Aragon's *Le Payson de Paris* and the Buried History of Buttes-Chaumont Park

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In the second half of Aragon's experimental and semi-autobiographical novella, *Le Paysan de Paris* (1926), three friends undertake a nighttime escapade in Buttes-Chaumont Park, a sprawling green space in Paris nestled amongst what were at the time the largely working-class neighborhoods of the northeastern reaches of the city (fig. 1). This outing, Aragon recounts in his retrospective narrative, takes place over the course of a foggy evening sometime during the spring or summer of 1924, when he, Andre Breton and Marcel Noll have reached a collective state of boredom with their usual activities at Breton's nightly salon in Montmartre. Abandoning the customary agenda of word games and automatist seances for the preferable diversion of a jaunt in a taxicab, the trio remains aimless until Breton spontaneously suggests a nocturnal stroll within the shadowy confines of Buttes-Chaumont Park.

Once inside the gates, Aragon and friends experience alternating waves of excitement and trepidation as they confront the various features of this urban oasis through the disorienting veil of dimmed nightfall. On the one hand, the park initially represents a "huge, naive hope" for the expectant visitors, who envision the possibility of a fantastic or amorous encounter of some kind there. However, at the same time, this sense of wonder and potential discovery instilled by the park is overshadowed from the outset by a vague but palpable sense of foreboding. Immediately upon their arrival, the young men realize they are weaponless in a desolate place, and soon the darker associations of the park's history begin to drift gradually into their collective consciousness, coloring their perception of what Aragon describes as the *romanesque*, or storybook-like, outward appearance of the park.

Indeed, although explicit allusions to the markedly curious history of Buttes-Chaumont only arise occasionally in the narrative of *Le Paysan de Paris*, it is arguable that the historical context of the park plays a crucial role in the way in which Aragon and his friends experience and comprehend their adventure amidst its verdure. As narrator, Aragon is demonstrably aware of at least some of the circumstances of the park's background. For example, he mentions in passing the park's prominent role in the Paris Commune in May of 1871, describing it as "a louche zone that was the site of a notorious day of murder." Further on, he makes reference to the remarkable circumstances of its mid-19th century construction by Baron Haussmann, calling Buttes-Chaumont, "a crazy area born in the head of
an architect from the conflict between Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the economic conditions of existence in Paris: 5 Likewise, throughout the text Aragon notes the park's former popularity as a place for suicide, as well as the kitschy "modern machinery" of the park's manufactured 'natural' wonders. 6

Along with these and other explicit references to the history of Buttes-Chaumont in Aragon's narrative, fragments of evidential knowledge which certainly structure his perception of this location, it is arguable that latent historical associations of the park's past also directly determine the tenor of the trio's nocturnal escapade. While the excursion begins in a state of optimism, the visitors soon fall prey to the connotations of the park that lie dormant beneath the surface- of both the park's rolling hills, as well as the subterranean levels of their own minds. It seems that under the cover of night in particular, the repressed nuances of the location's past gradually begin to emerge. Noll spies a ghost climbing on a rocky outcropping, and by the end of the text, Aragon is plagued by thoughts of his own suicide, an urge for auto-destruction which is fulfilled in the conclusion when the narrator figuratively decapitates himself. 7

Even the bronze column formerly installed at the highest point in the park transforms into an ancient sepulchral monument that the visitors have to decipher by match-light like "modern Champollions;" its rote list of bureaucratic municipal figures suddenly morphing into magical ciphers marking an anonymous tomb. 8

The trio's journey ends abruptly on a resounding note of negativity, the dramatic mood swing of this portion of Le Paysan de Paris thus confirmed.

Therefore, even for all its idyllic landscaping, Buttes-Chaumont is certainly not comprehended by Aragon and his friends as a simple tabula rasa - a paradigm of pristine nature lodged within the metropolitan network, offering a convenient means of escape from the fast pace of urban life. Nor can the park merely be considered an ironic reprisal of anachronistic and kitschy Romantic aesthetics for Aragon, Breton and Noll here, as several scholars have previously argued in a convincing manner. 9 Rather, I would argue that most importantly, Aragon evokes a much more specific cache of both manifest and latent historical connotations in his depiction of Buttes-Chaumont Park. In Aragon's text, the enclosed zone of the park is so interesting and modern for these soon-to-be-surrealists precisely because it is replete with historical, cultural, and temporal contradictions resulting from the simultaneous associations of the park's vastly antinomic past and present societal functions.

As Aragon, Breton and Noll scramble through and over the park's dewy vales and rocky slopes, they become increasingly attuned, in true automatist fashion, to the buried subtext of what not long before had been the most forbidden realm of death and waste in the greater Paris area over a number of centuries. Therefore, as a profound environmental paradox, the renovated Buttes-Chaumont sublin1inally broadcasts the residues of its troubled history even while its manicured official facade feebly attempts to function as a protective screen against sordid mnemonic traces, layered beneath the surface like so many compressed geological strata. Indeed, it seems that the concerted societal effort
to attain a pure and timeless zone in the renovated guise of Buttes-Chaumont instead renders the lurid patina of this location's history all the more conspicuous to the three friends.

But what are the historical details of the deeply palimpsestic Buttes-Chaumont Park, which seem to have remained largely obscure for much of Aragon's generation? Before Aragon's complex depiction of this location in *Le Paysan de Paris* can be fully accounted for, it is necessary to review the past circumstances of Buttes-Chaumont, a task that surprisingly has not yet been undertaken beyond the most cursory level in scholarly discussions devoted to this text. Accordingly, the discussion will now turn to a condensed overview of the background of Buttes-Chaumont, before further conclusions are drawn concerning the surrealist encounter with this location.

Presently situated near the periphery of Paris, Buttes-Chaumont Park occupies a piece of high ground between the neighborhoods of Belleville to the south and La Villette to the north. The park's most notable feature is its rolling, arid hills, which rising to an altitude of three hundred feet above sea level, constitute one of the loftiest vantage points in the city (fig. 2). This collection of treeless buttes or rocky summits comprises its distinctive topography and gives the park its name: "Chaumont" indicates the bald or chauve mountains that were the site of an extensive gypsum quarry for hundreds of years.

The privately owned land surrounding the ancient quarry was purchased by the city of Paris in 1862 and rapidly transformed from a barren expanse into a picturesque landscape. Long known in general by the name of Montfaucon, or Falcon Mountain, the region was officially rechristened with the new appellation of Buttes-Chaumont Park. As part of the final stage of Baron Haussmann's urban facelift of Paris under emperor Napoleon III, Buttes-Chaumont was intended to be the jewel in the cap of the Exposition universelle of 1867 in Paris, and was grandly inaugurated as part of the festivities that year. Designed by state engineer Adolphe Alphand and state gardener Jean-Pierre Deschamps, the plan for the park
made the most of the natural features of the terrain, but also imposed extensive modifications to the land. Their combined vision transformed the looming, pockmarked face of the former quarry into a fairytale lookout topped with a faux-Grecian temple, as this photograph of an original maquette of the park shows (fig. 3). Among other structures, two impressive bridges were constructed to provide access to this summit from opposing sides of the park: a narrow suspension bridge spanned the surface of the lake, while an arched masonry bridge stretched an arm out to a neighboring hillside (fig. 4). Nearby, Alphand and Deschamps constructed the most spectacular of the attractions in the park: a one hundred-foot artificial waterfall that tumbled into a grotto of false stalactites and boulders made of concrete. Branching outward from this impressive aquatic hub, mechanically churned water followed a meandering path of concrete streambeds that lined several of the park's paths at the lowest level of altitude.

However, before all this beautification came to pass, Buttes-Chaumont had a significantly dark history that it was not fully able to shake even after its remarkable makeover. As early as 880 AD, the exposed slopes of the surrounding countryside became the site for the pivotal battle of Montfaucon, which saw the Parisians successfully defeat the attacking Normans. Centuries later, in the middle of the 14th century, this area also became the location of the infamous gallows or gibet de Montfaucon, known for its distinctive and innovative multi-tiered architecture (fig. 5). Whether hung or exterminated via some other ghastly form of execution, the bodies of unfortunate victims were left to be ogled by curious onlookers and eventually picked apart by the carnivorous birds that flocked to this Parisian Golgotha. Despite the removal of the gallows once and for all during the era of the French Revolution, the domain stubbornly retained its nefarious associations for decades to come, and few people dared to settle nearby. Then, at the end of March 1814, one portion of another particularly bloody battle took place in Montfaucon over the course of two days. The Battle of Paris commenced when a small army of Napoleon's men desperately attempted to fight off a massive invasion of Prussian and Russian forces, ultimately surrendering to defeat and signaling the final stages of the downfall of the empire.
Moreover, by this time the region had also become the principle dumping ground for the tidal wave of trash and excrement continuously spewing forth from the increasingly overcrowded center of Paris. In particular, it was the primary place of equarrissage for Paris where the corpses of dead livestock animals and horses could be legally dumped and left to decompose. Roughly fifty thousand animal corpses could be found at the site at any given time during the first half of the 19th century. Likewise, as early as the 18th century, the area became known for the particular kind of fertilizer or poudrette that eventually came to be chemically manufactured there from the available mountains of putrefying flesh, matter and human and animal waste (fig. 6). For many years, Montfaucon was the sole site in Paris for this economically profitable process, which not only created a horrible stench, but also dangerously noxious ammonia fumes. Indeed, the miasma wafting from the place was legendary: a popular adage held that Montfaucon acted as an olfactory weather vane for the whole of Paris, so disgusting was the wind coming from the north of the city. Moreover, rat infestations of apocalyptic proportions plagued the poudrette factory and dump during the early 19th century, adding to the nearly apocalyptic atmosphere of the place.20 By the end of the 1840's Montfaucon had closed as a result of repeated public outcries against the unsanitary conditions existing so close to the perimeter of the city.

Given these factors, it is not surprising that the land in this area remained desolate despite the fact that Paris was rapidly expanding during the first half of the 19th century. According to a strong tradition of local folklore, the ghosts of the executed were purportedly the primary inhabitants of the district.21 From among the ranks of the living, squatters and trash pickers alone ventured to live in the caves of the abandoned gypsum quarries and highwaymen were likewise drawn to these spaces as temporary hideouts.22 In sum, for most of its long history, Montfaucon cum Buttes-Chaumont was a thoroughly hostile environment in all aspects. However, it is surely because of this sordid past that the sanitary overhaul of Haussmannization would dedicate significant energy and expense to the expedited reform of this most odious zone on the map of Paris. In a shocking three years during the third and final reseau of Haussmannization, Montfaucon went from being one of the most repugnant environments in Paris, to encompassing one of the fairest idylls available within the city limits (fig. 7).

Certainly for a time following this exhaustive recuperation, it must have seemed to all that Buttes-Chaumont had successfully shaken its resolutely trashy former identity. Yet, a mere four years after its renovation, Buttes-Chaumont would unexpectedly become the setting for yet another belligerent episode that instantly resurrected the long and peculiar history of combined savagery and waste dumping in this location. The coup of the Paris Commune that commenced in March of 1871 culminated in the desperate battles of La Semaine sanglante, much of which took place in the working class neighborhoods that surrounded Buttes-Chaumont. During the last two days of fighting the park itself became a primary battleground, until the Communards were forced to surrender due to a shortage of ammunition (fig. 8).23 As the executions of the defeated soldiers mounted into the tens of thousands over the next week, approximately 800 bodies of Communards were thrown into the opening of a still accessible gypsum quarry at Buttes-Chaumont and cremated in a massive bonfire whose nauseating stench permeated all of Paris, in what was no doubt a disturbing echo of the former poudrette of Montfaucon.24 In addition, roughly 100 bodies were buried in shallow, unmarked graves throughout the park, although potentially many more burials in the park also went unnoticed at this time.25 Many corpses were simply thrown into the park's shallow man-made lake, only to resurface a few days later much to the horror of neighborhood inhabitants.26
Like the rest of Paris, Buttes-Chaumont Park eventually recovered from the aftershocks of the Commune, at least on a superficial level (fig. 9). Within just a few years of the bombardment of its vistas, the park had resumed its role as one of the most popular new leisure spots in Paris. Travel guides of the late 19th century for the most part did not even comment upon this most recent conflagration in the park. Indeed, the only vestige of the site’s somber past was the curiously frequent usage of the masonry bridge that led to the faux-Grecian temple as a place of suicide (fig. 10). However, by the time Aragon wrote *Paysan* in 1924-26, a metal fence had been installed along the entire length of the Suicide’s Bridge preventing would-be jumpers, relegating even this last vestige of violence to the status of a haunting urban myth.

Having thus recouped the unlikely tale of the shifting cultural identity of Buttes-Chaumont Park - from a quarry site and battleground, to an execution ground, to the foulest dump and *equarissage*, to an unblemished garden, and back again momentarily to a site of extermination and expurgation - it perhaps easier now to more accurately gauge the tenor of the surrealist encounter with this location in *Le Paysan de Paris*. Indeed, it is arguable that the full thrust of Aragon’s rapidly shifting narrative cannot be comprehended without such a specific contextual framing of the setting, so important for the self-professed "peasant" of Paris is a vernacular and localized approach to contemporary urban life. The initial elation felt by Aragon, Breton and Noll upon entering the gates of the night-enshrouded park can indeed be seen as a reflection, alternatingly sarcastic and sincere, of the Romantic emanations prompted by its renovated visage. However, in turn, the trio’s escalating feeling of dread thereafter demonstrates their parallel awareness, primarily on a latent psychic level, of the 19th century recuperation of the badlands of Montfaucon. Despite its transformation into a pseudo-utopia during the initial stages of Haussmannization, Buttes-Chaumont stubbornly retains many of its original associations for Aragon and his friends; hence the significant critical potential of the park as a singular paradigm of surrealist irony.
Endnotes


6. Aragon, ibid., 143.

7. At the end of Part II, the narrator's voice becomes quite distinct from the autobiographically-inflected voice of Aragon's narration that constitutes the majority of the rest of the text. Note that suicide was a prominent literary theme in Aragon's prose and poetry throughout the 1920's. Aragon attempted suicide by an overdose of sleeping pills in September of 1928 in Venice, Italy.


9. For instance, Giglin argues that Aragon was primarily interested in Buttes-Chaumont Park for its artificial construction as a Romantic 'folly.' This ridiculous aspect of the park, according to her reading, relates directly to Aragon's conception of the marvelous, which she argues is primarily wielded by Aragon as a weapon against the dominance of rationalism. See the chapter, "Le Paysan de Paris;" in, Yvette Gindine, Aragon: *Prosauteur surréaliste* (Geneva: Librarie Droz, 1966), 62-63. Likewise, Pégay-Gros has argued in an important article on Part II of *Paysan*, that Aragon enacts an attack on Buttes-Chaumont Park as an anti-Modernist representative of kitsch. See, Nathalie Piegay-Gros, "Paysages du *Paysan de Paris;*" in *Teritoires de la poésie: coItc11lporaine melanges offerts à Marie-Claire Dumas,* ed., Nathalie Piegay-Gros (Paris: H. Champion, 2001), 187-198. In an important article of 1978, Cardinal opined that Aragon knowingly effused about the obvious kitsch aesthetic of the park with "humorous provocation;" but at the same time, relayed a sense of something 'genuinely disturbing and haunting;' about the place. See, Roger Cardinal, "Soluble City: The Surrealist Perception of Paris;" *Architectural Design,* vol. 48, no. 2-3 (1978), 143. Ishikawa also reads this section of *Paysan* in relation to a kitsch reading of romantic aesthetics. See, Ishikawa, *Paris dans quatre textes narratives,* 140.


10. I have only been able to locate two sources that mention anything of the history of the Buttes-Chaumont area prior to its renovation as a city park in the late 1860's in relation to *Paysan.* Magallanes mentions only the park's "tormented quarried past." See, "Landscape Surrealism;" by Fernando Magallanes in, Thomas Mica, *Surrealism and Architecture* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 222. Short comments was built on the site of Paris's biggest rubbish dump: See, Robert Short, "A Fertile Figure: The Paris Peasant," in *Louis Aragon: du surrealisme au realisme socialiste, du Librotnage au Menti r vrai des incipit à la postiere,* eds., Gavm Bowd and Jeremy Stubbs (Manchester: AURA Publication, 1997), 19. Otherwise, if scholars mention the history of the park at all in their discussions of Aragon's text, it has been in passing reference to the innovative artificial-natural design by architects Alphand and Barillet-Deschamps.


13. For Alphand's account of the history of the site and his modifications to it, see, Jean-Charles Alphand, *Les Promenades de Paris*, vol. 2 (J. Rothschild, 1873).


16. Ibere has been some indecision concerning the precise location of the Montfaucon gallows. In 1858, Viollet-le-Duc recorded the gallows as having been originally located on the Rue de Meaux, just beyond the gates of what is now Buttes-Chaumont Park. See, Eugene-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, 'Fourches patibulaires;' in *Dictionnaire raisonné de l'architecture française du Xle au XVIe siècle* (Paris: E de Nobele, 1967), 556. However, most contemporary historians locate the gallows within the boundaries of the park. For instance, see Soprani below.


18. It seems that as early as the 16th century, Montfaucon was designated as one of several refuse and excrement dumps in Paris, thus doubling its utility as a site for both execution and offal disposal (lore has it that the bodies of the executed were thrown in the dump with the rest of the trash and excrement). However, by the early 19th century, Montfaucon had grown to become the enormous epicenter for which all Parisian garbage and waste was eventually destined.


20. I am grateful to Gregory Pierrot for this point.


27. Indeed, the number of suicides on this bridge had become such that by 1907, the English Baedeker guide remarked that it had been nicknamed 'Le Pont fatal;' *Paris and its Environs*, 240.