



Column: Parisien Portrait Death of a Princess

by Raana Haider

9am Sunday, 31st August, 1997

While gathering to go on an outing to Deauville in Normandy, a North Sea resort town also renowned for its horse-racing, horse-breeding and casinos, someone had seen the news on television early that morning. Stunned with disbelief, we switched on immediately the car radio. We tuned into a French radio station and then BBC radio news. And so passed the week while we alternated between CNN and BBC television coverage of the fatal car accident in the tunnel under Place de l'Alma, close to the Seine river and in view of the Eiffel Tower. The dead included Diana, Princess of Wales; Dodi (Emad) al-Fayed, her companion and Henri-Paul, the driver. The sole survivor, Trevor-Rees, Jones, Princess Diana's bodyguard returned to London following a month's stay at a Paris hospital on 3rd October. Suffering from amnesia, he was unable to fully recount the events of the tragic night.

A déjà vu situation? Yes. On 22nd November, 1963; thirty-four years ago, in Washington DC we had passed a similar week glued to the television when President John F Kennedy was assassinated. Then at Alice Deal Junior High School in Washington DC, we were let out of school early that 22nd November afternoon.

Where were you on 22nd November, 1963? Where were you on 31st August, 1997? Global mass communication, both the electronic and print media have imprinted these two dates in people's minds unlike few other events of the past fifty years. The deaths of two individuals whom very few of us have known constitute a memory milestone and a time reference in our lives.

A gold-painted sculpture of the Statue of Liberty's flaming torch erected by the International Herald Tribune newspaper in Paris in 1987, commemorates Franco-American relations on the occasion of the hundred years anniversary of the newspaper. This sculpture is located at Place de l'Alma, above the tunnel of Alma. This site has today become a memorial site to Diana, Princess of Wales.

The actual tragic spot is inside the tunnel of Alma. In the two weeks following the fatal crash, there were floral bouquets at the two spots inside the tunnel where the car first hit the thirteenth pillar on the left side and then the right wall where the mangled remains of the car wreck were found. The base of the flaming torch sculpture was plastered with pictures of Diana, Dodi, Diana and Dodi; letters, cards and floral bouquets. The international presence of mourners is evident with flags of countries accompanying the bouquets, letters and cards. Many have signed their names and given names of their countries. The grassy mounds at the side of the tunnel were also strewn with flowers even six weeks after the accident. My daughter also paid her floral respects.

As a hundred days of the fatal accident passed, French television screened on 10th December, 1997 a French-produced documentary titled, 'All You Need is Love.' It analyzed Diana, Princess of Wales' role in the British monarchy and her place in society. The same evening, in another French-produced programme, 'La Vie à l'Endroit' (With Regard to Life) was screened on 2 France. The particular programme, 'The Orphans of Lady Di' presented by

Mireille Dumas was an original and intelligent treatment of a much-media-exposed individual. Both documentaries dealt with the concept of Myth, for which essential ingredients are beauty, suffering, love and death and both spoke of Diana's unique and exceptional destiny. 'L'Express', a French news magazine wrote, "She was born a lady, became a princess and died a saint".

More than one hundred days following the crash, the situation has not changed all that much. There are still fresh flowers being placed at the base of the sculpture. Pictures, cards and letters and candles are still to be seen. There is a lot of graffiti on the base and the column of the flaming torch and on the bridgehead of the Pont Alma. There are now also remarks pertaining to the Conspiracy Theory.

While talking to a Sudanese friend about the large number of visitors to Paris, he remarked that "in addition, they all want to see The Tunnel", I, for an instant, thought of the Euro Tunnel, the Channel crossing between England and France through which the Euro train passes. This tunnel has considerably eased travel between London and Paris and added to the number of visitors from London. I, then realised, that he was referring to the tunnel at Place de l'Alma. The spot is now crowded with tourist buses and on the list of everyone's must-see-in-Paris list.

There is also a suggestion on a piece of paper on the base of the flaming torch statue that the Place de l'Alma be renamed Place Diana, Princess de Galles (Place Diana, Princess of Wales). In fact, Place de l'Alma was to have been renamed Place Maria Callas in mid-

September 1997. Maria Callas, the Greek opera singer, the Diva, the Voice of the Century died in Paris twenty years ago. However, since 31st August 1997, such is the sentimental association of Place de l'Alma now connected with Diana that the naming ceremony was postponed. Sadly, in life too — Maria Callas lost out. Aristotle Onassis, the Greek shipping tycoon with whom she had a longterm relationship, left her for Jacqueline Kennedy whom he married.

Interestingly enough, the residence of the Ambassador of Thailand in the Muette area of Paris, 16th arrondissement (district) is an imposing property Onassis was about to purchase for Callas in the early 1960s; but neither the purchase nor the relationship matured. He bought her an apartment on the prestigious Avenue Henri-Martin, the double tree-lined boulevard connecting the Eiffel Tower and the Bois de Boulogne.

Paris was also the city for another grand romantic legend of the 20th century — the historical love affair of the Duke and Duchess of Windsor. Following King Edward VIII's abdication in 1936 in order to marry American, Wallis Simpson in 1937; the former king now reduced to Duke of Windsor and the Duchess of Windsor went into exile in various places. In 1953, they settled permanently at 4, route due Champs-d'Entraînement, a grand mansion in the west of Bois de Boulogne placed at their disposal by the city of Paris.

The Duke of Windsor died in Paris in 1972 and the Duchess of Windsor passed away in 1986. History abounds in coincidences. The same regal residence of the couple-in-exile was subsequently

bought by Mohamed al-Fayed, the Egyptian businessman millionaire and father of Dodi al-Fayed, Princess Diana's companion. There has been much speculation in the French newspapers if that very residence would have become the home of Diana and Dodi — if they had married. We will now never know. Press reports wrote of a brief visit to the secluded residence by the couple — en route from Le Bourget airport to the Ritz Hotel on the afternoon of the accident. The British-French connection started by one ex-King of England would have been continued by another ex-future Queen on England. Fate? Destiny?

The priceless and historical contents of the former residence of the Duke and Duchess of Windsor were to have been auctioned in September 1997 by Sotheby's, the renowned international auctioneers. Following the deaths of Diana, Princess of Wales and Dodi al-Fayed, Mohamed Al-Fayed, the owner of the historical residence postponed auction of the contents of the mansion. Today, the future of the residence remains unknown. The auction is now rescheduled for February, 1998. I saw the catalogue in two volumes entitled, 'The Private Collection' and 'The Public Collection' at Harrods (owned by Mohamed al-Fayed) in London. The more than 40,000 objects including paintings, photographs, carpets, furniture, objects of art, clothes and personal belongings will be presented in 3,200 lots of sale.

A portrait of the Duchess of Windsor by Gerald L Brockhurst is valued at \$70,000 to \$90,000. The Duchess was listed at the top of the ten best-dressed women in the world in 1946. She had an inborn sense of glitz and glamour.

A unique item on sale will be the

mahogany writing desk dating from 1755 on which King Edward VIII signed his abdication in 1936 in order to marry "the woman he loved." Sotheby's has valued it at 30,000 to 50,000 pounds sterling. It will probably fetch a price far above the estimated one. An exclusive French magazine covering top-of-the-market real estate and their furnishings, 'Demeures et Chateaux' reports that Mohamed al-Fayed had offered the historical desk to the British royal family but Queen Elizabeth II refused the offer. Should Fate have dealt the occupants of the doomed Mercedes 280s a different hand on the night of 31st August, 1997, Queen Elizabeth's former daughter-in-law, Princess Diana one day may have been seated at the very desk her late ex-grand uncle, King Edward VIII signed his self-removal (as she did) from the throne of Great Britain.

What might have been also plagued the ring Dodi-al-Fayed supposedly ordered for Diana at Alberto Repossi jewellers in Monte Carlo during their idyllic summer vacation in the French Riviera. Press reports write of his crossing the Place de Vendôme from the Ritz Hotel (also owned by Mohamed al-Fayed) where they were staying, in order to collect the diamond ring worth 1.2 million French francs from Alberto Repossi at Place de Vendôme, the very afternoon of the fatal crash. The ring is one out of an exclusive series named — 'Dis-moi oui' (Say Yes). The ring was later found in the ill-fated car.

In the poignant events of the year, there are certainly many facts which beat fiction. And so a summer of personal triumph and collective tragedy came to a close on 31st August, 1997.

profile Louis Aragon's Masks

by Anne Benjamin

ARAGON was born on 3rd October 1897. He was the illegitimate son of Louis Andrieux, a former chief commissioner of the police, and Marguerite Toucas from whom he was to learn in 1918 that one of them was not his godfather and the other was not his elder sister. While he was studying medicine in 1917, he met Andre Breton and plunged wholeheartedly into the adventure of Surrealism. At the age of 24, in 1921, he published a very beautiful text, "Anicet ou le panorama". Half a century later at the age of seventy-seven, he wrote the very impressive "Theatre-Roman". Between the two, there were thousands of pages in verse or in prose which give a permanent feeling of ease. Aragon, who was too good-looking and definitely too gifted was to remain on the literary scene for nearly sixty years. His best friends included Drieu La Rochelle. They shared the same disgust with what the war had done to French society. Drieu, who was the older of the two, was fascinated by the prodigious intellectual and literary ease of his younger friend, who was just as fascinated by the ease with which Drieu covered himself with women and lived off them richly. When Aragon threw himself into the communist radicalism of Surrealism in 1925, their friendship was shattered and the comings and goings between them of one woman, Elisabeth de Lanux, were enough to make the break public and final. Although his adventure with Elisabeth de Lanux was his first sentimental affair, Denise Levy was the woman who left Aragon broken-hearted as revealed by the letters that he wrote to her. Nancy Cunard put Aragon through all

the hell of jealousy and handed a man who had just escaped suicide over to the sister of the lady companion of the Russian poet Mayakovski. Elsa Triolet, who was to share his life from 1928. They were to build one another up again together, with the USSR between them, of which Aragon dreamt and from which Elsa could not manage to free herself. Aragon absolutely worshipped Elsa in his post-1939 poems, but Denise and Nancy were the true heroines of "Aurelien", "Blanche ou l'Oubli" and "Theatre-Roman".

In 1927, he joined the French communist party. With Elsa, he made lengthy stays in the USSR and became a journalist on "L'Humanite". In 1932, he broke with Andre Breton and the Surrealists for good. Immediately before the war, Aragon could see clearly. In an editorial in "Ce Soir", dated 31/12/1938, he wrote: "I wish for the peace that will wipe out the memory of Munich right in its foundations and if re-establishing peace means resisting with weapons in our hands... whom among us would such a thing frighten?" And, indeed, he took part in the 1940 war bravely and, during the Occupation, played the card of patriotism. His lyrical poems link the woman he loves with the mother-land ("Cantique à Elsa" or "Les Yeux d'Elsa" 1942) and when Aragon sings "My party has given me back the colours of France", he exorcised his drama. His lines reveal the heartache of the soldier of Dunkirk for the ruin of his country, which meant turning his back on the cooperation with Germany that the Germano-Soviet pact demanded, pressure that Aragon was to deliberately ignore, not making contact with the clandestine French communist party again till just before the Nazi attack on Russia, on 22/6/1941. Triumphant com-

Towards the end of his life, Louis Aragon gave rise to many comments by appearing in a mask in a series of television discussions. Was there a meaning to this gesture? Through a thoroughly overhauled biography by Pierre Daix, the publication of his "lettres a Denise", of his correspondence with Jean Paulhan and of the "Projet d'histoire contemporaine", the literary world is once again asking itself questions about Louis Aragon.



Louis Aragon (1897-1982)

munist was then to catch up with him. From 1954, Aragon held a position on the French Communist Party's central committee which, even today, causes lasting resentment as he tends to be blamed for all the excesses of the

Aragon has always denied that will, anchored in the dramas of childhood, to belong to a group or a party to, as his biographer notes, remain the sole possessor of his story and to rewrite it at will as if it were his most precious possession. Aragon himself said, "What matters in what one says about oneself, are the gaps and the silence." Although he often showed the need to be taken in hand, he also had to be able to escape through "true-lying", through a continually remodelled biography which is transposed and which, for that reason, he was obviously unable to write. In 1970, after Elsa's death, the French Communist party informed him that his financial support to "Lettres Francaises", a review that Aragon headed, had become incompatible with the positions he had taken in particular on the suicide of the son of a Czech intellectual. Although, in the last issue of the publication he admits, "I have wasted my life", he continued to support the party and to receive honours and benefits from it until his death in 1982.

But Aragon is triumphant when he is borne along by this language of "The noblest French", Pierre Daix notes. He is a "writer as he breathes". Finally casting aside the mask, he reveals his deepest truth, "a novel is organised language for me... a construction in which I can live". In writing novels, Aragon does not stop questioning himself on literature and on the mechanisms of literary creation. His novels first of all explore the real world ("Les Cloches de Bale" 1934 and "Les Beaux Quartiers" 1936). After that, he was to write about the same themes, love and history, in inexhaustible variations. His novel "Aurelien", written during the war and partly inspired by his friend Drieu La Rochelle, is the story of love which

comes to an end in the tragedy of history. Similarly, Aragon's poetical work is prodigious. From his first poem in 1918 in the "Nord-Sud" review to "Les Adieux" in 1981, specialists compare them to those of Victor Hugo, with his illuminations, his laments, his outrage, his plain-song and his melodies. "Sur le Pont-Neuf j'ai rencontré/Semblance d'avant que je naisse/ Cet enfant toujours effare/ Le fantome de ma jeunesse". (On Pont-Neuf bridge I met/ a semblance of before I was born/ that always frightened child/ the ghost of my youth). Aragon was never to break with what Apollinaire called "the old play with lines" and he explained that, as an enemy of "poetry schools", he returned to the alexandrine, the octopod and the decasyllable as a reaction against them. He was obviously skilled at using French verse in poems which were influenced by popular songs as well as by elegiac laments in rhyming lines of 16 feet, the apex of Aragon's poetic work. The man who wrote "Arachezmoi le coeur, vous y verrez Pars" (Tear out my heart and you will see Paris there) still today remains the poet of love and the poet of Paris.

It was precisely from the impossibility to accept his life, the lies about his birth, his fake family, and the poverty that resulted from it, and the inavowable malaise that his sexuality inspired in him, that his need to write was born. If Aragon only found his true path through grappling with the most dramatic situations, his poems and his novels were built up out of them, giving his inner drama the dimension of France's conflicts in the middle of the 20th century and of the struggles of his generation in the face of communism.

— L'Actualite En France

Two poems by Jahanara Khan Bina, Translated by Ziaul Karim

Love Story

He told me
Once
Stories about flowers,
Birds and rivers.
Said
The cluster of blossoms
Of his garden
The whistle of birds
And
The lullaby of rivers
Are all for me.
One Sravan evening
He sent me laughing
As he neared me
To whisper something into my ear
That made him stand in gloomy silence



Like Sravan's overcast sky,
Wiping my teenager's joviality
Just when I took a
Fuller look at him
He began to speak of something else,
An altogether different story.
Stories about a war
Of refugees
Of relief camps
Cramped and clustered with people
And the fire of war ravaging
Villages cities
Towns ports
His painful days
His nights of agony
Were being lessened by
A young girl's homely smile
The war being over
The first thing that



Flashed through his mind
Was the smile
The little girl turning
Adolescent and then
Reaching adulthood
In the river of anticipation
Water flows on
But is he coming?

Only For You

As the river banks erode
In thunderous sound
Your love crumbles into pieces.
Young man
What sort of a love is this?
You who can bring about
An undercurrent of happiness



In an infertile or a fallow field
With spontaneous ease
Turn unfaithful
Dislodging the soil
Of faith.
Young man
What sort of a love is this?

Come back
Young man
Right here
Where a simple rustic woman is taking
A deep
Moonlit shower:
In the darkness of her forest hair
And in the shadows of her mysterious eyes
A world of love is in
Store for you.