propensity to create dream worlds, contaminated the man of action that Jaime was and enclosed him in a world of the text. Not only did Felipe prove inept to act on his ideas but he also incapacitated his leader. Wishing a world into existence does not necessarily entail willing it into existence. This seems ridiculously evident. However, Jaime and Felipe agonize over their discovery and try to find attenuating circumstances for their inability to transform dreams into reality.

Self-incriminating, Felipe bemoans his own selfishness; he has not devoted himself entirely to Jaime and did not serve him well. Also, he confesses to Jaime, "Je t'ai trahi, en te trahissant j'ai trahi la musique" (*L'homme*, 228). An artist needs to obliterate himself entirely before a hero, so that the hero can accomplish great deeds. His heroic actions are the only source of great art and religion. From Felipe's convoluted argument, art and religion emerge as the

supreme goal of great actions. In the end, what remains is the testimony, and this is precisely what Jaime asks Felipe to give.

Jaime abandons his soldiers and his dreams of an Incan empire. He leaves the scene on foot, with only Felipe watching him: “Je regardai le dos de cet homme derrière lequel j’avais marché pendant vingt ans. L’homme à cheval était à pied” (*L’homme*, 241). Drieu has his fascist leader fail, and more dramatically, Jaime loses his horse. The glorious warrior, riding superb horses, contrasts sharply with the aged man, deprived of his dreams. To Felipe, Jaime still preserves his glory through the sacrifice of his horse. This time, the sacrifice leads to nothing; there is no foreshadowing of a glorious return.

In the epilogue, Drieu uses a common literary device: a certain man found among his grandfather’s papers the manuscript retelling Jaime and Felipe’s adventures. The grandfather had the manuscript from an eccentric friend of his who claimed to be Bolivian. Instead of authenticating the narrated events, the epilogue actually dismisses them. The grandson questions even the South American origin of the eccentric refugee. He bases his doubts on “monstrueuses” (*L’homme*, 243) historical inaccuracies and believes Jaime never existed. The skeptical grandson concluded that it was probably a dream.

Yet again a comparison with *Gilles* is necessary. Gilles participated in a real event, the Spanish civil war, an event of recent history above all. He did succeed in metamorphosing into a glorious warrior, who feared nothing and who held the promise of a better tomorrow. In contrast, *L’homme à cheval*, marks, as Thomas M. Hines notes, “l’adieu symbolique de Drieu à la vie authentique de l’action ainsi que l’abandon, sur le plan politique, du mythe héroïque du chef.”⁹

⁹ Thomas M. Hines, *Le rêve et l’action: une étude de L’homme à cheval de Drieu La Rochelle* (Columbia, South Carolina: French Literature Publication Company, 1978), 148.

Jaime departs without accomplishing his mission and the testimony of his adventures is questioned. Moreover, not even in a dream can Jaime achieve the fascist federation.

Upon the publication of *L'homme à cheval*, the press made no mention of it. Drieu explained to himself this undeserved silence: "Chateaubriand et Brasillach m'en veulent de ne plus collaborer à leurs journaux et de ne pas parler d'eux dans la revue, Déat d'être chez Doriot et aristo."¹⁰ Drieu was indeed in an unfavorable position. Critics on the left could not applaud a collaborator, if by chance they were allowed to publish. However, Jean Paulhan congratulated Drieu in a private letter. As for the critics on the right, they could indeed have been spiteful, as Drieu portrayed them. On the other hand, they could have feared to publicly criticize Drieu. After all, Drieu was in power.

b. The Traitor

The conclusion of Drieu's last completed novel, *Les chiens de paille*¹¹ echoes the pessimism of *L'homme à cheval*. In anticipation of a parallel between his new protagonist and himself, Drieu cautions: "Constant n'est pas l'auteur. Un personnage n'est jamais l'auteur; un personnage n'est jamais qu'une partie de l'auteur" (*Les chiens*, 11). If I interpret Drieu's statement ad litteram, then Constant reflects only the former Drieu who indulged in the illusions that man can control his destiny and forge a better world.

In stark contrast with the Gnostic Drieu, the Drieu of *Les chiens de paille* has lost confidence in the solutions offered by both fascism and communism and presents them as impotent. Drieu's heroes, who have been lowered in quality, testify first and foremost of the author's loss of faith in the political realm. During his period of Gnostic certainty and fascist

¹⁰ Drieu La Rochelle, quoted in Pierre Andreu and Frédéric Grover, 514.

¹¹ In the 1944 Preface, Drieu confesses to have written the novel in the spring of 1943. It was published posthumously only in 1964.

optimism when Drieu wrote *Gilles* (1939), he assigned the task of saving humanity to a fascist new man who, like Jesus, can sacrifice his own life for the salvation of all. Several years later in *L'homme à cheval* (1943), the Christ figure, Jaime, returns on his horse; but his ill-timed return leads to a political failure of catastrophic proportions. At the time of *Les chiens de paille*, Drieu depicts an impotent Christ and his main protagonist Constant Trubert “rises” only to the level of Judas.

Like all Drieu’s characters, and Drieu himself, Constant abhors hypocrisy, which he associates with most human endeavors. Consequently, he keeps himself “hors de la politique” (*Les chiens*, 27). Moreover, considering political affiliation to be enslaving, Constant Trubert chooses a different type of association, with lords of the black market, the Corsican brothers Susini. An unlikely contrabandist, Constant expresses no interest in the profits the black market generates or in the development of the war as a whole. He has no personal investment in the job he, nonetheless, performs earnestly, but he appreciates it for its lack of pretense. Constant knows his activities are illegal and often immoral, but he also knows he does not need to present himself in a more favorable light. As for Drieu, he was not engaged in any illegal activities during the war; nonetheless, I could argue, as most of his countrymen did, for the immorality of his collaboration with the German occupants. Just like Constant, Drieu opted for the only occupation that held no claim to probity. As self-destructive as his author, Constant chooses the most abject position in the most abject profession: policeman of the black market, a position that allows him to openly be himself: a Judas figure.

Drieu has Constant embark upon a rereading of Judas’s role in the history of salvation. As a traitor who “se charge de la salissure morale” (*Les chiens*, 116), Judas has a crucial importance and without him, Constant believes, the world would have stagnated. Constant thus

vindicates a character deemed despicable by the rest of the Christian world. Constant redeems Judas by contrasting him to the other apostles, to Jesus, and to the political leaders of the time, who, reluctant to compromise, would rather Judas accomplish the seemingly impossible, yet necessary. In Constant's interpretation, Judas rises to the status of a "deus ex machina," (*Les chiens*, 117) who manages to solve the impossible riddle of history and readily embraces eternal damnation for his betrayal.

There is an obvious parallel between Constant's interpretation of Judas' role and the one proposed by the ancient Gnostic sect, the Cainites. Like most ancient Gnostics, the Cainites believed that our material world was not created by the real God, but by an imperfect and angry God. According to the Cainites, Cain was not to be blamed for his fratricide, because of his courage to stand up against the imperfect God. In order to worship the true God, one had to violate the rules given out by the malevolent one. The Cainites worshiped all contrarians; besides Cain, they revered the people of Sodom and Gomorrah and ultimately Judas. Consequently, they produced their own version of the Gospel, the Gospel of Judas,¹² first mentioned by Irenaeus in his "Five Books on the Unmasking and Refutation of the Falsely Named Gnosis."

The Cainites reject the other Gospel's interpretation of Judas. To them, Judas was not a traitor, on the contrary he only obeyed Jesus' orders. Jesus singled out Judas for his courage and for his willingness to help. That is why Jesus confessed to Judas alone who he really was. It was only natural for Jesus to ask Judas to betray him. In the Cainites' interpretation, Judas does not

¹² The other possible authors of the Gospel of Judas are the Sethians. Unlike the Cainites, they did not redeem Cain. On the contrary they claimed Adam had a third son, Seth, who inherited his father's spark of the divine. Seth returned to earth under various appearances, including Jesus. The Sethians and the Cainites have a similar version of the Gospel of Judas.

act against Jesus, but actually cooperates with him. In order for Jesus to return to the eternal spiritual realm, he has to free the spark of the divine trapped in his body of flesh.¹³

Drieu's Constant is a modern Cainite, who, like his predecessors, argued that Judas had the opportunity to observe the ongoing events from different perspectives. Further on, Constant describes Judas as the only one concerned with materiality, the only one who “a le sens du temps” (*Les chiens*, 135). That is why Judas comprehends that things need to be hurried; and by “things,” he understands the arrival of the kingdom of God. Among Jesus' followers, Judas alone grasps that, “On ne peut pas attendre Dieu” (*Les chiens*, 135) and becomes the first millenarian of Christianity. Constant omits to acknowledge that it was Christ who told Judas “what you're about to do, do quickly” (John 13:27). Moreover, Judas exemplifies perfectly the hypocrisy that Constant detests: as a “follower” yet traitor of Christ.

In this Cainite tradition, Constant offers a different version of Jesus' last days. Confident in God's timing, and more fatalists for that matter, the other apostles and Jesus himself, all choose to think nothing needs to be done. For them what must occur will eventually occur, regardless of their own input. Judas alone considers that in order to make history happen the people of Galilee have to overthrow the Romans and the clergymen. Yet again, Constant does not address the question of Judas's greed. In Constant's version of events, the final realm, that of perfection, can emerge thanks to human intervention. It is left up to a human to set the change in motion; although divine, Jesus has no idea of what course of events to pursue. Moreover, Jesus, as Constant sees him, refrains from taking risks and having the people revolt and, clueless, he needs Judas to help him fulfill his destiny. However, since Jesus prophesied that one of his

¹³ Irenaeus protested not only the Cainites' argument that the creator of the world was imperfect, and not the actual God, but also their claim that people have a spark of the divine in them.

apostles would betray him, he was not clueless. Constant needs him to be as such in order to aggrandize Judas' performance.

Constant understands intuitively Judas' anger at the mediocrity of his company, but he refrains from considering the traitor a genius. However, in spite of recognizing Judas' sordid nature, Constant sees him "sensible de quelque façon à la supériorité de Jésus. Peut-être comme un marchand de tableaux qui ne comprend rien à la peinture et qui pourtant a le sens de la valeur picturale des tableaux qu'il vend" (*Les chiens*, 169). Impotent as a leader who actually embodies the mediocrity of his disciples, and offers them meaningless solutions, Constant's Jesus can be of use only as a victim. Furthermore, it is the victim potential that grants Jesus his superiority, hence Judas' readiness to use him, to sacrifice him. In an attempt to ridicule Constant's view of history, Drieu actualizes the biblical conflict.

As the modern Judas, Constant is as acutely aware of the decadence that surrounds him as his infamous predecessor. Through meditating on Judas's evolution, Constant detaches himself from his – and Drieu's – intellectual mentor, Nietzsche. Along with Nietzsche's view of history, Constant rejects his postulate that human destiny can be fulfilled here on Earth, as well as his view of history. Judas himself, as the apostle of progress he was, dismisses the doctrine of eternal recurrence and falls into what Nietzsche considered to be decadence. For Judas, Constant remarks, this change occurred over time; in his youth, Judas believed in a possible earthly paradise, in the Jewish supremacy, and in the possibility of triumphing over human nature. But Judas abandoned his dreams, and more importantly, he abandoned the certitude of life for the hope in the after life.

Constant renounced his Gnostic hopes progressively as well. In his case, it happened because, "Par malheur, le ressort vital était trop usé dans Constant" (*Les chiens*, 128). The fault

is not Constant's, but Nietzsche's whose theory starts from a faulty premise: one's will. Nothing but an artificial concept, argues Constant, human will can not stop fatality, in spite of Nietzsche's desperate attempts and his awareness of modern decadence. Thus, in the modern world, there are neither heroes nor saints for Constant who: "avait toujours eu horreur de ces réussites spectaculaires qui font que par contraste on pensera toujours qu'il y a eu quelque part dans le monde des hommes secrets et exquis qui ont été plus héros que Napoléon et plus saints que saint François" (*Les chiens*, 154).

In Constant's analysis, Nietzsche appears as a decadent, one who suffered enormously and ultimately lost his mental sanity once he realized that, in fact, he was imitating Jesus. Constant denounces, as well, the fascist and communist appropriations of the German philosopher's theories: "les rencontres entre philosophes et hommes d'action sont des malentendus où tout le monde perd" (*Les chiens*, 152). The obvious question is what Constant's author felt he lost due to his association with men of action. I can safely venture that he lost confidence in the applicability of his political constructs. Moreover, as my interpretation of *Les chiens de paille* demonstrates, Drieu also lost confidence in the power of human beings to construct their future.

Why this loss of confidence? Why the renunciation of Gnostic certitudes for millenarian hopes? Is it a sign of decadence as Constant wonders: "Judas renonçant à faire de Jésus un roi, se résignant à en faire un dieu: n'y avait-il pas là une terrible déchéance?" (*Les chiens*, 149). The explanation Drieu provides reminds the reader of his former justification for Jaime's political failure in *L'homme à cheval*. In the Bolivian context, the times did not welcome the changes Jaime wished to implement and neither did the international context; in *Les chiens de paille*, the Jews appear as a defeated people. Between continents and in the path of several armies, the small

Israelite people stood no chance and slowly but surely were drained of their vitality. By the time Judas came along, his countrymen were a people of intellectuals, of “litterateurs,” and even worse: “ce n’étaient même plus des littérateurs, c’étaient des espèces de curés, de moines frénétiques, vains, hideux, grotesques qui au milieu des philosophes et des athlètes grecs, des aristocrates et des soldats romains continuaient à pérorer sur le génie juif, suprématie «purement intellectuelle», et tout à fait spirituelle! Le cul botté et rebotté, ils parlaient sans cesse de la supériorité de leur cul sur le pied botté” (*Les chiens*, 150). This tirade against over intellectualization is reminiscent of Drieu’s previous critique of the Surrealist movement.

From the specific, Constant moves to the general and applies the Jewish self-infatuation to the global political scene. To Constant, for whom “Juif, c’est un état d’âme” (*Les chiens*, 114), Jews have not always been Jews, but Hebrews. They did, however, allow themselves to become Jews; similarly, the danger of “jewishness” lurks over the people of Europe. Consequently, the main protagonists of the novel represent the “jewishness,” i.e., the decadence of contemporary France. Fascists In spite of their differences (Bardy), Gaullists (Préault), communists (Salis), and even nationalists (Cormont) meet in their impotence to solve the crisis they experience:

Constant regardait tout cela. Il voyait tous ces pauvres Français égarés, aveugles, voués à la fatalité de n’échapper à un étranger qu’en se rejetant sur un autre. Ceux qui criaient contre la servitude aux Allemands ne pouvaient que se réfugier dans la servitude aux Anglais ou aux Russes. Et ceux qui criaient contre la servitude aux Anglais se perdaient dans la servitude aux Allemands. Les uns avaient les mêmes défauts et les mêmes faiblesses que les autres. Plus ils étaient divisés et plus ils se ressemblaient: plus le collaborateur crachait sur le gaulliste et plus il lui ressemblait et réciproquement. Et les communistes, en dépit de leur plus forte armature extérieure, ne différaient pas intimement de tous les autres. Tous, moins ils étaient Français et plus ils étaient, mais négativement, stérilement, tout en creux (*Les chiens*, 39).

Just like the biblical Jews, the French are decadent; following this logic, it is only natural that they imitate other nationalities, ostensibly more vital than their own. However, Drieu reproaches

the French exactly for this very imitation; as for Cormont, Constant ridicules him for imagining France to be able to survive on its own. From Constant's standpoint, France lacks the means to move beyond the impasse into which it has led itself.

This menacing extinction crystallizes as the story unfolds. It is a story of striking simplicity. All the factions that evolve in *Les chiens de paille* covet nothing more than Susini's ammunition depot, a deposit in Constant's care. Constant's attachment to ethics in an immoral enterprise astounds communists, nationalists and fascists alike who fail to believe Constant can refrain from taking sides. Constant ultimately has to take sides, but only because of the others' mediocrity.¹⁴ Drieu amuses himself in crafting a veritable siege with Cormont in a provisory possession of the guns and "le communiste et le fasciste de la région...là, prêts à s'entendre. Ça en dit long. Et sur le dos de la "France seule," ça en dit encore plus long. Les internationales se comprennent" (*Les chiens*, 215-6). Drieu has Bardy and Salis compromise: they both wish for the guns to remain in place, or in other words for the maintaining of the status quo, although no one gains from it. They choose stagnation because they can not imagine any alternative. Their plans to seize the guns turn out to be nothing but empty words, with no consequence in the real world. Moreover, Constant remarks upon the similarities between communism and fascism, two movements with a similar will to power and entirely deprived of moral principles. Salis and Bardy unite because they recognize their weaknesses, but also because they recognize their common interests, which never coincide with those of France:

Ce qui était profondément comique et significatif pour Constant, c'était la ressemblance de comportement entre des hommes si divisés. La plupart des hommes de Bardy étaient

¹⁴ The proximity of the Germans and their military superiority render the whole enterprise ridiculous. The French can not accomplish anything with the help of the ammunition they attempt to gain possession of, yet they waste all their resources, financial and human, in the process. More concerned with the immediate, they fail to design a plan of either how to seize the deposit or of what to do with the guns afterwards. Most importantly, the French lack the sense of proportions and they all act as if the outcome of the war depended on the capture of a handful of guns.

d'anciens communistes devenus cagoualards, doriotistes ou francistes. Les communistes étaient devenus impérialistes, nationalistes, militaristes, endurcis, attachés à Staline comme les autres à Hitler. Quant aux hommes de Cormont, ils étaient aussi fanatiques que ceux de Salis ou de Bardy, en tout cas aussi entichés de rigueur et d'obéissance aveugle (*Les chiens*, 222).

Constant's decision to perform the role of "deus ex machina," to be the Judas of Cormont contrasts with conclusion that human will can not prevail over fate.¹⁵ Constant decides to act because of others' lack of initiative. Yet Constant does not share Cormont's faith in France's power, and for him: "La France seule, cela ne veut plus rien dire. Si j'étais du siècle, je serais pour une internationale ou pour une autre" (*Les chiens*, 210). Constant sides with Cormont solely because he does not consider himself a 20th-century man and thus can see through the political pretense of internationalism. It is the first time that Drieu admits through a character, that "les idéologies n'existent pas, il n'y a que des empires qui sont tous de proie, comme de bien entendu, et qui cachent mal leur puissante obscénité sous des haillons idéologiques" (*Les chiens*, 211). At a time when the Germans' defeat was solely a matter of time, one can argue that Drieu distances himself from fascist ideology in an attempt to save his own life. However, nothing in Drieu's public behavior testifies to any instinct of self-preservation. In his *Journal* which was not meant for publication, Drieu's disappointment with Hitler surfaces on every page as early as 1942. In his March 1st 1944 entry, Drieu decries: "Quelle déchéance européenne! L'Allemagne incapable comme l'Angleterre et la France! Il n'y a plus de génie politique, après un siècle de « civilisation petite-bourgeoise ». Hitler est un révolutionnaire allemand mais pas européen" (*Journal*, 370). Through the last years of war, Drieu oscillated between applauding and criticizing the German war effort, in response to what he perceived to be their success or failure at inciting a world-wide fascist revolution.

¹⁵ Drieu has lent all his protagonists his many contradictions.

To Drieu and Constant, Hitler's intentions – and Stalin's, for that matter – stem from their imperialistic attitudes which stand naked by 1943 when Drieu composed *Les chiens de paille*. Drieu has made his choices and has Constant profess: "J'aime mieux la philosophie tibétaine. Et si c'est là de l'égotisme, merde pour les mots. J'aime mieux m'occuper de l'Indicible que de ce qui est si facilement dit et si faussement dit dans le jargon politique" (*Les chiens*, 211). Through Constant, Drieu finally assumes his preference for meditation and for Indian philosophies that condone detachment from worldly matters and admit the unknown. The former prophet, who aspired to absolute knowledge and repeatedly predicted future events, now faces reality and disavows political lies. He distances himself from a past of Gnostic illusions, ready to embrace his future with all its discomfoting mysteries.

Constant attempts one more desperate act before leaving the scene when he "helps" Cormont become a victim. Although to Constant, Jesus represents novelty and progress and Cormont regression, he compares the two ("ce n'est pas un rapport d'égalité, bien sûr, mais un rapport de similitude" (*Les chiens*, 219) because, to him all, victims resemble Christ. Similarly, Christ resembles all the other gods or demigods that sacrificed themselves: Osiris, Athys, Adonis, Tammouz, Dyonyssos, Hercule, Orpheus. Constant's blasphemous enumeration rejects the Christian postulate of Christ's uniqueness. Unlike Judas who supposedly sacrificed Jesus in order to speed up the advent of the Kingdom of God, Constant sacrifices Cormont for his own benefit. In the process of victim substitutions like the one Constant operates, René Girard sees "the appetite for violence that awakens in people when anger seizes them and when the true object of their anger is untouchable."¹⁶ Constant is angry with the world and every human beings around him, but since he can not get his revenge on all, he directs his anger towards the innocent

¹⁶ René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001), 157.

Cormont. Because he is innocent, Cormont can not perform the scapegoat role. Killing him does not restore social order, which Constant does not want anyway. By contrast, Constant wants to punish his compatriots.

At the same time, Constant understands his actions' reprehensibility, so he rationalizes them. Consequently, he convinces himself that, by sacrificing Cormont, he accomplishes the will of the entire community: "tout le monde veut le sacrifice et ... personne ne sait comment y arriver. C'est ici que l'affaire Cormont rejoint mon affaire. Je dois être le Judas de ce Jésus" (*Les chiens*, 220). Constant seeks no glory in his endeavor; on the contrary, it is essential to him that "l'opération reste démoniaque" (*Les chiens*, 220) and that he is humiliated. Constant shares with Drieu both his propensity for self-destruction and his self-denigration. The obvious question is what does Constant gain from sacrificing Cormont. In order to answer this question, I will first examine what sacrifice entails for Constant.

To Drieu and to most of his fictional voices including Constant, life's supreme moment happens only when (and if) Eros meets Tanathos. "On ne peut jamais si bien vivre qu'au moment où l'on meurt, si toutefois l'on meurt jeune" (*Les chiens*, 26), declares Constant. Death must be an act of will and not the result of one's weakness, whether physical or moral. Hence, Drieu points out the importance of dying young, when one still has perspectives and alternatives. If death is not a willing choice, it means nothing to Drieu's heroes and to Drieu himself. Moreover, being able to renounce the supreme gift of one's life is what makes us human, in Drieu's view. It is the synthesis of an essentially Christian attitude, the willingness to sacrifice, with an attitude sanctioned by Christianity, seeking one's death, that makes Constant's case unique. Furthermore, Constant actively pursues sacrifice for its empowering force; he sees it as "la connaissance totale de la mort, simultanément chez celui qui la donne et chez celui qui la reçoit" (*Les chiens*, 221).

In addition, Constant can muster no more patience for the Salis and Bardys of the region, and his disappointment reaches its apogee. In his exasperation, Constant identifies the “real” France with Préault: “Capitaliste au demeurant, c’était lui qui était la vraie France, absolument immobile et sclérosée, gaulliste, mais prétendant éviter l’autoritarisme, ce qui est contradictoire, crispée contre l’invasion militaire mais à jamais abandonnée à tous les envahissements subreptices, butée pour le moment dans l’anti-bochisme mais vouée à dix autres occupants” (*Les chiens*, 223). Drieu’s recurrent preoccupation to gauge the “mesure de la France” reveals what he still considers to be society’s flaws: capitalism, political slumber, anti-progressiveness, hypocrisy and contradictions. His criticism remains Gnostic in nature; the solutions, or better said, the lack thereof, speak for Drieu’s refusal to offer unrealistic but comforting answers.

Neither Susini nor Cormont understand Constant’s behavior; they also fail to agree with Constant that Cormont needs to become a victim. Constant’s explanations do not convince the reader either: “Mais il faut que tu sois zigouillé. Parce que tu es le dernier Français. Il faut que tous ces Français vendus à tous les étrangers possibles et imaginables zigouillent le dernier Français, le dernier Français, le dernier Français de la France seule, de la France petite, de la France patriote, de la France seulette” (*Les chiens*, 237). Logically, Cormont, as the last Frenchman, should be preserved; but in Constant’s view, he can serve his country better dead, i.e. victimized, than alive. Especially as the France Cormont represents has no chance of survival. Constant wants to kill the old in order to make room for the new.

Under the allied bombs, the French protagonists of the novel all act in contradiction with the ideas and ideals they supposedly uphold. Communists align with fascists and Gaullists, anti-Semites secretly work for a Jewish empire. In the midst of this ideological confusion stands the traitor, the only one ready to assume his destiny. His detachment from worldly matters and his

firm belief that life is nothing but a sacrifice prepare him for his own death: “Constant Trubert, le tuer, est-ce me tuer? Non, c’est tuer cet individu, ce raseur que je traîne après moi depuis cinquante ans. C’est tuer mon ombre, tout ce qui est superflu et encombrant...” (*Les chiens*, 238). Constant remains a Gnostic to the very end; in his disdain for the flesh, he dissociates himself from his own body which he sees solely as the container of his real self. This superfluous and bothersome carrier actually bars Constant from knowing himself and to annihilate it results in an act of liberation. While Christianity views suicide as a sin, Constant sees it as an act of rebellion. Just like the Cainites, who argued that one needed to protest the evil God, Constant attempts to “enlever le couteau à la main de Dieu” (*Les chiens*, 238). Constant considers suicide a sacrifice that permits him to put an abrupt stop to the decadence that life is.

Drieu refuses his protagonist his final attempt at empowerment: “Mais il était dit qu’un Français, même fou, n’était plus maître chez lui, car si une formidable explosion se produisit qui emporta tous les personnages de cette véridique histoire, ce fut par l’effet d’une bombe d’avion. Un avion anglais, obéissant à on ne sait quels ordres, bombardait le pays des marais. Après la Maison des Marais, ce fut le tour de l’usine de Préault” (*Les chiens*, 239). Constant fails to realize the sacrifices of his victims and of himself; and by doing so, he fails to fulfill his alleged calling. To even imagine being more powerful than fatality indicates a Frenchman’s insanity, concludes Drieu in 1944.

The end of the novel emphasized above all that the randomness of fate clashes with those poor humans who fantasize that what they do matters in the big scheme of things. Consequently, Drieu has the English bombs hit the allies’ supporters as well. Préault, who devoted his energy to General de Gaulle, ends up exactly like Salis the communist, Bardy the fascist, Susini the contrabandist and Constant the ultimate traitor. As Lecarme observes, *Les chiens*, “ne permettent

pas au lecteur de connaître le choix qui a été celui de l'auteur dans les conflits des années noires."¹⁷

The novel's conclusion mirrors Drieu's epigraph: "Le ciel et la terre ne sont pas humains ou bienveillants à la manière des hommes, ils considèrent tous les êtres comme si c'étaient des chiens de paille qui ont servi dans les sacrifices" by Lao-Tseu. Drieu abandons his old view of history when man forged his own future and now grants providence a central place. Cormont is not a Jesus; he is nothing but a simulated victim. That is why his sacrifice is nothing but the simulacrum of a sacrifice that ultimately accomplishes nothing.

Winegarten proposes that at the time he wrote *Les chiens de paille*, Drieu did not believe in anything. Consequently, according to the critic, "Drieu could never extricate himself from the nihilism that threatened to overwhelm the period after the 1914-1918."¹⁸ On the contrary, in 1944, Drieu believed in the limits he set for his characters; they can not steer their future in the direction they wish, not even in an act of destruction. Even though, on the eve of his own suicide, Drieu is not a nihilist. He is certainly not a Gnostic any longer. His Judas, Constant, did not foresee Jesus' true nature; he did not even recognize Jesus. Cormont does not welcome his sacrifice, but on the contrary resists it. When the flesh disappears there is no spark of the divine that is released. Human beings have no such sparkle, they are nothing but straw dogs with which gods toy for their own sake. Cormont's death does not bring the promise of redemption, he simply dies. Constant only imagined, just like the Cainite Judas, that his own actions had any impact on Cormont's death. Constant's Gnostic fantasy harmed not only himself, but the innocent as well, with no results whatsoever. Drieu's traitor errs primarily because of his

¹⁷ Lecarme, *Drieu la Rochelle ou le bal des maudits*, 14.

¹⁸ Renée Winegarten, *Writers and Revolution: The Fatal Lure of Action* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1974), 286.

arrogance that leads him to believe he has a better understanding of reality than all those around him.

Louis Aragon, the Insubordinate Communist

From its inception, PCF echoed the doctrinal shifts occurring in the Soviet Union. And so did Aragon, who supported the Soviet Union even at times when it would have been wiser to dissociate himself from the politics of the Kremlin.¹⁹ When Stalin, for instance, signed the non aggression pact with Hitler, Aragon's *Ce soir*, published as a subtitle to the news: "*l'annonce du pacte de non-agression fait reculer la guerre.*"²⁰ In Daix's view, "il s'agit d'un article de croyant, d'un acte de foi fondé sur cette conception que l'Union Soviétique menait une politique de paix."²¹ As the article from *Ce soir* testifies, when Aragon needed to convince himself facts were true, he did. During the 1930s Russian trials, Aragon argued that the accusers were all counter revolutionaries and thus needed to be tried and executed. And yet, one of the high officials on trial was Elsa's brother-in-law, whom he knew personally. Aragon did not flinch; not even the execution of somebody so close to him dissuaded him to change his public discourse.

Aragon had company. The case of Romain Rolland is emblematic in this regard. Rolland was an early enthusiast for the Russian revolution, but opposed the terror that followed. Later on, he became a staunch supporter of Stalin. When in 1933 Victor Serge was imprisoned for having criticized Stalin and was waiting for his death sentence, Rolland personally intervened on

¹⁹Aragon writes about Kirov's death: "Quand Kirov est mort et que son corps a été exposé dans la salle des Colonnnes, Staline a pleuré, j'étais à quelques pas, j'ai vu les larmes sur son visage... Sans doute, chaque fois qu'un grand homme meurt, y a-t-il quelque chose qui finit, et qui laissera toujours cette pensée que tous les hommes viennent de perdre ce qui ne sera jamais plus et qui ne pouvait naître que de cet homme-là. J'ai souvent relu et toujours avec un serrement de cœur ces cinq pages de Victor Hugo dans 'Choses vues,' où il raconte la mort de Balzac sans élever la voix, presque sèchement... Ce n'était que Balzac. Ce n'est pas pareil." (Louis Aragon in *Les intellectuels communistes et le culte de Staline*, supplement to *Est & Ouest*, no. 273 (February: 1962):16).

²⁰ In Daix, *Une vie à changer*, 301.

²¹Ibid.

Serge's behalf. After an audience with Stalin, Serge was freed. Serge's family did not enjoy the same happy ending; they all died in prison. One would expect that Rolland, as a lover of human freedom he claimed to be, would have changed his opinion about Stalin. Yet, the injustice brought against a close friend of his, of whose innocence he was sure (otherwise, he would not have appealed to Stalin), did not convince Rolland that Soviet Russia was an unjust regime. "It is regrettable" writes Neil Harding, "that with some distinguished exceptions, these careful Marxist-inspired analyses of the sites of power in bourgeois society have not been applied to Soviet-type societies or to the functioning of Marxist parties. These would, at least, at first sight, appear to be extraordinarily fertile areas in which to apply Marxist critique."²² André Gide and Paul Nizan²³ were the most famous cases of intellectuals who took a stance against Soviet atrocities. Such acts of courage came at a huge price. According to Daix, Maurice Thorez called Nizan "l'indicateur de police" and placed an "anathema" against him.²⁴ In spite of his friendship with Nizan, Aragon took up this story and amplified it greatly in his last novel of the *Monde Réel* cycle, *Les communistes* (1949).

Raymond Aron explains the reasoning behind such ferocious attacks that critics of the Soviet Union faced: communists could not condemn the Soviet regime, since that entailed the questioning of Marxism itself.²⁵ Even though Russian realities did not conform to the communist dream, most communist intellectuals did not lose faith in Marxism. Since communism

²² Neil Harding, "Intellectuals and Socialism: Making and Breaking the Proletariat," in *Intellectuals in Politics: From the Dreyfus Affair to Salman Rushdie*, ed. Jeremy Jennings and Anthony Kemp-Welch (London: Routledge, 1997), 196.

²³ He resigned from the PCF in response to the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact.

²⁴ Daix, *Les hérétiques du P.C.F.*, 157.

²⁵ "How can one condemn the Soviet Union, since the failure of the Bolshevik enterprise would be the failure of Marxism and therefore of history itself?" (Aron, *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, 120).

scientifically applied Marxist principles, one could not contest the application without attacking the theory. Can we then talk about subversion in Aragon's case?

Aragon did not simply criticize the Soviet Union, he did more: he undermined the theory that laid its foundation. Just like Drieu, Aragon expressed his reticence in literary texts and not in his articles. Suzanne Ravis notes that "les textes non fictionnels, les articles ("Le Prolétariat de l'Esprit," par exemple), adoptent une position idéologique nette, tandis que l'espace de la fiction, grâce à la polysémie du texte littéraire, autorise un jeu plus subtil."²⁶ I will analyze two instances in which the PCF reprimanded the author, or in other words, when the party itself saw Aragon's texts as subversive. The first case concerns the portrayal of the anarchist movement in *Les cloches de Bâle*.

a. Flirting with Anarchy

The position of the PCF towards anarchy did not leave room for any ambiguity. In 1935, in the preface to the pamphlet *Contre l'anarchisme* (which examines articles previously published by Marx and Engels), one can read the following indictment: "Les clameurs des anarchistes contre 'l'autorité,' prêchant uniquement les 'actions par en bas,' leurs vociférations contre les 'actions despotiques d'en haut,' etc., sous une démagogie extérieure d'un gauchisme extrémiste, cachent une capitulation petite bourgeoise, conduisant au désarmement de la révolution, à la lutte vraiment révolutionnaire."²⁷ Essentially authoritarian, communists not only reject the anarchists' refusal of state authority, or any type of authority for that matter, but also their way of gaining popularity. Exploiting the emotions, passions, and prejudices of the people, anarchists actually obstruct revolution instead of propelling it.

²⁶ Ravis, "Aragon et l'anarchie: d'Anicet aux *Cloches de Bâle*," 294.

²⁷ Quoted by Ravis, "Aragon et l'anarchie: d'Anicet aux *Cloches de Bâle*," 290.

I have already examined the type of revolution Libertad proposed and the reasons Aragon rejected it. Nonetheless, the author displays his affinity with the movement Libertad initiated on several occasions. In Philippe Forest's opinion, sympathy for the anarchists is not occasional but rather dominates the whole novel. Thus, he points to the "l'inspiration anarchisante pure qui court tout au long du roman."²⁸ Another critic, Winegarten, maintains that even though Aragon joined the communist cause, he "simply carried his anarchism into the Party."²⁹ Indeed, Aragon does not depict Libertad in the unfavorable light the communist propaganda demanded: a working class man, Libertad does not crave either public support or public acceptance. Even amongst individual anarchists, Libertad speaks a dissonant language; he is anti-authoritarian, anti-capitalist but is remarkably not pro-worker, even though a worker himself.

As previously noted, Aragon disagrees with numerous aspects of Libertad's political agenda: his view of social classes, his criticism of the working class, his individualist revolt, and his readiness to oppress others in order to enjoy absolute freedom. And yet, Aragon creates a multifaceted character and insists repeatedly that Libertad belongs to the working class. Unlike most anarchists who reject work, writes Aragon, Libertad was not "un fainéant." (*Les cloches*, 209). Aragon points out that Libertad converges with the communists in his rejection of socialist reformism as well.

In crafting Libertad's character, Aragon employs the newspapers articles Libertad published, the electoral posters he composed, and the public speeches he held. In most cases, Aragon refrains from a direct commentary, allowing the reader to form a personal opinion. For instance, Aragon does not give a definitive verdict on Libertad's electoral slogan which equates

²⁸ Philippe Forest, ed., *Œuvres romanesques complètes*, by Louis Aragon (Paris: Gallimard 1997), 1062.

²⁹ Renée Winegarten, *Writers and Revolution: The Fatal Lure of Action* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1974), 241.

the electorate with the enemy. Aragon describes it as “une formule paradoxale” (*Les cloches*, 203) or in other words, a proposition that seems self-contradictory or absurd but in reality expresses a possible truth.

Above all, Aragon rebukes the communists’ claim that Libertad works for the police. As a rule, Libertad never did a background check of the people who joined his group. Aragon hints that even though the police might have infiltrated Libertad’s entourage, he was never aware of it. The closing argument Aragon presents against these charges is the way Libertad died. Aragon describes in detail the final confrontation between Libertad and police agents. Aragon contrasts the officers’ virility, all well-nourished and powerful, to the invalid man, fallen down on the street, with his crutches as his only weapons. Aragon does not waste any effort to make the reader commiserate with Libertad: he is a victim. His comrades acknowledge his death in passing without “aucun détail sur la mort, pas d’article nécrologique. N’est-ce pas, Libertad détestait cela, il appelait cela *le culte de la charogne*. Un homme tombe, le monde continue à tourner” (*Les cloches*, 225). The anarchists choose not to capitalize on Libertad’s murder out of respect for the wishes of a man who perfectly understood his own position in the world. In spite of his individualism, Aragon’s Libertad does not fall prey to the cult of personality, dominating others even after his death.

By the time of Libertad’s death, Catherine has already distanced herself from the anarchist movement. Yet, she sees Libertad as a martyr. Catherine thus deplores the individualist anarchist’s death and ranks him amongst her idols. Surprisingly, she places the members of the Bonnot gang on the same pedestal. For all his “faults,” Libertad never exercised violence on others. The protagonist merely claimed to be willing to act as a violent revolutionary.

Just like Libertad, the Bonnot Gang is not fictional. In the winter of 1911, a group of disgruntled workers, who mingled with the editors of *l'anarchie*, decided to put an end to their miserable existence and robbed the Société Générale. The gang outwitted law officials by using automobiles as a means of escape. The French policemen, on bicycles or on horses, stood no chance against Bonnot's innovations. Moreover, internal rivalries within the French police allowed the gang to operate for several months, although newspapers published pictures of the members shortly after their first crime.

The Bonnot Gang did not strike political targets; they mainly robbed rich people or banks for their own personal enrichment. The attacks of the Bonnot group coincide with the strike of the taxi drivers, a strike which sometimes grew violent. It is an occasion for the main protagonists, to compare the anarchists' use of violence to the strikers'. Unlike Victor, Catherine sees no difference between the murder of Plehve, the Russian Minister of Interior (assassinated in 1904 by the socialist revolutionaries), and the Bonnot's coups. Innocent people died as a result of both crimes, and yet the socialist revolutionaries refuse to call Plehve's murder an assassination. Aragon has Catherine adopt a non-relativistic view: murder is murder, no matter who commits it or the reasons behind it. Victor disagrees with Catherine; for him, individual acts of violence and political coups have no common denominator. Political coups, Victor argues, advance the cause of the working class and thus, demonstrate their superiority and validity.

Even though Catherine struggles to depart from her class and join the working class, it is still remarkable that Aragon has her hold a polemic discourse. Previously, Aragon encouraged the French proletariat to use its force (actual force, not metaphorical) and annihilate the bourgeoisie. Just like Drieu, Aragon opted for the most likely solution to bring about the age of perfection. Since anarchists were more successful, why reject their methods? After all, they had

the same enemy. Aragon has Catherine lament: “Ah! s’il y avait eu quelques centaines de Bonnot, il n’aurait pas fait long feu, le capitalisme” (*Les cloches*, 324). Catherine’s frustration with the working class informed her new appreciation of violence; Victor and his colleagues suddenly appear less glorious, less ready to take chances, and less consistent. And furthermore, the strikers are as violent as anarchists. One of Victor’s close associates, Bachereau, argues for “l’action directe:³⁰ qu’on leur brûle leurs voitures, qu’on leur casse la gueule” (*Les cloches*, 318). In other words, act exactly as the Bonnot gang. Indeed, the taxi drivers on strike physically assault scabs and policemen alike; and innocent people die as a result of the strike. In Catherine’s eyes, to choose one faction over another is inconsistent. Catherine impresses the reader with her lucidity, a lucidity seconded by utter cynicism: destruction of the old world entails the death of innocent people, and the initiators of this destruction can belong to any political faction.

Furthermore, Aragon challenges the strikers’ claim that Bonnot’s victims were indeed innocent. The anarcho-syndicalist, Bachereau, does not share Catherine’s admiration for anarchists because “il pensait, lui aussi, *aux innocentes victimes*” (*Les cloches*, 324). Aragon italicized *aux innocentes victimes* for even more emphasis. It is the French politicians, or the bourgeois, who believe in the innocence of the rich people murdered by Bonnot. Aragon certainly did not believe in their innocence. He thus makes it clear that he spurns the drivers for their dissociation from the anarchists. He has the leader of the union, Fiancette, play the game of the big industries: “Sa grève risquait de sombrer dans l’impopularité, on pouvait se mettre à confondre vraiment les chauffeurs et les anarchistes.... Le citoyen Fiancette réprouvait toute violence. Il était sincèrement désolé de ce qui se passait là. Wisner l’avait bien jugé: c’était un

³⁰ Peter Marshall explains that the strategy of ‘direct action’ consists “in the form of the boycott, buying goods from approved employers, sabotage, anti-militaristic propaganda, and the strike in all its gradation. The strike was considered to be the most important tactic, especially the general strike which took on mythic proportions.” (Peter Marshall, *Demanding the impossible: A History of Anarchism* (London: HarperCollins, 1992), 441).

homme avec qui on pouvait parler” (*Les cloches*, 354). In an attempt to make the strike socially acceptable, Fiancette appropriates the drivers’ strike, and Aragon emphasizes ownership yet again with his use of italics: “*sa grève*.” Demonstrating concern for propriety, Fiancette belongs more to Wisner’s world than to the working class. By associating Wisner and Fiancette, Aragon discredits the leader of the drivers’ union and has the strike aim for minimal reforms and not a complete reshaping of society.

The strike effort suffers indeed from Bonnot’s actions, and politicians use the taxi consortium to associate anarchists and strikers. In an effort of fairness, Aragon recognizes that the anarchists’ methods almost always have the opposite effect of their intended results. Even though they fight against the police, they end up buttressing state authority. Aragon illustrates this point with the infamous anarchist Auguste Vaillant who, in 1893, threw a bomb in the Chamber of Deputies. Catherine’s mother, as a close friend of Vaillant, knew of his planned coup ahead of time so she alerted the police. To her surprise, the police decided not to act upon that information and years later, M^{me} Simonidzé speculates: “Probablement que ça les arrangerait, qu’il y ait quelques députés tués... une combinaison ministérielle... je ne sais pas” (*Les cloches*, 328). The police did indeed capitalize on the event; and even though Vaillant did not kill anybody, claiming he only intended to hurt as many deputies as possible, he received a death sentence. Moreover, in response, the French government passed infamous laws limiting freedom of expression with a specific focus on antimilitarist sentiments. Aragon does not denounce the coup per se, but rather questions Vaillant’s reasoning as to the outcome of his actions.

Under these circumstances, it is even more telling that Aragon “manifeste une sorte de fraternité,”³¹ towards the Bonnot Gang. Instead of presenting an unambiguous portrait of Bonnot, Aragon chooses to explain and maybe even justify their reprehensible actions. One can argue that Aragon was faithful to his literary talent and refused to comply with the “black and white” rules. He relates Bonnot’s final confrontation with the police in commendatory terms:

Un seul homme suffit à montrer d’une façon éclatante la bassesse et la lâcheté de cette police française, si forte, quand il s’agit de faire des faux, de glisser un revolver dans la poche d’un ouvrier qu’on arrête, de pousser au crime ou à l’attentat ceux qui ne savent plus, face aux banquiers, aux industriels, aux provocateurs, s’il est un bien et s’il est un mal; un seul homme suffit à éclabousser, de son sang et de sa cervelle, les défenseurs d’un ordre, qui deux ans plus tard allait s’auréoler de millions de cadavres (*Les cloches*, 401).

Bonnot failed to distinguish good from evil, but he was not to be faulted. On the contrary, according to Aragon, Bonnot was the natural blowback of a corrupted system, a system that ultimately glorifies violence but abhors it when directed at itself. Suzanne Ravis argues that in this passage, Aragon “héroïse le révolté abattu.”³²

The Bonnot episode where Aragon applauds individual revolt has a precedent in his past.³³ In 1923, Germaine Berton, a young anarchist, attempted to murder Léon Daudet from the Action Française, but instead assassinated the secretary of the organization, Maurice Plateau. Germaine expressed no remorse for her crime because she held the Action Française accountable for Jaurès’ murder and for instigations to occupy the Ruhr region. After her acquittal, writes Margueritte Bonnot, “Simone Breton, Aragon et Max Morise allèrent lui porter une corbeille de fleurs rouges accompagnée de ces mots: ‘A Germaine Berton, qui a fait ce que nous n’avons pas

³¹ Ravis, “Aragon et l’anarchie: d’*Anicet* aux *Cloches de Bâle*,” 292.

³² *Ibid.*, 287.

³³ Carole Reynauld-Paligot points out the similarities between the surrealist type of revolt and the libertarian utopia: “la révolte aboutit le plus souvent à un non-conformisme dépolitisé. Mais chez les surréalistes, à cette attitude de refus succède la recherche d’un monde meilleur, la volonté de créer une autre morale. [...] Ainsi, se constitue une éthique originale, centrée sur la liberté, l’amour, le désir, et qui s’apparente à l’utopie libertaire.” (Carole Reynauld-Paligot, “L’éthique libertaire du surréalisme,” in *Littérature et anarchie*, ed. Alain Pessin and Patrice Terrone (Toulouse: Presses Universitaires du Mirail, 1998), 493).

su faire.””³⁴ Once a member of PCF, Aragon tempered his enthusiasm for the anarchist type of revolt,³⁵ and in 1935, in his *Message au Congrès des John Reed Club* in New York, he argued to have long surpassed that stage of his life and to have been cured of “sa maladie sociale” (*Pour un réalisme*, 55). Nonetheless, a year earlier in *Les cloches de Bâle*, Aragon does not prove his departure from extreme anarchist actions as firmly as the communist ethic demanded it. Aragon might have depicted the communists more reticent at exerting violence, but at the same time, through Catherine’s eyes, they also appear more hypocritical. Ultimately, she reprimands them for “vouloir la fin, et pas les moyens” (*Les cloches*, 324).

The doctrine of socialist realism demanded that characters be prototypes, either bad or evil; in other words, Fiancette, as the elected leader of a union, should inspire emulation from the reader. Most of the times, Aragon obeyed to the directives of what Régine Robin calls an “impossible aesthetics”;³⁶ but in the case of Fiancette or the anarchists, he did not. He has Catherine personally meet Soudy, one of the members of the Bonnot Gang. Upon their first encounter, Catherine experiences a tuberculosis attack, and the young Soudy, suffering from the same malady, tends to her needs. Aragon establishes beforehand Soudy’s profound concern for people in pain. Bedridden, Catherine is impressed by “quelque chose d’extraordinairement doux et fraternel dans la voix de ce petit” (*Les cloches*, 251). Even after he joins Bonnot, Soudy remains childlike to Catherine, “un pitoyable gosse, rongé par la maladie ... un enfant triste” (*Les cloches*, 391) Aragon thus rejects the bourgeois and communist dehumanization of the

³⁴ Marguerite Bonnet, “Littérature et le reste...” Foreword to the new edition of *Littérature* (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1978), 18; quoted in Ravis, “Aragon et l’anarchie: d’*Anicet* aux *Cloches de Bâle*,” 267.

³⁵ *L’Humanité* of January 1923 dissociated from Germaine Berton’s response: “Quant à l’acte même, on sait ce que nous en pensons comme communistes, comme marxistes révolutionnaires. Nous n’approuvons pas les initiatives individuelles dans la lutte des classes. [...] Les attentats individuels masquent au prolétariat son véritable adversaire: le régime capitaliste.” (Quoted in Ravis, “Aragon et l’anarchie: d’*Anicet* aux *Cloches de Bâle*,” 269).

³⁶ Régine Robin, *Socialist Realism: An Impossible Aesthetic* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1992).

Bonnot Gang, and he presents instead a proud participant in an armed robbery as a confused child. In order for the reader to relate to the young anarchist, he must know him on a personal level and admit that his aspirations and deceptions in life are those of any man.

In the end, Aragon attempts to redeem himself and has the anarchists agonizing over Bonnot's death. Unlike communism, anarchy depends on its leader and does not start from the bottom and move upwards. "Avec Bonnot," writes Aragon, "ce qui tombe c'est cette conception même qui poussait Libertad à nier la division du monde en classes, à demander à la fois la suppression du banquier et du contrôleur de métro" (*Les cloches*, 402). Anarchy has no valid answer for the turmoil of 1912; even though it can destroy the old world, it is incapable of providing a viable future, never managing to overcome the outburst of nihilism that engendered it.

The epilogue of the novel takes the reader to the famous 1912 socialist congress of Basle. Aragon's writing is at its most ambiguous. "Peur, apaisement, ironie, enthousiasme," writes Hélène Vellut, "telles sont les réactions d'Aragon, qu'il veut nôtres."³⁷ He applauds the socialist effort to prevent a world war; but at the same time, he can not contain his irony. Moreover, he commences to talk about the German socialist Clara Zetkin,³⁸ but then returns to Catherine's character. This fascination with Catherine's slow and vacillating journey towards "the light" has its roots in Aragon's own personal evolution. In *J'abats mon jeu*, he writes, "Je n'ai pas une seule certitude qui ne me soit venue autrement que par le doute, l'angoisse, la sueur, la douleur de l'expérience. Aussi ai-je le respect de ceux qui ne savent pas, de ceux qui cherchent, qui

³⁷ Hélène Vellut, "La composition des *Cloches de Bâle* de Louis Aragon," *Cahiers de littérature et de linguistique appliquée* 3-4 (1970): 11.

³⁸ A very close friend of Lenin and Rosa Luxembourg, Clara Zetkin was the most well-known communist militant before WWII. She died while in Moscow, in 1933. Her coffin was carried by Stalin and Molotov themselves, and then buried in the Kremlin wall.

tâtonnent, qui se heurtent. Ceux à qui la vérité est facile, spontanée, bien entendu j'ai pour eux une certaine admiration, je l'avoue, peu d'intérêt" (*J'abats*, 135). So by the end of the novel, Catherine, the interesting yet problematic protagonist, lures Aragon into countless divagations. From his own experience, Aragon knows the difficulty to depart from his class and moreover, to renounce the individual type of revolt anarchy favors.

In his address to the reader, Aragon admits his guilt concerning the following counts: "On dira que l'auteur s'égare et l'auteur ne le contredira pas. Le monde, lecteur est mal construit à mon gré, comme à ton gré mon livre. Oui, il faut refaire l'un et l'autre, avec pour héroïne une Clara, et non point Diane, et non point Catherine. Si je t'en donne un peu le goût, la simple velléité, tu peux déchirer ce bouquin avec mépris, que m'importe" (*Les cloches*, 424). A novel with a protagonist like Clara would be of no interest to a reader, and Aragon knows that fact. That is why he publishes *Les cloches* in spite of its ambiguity and, in the words of René Garmy, lack of "éclairage idéologique."³⁹ Had he been really discontent with the construction of his novel, Aragon would have never exposed himself to the criticism of the PCF, whose favor he was trying so hard to win. Aragon interferes directly in his novel, as Paul Morelle points out, "non pas pour en assumer les faiblesses, les revendiquer, mais pour s'en défendre; le rejet de la responsabilité non pas sur lui-même, sur ses fautes, mais sur d'autres: ici le monde qui serait mal construit comme est mal construit le livre (entendons: si le livre est raté, c'est que le monde est mal fait)."⁴⁰

Aragon rejects thus the basic socialist realist guidelines; it is clear that to him in 1934, there is no *one way* to write a novel. Similarly, there is no one way to destroy the old world and

³⁹ René Garmy, *L'Humanité*, 31 December 1934, quoted in Ravis, "Aragon et l'anarchie: d'*Anicet* aux *Cloches de Bâle*," 288.

⁴⁰ Paul Morelle, *Un nouveau cadavre: Aragon* (Paris: La Table Ronde, 1984), 117.

create a new one built upon its ashes. Thus, he makes no commentary on Bachereau's anarcho-syndicalism, long dismissed by the PCF, nor does he categorically condemn Libertad and Bonnot. Moreover, he has Victor, the novel's most positive character, opting for reforms and not revolution. For a Gnostic to claim others might also have alternatives to the problems of the world is pure heresy. And René Garmy blames Aragon exactly for the "idéalisation inconsciente de l'anarchisme. Malgré lui, contre ses propres tendances et sa propre volonté, son livre peut laisser au lecteur non averti l'impression fausse que le mouvement anarcho-syndicaliste recelait en lui quelque chose de sain, qu'il était un 'embryon de parti communiste.'" ⁴¹

I disagree with the communist critic that Aragon acted unconsciously. ⁴² Aragon himself admitted to the flawed construction of the novel where, just like in the real world, competing factions interact, all with possibly viable answers. To argue Aragon was not deliberate in his portrayal of the different types of anarchy is to refuse him authorial agency. Paradoxically, Garmy's argument for Aragon's unawareness recalls Breton's defense of Aragon's *Front Rouge*. When Aragon does not meet the expectations, both the communists and the Surrealists invoke some type of automatic writing. In the case of the communist critic, an author is not only defenseless against the subconscious, but also the subconscious acts necessarily against the author's own will. This theory then begs the question: what about the times when Aragon did conform to the communist ideology?

Aragon understood his party's position towards anarchy. He himself published a vehement indictment of anarchy, which he described as "l'origine et fondement de tous les

⁴¹ Garmy, in Ravis 289.

⁴² It is however understandable why Garmy attempts to depict Aragon as "fooled."

fascismes.”⁴³ Moreover he saw anarchy as “contre-révolutionnaire, puisqu’elle distrait de la plus grande révolution possible des esprits révolutionnaires.”⁴⁴ Aragon’s charge prefigures the preface *Contre l’anarchisme* quoted earlier: anarchy is a distraction. Yet, Aragon welcomed this distraction into his first socialist novel. Therefore he lets the ambiguous Catherine distract him from the real communist Clara Zetkin.

Clara remains thus an immaterial character. Clara can not “save” the novel, because Aragon does not give the reader the opportunity to know her. Aragon might have attempted to conclude his novel in an unequivocal manner, but he did not. He concludes that Clara is the woman of the future; but in the absence of compelling arguments, he can not convince us. Clara does not have the same effect on the reader of *Les cloches* as she did at the Tours Congress. She can not bring the reader to communism since at Basle she “performs” in an atmosphere Aragon described as “touch[ant] à l’opéra et au carnaval” (*Les cloches*, 429). While Aragon insists that he does not wish to mock⁴⁵ the dignified effort for world peace, he can not refrain from noting the ridiculousness of the processions. His mixed feelings stem from his knowledge that a few months later these same leaders of the socialist movement present at Basle would betray the proletariat.

Even *l’Humanité*, writes Aragon, omitted to mention Clara’s speech: “D’après *l’Humanité* du lendemain, impossible de soupçonner même la présence à Bâle de la militante allemande Clara Zetkin, qui y prit la parole au nom de toutes les femmes socialistes” (*Les*

⁴³ Louis Aragon, “Le Proletariat de l’Esprit,” *Clarté* 78 (November 1925), quoted in Ravis, “Aragon et l’anarchie: d’Anicet aux *Cloches de Bâle*,” 276.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ “Peut-être bien qu’il y avait plus de ridicule que d’efficacité à cette parade des Guillaume Tell et des Anges de la Paix, Peut-être que la bouffonnerie l’emportait sur le tragique. [...] Pourtant, dans cette fête, où s’élève un double parfum d’encens et de pourriture, présager des terribles charniers du Masurenland ou de Verdun, je ne ris pas du geste des enfants qui sèment des fleurs. [...] Je ne ris pas de cet immense peuple rassemblé dans Bâle, de cet immense espoir qui sera frustré.” (*Les cloches*, 430)

cloches, 436). Aragon slanders one last time the Socialist Party's press organ because they failed to grasp the importance of Clara's intervention and the novelty of her presence at a congress. In an attempt to have the reader understand her impact, Aragon promises at the end of his novel: "c'est elle que je chante. Et c'est elle que je chanterai" (*Les cloches*, 438). He does not, however, tear up his book either, but goes ahead and publishes it. Why leave the reader with the option to tear up the book himself? Why not set the right example? Is it because Aragon felt more indebted to his literary talent than to his party? It is safe to propose an affirmative answer to the last question. At the same time, there is an indirect admission of one's own limits, and, by extension, of the limits of literature. A novel might wish to transform the world, instead of simply representing it; but in the end, there is only so much that one can hope to accomplish.

b. The "Quest for the Absolute"

At the end of WWII, Aragon published his novel *Aurélien*, another work that discontented the PCF. Even though he spent the war years actively involved in the French resistance, the PCF berated Aragon for having wasted his time writing a bourgeois novel. Once more, Aragon did not write the novel the party was expecting from him. In *J'abats mon jeu*, Aragon recalls: "On me disait déjà d'*Aurélien*, avec ce visage offusqué des gens qui savent et vivent hors du péché, mais comment, comment avez-vous pu écrire *cela* de 1941 à 1943?⁴⁶ dans un pareil temps n'y avait-il pas mieux à faire?... C'est qu'*Aurélien*, c'est de la littérature bourgeoise, c'est que je commets le crime d'aimer la littérature bourgeoise... Fabrice des Dongo et Frédéric Moreau n'étaient pas syndiqués non plus" (*J'abats*, 37, 38).

Instead of writing a novel that would invite the French to fight against fascism and for the communist revolution, Aragon wrote *Aurélien*, a lengthy love novel with almost no trace of

⁴⁶ Aragon wrote the Epilogue after the liberation of France.

socialist realist principles. In this particular case, the criticism of the PCF is entirely justified.⁴⁷ From the reader's perspective, Aragon's abandonment of socialist realism criteria is precisely what makes *Aurélien* the most enjoyable novel from the cycle *Le Monde Réel*. The author himself, seems to be guilty of the same esthetic prejudices, calling it in the 1966 Foreword "un livre de prédilection" (Foreword to *Aurélien*, 22). Consequently, Aragon had the "non syndiqué" individualist, Aurélien, seduce his feminine entourage, and the reader as well, with no effort to dissuade his public against it.

Yet, when Aragon composed *Aurélien*, barely five years elapsed since the publication of *Les voyageurs de l'impériale* and the detestable Pierre de Mercadier. Even though Pierre does not appear as a unilateral character, through him, Aragon painstakingly illustrated what he believed to be the nefarious consequences of individualism. Thus, at no time could the reader hesitate about what the author wants him to think about his protagonist. Pierre's selfishness has repercussions for the whole society, and thus the reader should partake in the author's moral condemnation.

Aurélien is a more ambiguous character, and his ambiguity derives in great part from his model in real life, Pierre Drieu La Rochelle. I disagree with Morelle who states that, "Aragon n'écrit pas ce qu'il désire écrire, ce qu'il a besoin d'écrire, mais ce qu'il pense que le lecteur attend de lui, ce que le public, ou le Parti pense. Le Parti pense que Drieu doit être traité en méchant et le public s'attend qu'on le lui présente comme tel. Alors Drieu est un méchant."⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Even the portrayal of the big industrialist Edmond Barbentane is somewhat questionable. Unlike his predecessors, Edmond has no concern to constantly accrue his fortune. Whatever he received through marrying Quesnel's daughter is sufficient him. It is true that Edmond is corrupted and does not shy away from anything, but he is never obsessed with money, which for him is nothing more "qu'un moyen de ne plus avoir à penser à l'argent." (*Aurélien*, 181) A consumer rather than a producer, Edmond cherishes luxury above all and his only goal in life aims at the preservation of his comfortable lifestyle.

⁴⁸ Morelle, 143.

The party did indeed consider Drieu evil; and probably so did Aragon. For a change, Aragon seemed open and wished to having his public understand a behavior even though he disagreed with it.

In the midst of the German occupation, the resistance fighter chooses as model for his character the collaborationist with whom he had had no direct contact in almost two decades. I already mentioned Drieu's repeated efforts to distinguish himself from Aragon, which testifies above all to Drieu's fear of being similar to the all-despised communist. Drieu acknowledges on several occasions the similarities between fascism and communism, although most times, he argues for the superiority of fascism. Aragon does not display the same obsession with Drieu, at least not in his public writings. In his private war correspondence with Jean Paulhan however, Drieu's name appears frequently. Yet, since Drieu replaced Paulhan at the *Nouvelle Revue Française* and his actions affected all non-fascist writers, it was only natural for Aragon to be interested in Drieu. In this context, *Aurélien* comes as a surprise to anyone who is familiar with Aragon and Drieu's friendship and their subsequent split.

The curiosity and confusion the character of Aurélien generated, ultimately irritated the author, who decided in 1963 to confess to Francis Crémieux: "On a dit essentiellement que c'était moi et c'est moi qui ai dit que c'était Drieu La Rochelle. Drieu a été un ami de ma première jeunesse, dont je me suis trouvé séparé, et quand je parle de Drieu, je ne parle que de cet ami que j'ai eu, je ne parle pas de ce qu'il est devenu, ce sont deux êtres incompatibles" (Foreword to *Aurélien*, 8). Nonetheless, the whole novel can be construed as an attempt to deconstruct this last statement: Aurélien became fascist in response to the war experience, and the failures he experienced during his youth. The same can be applied to Drieu. Drieu's youth – when he enjoyed Aragon's friendship – is perfectly compatible with his later life. Serra also

notes that “il n’y avait aucune incompatibilité entre le jeune Drieu et celui de la maturité...

Feindre le contraire était une manière de prendre ses distances, caractéristique de l’homme et sans doute compréhensible dans ces difficiles circonstances historiques.”⁴⁹

In the same interview, Aragon continues:

Il va sans dire que bien des traits d’Aurélien viennent de moi, parce que je n’étais pas Drieu et que, quand je mettais Drieu dans certaines situations, c’était en moi que se trouvaient les solutions et les pensées. Mais Aurélien n’était pas plus au fond, Drieu la Rochelle que moi-même. Il y a un troisième facteur qui est une composante du personnage d’Aurélien, c’est qu’Aurélien, plus que tel ou tel homme, est avant tout une situation, un homme dans une certaine situation (Foreword to *Aurélien*, 8).

The fictional character who realizes the synergy between two individuals and still had consistency and coherence speaks above all about of the close friendship Aragon and Drieu once had. Lecarme hypothesizes that “il ne serait pas inconcevable, croyons-nous, que la figure androgyne d’Aurélien combine, en les sublimant, les traits plutôt masculins de Drieu et les traits plutôt féminins d’Aragon; qu’elle incarne, en conséquence, la vérité d’une relation homosexuelle refoulée et déniée, et que, sous l’effet de pression intolérable de la mémoire et de l’oubli, elle ait atteint à une vérité mythique, quasi universelle.”⁵⁰ Although frustrated sexuality can play a decisive role in one’s political affiliation, there is not enough evidence to support Lecarme’s suppositions.

What matters above all for our study is Aragon’s admission that he fused himself into a future fascist. Consequently, if Aurélien is a man made from elements of a man of both the right and the left, he could have as easily adhered to the communist cause. Moreover, Aragon sets to move from the particular to the general: Aurélien’s responses to the stimuli around him are not only his own, but are typical of the former combatant upon his return to civilian life.

⁴⁹ Serra, 213.

⁵⁰ Lecarme, *Drieu la Rochelle ou le bal des maudits*, 360.

Aurélien belonged to the generation that served three years of military service and then was enrolled in WWI. He “ne s’était jamais remis tout à fait de la guerre” (*Aurélien*, 31). The consequences of having spent almost eight years in the army are catastrophic for Aurélien and for the generation he represents. From this perspective, we can inscribe this “bourgeois” novel into the category of socialist realism, although it does not clearly illustrate the potential for change in French society, nor does it portray a character the reader should unequivocally emulate. Aurélien is reminiscent of a character from Drieu’s short story *La comédie de Charleroi*: just like Drieu’s protagonist, Aurélien feels guilty for having survived the trenches while his brothers in arms did not.

Having spent his formative years receiving orders, Aurélien can not take any initiative on his own. Yet, he blames himself for his lethargy: “Aurélien se disait que la guerre n’avait pas dû jeter tout le monde dans cette irrésolution, et il en accusait sa nature. Il ne savait pas qu’il participait d’un mal très répandu” (*Aurélien*, 45). Aragon excuses Aurélien; since the phenomenon is so widespread, Aurélien then can not be singled out and admonished. Even though politics bores Aurélien, Aragon differentiates him from Pierre Mercadier. Unlike Pierre who never did anything for others, Aurélien fought in the war. Aurélien does not get involved in any political group because war consumed all his energy.

Working could have been the last resort to propel Aurélien into meaning, but, unfortunately, he inherited enough money to permit his utter laziness. The communist Aragon, who praised the Soviet workers for the countless hours they put into the construction of socialism, does not revolt against Aurélien’s inactivity. Instead, he “saves” his protagonist again and has him worry about not working. His inquietude recalls, Aragon writes, “celle qu’il avait connu dans les longs loisirs des tranchées. Celle-ci, sans doute, avait ouvert les voies de celle-là,

rendu en lui naturelle cette attente sans objet, cette absence de perspective” (*Aurélien*, 47).

Aragon attributes thus all of Aurélien’s faults to the war experience, an experience that traps him into vice.

A connoisseur of his future readers, Aragon wishes to deter them from casting moral judgments on his character. Almost apologetic, he warns: “On aurait tort de juger si vite Aurélien, et de le croire satisfait, ou de conclure de son inquiétude à des ambitions plus hautes, à de la cupidité. La vie qui lui était faite, ce confort, cette apparente sécurité, il n’y était pour rien, il ne les avait pas recherchés, désirés” (*Aurélien*, 47). Unlike the fictional Aurélien, Drieu did not benefit from any inheritance; on the contrary, he did anything he could to ensure his financial security. Just like Gilles, Drieu married a rich woman whom he did not love; and when he divorced her, he received a large fortune from his wife. The parallels between Aurélien and Drieu are not always accurate. What matters most in this case is that Aragon attempts to explain to his readers that inheriting does not constitute a crime. Moreover, he also tries to get into the mindset of the person who inherits a large fortune and to describe money’s irresistible lure. In Aurélien’s case, his fortune prevents him from reaching his full potential and, more importantly, from escaping war’s impact.

Aragon refuses to blame Aurélien and employs a different narrative strategy: Aurélien recognizes his own flaws and becomes his own judge. Aurélien lucidly examines himself in the smallest details, always with a propensity to denigrate himself. Outside of his bourgeois milieu, Aurélien experiences his shortcomings even more acutely. A visit to the municipal swimming pool reveals to the ever critical Aurélien the lack of naturalness of his own bourgeois class. While Aurélien strives to distinguish himself from others in his way of dressing, he paradoxically thrives in the uniformity of the bathing suits. This uniformity comes as a relief to

Aurélien who has grown tired of playing the roles others expect of him. With an unaccustomed ease, he befriends a certain Riquet; but, once dressed up, the two men find it impossible to return to their newly found camaraderie. Neither of them can surpass class differences; the dialogue can not develop between the poorly-clothed Riquet and Aurélien who had a pearl pinned to his tie. The friendship vanes, especially since Aurélien feels remorseful and guilty for not doing anything in life. The short encounter with Riquet only reinforces Aurélien's feelings that his entire existence is a fake. A man of action – as a lover and father – Riquet contrasts sharply with the unattached and fainéant Aurélien. The protagonist repeatedly makes this comparison, as if in an effort to belittle himself.

Among the many faults Aurélien admits to, one stands out: “ce trait de caractère au moins, qui faisait qu’il n’achevait rien, ni une pensée ni une aventure. Le monde était pour lui plein de digressions qui le menaient sans cesse à la dérive.... Il ne s’était pas plus tôt formulé une vérité certaine, que l’incertain lui en paraissait, qu’il était prêt à parier contre lui-même, à épouser la certitude inverse” (*Aurélien*, 88). Aurélien walks through life uncertain not only of his ideas, but also of his own wishes and feelings. This uncertainty stems in great part from his passivity; he takes whatever life throws at him without reacting in any meaningful way.

When Edmond Barbentane decides Aurélien should court Bérénice, Aurélien accepts it. Even though at first he does not find her attractive, Aurélien plays the part Barbentane assigned him. He plays it reluctantly, but does not gather enough energy to resist it altogether. Falling in love with Bérénice is not part of anyone's master plan and takes everyone by surprise, including Aurélien. His love for Bérénice saves Aurélien from a mediocre destiny and from the author's contempt. Among Aragonian couples, Aurélien and Bérénice form a category of their own, even though their life as a couple never materializes. Lured by the waters of the Seine, Aurélien grasps

for his feelings for Bérénice like a drowning man. He desperately needs a buttress to escape his meaningless existence. The words “Je vous aime” – a sentiment which Aurélien never addressed to any woman before Bérénice – have the power to make him “retrouve[r] l’estime de lui-même. Il vient de légitimer, mieux que d’excuser, sa vie. Cette flâne, cette irrésolution s’expliquent. Il attendait cette minute” (*Aurélien*, 239). The transformative love that operates on Aurélien’s self-perception redeems him; all his apparently wasted potential gathers meaning with the perspective of this new relationship.

In spite of their mutual love, Aurélien and Bérénice fail as well. In the first chapter of this work, I have examined the various reasons that trigger the collapse of Aragon’s couples. With Aurélien and Bérénice, the failure is of entirely different sort since they both belong to the bourgeoisie and they live outside of politics. Catherine and Jean Thiébault were also bourgeois, but their couple disintegrates for Catherine acts on account of her sympathy for the working people and Jean does not. Aurélien is as unsympathetic to others as Jean, and he even confesses that fact: “Personne ne peut s’apitoyer que sur soi-même” (*Aurélien*, 123). Yet, Aurélien’s lack of empathy does not cause the couple’s initial failure. “Le sujet du livre,” writes Aragon in the foreword to his novel, “est l’impossibilité du couple précisément du fait que la femme, elle, a eu une certaine continuité de pensée malgré la guerre, à cause de la continuité de sa vie, sans l’entracte des tranchées, et qu’elle est de ce fait à un autre stade de pensée qu’Aurélien” (Foreword to *Aurélien*, 14). Aurélien’s life was stopped before it even had the chance to start; and as pointed out earlier, he finds himself trapped in a state of suspension. Drieu has also noted the same insurmountable gap between the men who fought in war and the women who did not. Drieu normally grants superiority to the men who have tested their courage versus the women who can never gauge their personality. By contrast, Aurélien does not prevail over Bérénice;

while he tested himself in war and proved his courage, that accomplishment did not advance him in civilian life. On the contrary, he became socially inept, and even though Aurélien left the trenches physically, he remained there mentally.

Aurélien disappoints Bérénice since he can not respond to her “quest for the absolute.”

Aragon describes the abstract term in the following manner:

Ce symptôme est une incapacité totale pour le sujet d’être heureux. ... De ce qui ferait son bonheur, il exige toujours davantage. Il détruit par une rage tournée sur elle-même ce qui serait son contentement. Il est dépourvu de la plus légère aptitude au bonheur. J’ajouterai qu’il se complaît dans ce qui le consume. Qu’il confond sa disgrâce avec je ne sais quelle idée de la dignité, de la grandeur, de la morale, suivant le tour de son esprit, son éducation, les mœurs de son milieu (*Aurélien*, 331).

Contradictions tear Bérénice apart and the all too worldly Aurélien can not ever cure her fatal “disease.” In the end, her hesitations reduce Aurélien to paralysis. For most of their short relationship, Aurélien and Bérénice miss each other, like two parallel lines which never intersect. When Bérénice finally leaves her husband, she arrives too late as Aurélien has found revenge in the arms of a former mistress. To Bérénice, he resembles an “objet taché, ou ébréché, écorné... le plus beau du monde... je ne peux plus le voir. Il faut le jeter... Je ne le supporte plus...” (*Aurélien*, 505). She can never forgive his faux pas. Her resentment towards him surfaces not so much out of jealousy but more because Aurélien does not fit the perfect image she wanted of him.⁵¹

Feminist *avant la lettre*, Aragon always sides with the woman when he depicts a couple. Even in the case of positive male characters, such as Armand Barbentane, men are not blameless in their love relationships. With Aurélien, assigning guilt for this new failed love is more problematic. Certainly Aurélien disrupted the harmony, but he acted only in response to

⁵¹ Despite her disappointment, Bérénice continues to love Aurélien even after she deserts him and always regrets that she could not “croire en lui.” (*Aurélien*, 561)

Bérénice's rejection. Moreover, when Bérénice herself takes on a lover, she convinces herself that one can have a sexual relationship with one person and continue to love another. The question therefore lies deeper than sex, in the realm of the quest for the absolute. This is a quest that no human being can actually fulfill for somebody like Bérénice. Guilty of falling short of an impossible ideal, Aurélien resigns to rejoin his class: he accepts a position in the factory his parents owned.

The epilogue of the novel transports the reader 20 years into the future, at the beginning of WWII. The spectacle of the French army in retreat is pitiful. Aurélien retrospects his life, which he finds "si peu choisie, si peu faite à sa volonté" (*Aurélien*, 709). The Aurélien of the epilogue is a fascist. Even though he tried to remain outside the realm of politics, he could not; and after the events of February 1934, he joined the ranks of the former war combatants:

Ce soir-là, ce six février, n'était que le résultat d'une illusion. D'une illusion tenace. Quand on a eu sa jeunesse ravagée par la guerre. Au fond quand on n'a pas eu de jeunesse à cause de la guerre, il est bien naturel de croire aux mouvements des anciens combattants, de croire que tout ce qu'on trouve mal fait, pourri, on peut s'en débarrasser en s'unissant avec les autres, ceux qui ont été avec vous dans les tranchées... (*Aurélien*, 711).

Aragon has hinted to this possible association before the epilogue as well. Giving in to the demands of his former brothers in arms, Aurélien participated in one of their reunion dinners. In spite of his initial reluctance, Aurélien ends up enjoying himself and even starts singing. The friend who accompanies Aurélien to the reunion notices with astonishment that "pour la première fois, le visage un peu suant, il n'avait pas l'air de se surveiller, le docteur comprit que Leurtillois était dans son élément véritable" (*Aurélien*, 473). Just like at the swimming pool when Aurélien thrives on uniformity, amongst his former fellow soldiers, Aurélien can renounce the masks and act in accordance with his true self. Aurélien did not join the movements of the former combatants in an effort to differentiate himself from the rest, but rather because he

needed a community with which to share the same political aspirations. It is very natural, writes Aragon, for Aurélien to seek out their company, to put his trust in them and their far right agenda.

Overly deterministic, Aragon portrays Aurélien as a product of his environment: Aurélien was forced to waste his youth in war, and consequently, all his life decisions suffered from that experience. Yet, there is some truth to Aragon's argument as well, since one makes decisions in a specific historical context, and not in a vacuum. In Aurélien's case, it was in the aftermath of WWI, after a traumatizing trial, and with the constant guilt of having survived at the expense of others. Aurélien can not even look at his own hands without shuddering at the thought of all the atrocities he committed himself. This load, too much for the unstable and passive Aurélien to bear, predisposed him to a militaristic and vengefully nationalistic world view.

Yet Aurélien got disenchanted with the former war combatants as well: another effort that led to nothing. Ultimately, disappointed with the democratic system, Aurélien became one of those "qui croyaient qu'on ne peut refaire le monde que par la violence" (*Aurélien*, 711). Thus, Aurélien's recourse to violence grew out of resentment and despair and not out of a will to destroy. To his credit, Aragon does not give in to the temptation to demonize the enemy. On the contrary, he humanizes Aurélien by having him suffer at the French defeat and genuinely care about the fate of his fellow soldiers.

In contrast to Drieu who welcomed the Germans into France as the ones who would finally make change happen, Aurélien is haunted not only by his personal failure but also by the national one as well. Having lived through WWI, Aurélien believed in the French victory and suffered when his countrymen did not capitalize on their advantage. Yet, his feelings towards Germany did not lean towards chauvinism. Even though he opposed the retreat of the French

troops from the Rhine basin, he also opposed his countrymen's superior attitude towards the Germans. Aragon takes his protagonist to Bavaria where Aurélien witnesses firsthand the hostilities between the two nations.

Surprised by the hospitality of the natives, Aurélien finds it difficult to consider the Germans his adversaries: "Des ennemis? Vraiment ce n'était pas croyable" (*Aurélien*, 673). In one of his solitary walks, Aurélien finds himself surrounded by a group of young Germans, who sees him as the enemy. More vehement than the men, the young women verbally assault Aurélien, threatening to chase him and the like out of their country. Unlike the other French whom Aurélien befriends in his trip, and who act as if they owned Germany, Aurélien takes the side of the German women. Forced to pass by the boisterous group on a narrow path, Aurélien had "le sentiment que d'un coup d'épaule, il ferait un kilomètre de hauteur, il ne se sentit pas vraiment très vainqueur et assez penaud. Surtout à cause de ce sentiment en lui, qu'après tout, à leur place, il aurait senti comme eux" (*Aurélien*, 678). Aurélien stands out from his bigoted countrymen who embarrass him. For him, France or Germany amount to the same thing, especially since all people are materialistic, regardless of their nationality. For a former combatant to express such ideas as early 1923 would be considered heresy by the common Frenchman. Some twenty years later, Aurélien laments what he and his countrymen have done with their victory

According to Aurélien, WWII happened as a result of the French mismanagement of the previous victory. Aragon alludes that Aurélien has no original explanations and only repeats clichés. In spite of his sympathy for Germans and for their fascist doctrines, Aurélien still deplores France's loss of freedom. At the same time, he wishes for the armistice to be signed as soon as possible. Aurélien already spent years in the trenches and is fully aware of what war

entails. In his forties, Aurélien feels tired, overwhelmed by the “sentiment de sa faiblesse, à Aurélien, la fièvre dans ses veines” (*Aurélien*, 724). Aragon’s Aurélien joins thus the ranks of veterans who collaborated with the enemy so that they did not have to fight yet another war.

Bérénice, in contrast, believes the opposite.⁵² The quest for the absolute that devoured her matured into compassion towards the less fortunate.⁵³ At least, that is the explanation Aragon offered to the communist reprimand: “le goût de l’absolu chez Bérénice s’est, avec la vie, transformé en cette conscience, que vous l’appeliez morale ou politique... Je dis ceci pour les critiques de *gauche* qui m’ont été faites de cette introduction d’un concept aussi peu « scientifique » (c’est bien comme ça qu’on dit?) que le goût de l’absolu, dans *Aurélien*” (Foreword to *Aurélien*, 24).⁵⁴ I entirely agree with Suzanne Ravis who asserts that Aragon’s attempt to redeem the notion of “le goût de l’absolu,” sheds light on the author’s conflicting attitudes towards socialist realism and communism in general:

la formulation d’une thèse dans un roman s’accompagne toujours de la proposition d’un système de valeurs non ambiguës. Ici la distinction bien/mal n’est guère possible: posé d’abord comme une ‘maladie’ dont ‘les amateurs frénétiques de la grandeur humaine’ regrettent à tort la rareté, ‘le goût de l’absolu’ est ensuite étrangement valorisé: il suppose ‘une foi profonde, totale, en la beauté, la bonté, le génie. Ces contradictions ruinent l’univocité du discours. Elles ne sont que l’effet d’une ambiguïté beaucoup plus fondamentale, qui concerne l’origine de ce discours: le narrateur lui-même.’⁵⁵

The new Bérénice can not accept Aurélien’s defeatist attitude concerning the German invasion. In her intransigence, she would have destroyed Paris rather than capitulate without a

⁵² Aurélien meets Bérénice serendipitously in their retreat.

⁵³ We learn from her aloof husband that Bérénice got involved with numerous committees and was currently harboring a Spanish refugee.

⁵⁴ In 1964, when he wrote these lines, Aragon uses irony in referring to the pretense to science that communist literature claimed to have. His position in the PCF was secured and he became as Jean- Pierre Vernant notes, a the arbiter of communist art: “Et même quelques-uns, mais je n’y insisterai pas car ce n’est pas plaisant à regarder, écrivains et artistes, dépendaient matériellement du Parti, qui avait créé aussi une contre-société intellectuelle: leurs succès, leurs tirages, leurs traductions étaient absolument en fonction de leur conformité avec, par exemple, ce qu’Aragon décrétait qu’il fallait faire en poésie, en peinture, etc.” (Jean- Pierre Vernant, *Staline à Paris*, ed. Natacha Dioujeva and François George (Paris: Editions Ramsey, 1982), 17).

⁵⁵ Suzanne Ravis, *Aurélien ou l’écriture indirecte* (Paris-Genève: Champion-Slatkine, 1988), 140-141.

fight. She chooses resistance at all costs, so that the French soldiers who already died did not die in vain. Those who are alive had the moral obligation to continue fighting, and Aurélien's resignation to defeat widens the gap even further between the two. Moreover, she finds his preoccupation with their failed attempt at love inappropriate in the current situation. For her, it is impossible to think of personal matters during the collapse of their country and she sees it as disrespectful towards all those who lost their lives. Her words sound insincere to Aurélien who can not efface his personal drama even when confronted with the collective crisis. This is what makes Bérénice give the final verdict for their relationship: "Il n'y a vraiment plus rien de commun entre vous et moi, mon cher Aurélien, plus rien..." (*Aurélien*, 749).

In an explanation of his famous poem, *Il n'y a pas d'amour heureux*, (written at the same time as *Aurélien*), Aragon sheds light on Aurélien and Bérénice's impossibility to find love. Aragon explained that it was impossible to find individual happiness in the midst of general unhappiness. One can obviously still be in love during war but, if that person has any moral sense, he or she can not be happy. Since Aurélien still thinks only of himself and attempts to regain Bérénice, that testifies to his selfishness and ultimately to his lack of morality. In the last scenes of the novel, Aragon parallels thus the egotistical fascist and the new communist woman refusing to give in to individualism. In the absence of a common ground, Aurélien and Bérénice can not engage in any meaningful dialogue. In the end, the fascist Aurélien, who believes in Pétain's honesty, can not offer any argument to counteract Bérénice's unwillingness to talk about themselves. In the epilogue, Aragon presents in Aurélien most of the fascist stereotypes: immoral, self-centered, misogynistic. Disappointed with the changes in Bérénice, Aurélien concludes: "Une femme a une autre genre d'intelligence... Quand elles se mêlent de ce qui ne les

regarde pas...” (*Aurélien*, 750). Aurélien views politics as exclusively men’s domain, as women are incapable of forming judgments based on anything but feelings.

As if suddenly made aware of the favorable portrayal of Aurélien, Aragon uses the last pages of the novel to deconstruct it. Yet, he did not use all the ammunition Drieu’s biography could have offered. According to Paul Renard, Aragon “banalise” Drieu, since he does not wish to “décourager le lecteur.”⁵⁶ In the foreword Aragon writes: “J’avais décidé de maintenir cette évolution dans des limites autres que celles de la vie, de m’en tenir à un Drieu qui n’irait pas jusqu’à l’horreur du doriotisme, simplement devenu par la force des choses, sa famille, un industriel croyant à la nécessité d’en passer par les voies prescrites par le Maréchal” (Foreword to *Aurélien*, 10). Moreover, unlike Drieu, Aurélien is not guilty of anti-Semitic sentiments. In an act of generosity, Aragon corrected thus the political trajectory of his former friend, rendering it more palatable to the public. This change could not have appeased Drieu, however. Considering Drieu’s hatred of the bourgeoisie and his admitted dissatisfaction with Pétain, it is safe to assume that Drieu could not have been satisfied with Aragon’s corrections.

Aragon did not deviate from his initial goal: “il ne s’agissait pas pour moi de *condamner*, voire de *dénoncer* Aurélien. Je voulais montrer en Aurélien, par Aurélien comment l’homme d’hier, un soldat de l’autre guerre, arrivé à l’âge de la responsabilité, n’a plus reconnu le destin auquel il était à nouveau entraîné” (Foreword to *Aurélien*, 10). In one sense, Aragon redeems Aurélien for the choices he made: he is simply a man who has not understood, who has not managed to overcome his weaknesses. Just like a bourgeois who can be reeducated, so can a fascist. It is all a matter of understanding. Obviously, Aragon manifests the same Gnostic

⁵⁶ Paul Renard, “Drieu la Rochelle, ‘Pilotis’ d’*Aurélien*?,” *Roman 20-50: Revue d’Etude du Roman du XX^e siècle* 7 (March 1989): 96.

confidence that he understood, a confidence easy to explain in the euphoria of the victory over the fascists.

At the time of the armistice, Aragon calls for one's understanding the enemy. He, however, endangered his life for several years in his fight against this enemy. *Aurélien* reveals thus a conundrum: was the enemy only circumstantial? Just as Aurélien refuses to consider the Germans of WWI his enemies, Aragon passes over political differences and considers the human being behind both the communist and the fascist. A dialogue between the two is impossible, as illustrated by Aurélien and Bérénice; yet, the one who becomes a fascist does not necessarily have a putrid soul.

Above all, Aragon contests the applicability of science to explaining human nature. Bérénice's "goût de l'absolu" drives all her movements, and yet Aragon can not explain what exactly it entails. He thus admits there is something beyond the discernable and thus beyond control in a human being. Suffering from a "disease" that lies beyond medical diagnosis, Bérénice fights unsuccessfully against the invisible virus that prevents her from being happy. Serra argues that "la grandeur de l'écrivain libre tient précisément au refus de transformer les personnages en caricatures politiques, en mannequins idéologiques: ils sont humains parce qu'ils ont des limites."⁵⁷ Aragon did, however, try to redeem himself and contended that Bérénice's taste for the absolute became morality. In my view, he only ventured onto even more unstable fields. If I follow Aragon's argument, Bérénice became involved in politics not because she could not bear others' suffering, but because of her own unhappiness. With that in mind, politics then compensates for her personal failure, filling the void left behind by her unsuccessful relationship with Aurélien. I disagree with Lucille F. Becker who suggests that Bérénice "has

⁵⁷ Serra, 212.

completed the journey Catherine was unable to finish, to become the prototype of the women of the future.”⁵⁸ Since Bérénice’s experience is not grounded in the concrete, a reader can not replicate her experience.

The end of the novel offers the reader yet another surprise: a stray German bullet kills Bérénice. “La représentation d’une Histoire gouvernée par le hasard qui affluera dans les derniers romans,” writes Carine Trévisan, “n’apparaît cependant que de manière asymptotique dans *Aurélien*.”⁵⁹ Trévisan suggests that Bérénice’s death is a possible foreshadowing of Aragon’s future view of history. It seems that the reassuring view of history advocated by Aragon and Drieu could not resist the impact of a new war. Constant and Bérénice’s deaths reveal the absurdity of the human condition.

Moreover, through Bérénice, Aragon grants human beings transcendence; economic determinism is not at the root of her actions. On the contrary, Bérénice’s existence exceeds the limits of material experience, her originality as defined by her subconscious. Bérénice stands in stark opposition to the communist idea of man, which presupposes, as Camus notes, that “L’homme [...] doit se résumer au moi social et rationnel, objet de calcul.”⁶⁰ Her thirst for the absolute, unpredictable and even irrational makes Bérénice a rebel of a metaphysical type. She revolts above all against the banality of human existence and always aims for something higher – a higher purpose that, at a different moment in time, might have appeared as a search for divinity.

In *L’homme à cheval* and *Les chiens de paille*, Drieu outgrew the illusion of history’s linearity, marked by a constant progression towards a much better world. He also overcame his

⁵⁸ Lucille F. Becker, *Louis Aragon* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1971), 68.

⁵⁹ Carine Trévisan, *Aurélien d’Aragon: un “nouveau mal du siècle”* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1996), 188.

⁶⁰ Camus, *L’homme révolté*, 298.

fear of the unknown and offered no more easy and unfeasible alternatives to the world's problems. In 1944, Drieu faced his public honestly, ready to admit he did not know. Aragon did not. He did however reject the communist claim that human beings could be understood in their totality. In this regard he adopted what Camus called, "la pensée des limites."⁶¹ Through *Aurélien* and *Les cloches de Bâle*, Aragon admitted that human understanding was limited. If Drieu professed it more openly than Aragon, it was because he was ready to depart from this world and felt no constraints for consistency.

⁶¹ Ibid., 367.

Conclusion

On the eve of the *Anschluss*, Robert Musil addressed his contemporaries on what he thought to be a major issue of his time: stupidity. How else could he explain his compatriots' attraction to National Socialism? In his lecture "On Stupidity," Musil proposes that there are two kinds of stupidity:

In life one usually means by a stupid person one who is "a little weak in the head." But beyond this there are the most varied kinds of intellectual and spiritual deviations, which can so hinder and frustrate and lead astray even an undamaged innate intelligence that it leads, by and large, to something for which the only word language has at its disposal is stupidity. Thus this word embraces two fundamentally quite different types: an honorable and straightforward stupidity, and a second that, somewhat paradoxically, is even a sign of intelligence. The first is based rather on a weakness of understanding, the second more on an understanding that is weak only with regard to some particular, and this latter kind is by far the more dangerous.¹

Inoffensive, genuine stupidity, Musil argues, could even be construed as likable were it not for its gullibility. By contrast, intelligent stupidity, a "disease of culture,"² poses a real danger.

Because it is difficult to recognize, it attacks the very foundation of a society. This particular type of stupidity manifests itself in a failure of intelligence, because it "presumes to accomplishments to which it has no right."³ It also allows emotions to guide its judgment of the world.

Louis Aragon and Pierre Drieu La Rochelle certainly claimed access to knowledge they did not possess and let their emotions influence their perception of reality. They projected their dissatisfaction with their own lives onto society as a whole. In the Gnostic tradition, they did not

¹ Robert Musil, "On Stupidity," in *Precision and Soul: Essays and Addresses*, ed. and trans. Burton Pike and David S. Luft (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 282.

² Ibid., 283.

³ Ibid., 283.

hold themselves responsible for their feelings of alienation; they blamed the construction of the world itself. In Aragon and Drieu's writings, capitalism was the root of all evil, from world wars to failed love affairs. Paradoxically, this bleak view of the world brought them intellectual comfort, since they had *a priori* solutions for the modern predicament.

In an effort to import the communist and fascist revolutions to France, Aragon and Drieu adopted an alarmist tone and argued for a complete break with the past. They used their intelligence to construct arguments in favor of their ideas while ignoring reality. After each visit to the Soviet Union, Aragon returned more enthusiastic and eagerly shared his experience with his compatriots. Aragon was not "blinded" by accident but by choice. Aragon did not travel across the Soviet Union to form an educated opinion about the results of the Bolshevik revolution; he had reached his conclusions before he even left France. Once in the USSR, he only looked for confirmation of his prior convictions. Similarly, Drieu journeyed to Germany and returned impressed with the youth of the fascist masses marching in the streets of Nuremberg. The militarization of civil society did not incline him to reconsider his opinion. On the contrary, Drieu wholeheartedly embraced the *élan* of the German nation and their "willingness" to sacrifice for an idea. Moreover, even though he frequented Jewish milieus and counted many Jews as his close friends, he still engaged in anti-Semitic discourse.

I argue, with Musil, that intelligence failed Drieu and Aragon, but only when they examined their own political faction. At the same time, Aragon was as astute a critic of fascism as Drieu was of communism. Aragon repeatedly protested the human rights abuses perpetrated in Germany while remaining silent about those occurring in Russia. Drieu deplored communist intellectuals' subordination to the Soviet Union, even as he pledged allegiance to Jacques Doriot. Their desire to will their utopias into existence led them to switch their intelligence on and off.

Both Aragon and Drieu yearned for heroes that could bring along the age of perfection, so they gave life to their fantasies.

Through an act of will, the man portrayed by Drieu and Aragon could alter his structure. Individualist only because he was forced to live in a capitalist world, man could learn again how to think in term of the collective. The fascist new man mastered his own body, his own desires and weaknesses, emerging as an ascetic soldier ready to fight for the salvation of all. The communist new man transformed himself through work into a socialized being with a strong personality, always acting in accordance with the common good. With their allegedly comprehensive knowledge of human nature, Drieu and Aragon offered formulas for the metamorphosis of the old, degenerate man.

Aragon presented Soviet man as an example for the French to emulate. Aragon even bestowed heroic qualities upon Stalin, and those who challenged Stalin, or Maurice Thorez, soon felt Aragon's wrath, as illustrated by Nizan's case. Drieu described Jacques Doriot as the savior of France, the messiah who would lift the elect to glory. He did, however, criticize Hitler for not prompting the fascist revolution he believed France needed.

Under the pen of Aragon and Drieu, imprisonment became reeducation, genocide purification, totalitarianism order, will to power humanitarianism, personal failures alienation, and so on. Both authors used their literary talents to try to convince the French public that reprehensible actions were acceptable because they would bring about a better tomorrow. The "intelligent stupidity" displayed by Aragon and Drieu was dangerous in this rationalization of evil. At the same time, their literary works reflect their ambivalence toward the totalitarian political theories they endorsed.

In *L'homme à cheval*, Drieu presented himself as a disillusioned Gnostic who no longer believed in the feasibility of a fascist federation. More importantly, the fascist leader failed at his noble mission because of his all-too-human nature. Drieu acknowledged through his protagonists that even fascist leaders could err in their appreciation of reality. Even though Jaime had the fascist man's qualities, he accomplished nothing, and his dreams of an empire collapsed lamentably. Through Felipe, Drieu conceded the real motives behind his political views: dissatisfaction with his art, boredom, sexual frustration, and demiurgic aspirations. A few years later in *Les chiens de paille*, Drieu refused human beings agency: nothing but straw dogs in the hands of a powerful fate, his protagonists could not speed up the course of history. On the eve of his own suicide, Drieu did not allow his protagonist Constant to die with the illusion that human beings have any control over their destinies, including taking their own lives.

If Drieu lost his Gnostic confidence only after the Germans' failure in WWII, Aragon fluctuated in his political views from the very beginning of his political involvement. While he insisted on the writer's obedience to the party, in his own novels, Aragon did not wholly adhere to the rules of socialist realism. From *Les cloches de Bâle* to *Aurélien*, Aragon swerved around his party line and created dissonant characters. The vacillating Catherine Simonidzé with her interest in the anarchist movement intrigued Aragon more than the communist heroin Clara Zetkin. During WWII, Aragon distanced himself even further from socialist realism. Aragon presented the fascist Aurélien, modeled after Drieu, with sympathy, always striving to prevent his readers from reaching rushed judgments. Paradoxically, in the midst of the war, love interested Aragon the most. This time, however, he refrained from offering unsatisfactory answers for the impossibility of the couple. Aragon dismissed the applicability of science in the study of human beings and made Bérénice suffer from the "goût de l'absolu."

In the conclusion of his comparative study of Aragon, Drieu, and Malraux, Serra writes, “La parabole des frères séparés s’achève sur l’impossibilité de faire coïncider liberté de l’art et militantisme de parti.”⁴ Serra is right: for two politically involved intellectuals such as Drieu and Aragon, literature was the only public outlet through which they could express their singularity. In the process, they cheated on the political ideologies they advocated. At the same time, though, Aragon and Drieu cheated their readers. Both wrote incessantly about intellectuals’ moral duty to become involved in the problems of society, but they apparently did not consider it their duty to tell the truth.

⁴ Serra, 312.

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