

HIGH SOLITUDE, Léon-Paul Fargue, translated by Rainer J. Hanshe. Contra Mundum Press, 2024, 187 pp.

Léon-Paul Fargue is the night moth—an imposing apparition whose wing-flap privileges the shadows and the secret corners of Paris. His beckoning is intimate, seductively concrete yet ultimately ephemeral; he leads us on with authority, on to the night's secret and to his last steps at sunrise, thus on to a path of our own anguished ontology. Gide, Pound, Eliot, Joyce and Rilke all thought him one of the major poets of the early century.

First among flâneurs, he greatly deepened that genre with *High Solitude* (*Haute Solitude*, 1941). There were flâneur vignettes in his first book of prose poems (*Poèmes*, 1905 and later variants)—for decades the only book translated into English (Thompson, 2002). These were urban scenes, but they were balanced with moments in nature and the odd dinosaur dilation (this last a feature of *High Solitude* as well). The later *Piéton de Paris* (1947) boosts his flâneur status, to be sure; it is more programmatic, though, as it catalogues (by chapter) Parisian sights and personalities. *High Solitude* is the indispensable Fargue.

While *Epaisseurs* has similar imagery, it does not have the same vast scope. *Vulture* has a similar degree of dark, interior penetration—but gives the train ride rêverie (a narrative technique as well for Michel Butor and the poet Saint-Pol-Roux) a violent, metaphysical twist. In *High Solitude* Fargue balances the spooky, the goofy, the quotidien and the oneiric to outline an inner life—and a long vocation toward that inner self.

It is said that every work of art is a translation. Certainly Fargue moved *between* states more than most writers: between the family ceramics business and his poetic output, between bright dinner parties and the side streets he favored—those that had escaped Baron Haussmann's scalpel. As this reviewer has said elsewhere, "Paris is the allegory of his movement between two worlds, and of the poetry he invents to light his way." A review of the present translation has to underline three things: Fargue's importance, the preeminence of *High Solitude*, and the difficulty of this particular translation. Rainer Hanshe has succeeded magnificently—no doubt with the same pains and revisions for which Fargue was famous. When Fargue's sentence is a liling example of early twentieth century syntax (and Gallic clarity), there is no special difficulty:

For the man who wants to take the trouble, as for the good poet with the right shoes, Paris is a curious city, which has its folds, its ruptures, its broken down areas, its thrust streets and its volcanism (34).

The problems arise with obscure words, words playfully distorted, biological and geological references, and outright neologisms:

...poisons-hirondelles, monstres élégants des mers de Chine en forme de peignes de corne, de croissants bizarres ou d'instruments de musique, vielles en cotte de maille, rebecs à l'oeil hagard, réductions de harpes, tailleés dans la cymophane... (31, edition of 1966.

...swallow-fish, elegant monsters of the seas of China in the form of horn combs, bizarre croissants or musical instruments, chain-mail hurdy-gurdys, haggard-eyed rebecs, reductions of harps, carved in cymophane... (20)

It helps to know Fargue's other works, to be attuned to his intimate and nostalgic connotations, to know old Paris and to have a massive dictionary and a search engine at your elbow.

The magic here is that it has all come through. Hanshe, who runs a translation press, has taken on a huge task; he has produced a smooth, erudite and sensitive version of an important and utterly unique book. The book which most suggestively reveals

[Fargue's] destiny, it's the effort of every night toward myself. It's the return to the heart, with slow steps, along cities enslaved to the bureaucracy of mystery... (62)

Generally, in avoiding modern slang and distinct Americanisms, an English version lets Fargue's beloved Paris shine through. Hanshe has stepped wisely here. For it is a subtle light that is preserved: gaslights on the somewhat grimy streets of what is called "le temps des fiacres" (the era of horse-drawn cabs). And the strange quiddity of Fargue's Paris—his favorite nooks and disparate, radiant objects—has come through with his exact emphasis: sometimes as plain apparition, sometimes with inexplicable tenderness—even a sense of loss. The "high solitude" that results is the pluperfect intimacy, that is, Fargue's own. It is unlike certain others: the lyrical intimacy of the Romantics, the analytical intimacy of Proust, the "confessional" intimacy of Robert Lowell and the group that wore that label.

Still, because this intimacy is understated, and sometimes alloyed or even muddled with the strange vibrancy of Surrealism, we are invited into it. We are invited into his pool of lamplight and into a dim uncertainty. "I work at my solitude" – and we are shown how this is done. Fargue's nightly journey "toward himself" can be our own search for self and meaning.

~~Peter Thompson, *Ezra Journal*, Vol. 19.3 (Fall 2025)