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Poet of Paris Streets

by [Katherine Knorr](#)

Review of Léon-Paul Fargue by Jean-Paul Goujon

The poet Léon-Paul Fargue (1876–1947) is something of a forgotten man in French twentieth-century literature. Although he both craved and disdained official honors, he was his own worst enemy when it came to his place in the world of letters, always late with his copy, presumptuous with his patrons, and inconsistent in his literary aims. The result is that his poetry books are difficult to find; he is remembered, if at all, for his brilliant essays on Paris and those funny poems about cats and frogs. Jean-Paul Goujon's excellent biography, published recently by Gallimard, tries to give due credit to this most difficult man who was, in his curious way, highly influential in a variety of artistic fields.

Any account of Fargue's life takes us across the much-mythologized cultural history of Paris, from nightclubs such as Le Chat Noir and, much later, Le Boeuf sur le Toit, with its talented and self-promoting crowd, to "scandalous" painting exhibitions, to Adrienne Monnier's lending library, and to the various salons where ladies of means, many of them American heiresses married to European titles, distributed money and petits fours in exchange for some place in literary-social history. In retrospect, Fargue figures in all such stories almost like a ghost, and that very evanescence gives this biography an interesting angle on the Paris that so many "cultural historians" have mostly misunderstood. One anecdote places him here, in a doorway, or there, near the piano; another places him on a divan, smoking and bathing his listeners in his intoxicating conversation, then disappearing on mysterious excursions for English cigarettes and Swedish matches, or to mail a letter and infuriate the tobacconist by asking to see the whole sheet of identical postage stamps and demanding, inevitably, the one in the middle.

Yet Fargue was, through his many friendships and collaborative undertakings, involved in the taste and direction not only of the literature of his time but also of the music—Debussy, Ravel, Satie, Stravinsky—and his uneven but enormously imaginative and evocative body of work surely has as much call to appear in Gallimard's Pléiade collection (from which it is presently excluded) as those of his onetime friends Valéry Larbaud and Alfred Jarry. As Goujon points out, Fargue has been ignored by the French Academy and ill-served by publishers, partly because the later years of his life were wasted on amusing but limited journalism, partly because he fits into no "school," and partly because, with the major exception of the late novelist André Beucler, he left no claque behind.

He was, as the cliché goes, a man of contradictions. He was a bad student with a brilliant mind, he was a habitual liar and a great teller of truths, he was avid for decorations to the point of appropriating those he had not received and at the same time a sharp satirist of vanity. He was a notorious moocher, and yet a generous man, helpful to young writers both with introductions to the

famous and with the era's version of book blurbs. He was by many accounts extremely charming; his was unfortunately the sort of charm that goes with a talent for gossip, and he lost quite a few friends that way. He was a collector of aristocratic connections who was much happier with the conversation of barmen and concierges, those who described life with a colorful and violent simplicity. At heart, he was a deeply wounded man.

In some ways, he remained childish all his life. He never really held down a job, although he tried pretty much unsuccessfully to run his father's ceramics business, and he lived off and on with his mother until her death at the age of ninety-three in 1935. He married only late in life, just before the Second World War.

Solitude and, especially, the lost paradise of youth, were the themes of most of his writing. Although his own early years were lonely and filled with a sense of insecurity, he remembered them with a warmth that permeated all his writing, notably in what is perhaps his most famous line: "On ne guérit pas de sa jeunesse" (which means, less elegantly put, that you don't get over your childhood).

Fargue was born out of wedlock in 1876 to a seamstress, Marie Aussudre. His father, Léon, was an engineer whose family would not accept the liaison, and although the elder Fargue created a family with his lover, he did not legally recognize Léon-Paul until 1892, and did not marry Marie until 1907. For Léon-Paul, this made for a life full of fears and questions, though he loved both his parents intensely, and there are echoes of them in many of the prose poems that deal with family such as those gathered in *Vulturne* (my translation):

There was a family. Its life, its gay moments. Its child... . The window open to the sun...
. Friends at their table, happy, at the coffee hour. Their return from work. The time of
their toilette with their almond soap... . Their voices in the rooms, calling each other,
their poor eyes, their humble gestures. They walked gently alongside life, in the sadness
and the shame and the joy... . All of that, ddead!!

He was devastated by his father's early death in 1909, after which he wrote one of his greatest poems, "Aeternae Memoriae Patris," and sprinkled innumerable others with his guilt over all the things left unsaid and undone.

There are quite a few mysteries surrounding Fargue's schooling, and although Goujon has worked hard to elucidate them, he has gotten only so far. In later years, Fargue would boast of having been at *lycées* where he apparently never enrolled, and of having studied with the poet Stéphane Mallarmé. He seems to have polished up what was an indifferent record all the way up to the baccalaureate, which in those days was still a difficult and important scholastic achievement and which he failed. Still, he did meet in one of his various schools, in 1892, a young man who would change his life and secure his vocation, Alfred Jarry, eventually the author of *Ubu Roi* and creator of the absurdist Pataphysique. Fargue and Jarry were extremely close until a violent falling out in 1894, the precise reasons for which Goujon wasn't able to pinpoint. It is likely they were lovers, Goujon writes, and indeed for a time in his youth Fargue looked the part of the poetic faun (this will seem laughable to anyone who has seen photographs or drawings of the older Fargue, with his comb-over and his thick glasses).

Associated with this period is Fargue's first work, *Tancredi*, which brought him fame. First printed anonymously at the trailing end of Symbolism in the review *Pan* (October 1895 and March 1896), *Tancredi* is very much a young man's book, inevitably a bit precious and clearly tied to the Jarry years. Fargue later revised it a number of times, notably to remove anything suggesting homosexuality, which seems to have been for Fargue very much a passing phase of late adolescence.

Fargue appeared to be on his way, but he was a man with a deep attraction to failure, who started talking about writing more than he wrote. He did not publish again—aside from the odd piece in

literary journals—until 1907, when the printing of the so-called *Premier Cahier* of his poems was organized by Pierre Haour, both friend and patron. Fargue characteristically sabotaged the publication with last-minute additions and deletions and imperious orders on the quality of the paper, all the while insisting that the book was someone else's idea and put together without his knowledge. The book was printed but never distributed. (As Goujon points out, dates of publication for various of these books are slippery because of revisions and changes of printers.)

This set a pattern: Fargue was chronically unable to produce what he promised, and unable to let go of what he did write. The publisher Gaston Gallimard, to whom he became very close, is said to have locked him in a room, to no avail: Fargue came out having written one line over and over. He did at last publish *Poèmes* in 1912 after working hard to foil the project, with the usual second thoughts and eccentric orders and counterorders. It was difficult, indeed saintly, to help Fargue. Still, such was his charm and his talent that people kept trying.

The second great friendship that marked his life was with the writer Valéry Larbaud, whose father owned the Vichy mineral water source. Larbaud, whom Fargue got to know well in 1909, helped Fargue survive financially and of course tried hard to get him published. Fargue provided the nightlife, the wild schemes and occasionally, it appears, the brothels specializing in little girls. He introduced Larbaud and the poet Paul Valéry to Adrienne Monnier, with whom he became friendly in 1916 (and with whose sister, Marie, he had a long liaison), but both friendships turned sour, mostly because of Fargue's love of gossip.

Although acknowledging that much of the more malicious gossip and lies were unpardonable, Goujon does defend Fargue's mythomania about his own achievements as a form of "revenge" against life. "By inventing a chimerical existence," he writes, "the poet gave himself a kind of satisfaction, at the same time as he erased the memories of disgraces and humiliations." He adds: "No doubt also he ended up sincerely believing his own fictions."

Fargue's consecration came with the publication in 1927 of a special issue of the review *Feuilles Libres* with homages from writers, painters, and musicians (and a letter purportedly written years before by Jarry, which Fargue seems to have written himself; Jarry, of course, was long dead). In 1928, he actually had four books at Gallimard: *Banalité*, *Vulture*, *Epaisseurs*, and *Suite Familiale*. He would never be quite so visible again.

To read Fargue's prose and poetry, the serious and the silly, is to step into a world deliriously playful and at the same time desperately sad in its evocation of the past. He loved the poetry of the quotidian, the throw-away line heard in the street. He loved the absurdly profound (and the profoundly absurd), he loved the names of things and of places. Having lived much of his life in the La Chapelle quarter near the Gare du Nord and the Gare de l'Est, he retained a fascination not so much for travel itself as for the idea and the infrastructure of travel. He saw the beauty in the powerful scenery of train stations, the bridges above the maze of tracks, the platforms and the *buvettes*, the hotels with their fog-dimmed lights, and the prostitutes. When he published *Le Piéton de Paris* in 1939, an absolute jewel of a book that is a personal history of the Paris he loved so well, it was a kind of autobiography.

A key to understanding Fargue is an appreciation of French intellectuals' love for *contrespèteries*, which can only be badly translated into English as spoonerisms. A good *contrespèterie* is obscene, and Fargue delighted in the use of witty obscenity, just as he did in the singsongy vulgarity of the street. Before the break with Adrienne Monnier, Fargue became involved in some of the team-translating of *Ulysses*. Although his translation didn't pass muster, at least partly because he introduced into the Molly Bloom soliloquy more obscenity than Joyce could take, the two writers enjoyed each other; they had in common the love of words gone haywire.

If so many Fargue anecdotes (more or less factual, of course) have come down to us, it is because in 1924 he met André Beucler, who, then in his mid-twenties, was delighted to discover the night world of the older writer. Beucler's recently reissued *Dimanche avec Léon-Paul Fargue*, which takes us—mostly in taxis rented for hours—from bouquiniste to restaurant banquette to pretentious cocktail party, is a minor work of genius, capturing all the color, humor, and depth of Fargue's endless conversation.

In 1943 Fargue had a dramatic stroke in a restaurant at a table with Picasso and others, and remained partly paralyzed until his death in 1947. He had to give up the restaurants and the taxis, and instead turned his home into a salon where, never far from his medicine and his telephone, he received guests while lying down.

There is much in Fargue's life that was sad, and this is a book that leaves the reader melancholy. Perhaps it is best to recall what Beucler referred to as "Farguiana"—the Fargue who loved the good things in life, food and drink and billiard halls and pretty ladies, and especially the Brasserie Lipp, where the ceramics had been supplied by his father. He was lyrical and earthy about all of it: speaking of a ripe Camembert, he called it "the feet of God." Years afterward, he could still describe the menus of elegant dinner parties: "trout patés, . . . civets of fresh salmon á la Vosne-Romanée, soups of veal kidney á la russe, stuffed langoustes rubbed with garlic, gently roasted in the oven under a snow of parmesan, and served under the sun of Champagne."

Katherine Knorr

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