

# Louis-Ferdinand Céline

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*Man hardly comes in more than two varieties, wherever he is, whatever he does: workers and pimps . . . they're either one or the other! . . . and inventors, the worst kind of job-holder! . . . they stand condemned! . . . the writer who doesn't pimp along, peacefully plagiarizing, who doesn't pump out the pop stuff, he's had it! . . . everybody hates him!*

—L.-F. Céline

*Conversations with Professor Y . . . (25)*

Louis-Ferdinand-Auguste Destouches was born on 27 May 1894 in the town of Courbevoie, in the Seine department outside Paris. His father, Ferdinand-Auguste (Fernand), worked for an insurance company, eventually retiring from his firm as a vice president. His frugal mother, Marguerite-Louise-Céline, ran a successful lace business in Paris's Passage Choiseul, earning "quite a bit of money [so that] she even bought diamonds, which her granddaughter still wears to this day" (Knapp 6). Later, Louis-Ferdinand would assume his mother's name as his nom de plume. By many accounts (and despite the lurid myth that Céline carefully cultivated throughout his life), the Destouches family was comfortably middle class with higher social aspirations—at times flaunting supposed aristocratic origins. One critic goes as far as describing Louis-Ferdinand's upbringing as "*bourgeois* amongst the people, according to aristocratic principles and with proletarian means" (qtd. in Vitoux 16).

Céline went to local schools in the Seine department until 1907, when he was sent (for the first of several long visits) to Germany and England: "In his mother's thinking, such knowledge would eventually come in handy in the lace business" (O'Connell, "An Introduction" 100). Thus at an early age Louis-Ferdinand had exposure to other languages and cultures, influencing perspectives that would surface later in his work. After his visits abroad, the adolescent Céline worked for several small local businesses, drifting about until he began his military service in 1912. At the advent of the First World War, he was in the midst of fulfilling his compulsory three-year duty in the French cavalry. In 1915 Céline was seriously wounded at the Flanders front, sustaining neural damage in his arm, ear, and head. These severe wounds, which would affect him for the rest of his life, earned him both an honorable discharge and the Médaille Militaire for bravery. "The crash of exploding shells

henceforth rang like a distant echo in Louis Destouches' battered head," according to Frédéric Vitoux. "He [began to put] distance between himself and the horror" (79).

After his discharge in 1915, Céline took a position at the French consulate's passport office in London. There he met and married the barmaid Suzanne Nebout. He quickly tired of London and the first Madame Céline, leaving them behind in 1916 when he took a position with the Sangha-Oubangui lumber company in the former German colony of Cameroon. O'Connell explains, "In search of adventure and to earn a living, he spent the next year in West Africa working as a trader in the bush for a French forestry company" ("An Introduction" 101). This African sojourn was disastrous for Céline; in Cameroon, he contracted dysentery and malaria—conditions, like his war injuries, that would plague him for the rest of his life. In 1917 he returned to France after spending several torturous months in a colonial hospital. Largely because of his fluency in English, Céline was offered a position with the American Rockefeller Foundation in Paris to lecture on tuberculosis awareness and prevention. Several biographers have argued that this experience deeply affected Céline. He found his professional calling during his tenure with the foundation, choosing to pursue the field of medicine.

"Louis had a passion for medicine . . ." (Vitoux 115). Céline began his accelerated medical studies at Rennes in 1921; he received his degree two years later with a doctoral dissertation entitled *The Life and Work of Philippe Ignace Semmelweis*. During his medical studies, he had a daughter, Colette (his only child), with his second wife, Edith Follet. The second Madame Céline was the daughter of a professor of clinical medicine at the University of Rennes who was also an *officier* of the Legion of Honor and an important member of the public education board. Dr. Follet opened many doors for his young son-in-law. After receiving his degree, Céline opened a private medical practice in Rennes, which he dissolved, along with his marriage and all of the vicissitudes of his connection to influential Dr. Follet, a few months later. Again choosing a life of adventure, he took an epidemiological position as a medical officer with the League of Nations, moving to its headquarters in Geneva. From Geneva, Céline took on projects in Liverpool and, despite his past misery, Cameroon, to evaluate the endemic proportions of encephalitis and yellow fever there.

His position with the League of Nations brought Céline to the U.S. in 1926—an assignment that would profoundly influence perspectives in his first novel. With a group of South American physicians, he visited American health facilities and hospitals. He was overwhelmed by the reality of America "with its prodigious vitality, its



crowds, its architecture, its poverty, its opulence, its cynicism, its women so beautiful you didn't know where to begin, and its endless factories" (Vitoux 143). He visited New York and spent a great deal of time in Detroit, where he was captivated by the mechanization of the Ford plant. He took special interest in the ways in which the humdrum monotony of the assembly line affected Ford's workers physically and psychologically. Around this period he began an affair with Elisabeth Craig, an American dancer whom he had first met in Geneva. This affair would have a lasting influence; indeed it was Elisabeth Craig to whom Céline dedicated his monumental first novel, *Journey to the End of Night*, in 1932. Craig was more than a beautiful paramour; she came to personify the qualities and passions—adventure, beauty, eroticism, humor, and transgression—that Céline had been craving throughout his life. In short, Craig fascinated the smitten young doctor. She embodied Vitoux suggests, "the liberation from constraints: ugliness, gravity, prejudices, fear of scandal, bourgeois proprieties, social obligations" (159). Céline and Craig spent six years together, from the time that he worked for the League of Nations through the time that he established another medical practice in the grubby Paris suburb of Clichy.

While he was practicing in Clichy, Céline wrote the play *L'Église* (The Church), in which he exposed the first notes of anti-Semitism that would develop in his later works. He then wrote *Journey to the End of Night*, which took three years to complete. Most critics believe that the town of Clichy—its dinginess, downtrodden inhabitants, and despair—figures into the novel as the fictional town of La Garenne-Rancy, where an important episode takes place. Initially, Céline sent his thousand-page handwritten manuscript to two small publishers, who promptly rejected it because of its length and complexity. Through the agency of a friend, he then sent copies to the publishing houses of Gallimard and Denöel et Steele. While Gaston Gallimard hesitated with the manuscript (passing it among many readers, including Benjamin Crémieux, André Malraux, and Jean Paulhan), Robert Denöel enthusiastically embraced the book, agreeing to publish it with minimal editorial interference. With the publication of this novel in 1932, the author formally adopted the pseudonym of Céline, distancing the "lives" of the physician Louis-Ferdinand Destouches and the controversial writer Louis-Ferdinand Céline. This first novel was an immediate success, gathering both critical praise and financial rewards. "Here is a work where art, culture, or a god is no longer the concern," asserted the critic Eugène Dabit in the journal *Nouvelle revue française* of December 1932, "where revolt is born not of aesthetic discussions or symbols,

but of a cry of protest against the human condition—against what man can do to a multitude of other men, which is a mockery and crime against life” (24). Céline was nominated for the prestigious Prix Goncourt, which he lost to Guy Mazeline’s *Les Loups* (*The Wolves*), a largely forgotten novel. Several members of the Goncourt jury found Céline’s language reprehensible and his message appalling. In lieu of the Goncourt (and much to his own chagrin), Céline received the “second” prize of a Renaudot. Even though he felt alienated by the literary establishment, the scandal surrounding the prize enhanced the allure of the novel: “In the two months following the lost Goncourt, more than 50,000 copies were sold, as well as the foreign rights in a dozen countries” (Vitoux 222).

Following the success of *Journey*, Céline published his second novel, *Death on the Installment Plan*, in 1936. The narrative of this second novel ends where *Journey* begins; in a sense Céline wrote its prequel. Unlike *Journey*, *Death* was received by readers and critics alike ambivalently; they found its obscene language and lewd representations offensive and jarring. Its weak sales deeply affected Céline, helping to foment the vitriol he developed toward the literary establishment. During this time, Céline and Elisabeth Craig parted ways. She, quite literally, disappeared in the U.S., leaving her perplexed abandoned lover in Paris. But Céline’s loneliness did not last very long. In 1935 he met the young dancer Lucette Almanson, with whom he spent the rest of his life. This dancer would stand by the author through all of his literary and legal travails.

While he was recovering from the failure of *Death*, Céline visited the U.S.S.R. *Journey*, which had been translated into Russian by Elsa Triolet, had been a great success there. Céline’s negative impressions of Stalinist society would form the first of his notorious pamphlets, *Mea Culpa*, which he published in 1936. After his time in the U.S.S.R., as another European war and the horrors of Nazism loomed on the horizon, Céline turned from writing fiction to writing incendiary, virulently anti-Semitic pamphlets. Over forty years after his death, Céline’s reputation is ineluctably bound to these troubling works. Céline published *Bagatelles pour un massacre* (Trifles for a Massacre) in 1937, *L’École de cadavres* (The School of Corpses) in 1938, and *Les Beaux Draps* (Some State of Affairs) in 1941. Unlike the earlier pamphlet that takes aim at the emptiness, filth, and violence of the Soviet state, *Bagatelles*, *L’École*, and *Drap* focus on the “pernicious Jewish world conspiracy” and the “destructive influence” of Jews in the West: “Claiming that the Jews in France, with their brothers in London and New York, are planning another war in which they intend to wipe out the Aryans, he calls for the neutralization of Jewish power in France” (O’Connell, “An Introduction” 106).



Céline's anti-Semitic celebrity was overlooked by neither the right nor the left. In 1939 he attended a conference of the virulently anti-Semitic *Centre de Documentation et de Propogande*, organized by Darquier de Pellepoix (who later served as Vichy's commissioner for Jewish affairs). In the same year the author and his publisher, Robert Denöel, were sued by liberal sources for the libel expressed in *Bagatelles*; the pamphlet was withdrawn from circulation. With the collapse of the French government, Céline again had free license to express his views. In 1941 he was one of the anti-Semitic "dignitaries" who attended the opening of the Gestapo-run *Institut d'études des questions juives*. Not only did he publish *Les Beaux Draps* during the same year, with Nazi blessings, *Bagatelles* was also republished.

Besides his anti-Semitic activities, Céline volunteered for medical duty on a transport ship in 1940 (despite his declared pacifism). After the fall of France, in line with the official anti-Semitism of the occupying forces and no longer pursued by his enemies on the left, he, according to Vitoux, "could settle into his new life . . . and give himself thoughtlessly over to the four years of occupation" (351). This "new life" included a comfortable apartment in Montmartre and a new position as head of a medical clinic. After their many years together, Céline and Lucette were married in 1943. He published the novel *Guignol's Band* in early 1944. But this thoughtless bliss did not last long. By the end of 1944, when it became clear that Germany would lose the war, Céline recognized that things were about to change: "Having been denounced as a traitor over the BBC radio and having received death threats from the Resistance in the form of miniature coffins, [he] realized it would not be safe to remain in Paris" (Solomon 3). He secretly converted his currency into gold and transferred it to an account in Denmark, where he hoped to ride out the postwar trauma with his wife. It took the couple (along with their beloved cat Bébert) close to one year to reach Copenhagen through ravaged cities in Germany on the verge of starvation and still recoiling from the Allies' last onslaught. Despite all of his carefully laid escape plans and his stock of gold, life in Denmark was anything but the comfortable waiting period that Céline had envisaged while he was in France.

A warrant from the French government for his arrest arrived in Copenhagen even before Céline arrived. The French authorities asked the Danes to incarcerate the author until proper arrangements could be made for his extradition as a traitor. This marked the beginning of a harrowing episode in his life that would last for five years. Céline spent almost a year in Vestre Faengsel prison, shuttling between a cell and the infirmary (his disability plagued him throughout his incarceration). He later spent time in the Danish

National Hospital and rented an apartment with his wife. Between 1948 and 1951 he lived under house arrest in the North Sea town of Korsör—at times in an unheated, unplumbed cabin on his attorney's summer estate. During his stay in Korsör, he began corresponding with the young American Jewish professor Milton Hindus. Hindus later visited the author in Denmark; this visit and the correspondence between the two became the basis for Hindus's book *The Crippled Giant* in 1950. (Some critics also argue that it induced Céline to write in response to Hindus's book *Conversations with Professor Y . . .* in 1955.) In 1951 Céline was convicted of treason by a French court in absentia. Because of his heroism during World War I, the French military tribunal granted him amnesty. Céline seized the opportunity to end his Danish exile; he was officially granted permission to return to France.

His "years in prison and exile had aged him, exhausted him, made him more solitary still, more sick, more grouchy, more antisocial than ever" (Vitoux 516). Upon his return he alienated the friends who had supported him while he was away. He, Lucette, the cat Bébert, and a bevy of other pets that the couple had acquired in Denmark first stayed with family and friends in the resort town of Menton and the fashionable Parisian suburb of Neuilly, finally settling into a small house of their own in modest Meudon on the outskirts of Paris. Céline had now come full circle, returning close to the region in which he grew up. He would spend the rest of his life here.

Céline was remarkably prolific throughout the last period of his life. He wrote, completed, or published *London Bridge: Guignol's Band II* (published posthumously in 1964), *Féerie pour une autre fois I* in 1952, *Féerie pour une autre fois II* in 1954, *Conversations with Professor Y . . .* in 1955, *Ballets without Music, without Dancers, without Anything* in 1957, and the wartime trilogy *Castle to Castle, North, and Rigadoon*. He published the first two segments of the trilogy between 1957 and 1960. He died of a massive stroke while he was in the process of finishing *Rigadoon*, which was edited by Lucette and published in 1969. Céline died on 1 July 1961; he was buried in a vault in the Meudon cemetery with the double inscription: "Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Docteur L.-F. Destouches."

### **Monsieur Céline, the Célinean I, and Docteur Destouches**

Where and when are the author Céline, the narrating Célinean I, and Dr. Destouches one and the same? In what ways do these fictional and historical personalities part ways? These questions are paramount to an understanding of Céline's work. Not only have



critics discussed these questions, Céline himself embeds and problematizes the question of his own biography, continually coaxing and antagonizing his readers to separate fact from fiction. As one critic puts it, "Céline is as tightly packed with lies as a boil is with pus. To lance him suddenly would run the risk of killing him altogether, as it would also contain the possibility of relieving him" (Hindus 28). If Milton Hindus's comment is any indication, it is clear that Céline never had a problem arousing suspicions about his veracity from his readers, from his associates, and even from his sympathetic interlocutors. Yet the act of lying and the aesthetic appeal of lies might well be the interpretive keys that are necessary to unlock the essence of Céline's work as well as the biographical truth of Dr. Destouches's life. In his provocative book *The Inner Dream: Céline as Novelist*, the critic J. H. Matthews summarizes the perplexing questions that confront us when we attempt to differentiate the man from the principal characters, the descriptions, and the events in his work:

Supposing now, that [Céline] leaves us little or no chance of generously dissociating the author from the works he puts out, because his life history is apparently the very substance of his novels and, incidentally, he assures everyone who asks him why he writes that he does so only to make money? What if, in addition, outside his novelistic universe, just as much within it . . . he lies incessantly and apparently compulsively? And what if, misleading readers and listeners alike, he is supposedly in full agreement with the narrator of one of his novels [*Journey*], who declares, "You must choose, to die or to lie. Me I've never been able to kill myself"? Well, if he answers to the name of Louis-Ferdinand Céline, then dealing with him presents special problems. (2).

Even Céline's first work, his dissertation, *The Life and Work of Philippe Ignace Semmelweis*, begs biographical inquiry. The burgeoning young author does more than write a thesis about the life and times of the physician Philippe Ignace Semmelweis. The historical Semmelweis shares his own preoccupation with social medicine, hygiene, madness, professional isolation, and death. "Through Semmelweis, Céline portrays the fate of the polemicist [like himself] who, faced with the hostility and incomprehension of his contemporaries," according to Nicholas Hewitt, "particularly those in a professional hierarchy, can only react with increasing violence and exaggeration which lead him to madness and death" (42). Céline's personal connection to Semmelweis is but the first of similar relationships that would develop throughout his writing career. When we read Céline, we must consider the concordance that exists between his work and events in his own life.

Moreover, the chronology of Céline's work does not match the chronology of his life, further confounding the biographical question. His first novel, *Journey to the End of Night*, describes the experiences of Bardamu (the first-person narrator) during World War I, in Africa, in the U.S., and in La Garenne-Rancy, where he practices medicine. His—the narrator has now become Ferdinand—early life forms the basis of *Death on the Installment Plan* four years later, from childhood through his decision to join the military. But the seeming concordance between the life of the narrating Ferdinand and Céline becomes more confusing in later works. The much later novels *Guignol's Band* and *London Bridge* return to the early events of *Journey*—to Ferdinand's experiences immediately after the war (before his sojourn in Africa, his visit to the U.S., and his professional life in La Garenne-Rancy). Portions of *Féerie I* and *II* deal with the narrator's experience in Paris during World War II. These two compositions most closely approximate contemporaneous events in Céline's life. Other parts of *Féerie II* are concerned with life in Denmark—in prison, in the infirmary, and under house arrest. The wartime trilogy *Castle to Castle*, *Nord*, and *Rigadoon* also complicates the concordance. The first novel takes place in Sigmaringen in 1944-45, and the second novel describes events in 1944, namely the narrator's tortuous flight through Germany, while part of the last novel returns to the 1945 flight northward—again from Sigmaringen to Copenhagen. Where fictional Ferdinand narrates in the early novels (*Journey to London Bridge*), Céline narrates directly in the later novels. Even though he narrates as the "real" Céline, the later novels are as rife with phantasmagoria as the earlier Ferdinand novels. "From *Féerie pour une autre fois I* onwards he speaks in his own persona as Céline," according to the critic Merlin Thomas, "but this does not mean that the works from then on are more accurate as autobiographical sources: there is always an element of fantasy and hallucination" (*Louis-Ferdinand Céline* 41).

What then are effective strategies for differentiating Céline's work and characters from events in his own life? All of Céline's writing is enmeshed in historical conflict, from the traumas and politics of the petite bourgeoisie (*Death*, *Guignol's Band*, and *London Bridge*) to the catastrophic consequences of world war (*Journey*, *Féerie I* and *II*, and the wartime trilogy). Some critics even argue that the anti-Semitic pamphlets themselves are historical expressions rather than pathological symptoms. There is more to this biographical question than a critique of history. Céline does not use the creative possibilities of his own life to illustrate the ways in which individuals are ravaged by the flood of historical events. There is



far more at stake in the issue of the narrating Célinean I. As Charles Krance puts it, "The transpositional eye and the representational I of the Célinean narrative, although rooted in the author's apparent intentions to communicate the biographical and historical convolutions to which he was subjected, are in an historical sense, circumstantial to the events themselves, while in a purely narrative sense they are circumstantial to the effects of those events" (17). In Céline's fiction events themselves matter as much as their consequences; he struggles to convey the immediacy of an experience, using his own life as fodder for his reader's engagement with his fiction.

Besides history, and for that matter pathology, how can we factor Céline's anti-Semitism into Krance's model of the "transpositional eye and the representational I"? Considering his notoriety as an anti-Semite, it seems especially important to address this issue when we attempt to dissociate the man Céline from the fictional universe of his work. Céline's preoccupation with the Jewish question and his first Jewish characters appear in his play *L'Église* (1932)—a drama in five acts that prefigures many of the episodes in the later novel *Journey*. Certain critics have gone so far as to conceive of the work as a parody of anti-Semitic ideology. But there are other ways to understand the biographical aspects of the play. With its petit bourgeois physician protagonist, episodes in Africa and the U.S., and its pivotal scenes in Geneva, *L'Église* mirrors aspects of Céline's life experiences. At an early point in the drama, the protagonist Dr. Bardamu crudely asserts that the English annoy him "almost as much as the Jews" (8, my translation). By the second act of the play, a ship named *Youpinium*—the derogatory word *youpin* is the contemporary French equivalent of the English *kike*—appears. The third act takes place at the League of Nations' Geneva headquarters. Here Bardamu encounters the grotesquely named Polish Jewish character Judenzweck, who works with Moise and Mosaic—yet again, grotesquely stereotyped characters. These three conspire against Bardamu; they are portrayed as hypocrites, liars, and opportunists. *L'Église* "illustrates a kind of *Ur-Voyage* [*Journey*], a preliminary, tentative attempt by Céline to come to grips with his own personal demons," states the critic David O'Connell. He goes on, "since Céline was later to display an ugly, distasteful, and unjustified hatred of Jews, we get the earliest glimpses in [the drama] of that much-discussed side of his character" (*Louis-Ferdinand Céline* 79). Perhaps *L'Église* is Céline's first attempt at conveying immediacy to his audience; the play's Jewish stereotypes and anti-Semitic glimmers, especially where they connect to his own life, attempt in an eminently offensive way to engage the audience directly. *L'Église* is not only Céline's ur-text for *Journey*; it is

also a type of biographical ur-text for both his later narrative strategies and his anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism would again surface in Céline's second novel, *Death on the Installment Plan*, in a very different way.

In this second "autobiographical" novel anti-Semitism appears in an almost parodic way. The narrator's abusive father, Auguste (anything but a sympathetic character), rails against Jews, Freemasons, and a host of other "outside influences" in France throughout Ferdinand's childhood. Auguste's hatred of Jews centers on both their roles in the banking system and the roles that they play in the "modern" mechanization of Paris—both removed from his own petit bourgeois life. In effect, he blames among others the Jews for his financial woes and his *démodé* status; Auguste cannot advance beyond a certain point at his insurance firm because of his limited knowledge and experience. Indeed, "Auguste's anti-Semitism has its profound roots in his victimisation at the hands of a financial exploitation of time" (Hewitt 110). But there is more to Auguste's anti-Semitism than time or money. Especially through the perspective of the narrating Ferdinand (who hates his father), Auguste's racism appears not just clichéd, but even crazy; after all, grandiose delusions of secret conspiracies hint at something beyond economic woes. "In *Mort à crédit* [Auguste's ravings] include a diatribe against the Jews," states the critic Allen Thiher, "and [Auguste] is plainly characterized as berserk" (120). This identification between Auguste and anti-Semitism complicates our understanding of Céline's sentiments toward the Jews. Following the suggestions of Thiher's "berserk" anti-Semitic father, "it is difficult to surmise how Céline could take to heart anti-Semitism so readily" (120), as he does in his later pamphlets.

Concordance and anti-Semitism are not the only issues that disrupt a biographical understanding of Céline's work. The delirious sensibility that permeates his later work further problematizes the biographical question. In the wartime trilogy Céline does more than thwart chronology; he also plunges his readers into a world of delirium that could be either fictional or factual—considering the historical scenes that he describes in all their horror and grisliness. Thiher writes, "In their general outline these three chronicles appear to be accurate in their presentation of Céline's journeys, though there is much confusion about specific incidents. Their principal interest, however, lies in Céline's vision of history" (170). In this trilogy Céline plunges his readers into a chaotic universe that could be a real depiction of events at the end of World War II or an exercise in hallucinatory expression. What makes the trilogy most disconcerting though is the savage sense of humor that pervades



each of the texts. Through his own persona, Céline finds obscene moments of mirth in a world that is literally going up in smoke—Germany on the verge of collapse. In the trilogy Céline yokes events in his own life to the history that engulfs it, again offering his biography as fodder to his reader.

### Céline's Language

Just as Céline problematizes conceptions of biography in his work, so does he violate hidebound conceptions of literary language. Indeed, an understanding of Céline's style as well as the pivotal role that he has played in contemporary fiction revolves around his use of unconventional language and syntax. On many occasions Céline claimed that he sought to reenergize and resensitize literature through the power of the spoken word. In a much-quoted letter of 1947 to Milton Hindus, he states, "*Re-sensitize the language so that it pulses more than it reasons*—that was my goal. I'm a stylist, a colorist with words . . . I want ordinary words, everyday words. Vulgarity and sexuality have no part in all of this—they're just accessories" (qtd. in Hindus 93). While some sensitive readers and critics argue, contrary to Céline, that vulgarity and sexuality lie at the heart of his aesthetic, most cannot fail to recognize the everyday style of his work. Argot, strange neologisms, and unconventional syntax are embedded in all of his texts.

In *Conversations with Professor Y* . . . Céline coins the metaphor *métro emotif* (emotive subway) to convey the power of his writing style: "I ship all of my friends off on the metro, correction! I take everyone willy-nilly, with me! . . . charge along! . . . the emotive subway, mine in a dream! No drawbacks, nor congestion! . . . never a stop, nowhere! straight through! destination! in emotion! . . . powered with emotion! only the goal in sight: full motion . . . start to finish!" (93). Why the metaphor of a subway? Céline traveled on the Paris Métro when he lived in Montmartre, commuting between his apartment and his medical practice. Unlike the more convenient and interesting bus (not only did a stop stand close to his flat, the route went through some of the more colorful quarters of the city), the subway took him back and forth directly. Realizing the relevance to the immediacy that he struggled to achieve in his work, Céline appropriated the subway's directness to describe his style metaphorically. As O'Connell puts it, "he chose the subway because it took him directly to his goal, and to him the heart of writing was the need to implant an emotional power in written language" (*Louis-Ferdinand Céline* 134-35). Céline's metaphor also considers the interpretive differences between surface and depth. Unlike the

bus, where jolts, passing panoramas, and frequent stops provide distraction, the subway takes its patron through darkness. He or she can focus only on feelings and thoughts. The adventure of the subway takes place on the tracks, not beyond the cars' windows. Céline conceived of his writing as a track on which traveler-readers would experience affective immediacy, without distraction or external mediation. Beyond the written course of his track, only readers' memories are of any consequence in the emotive subway. "In the midst of the clashing and clanging of seemingly disjointed signifiers," writes Charles Krance, "the events, accidents, and traumatism of journeys past are transposed and made intrinsic to the *subversive* articulation of the text, in which they appear as many textual aftershocks" (20). Through his emotive subway, Céline strives to transfer the experience of the rail onto the written page. In order to achieve this effect, he develops a strategy of writing that violates syntax, linguistic norms, and narrative conventions.

In much of his work Céline uses the "streamlined" or "bevelled" language normally associated with spoken discourse (Thomas, *Louis-Ferdinand Céline* 91). Examples of this include violations of the French double form of negation (he generally uses *pas* instead of *ne . . . pas*), which is used in hurried everyday parlance, but almost never appears in literary works. Critics like Merlin Thomas also note that Céline fails, quite deliberately, to inflect words, again using the language that one would hear on the street rather than the language that one would expect to find in a work of literature. As with inflection, Céline also plays with rules of inversion and interrogation. In formal written French, questions either begin with an interrogatory expression or the pronoun and verb are inverted. Often, Céline's most poignant questions are simply marked with punctuation, mimicking the lilt of human speech instead of following the rules of the French Academy. Céline's exercises in syntactical violation come to bear on many issues that quite interestingly highlight the "literariness" of his work. In her *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* Julia Kristeva writes with great insight that "Céline's music is that of a syntactician; Céline the musician turns out to be a specialist in spoken language, a grammarian who reconciles melody and logic admirably well" (192). Céline's exploitation of truncated syntax has a rhythmic quality that moves readers forward on the tracks of his emotive subway. To use the musical analogy that Kristeva suggests, Céline's abbreviated spoken clusters form part of a textual symphony that can be understood both as a literary artifact (because of its intensely melodic characteristics) and an everyday expression (because of its accessible immediacy).



Céline incorporates a wide range of vocabulary into his texts, from obscenities, street slang, and neologisms to technical jargon, medical terminology, and onomatopoeic words. Even though he often writes about life at the lower reaches of society, he never sacrifices the linguistic color of his texts. In this vein Céline boldly states in *Conversations*, "Slang plays its role, sure! . . . of course! . . . as with all seasonings! . . . there isn't any? . . . it's a lousy-ass soup . . . too much? . . . lousier still! . . . it takes a knack! . . ." (65). His works are not stories of low and downtrodden folk written in the debased language of the street. Rather, "His lexicographical knowledge . . . is very extensive [enabling him] to avoid monotony when handling the spoken language, which is only too often restricted in scope and not easily sustained at length without its limitations being obvious" (Thomas, *Louis-Ferdinand Céline* 94). In many ways the uniqueness (and perhaps the genius) of Céline's work revolves around his extraordinary linguistic *mélange*—the ways in which each text rather seamlessly incorporates widely divergent levels of discourse. Indeed, his virtuosity with language, many critics argue, remains the most important contribution that he made to later literature, from the French *nouveau roman* to the American Beat poem. "Céline's legacy is his use of language," according to Thiher. "Language, *délire*, comedy, and revolt are inseparable in Céline" (210).

Any consideration of Céline's language would be incomplete if it did not consider his idiosyncratic punctuation. His ubiquitous *trois points* (three dots) warrant close examination. The dots first appear in *Journey* and proliferate throughout the rest of his texts. Céline writes, "My three dots are indispensable! . . . indispensable, thunderation! . . . I repeat: indispensable to my metro!" (*Conversations* 107). He openly admits that the *trois points* are key components of his emotive subway; ironically, through their mode of segmentation, they aggressively bind his eclectic verbal *mélange* together. As one of his translators notes, "they mark the incompleteness, the abruptness, the sudden shifts of direction characteristic of everyday speech, and signify a declaration of war on the flowing prose period" (Manheim x). Through this tactic of interruption, Céline urges his readers to fill in gaps—to respond to his words as if they were being spoken. Kristeva writes, "We are thrown into a strange state when reading Céline. What is involved goes beyond the content of the novels, the style of the writing . . . the true 'miracle' of Céline resides in the very experience of one's reading—it is fascinating, mysterious, intimately nocturnal, and liberating . . . yet complicitous" (133). One could almost imagine the nod of a head, a grimace, a sigh, or a wiggling finger where the *trois points* appear.

When caught in the written clamor and furious pace of his texts, the *trois points* bind us to the page. We might even conceive of them as a type of emotional glue that sutures us to the madness that constitutes Céline's written world.

### Céline and the Weight of History

Céline's life and work have deep historical implications. It would not be an exaggeration to state that his literary and biographical journeys are bound by the contemporaneous storms that raged through Europe from the fin de siècle through the postwar period, including colonialism and the wreck of the two world wars. History profoundly punctuates any reader's encounter with Céline. Most critics would argue that we cannot avoid historical questions when we approach Céline from multiple angles—as a “real person,” as a personification of hatred, as a literary embodiment of petit bourgeois angst, as a vehicle and propagator of virulent anti-Semitism, and even as an image of the tension between art and life. In the same way that we consider his use of iconoclastic language in the literary medium, we also consider the history that surrounds, informs, and at times engulfs his writing. (I mentioned earlier that some critics go so far as to interpret Céline's works as documents of history—far beyond the historical events that they describe.)

“With [Céline] . . . the ‘crisis’ in storytelling becomes the very mirror of the crisis in history, namely, the coincidental and seemingly gratuitous relationship between the individual and the world through which he passes . . .” (Krance 158). Commenting on the wartime trilogy, Krance notes that the fragmented and hallucinatory aspects of these last works strive to replicate the chaotic reality of the world that Céline describes. The narrating Céline witnesses the making of bad history. Neither describing specific events nor empathizing with key historical figures, Céline re-creates the experience of war, namely, its baseness, violence, senselessness, and, perversely enough, its moments of obscene humor. In effect Céline's “real” history of the 1940s wartime nadir emerges from a written collage of ugly details. In this Célinean version of history, war becomes an aporia for readers. Indeed, as the critic Erika Ostrovsky writes, Céline leaves “us no refuge of any kind, no exit from the trap he has shown our world to be” (18). Readers confront the general state of inescapable ugliness at the heart of wartime history. But far more specific historical events steep in Céline's body of work.

I have already commented on the ways in which anti-Semitism circulates throughout Céline's work, from *L'Église* to the virulence of the pamphlets. In fact, we might say that anti-Semitism adheres



to Céline historically. The Jewish "platform" that he advocates in the notorious pamphlets—economic and political disenfranchisement, cultural isolation, and nuances of extermination—came to fruition during the German occupation of France. As George Steiner puts it, "With a scatological crudity . . . , Céline depicts the Jew as the venomous louse in the body of Western culture. The Jew is shown to be a racial abortion, a nightmarish aggregate of filth and cunning, of sterile intelligence and avarice. He must be castrated or totally isolated from the rest of mankind" (199). In a most condemning way the text of history would come to mirror the logic of Céline's hate-filled prose. Scholars like Steiner have noted that Céline's anti-Semitic pamphlets are only compatible with the racism and pornography in such Nazi propaganda as Julius Streicher's newspaper *Die Stürmer* (199). Almost inevitably, the barbarism of the Holocaust haunts our experience of the Célinean text; Céline cannot escape the real ugliness of history in which his work may be said to have played a role. The very weight of bad history associated with his name may account for the fact, according to Merlin Thomas, that Céline "is less well known than he deserves" (*Louis-Ferdinand Céline* 20).

### Céline's Oeuvre

For many readers, it should prove productive to divide Céline's major works into four groups that conform to their publication history, their continuous narratives, and their critical reception. Of course, not all of Céline's writing conforms to this division; there are individual texts that rupture each of the four groups. In addition, Céline creates narrative bridges between each group. Many critics have argued that the narrative and stylistic roots of *Rigadoon* are already present in Céline's earliest published work, in effect that Céline refined and cultivated his style and themes from work to work: "Symbols and archetypal imagery, already present in the first two novels, appear and reappear with increasing virulence and antagonistic force in succeeding ones" (Knapp 3). From his "autobiographical" novels to his heinous pamphlets, a proliferation of argot, a wealth of outlandish descriptions, and a sense of ugliness prevail. With much aplomb, Bettina Knapp describes Céline's continuous narrative universe as a series of "Huge verbal frescoes" inhabited by "horrendous-looking giants . . . paraplegics, paralytics, [and] gnomes [in] scenes of dismemberment, insanity, [and] murder" (3).

*Journey to the End of Night* and *Death on the Installment Plan* form Céline's first narrative group; in reversed chronological order these novels describe the young life of the narrator Ferdinand

Bardamu. Céline's second group of texts, the pamphlets *Mea Culpa*, *Bagatelles pour un massacre*, *L'École de cadavres*, and *Les Beaux Draps*, are polemical in nature, though they retain the frenetic pace and style of the earlier novels. Céline wrote the third group of texts, the novels *Guignol's Band* and *London Bridge: Guignol's Band II*, almost twenty years apart. In these gritty London novels the author cynically revisits the narrative era of *Journey*. The wartime novels *Castle to Castle*, *North*, and *Rigadoon* form the fourth and last group of texts. These three works are intimately connected with each other, shuttling back and forth between Sigmaringen, Denmark, and France. Céline's other texts fall between these four groups, returning to early events and reformulating ideas for the stage. Last, we might want to conceive of Céline's singular text *Conversations with Professor Y* . . . as a rather ironic and involved explanation of his spoken style, emotive expression, and theory of writing—invaluable to understanding what is at stake in the intricate ramblings of his prose. "While there's no 'simple' Céline novel," writes Jim Knipfel, "I usually suggest that readers begin with *Conversations*. It's a quick, funny, nasty read—and one that provides much of the background . . . about Céline, his general outlook on things, and those three unholy dots [*trois points*]" (6).

### ***Journey to the End of Night and Death on the Installment Plan***

*Travel is useful, it exercises the imagination. All the rest is disappointment and fatigue. Our journey is entirely imaginary. That is its strength.*

*It goes from life to death. People, animals, cities, things, all are imagined. It's a novel, just a fictitious narrative. Littré says so, and he's never wrong.*

*And besides, in the first place, anyone can do as much. You just have to close your eyes.*

*It's on the other side of life.*

Céline's second epigraph to *Journey* delineates the scope of his massive 636-page novel. Céline tells his readers that they are entering his imagined universe, inhabited by fabricated people, filled with exciting possibilities, punctuated by excruciating disappointments, and, of course, laden with everyday banalities. While this "other side of life" represents his fictional journey into night, it also serves as an invitation for us to imagine our own imaginary journey. In a way Céline attempts to engage his audience directly. He warns us to beware of the possibilities of closing our own eyes "to look for our way in a sky without light" (first epigraph, from *Song of the Swiss Guards*



1793). He stages the fiction that follows in such a way that we become aware of our own involvement in the text, of our own complicity—to use Kristeva's term—in his gritty prose and antiheroic universe.

*Journey* consists of several discreet sections or episodes that are self-contained in terms of characters and plot. The antihero Ferdinand Bardamu, Céline's "autobiographical" narrator and principal character, unifies the text. Bardamu is an immensely complicated character—emotional, narcissistic, anxious, angry, humorous, and sarcastic. He has been described as "a solipsistic being whose world begins and ends with himself, [who] has never learned to communicate with others and so sinks more deeply into his solitary and miasmic realm" (Knapp 22-23). We cannot escape from Bardamu's loathsomeness when we read *Journey*; he is our guide through Céline's dark world. This unassailable fact conditions most readers' experience of the novel. Bardamu's very name further "conditions" French readers to the novel's violent flavor. This narrating antihero's strange surname, according to Philip Solomon, "is derived from *Barda*, the 'pack' carried by a soldier of World War I; and *mu*, the past participle of the verb *mouvoir*, 'to move'" (17). From the beginning of *Journey*, it is clear that figurations of war as well as past movement will factor into the narrative.

We first encounter Bardamu when he is a medical student who is swept away by the fervor of 1914; he volunteers for military service and describes some of his experiences. The second episode in *Journey* revolves around Bardamu's time in Paris, where he is recovering from his battle wounds. We then follow him to Africa and the U.S.; after his discharge, he seeks fortunes afar. After these foreign episodes, Bardamu describes his life as a doctor in dismal La Garenne-Rancy. The last episodes take place in Paris, Toulouse, and a suburban mental hospital where Bardamu works. Besides Bardamu, only one character appears in more than one episode, Léon Robinson, whom Bardamu first encounters at the Flanders front. Robinson appears in almost all of the episodes. Céline emphasizes the importance of Robinson by concluding *Journey* with this character's brutal death: "The relationship between Bardamu and Robinson is the key structural device employed [in the novel], and it is through contemplating the actions and attitudes of Robinson that Bardamu attains a kind of acceptance of his destiny" (Thomas, *Louis-Ferdinand Céline* 44).

Bardamu stumbles into Robinson while they are both wandering through the darkness of beleaguered Noireur-sur-la-Lys, a village in Flanders, cowardly yearning to be captured by the Germans. They each go their own way, only to meet again in Paris after the war, where they both hustle parents who lost their sons on the front. So far in the novel these encounters between Bardamu and Robinson

appear coincidental, even logical considering the displacement that often follows war, but the relationship between the two characters changes quickly. Robinson becomes more than a chance acquaintance of Bardamu's during the Africa episode. When Bardamu arrives in Africa, he finds out that he is replacing Robinson, whom he does not recognize right away. Only later—during a sticky jungle night—does he suspect that he will assume the professional role of his own comrade. He never gets the chance to confront Robinson since he disappears from the scene quickly. This uncanny situation—another peculiar encounter between the two men, Bardamu's failure to recognize his old friend immediately and Robinson's hasty departure—underscores the idea that Robinson is more than a character with multiple cameo roles in *Journey*. In the Africa episode it becomes clear that Bardamu and Robinson have a psychological connection, that Robinson "reflects" aspects of the narrating Bardamu. "In other words," states David O'Connell, "as a fictional device, Céline is telling his reader that Robinson is the outgrowth of Bardamu's inner psychological processes . . ." (*Louis-Ferdinand Céline* 51).

The two characters again meet in the U.S.; Bardamu seeks out his friend at the French Consulate, sensing his presence. Hounded by the authorities on account of his forged papers, Robinson works illegally as a janitor. Just as in Africa, Robinson quickly disappears, but only after he relays his woes to his friend. While Bardamu plans to return to France to complete his studies, Robinson is caught in a rut; his disappearance from the page almost confirms his hopelessness. He represents the fear and hopelessness that Bardamu has been able to overcome, at least for a while. Robinson makes his next appearance at La Garenne-Rancy after Bardamu has become disenchanted with his personal life and medical work. Robinson now comforts his friend. But he has a more pernicious role to play in the La Garenne-Rancy episode. Robinson tells Bardamu that he has been hired to kill an elderly woman, whom Bardamu refused to commit to an miserable asylum—a ramshackle institution that would have certainly ensured her speedy demise. (The woman's children hire Robinson after they fail to bribe Bardamu to consign their mother away.) In effect Robinson plans to do what his friend would not do. Everything goes awry when Robinson's murder plot fails. Now Bardamu seizes the chance to do what he could not do earlier; he "exploits" the old woman's children, receiving thousands of francs to get rid of the attempted murderer. He is now like Robinson, a criminal and opportunist. Later, in the Toulouse episode, Bardamu visits Robinson. At this point in the novel, he realizes that he will never really know his friend at all. It becomes clear that the psychological connection between the two



characters is dissolving. At the end of the novel, the two characters work together at a lunatic asylum in Paris, but their relationship is deeply strained, since Robinson fled from his lover in Toulouse to hide out with Bardamu. Neither character finds comfort in the other. This last episode ends with Robinson's murder. His abandoned lover, Madelon, shoots him right in front of Bardamu. Only now does Bardamu realize the value of life itself. He finally escapes from "... Robinson's single-minded resolve to say no to life, to society, to human involvement, and to do anything to maintain his independence from others" (O'Connell, *Louis-Ferdinand Céline* 66). Bardamu prevails because he keeps on living, unlike Robinson, whose journey has—quite literally—come to an end.

Robinson's appearances and disappearances anchor the plot of *Journey*. The novel opens with Bardamu's being swept up by the patriotism of 1914. He joins the army and soon witnesses the horror of the front. After his first encounter with Robinson, Bardamu lands in a military hospital, convalescing from war wounds. He has several love affairs at this point in the narrative, with Lola and the chanteuse Musyne. In this episode Bardamu embellishes his "heroic" war story, captivating the interest of a famous actress. (This actress is so impressed by her wounded "hero's" story that she reads it aloud to an audience at the Comédie-Française.) Next, we find Bardamu on his way to Africa on the ship *Admiral Bragueton*. In a paranoid frenzy he believes that the other passengers want to murder him. He hastily leaves the ship when it arrives in port. He travels in Africa, eventually arriving in Bikomimbo, where he has his uncanny encounter with Robinson. After this, he decides to leave Africa. The narrative now moves to an almost fantastic dimension. Bardamu finds himself sold as a slave to a ship captain by a degenerate priest. Overcome by malaria and intestinal disease, he leaves Africa for the U.S. on the galley *Infanta Combitta*. Bardamu is held in quarantine when he arrives at his destination. He escapes, eventually finding Lola in New York. After this reunion, he goes to Detroit, where he works at a Ford plant and meets Molly, a prostitute who goes out of her way to help him. This ends his sojourn in the U.S. When Bardamu returns to Paris, he completes his degree and begins practicing medicine at La Garenne-Rancy. Like all of his earlier careers, this too comes to an end. He then works for a theater impresario and drifts about Paris. The Toulouse episode, in which Robinson and Bardamu are again reunited, then occurs. (By this point in the novel Robinson is blind and engaged to Madelon.) The last part of the novel takes place in Paris; Bardamu, and eventually Robinson, works at Dr. Baryton's mental asylum. Robinson comes to Paris to break his engagement. In revenge, Madelon shoots

Robinson at close range in a taxi, before Bardamu's eyes. The novel ends with Bardamu's ruminating on death and travel.

*Journey* is as much an "autobiographical" novel as it is a massive exercise in parody. Any plot summary is destined to fall miserably short of capturing the work's literary qualities, satirical dimensions, and nuances of style. At first blush, Céline relies upon the conventions of the bildungsroman in *Journey*. Certainly Ferdinand Bardamu narrates his own period of apprenticeship, or saga of growth, but he does not move from passivity to active intervention in the traditional sense of the genre. (Indeed, no reader would confuse a classical bildungsroman hero like Goethe's Wilhelm Meister with an antihero like Bardamu.) Bardamu "moves" diegetically from patriotic chauvinism to, quite simply put, the belief that life is better than death. His apprenticeship is neither heroic nor self-abnegating. He learns how to get by, not thrive in any socially redeemable way. Céline undermines the lofty bildungsroman, especially its social didacticism, by emphasizing Bardamu's low status and the oppressive forces that conspire against him. Modern society itself plays a nefarious role in *Journey*, continually setting traps for Bardamu to fall into. What lessons does Bardamu learn? What does he teach his readers? How does Céline make a twentieth-century parody out of the classical bildungsroman? Bardamu "is the quintessential modern man living in our twentieth century, post-Christian society," states David O'Connell. "Everybody, like Bardamu, must lie a little just to survive . . ." (*Louis-Ferdinand Céline* 69).

Just as he uses the tradition of the bildungsroman, Céline also relies upon the picaresque genre in *Journey*. Much like Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and Diderot's *Jacques le fataliste*, *Journey's* principal character wanders through a series of grotesque situations. (At one point in the novel, Bardamu even "hails" Diderot explicitly.) Unlike an eighteenth-century picaro, however, Bardamu has no vision of ultimate fulfillment—love, wealth, and satisfaction. Instead, he bounces from one miserable stop to another, eking out a basic existence. Bettina Knapp notes that in Céline's appropriation of the classical picaresque tradition, "Stylistically, Céline's novel follows Laurence Sterne's dictates to a certain extent. 'Digressions, incontestably are the sunshine; . . . they are the life, the soul of reading'" (25). Certainly the novel's episodic nature and chance encounters conform to Sterne's narrative style. From this picaresque perspective, the novel's seeming arbitrary nature might also be understood; things often happen to Bardamu without any logical explanation. Céline's exploitation of the picaresque, according to Knapp, "has been considered a means of mirroring the unpredictable nature of life, the inexplicable and irrational in nature" (25). Bardamu, then,



is a modern picaresque, one who no longer has the ability to achieve any goal because of the many illogical and senseless facts that constitute contemporary life.

No discussion of *Journey* would be complete without considering the ways in which Céline satirizes literature in the work. Early in the novel Bardamu's interpretation of Proust is especially informative of this satirical dimension: "Proust, who was half ghost, immersed himself with extraordinary tenacity in the infinitely watery futility of the rites and procedures that entwine the members of high society, those denizens of the void, those phantoms of desire, those irresolute daisy-chainers still waiting for their Watteau, those listless seekers after the implausible Cythereas" (61). Céline compresses Proust's efforts in his massive *Remembrance*—a seminal text in the modern tradition that many critics believe had a direct influence on Céline's style—into a series of meaningless, watery vignettes of upper-class people in search of the impossible. What is remarkable about this critique is the way that Céline relates Proust's writing to a tradition in painting; we can almost visualize a Watteau canvas when we read Bardamu's Proust-like description. Through the words of his intrepid Bardamu, Céline seems to suggest that Proust's prose is mere decoration—dandified flummery for the empty desires of high society. There are many examples of this sort—other authors, other works, and other written traditions—throughout *Journey*, underscoring the idea that Céline took great effort to incorporate literary satire and parody seamlessly into the narrative.

With the exception of its almost hallucinatory opening vignette (which is narrated by an elderly Dr. Ferdinand, who has fallen into an abyss of physical suffering, extreme pessimism, and psychological torment), Céline's second novel, *Death on the Installment Plan*, ends where *Journey* begins—at the point that young Ferdinand Bardamu "makes his own way" into the army during the patriotic whirl on the eve of World War I. This second "autobiographical" novel fills in the gaps about the narrator's early life—what extraordinary trials and tribulations helped to create the complex, modern character of Bardamu. As David Hayman suggests: "based in the boy's [Ferdinand's] imagination, enriched by the fancy of the sick doctor, magnified by the magus' apocalyptic fury and despair, emotive realism dominates the book" (168). Céline refines his spoken style in this work, mixing street argot, obscene words, and neologisms. In *Death* Céline's signature *trois points* and exclamation points appear on almost every page. With *Death*, "Céline found his own style, one that only a genius in vituperation such as he could successfully handle" (Thiher 46). The novel's innovative syntax, eclectic vocabulary, and, especially, its frenzied pace

present difficulties to readers who are accustomed to cohesive modes of writing.

Bitter old Dr. Ferdinand narrates the first section of the novel. He freely relates details of his life as a physician and mentions a manuscript that he has written. Most important, he shares the "Legend of King Krogold"—a story from his childhood—with his readers. *Death's* point of focalization then shifts backward, to Ferdinand's past. From this point, the plot follows the life of young Ferdinand closely. Ferdinand is the sole child of Clémence and Auguste, almost overly determined members of the petite bourgeoisie. Clémence owns a lace boutique in a dingy Parisian *passage*. While Clémence is apathetic, Auguste is a truly contemptuous man who constantly mocks and abuses both Ferdinand and his wife. Ferdinand's childhood milieu is atrocious—a tiny, squalid apartment filled with people who argue and berate one another. The boy is treated warmly only by his grandmother Caroline and his uncle Edouard. Young Ferdinand seems to reflect the ugliness of his surroundings; he almost fails out of school and bounces from one marginal job to the next. After many professional failures, accompanied by the abuse of his parents, he is sent to Meanwell College in England. This experience—like everything else in his early life—comes to an abrupt end. Meanwell goes bankrupt; its director loses his wits, and his wife (a friend of Ferdinand's) kills herself. After this foreign interlude, Ferdinand returns home, only to be thrown out on the street by his father. He finds refuge with Edouard, with whom he lives for a short time, after which Ferdinand leaves his uncle (and Paris) to work for M. Courtial des Périères, a quirky inventor who also dabbles in fraud. Courtial and his wife run a halfway house for impoverished children, believing that they can "cultivate" a happy group of young people in the countryside. (The eccentric Courtial also attempts to create a special potato that will change the practice of modern agriculture.) But, as has been the case throughout the novel—everything falls apart, for Ferdinand, for Courtial, and for the waifs at the filthy halfway house. The "revolutionary" potatoes turn out to be rotten; the children develop into a gang of thieves; and Ferdinand finds himself—again—adrift. After Courtial commits suicide, Ferdinand returns to Paris. *Death* ends in a state of limbo, at a point where the narrative of *Journey* commences.

In *Death* Céline refines his pessimism and ugliness; characters are crueler and more conniving, and many situations appear grimmer. The savage sense of humor that occasionally surfaces in *Journey* abounds in *Death*. Even in his worst predicaments, young Ferdinand maintains an obscenely funny sensibility—crude, mean, and at times rife with pathos. But there are serious consequences to



this humor: "The stab of comic defiance that obscenity [as but one example] offers is often the only means available to the Célinean hero who tries to resist the contagion of *délire*" (Thiher 68). Céline exploits the satirical and emotive possibilities of Ferdinand's humor, emphasizing the idea that it is the only way that the young man can survive and compete in the crazy and ugly world in which he always finds himself. This exploitation of humor would become an important instrument in just about all of his subsequent works. Indeed, it marks *Death* as a turning point, one that would lead to the extreme perspectives expressed in the pamphlets, the London works, and the wartime trilogy. Knapp captures the edge of Célinean humor when she writes, "Céline's humor is frequently and cruelly satirical, and Céline surely must be ranked with the greatest of satirists. . . . For Céline, satire is an instrument of aggressiveness. He develops scenes in which bitter laughter is used to inflict pain by underlining man's weaknesses and his tragic side" (71).

### The Pamphlets

"Doubtless contradictory, hotheaded, 'raving' if you wish, Céline's pamphlets . . . in spite of their stereotyped themes, carry on the wild beauty of his style. Isolating them from the whole of his writings constitutes a defense of the claim on the part of the political left or right; it is at any rate an ideological stance, not an analytic or literary position" (Kristeva 174). At the beginning of the chapter in *Powers of Horror*, informatively entitled, "Ours to Jew or Die," Kristeva argues that Céline's troubling pamphlets cannot be separated from the rest of his work. She highlights stylistic continuities, separating ideology from textual analysis. She further conceives of these works, specifically their obsessions, seething rage, and hate as possible keys to understanding, "the phantasmatic substratum on which, in another connection and another place, [Céline's] novelistic works were built" (174). It follows from Kristeva's argument that the pamphlets are "true" to Céline, that they are part of his personal and literary history. Despite their inherent ugliness, compounded by the horror of the Holocaust, the pamphlets remain texts that warrant analysis. To date, this has not been the case (at least in many "foreign" circles), since the pamphlets remain the only works by Céline that have not been translated into other languages. Clearly, these works haunt Céline's reputation as a writer. To ignore Céline's pamphlets would only reify his heinous anti-Semitic message. As readers, we must ask ourselves if these texts should be forgotten as an unpardonable offense or critically read, interrogated, and discussed. In effect Céline's pamphlets beg us to consider the very stakes of critical reading itself.

In his first forty-page pamphlet *Mea Culpa* Céline attacks the Soviet Union, calling it a vast penal colony that has completely failed in its mission. He violently rants against the communists—a role that would be filled by Jews in the later pamphlets. *Mea Culpa* is anything but an organized work; Céline hurls insults and then moves to another topic almost arbitrarily in a fast-paced verbal barrage. As O'Connell sums up, "Irony, invective, *ad hominem* assaults, lies, and distortions bubble up and slap the reader or the object of the argument in the face, then fizzle and subside while other arguments, observations, and outraged cries do battle with each other for the reader's attention on succeeding pages" (*Louis-Ferdinand Céline* 100). Céline opposes the Soviet system and for that matter communism altogether for several reasons (his logic is often concealed in the bombastic flourishes of his prose). He detests the communist leaders in the U.S.S.R. and their representatives in the West, especially their commitment to materialist history. He basically sees these leaders as replacements of the bourgeoisie—ruthless, exploitative, and conniving. According to Céline, the Soviet revolution was nothing but a trick foisted on the ignorant masses; it failed to alleviate suffering and continues to engender fear, panic, and deprivation. It is important to see this pamphlet as a turning point in Céline's work. It sets the stage for the horrifying work that follows. In this regard he recasts the communist leaders' villainous roles in *Mea Culpa* into that of the Jews in his subsequent polemical works. "[W]ithin a short time after the publication of [*Mea Culpa*]," notes O'Connell, "the three main traits of the Communists that Céline denounces (materialism, arrogance, hypocrisy) will all be attributed to Jews . . ." (*Louis-Ferdinand Céline* 103).

Much of Céline's notoriety rests upon *Bagatelles*, an almost 400-page diatribe that aims at Jews in general, Jews in France, and the Jewish "world influence." Like *Mea Culpa*, this second pamphlet is quite loose in its organizational structure. *Bagatelles* consists of several conversations between the character Ferdinand (occasionally appearing as Céline), Popol (a painter), Léo Gutman (a Jew), Ferdinand's three cronies, and Ferdinand's relative, Gustin Sabayote. The course of the conversations moves from ballet to a vehement embrace of anti-Semitism. Céline's anti-Semitic tirade gravitates around three main points. He begins his argument against the Jews through a critique of communism; only now (unlike *Mea Culpa*) the Jews control the system, especially its exploitative commitment to materialism. These same people, Céline's reader later learns, have infiltrated French life, controlling the media and financial structures. Finally, Céline's Jews are planning to wage another world war against the "naive Aryans." As if torn from the



pages of the scandalous (and fraudulent) *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the book warns against a vindictive Jewish world conspiracy, one in which communist Russia and capitalist England are controlled and manipulated by international Jewry. Between these three poles, Céline "discusses" the Hollywood film industry, contemporary Jewish politicians, and "Jewish" art. Everything that *Bagatelles* finds debased and corrupt turns out to be Jewish at its roots. Reflecting his own problematic place within the French canon, Céline holds especial contempt for what he calls the Jewish artists and writers: "They have to deputize, fiddle, pillage all the time, suck their neighbours, the native inhabitants in order to maintain themselves . . . The Jews are disastrously lacking in direct, spontaneous emotion . . . They talk instead of experiencing . . . They reason before feeling . . . In truth, they don't feel anything . . . They boast about themselves" (47, trans. Thomas, "Remarks" 233). Interestingly, this derelict group of Jewish writers includes the likes of the very gentile Racine, Zola, Stendhal, and even Montaigne. In *Bagatelles* anyone or anything that Céline detests simply becomes Jewish. Yet he does not really offer a clear definition of the very people whom he attacks. Thomas notes that Céline defies racist anti-Semitism when he states, "The Jew is a negro, the semitic race does not exist, it's a masonic invention, the Jew is no more than the product of a cross between negroes and Asian barbarians" (*Bagatelles* 121, trans. Thomas "Remarks" 228). Most certainly the hybridized Jewish people whom Céline denigrates do not conform to the clearly defined Jewish race discussed by "classic" anti-Semites like Gobineau and Houston Chamberlain. Further, Céline's Jews do not conform to the contemporary, racial vision of the Nazis (a charge that is often made against his work). While we cannot lose sight of the implications of Céline's anti-Semitism in *Bagatelles*, we might want to consider that he also had another target in mind, namely his own society as it was collapsing in the late 1930s. In this regard, Thomas states, "What Céline probably wished to leave as a major impression at the end of [*Bagatelles*] was neither the desirability of anti-semitism, nor the fear of coming war, nor the need for an alliance with Germany to prevent the war, but rather his demonstration of the decadence and hypocrisy of France of the period" ("Remarks" 240). But the Jews surface again as antagonistic players in Céline's next pamphlet.

Céline repeats many of his points from *Bagatelles* in *L'École*, especially concerning the "Jewish peril." Like the earlier pamphlets, *L'École* is a highly disorganized text, ferociously rambling from point to point. Céline praises fascist leaders, including Mussolini and Hitler, and denigrates "Jewish" Soviet commissars, like Stalin. Again, anyone or anything that Céline detests becomes Jewish. Unlike in

the earlier pamphlets, Céline focuses on a particular historical moment in *L'École*, namely the contemporaneous crisis that occurred when the Germans pressed the allies for the Sudetenland. Céline fervently advocates the dissolution of Czechoslovakia, a state that he sees as weak, corrupt, and ruled (quite incorrectly) by a Jew.

Céline published his last pamphlet, *Draps*, in 1941, after the French had capitulated to the Nazi forces. Here, Céline heckles and rants about the necessary liquidation of the Jews with almost pathological zeal. Jews must be killed, according to Céline, to pay for all of the misery and suffering that they have caused in the Aryan world. In *Draps*, states Knapp, "... Céline's manifest hatred of the Jews ... has not abated. ... [I]t has invaded his entire organism" (124). It seems more than coincidental that the occupying German forces allowed (and even encouraged) Céline to exercise his hate-filled imagination in such a polemical way. The historical significance and ultimately tragic dimensions of *Draps*, and for that matter the polemical *Bagatelles* and *L'École*, is perhaps best captured by Steiner when he writes, "Céline's was the first public program for what was to become Hitler's 'final solution.' ... In 1943, when Jewish men, women, and children were being deported from every corner of western Europe, to be tortured to death and made nameless ash, Louis-Ferdinand Céline republished *Bagatelles pour un massacre*, with appropriate anti-semitic photographs" (199).

### The London Novels

Céline returned to fiction in 1944, when he published the first of his London novels, *Guignol's Band*, while in exile. This novel returns to an earlier period, between the chronological frames of *Death* and *Journey*. Just as it became clear that the "new European order" of the fascists was collapsing, Céline abandoned his polemical anti-Semitism for an almost nostalgic form of fiction writing. *Guignol's Band*, and for that matter *London Bridge*, looks at London during World War I. Céline's portrayal of the city in these works is quite different from his calumnious version of London in the pamphlets—a debased city controlled by wily Jewish politicians, corrupt Jewish bankers, and vicious Jewish profiteers. Rather, *Guignol's Band* and *London Bridge* are "an evocation of London during the First World War," according to Hewitt, "... which is still a fairy-tale town, acceded to by an association of one bombardment with another, and one bridge with another: the German bombardment of the bridge over the Loire at Orléans ... which opens [*Guignol's Band*], and the air-raid by zeppelins which looms over the last part of [*London Bridge*] and which precedes the narrator's final crossing of London



Bridge . . ." (201). Céline creates a phantasmic environment in the London novels. Indeed, this is not a known city of facts, but a bizarre and disorienting place of fantasy. In this respect many critics have commented on the ways in which Céline even alters the city's geography to meet his fictional needs. In *Guignol's Band* and *London Bridge* Céline writes a panorama of a haunting city and its lowly denizens. Now his intrepid Ferdinand moves through the London underworld with a motley cohort of almost Dickensian proportions.

Like the earlier *Death on the Installment Plan*, *Guignol's Band* begins in the present time: a first-person narrator comments on the style of the novel that will follow, noting that an editor found it crude and tedious. After this five-page discussion of writing, the narrative shifts: Ferdinand is now escaping from Orléans in an ambulance during the German bombardment. This section includes a lengthy description of blazing destruction, tanks, bombers, and military vehicles. Once again, the narrative shifts in time; almost fantastically, thirty years evaporate. We now find Ferdinand in London during World War I. This younger Ferdinand makes the acquaintance of the street-smart hustler Boro; together the two entangle themselves in "adventures" with an aggressive pimp, enterprising prostitutes, rapacious robbers, a greedy pawnbroker, and even murderers. After many illegal exploits, Ferdinand and his cronies commit murder and arson. (They burgle and kill the pawnbroker Claben.) Just as it begins with the blazing bombardment of Orléans, *Guignol's Band* ends in conflagration, only now Ferdinand incites the fire.

In *London Bridge* Ferdinand changes; we might say that he matures. At the beginning of this second London novel, he parts company with his corrupt cronies, choosing to lead a more "redeeming" life. He and his new companion, Sosthène, begin working for a colonel who is engaged in inventing a new gas mask for the British government. While working for the colonel, Ferdinand falls in love with Virginia, the colonel's underage niece. As in *Guignol's Band*, Céline embeds many ridiculous and unbelievable adventures and situations into *London Bridge*, highlighting the fantastic nature of the narrative. The colonel and Virginia all but disappear from Ferdinand's tale for an extended period. This appears as quite uncanny, considering that Ferdinand had been seriously threatened by the former and sworn to fidelity by the pregnant latter. After the extended colonel-vignette, the novel returns to scenes from the earlier *Guignol's Band*. Surprisingly, Ferdinand—the former arsonist and murderer—now becomes a victim. His old crony, Cascade the pimp, abducts him, spiriting him away to his hideout. At the hideout, Ferdinand finds Virginia and most of his old criminal friends. They celebrate until Boro and another hustler from *Guignol's Band* bring

in the pawnbroker's coffin, which had survived the blaze at the end of the first novel. (The murder serves as a haunting reminder of the past to the mature Ferdinand.) At the end of the novel, Ferdinand, Virginia, and Sosthène escape from Cascade's lair and walk through the streets of London.

Through the titles of the London novels, Céline cues his readers to the prose that follows, emphasizing the theatrical aspects of the text. In contemporary French, the word *guignol* is usually associated with the theater. "Grand Guignol" describes both an emotionally charged marionette play for children (in the line of Punch and Judy) and a fumbling comic actor or clown. The retrospective contour of the novel makes Céline's use of *guignol* quite clear. "The older narrator, who is in fact none other than Céline himself," notes David O'Connell, "will gaze back in the course of the next nine hundred pages on the foolish and laughable youth that he once was and on the 'band' of characters he came to know while residing in London during World War I" (*Louis-Ferdinand Céline* 119-20). Beyond his allusion to a "personal" *guignol*, Céline describes passing Londoners as if they were puppets on stage—members of a vast, living Grand Guignol. In both novels, these citizens jostle into one and other, dance about, and perform hilarious pantomimes on the street: "They are characters of farce, and their antics, like those of puppets, are immediately accessible to the reader" (Thiher 99). Céline would refine his farcical sensibility in his later wartime trilogy, portraying the *guignolesque* proportions of war itself.

### The Wartime Trilogy

The wartime trilogy represents Céline's last monumental collection of work. Like his earliest "autobiographical" novels and the two London novels, *Castle to Castle*, *North*, and *Rigadoon* form a cohesive literary unit. In this trilogy Céline tells his own story of flight, incarceration, and persecution, and he acts as a historian, recording the events that take place around him—in Germany, in Denmark, and in France. But, like all of Céline's nonpolemical work, the last trilogy is a work of fiction. The exhausting personal experiences and encounters that he relates in the novels do not match real-life events. Just as he manipulates topography in the London novels to meet fictional ends, he alters temporality in the wartime trilogy to heighten effect. In *Castle to Castle*, *North*, and *Rigadoon*, Céline (almost mercilessly for his readers) shifts between the present and the past, emphasizing the lingering effects of war and displacement. "There is no regular pattern in the shifts between these time-layers, but they happen often enough for it to be clear that they are deliberate,"



writes Colin Nettlebeck. "Too many sections of the text are set in the present, too, for the reader to take them as mere interruptions of the real story, though the bulk of the narrative is devoted to the past, indicating the latter's intended predominance" (271). Of course, Céline presides at the center of both of these temporal layers, as narrator, character, historian, and *guignol*.

*Castle to Castle* begins in Paris with the narrator (now Céline himself) looking out of a window at a boat on the Seine. He goes down to the boat and finds his old friend Le Vigan (an actor with fascist sympathies). Then the novel shifts into another realm. Céline tells his reader that the boat's captain (appropriately named Charon) is a ghoulish hybrid who is half-tiger and half-monkey. Charon behaves atrociously to his passengers, not only extorting gold from them but also bludgeoning their heads with his oar. The boat scene ends quite brutally; Charon pokes his fingers into his passenger-victims' brains, then the boat sinks to the bottom of the river. At this point, a radical temporal shift occurs. Céline propels his reader forward, providing a domestic vision of his wife Lili, of his cat Bébert, and of himself in their "real" house at Meudon. But this domestic episode does not last long. The last part of the narrative propels the reader back in time to the castle at Sigmaringen, where wife, cat, and husband fled with the German retreat. Céline describes the Hohenzollern castle in all its imperial grandeur, inhabited now by zealous Nazis, fleeing French collaborators, and deposed Vichy officials like Maréchal Pétain. Besides its political residents, Sigmaringen plays host to a group of deviates, eccentrics, and artists, including the director Raoul Orphize, who makes a movie about the end of fascist Germany there.

Unlike *Castle to Castle*, *North* begins in a place of flight. Céline, Lili, and the now ubiquitous cat Bébert find themselves in an elegant hotel in Baden-Baden, lodging with a group of high-ranking Nazis and collaborators. Against a backdrop of starving people and the ravages of war, this luxurious situation is more than anomalous. Céline is there to tend to the elite sick, while people are dying on the streets. This *luxe* vignette is short-lived though. Céline and his family, who again join Le Vigan, are evacuated to Berlin. Here they stay in a filthy flophouse, live with refugees, and subsist on meager scraps. Relief comes only through the agency of a Nazi doctor who gets "official papers" for Céline. Now the novel shifts to the town of Zornhof—a former German aristocrat's estate that has become the very embodiment of a Célinean nightmare. All of the residents—prostitutes, refugees, Nazi secret police, French collaborators, displaced Russians and Poles, and local peasants—detest one another. Céline finds himself in the unfortunate position of guarding the sup-

plies for his Nazi benefactor. On the sly he disburses longed-for commodities, like alcohol and tobacco, to the vile hate-filled residents. Céline treats his reader to all of the horrors of this place, including its residents' licentiousness, violence, and filth. At one grotesque point in the Zornhof episode, a crippled man drops dead in a latrine overflowing with excrement. But, like all of the stops in the wartime trilogy, Zornhof too comes to an end. Céline and his company, which now includes a group of haggard deportees, leave in an enormous oxcart in a northerly direction.

The beginning of *Rigadoon* (the last novel in the trilogy and Céline's last work) returns to the horrifying flight from Zornhof. As in *Castle to Castle* and *North*, Céline freely intersperses weird and gruesome visions and dreams throughout the novel. *Rigadoon* opens with the rag-tag group of Zornhof refugees embarking on a train that they hope will take them to their long-awaited refuge of Copenhagen. Yet this does not occur. Many pages describe the delays and subsequent desperation of Céline, his wife, and even his cat (who travels uncomfortably in a muslin bag). These three bounce from train to train, often moving in the wrong direction, away from Denmark. They experience bombings, fires, and plagues while they traverse ruined northern Germany. At the end of the novel they finally arrive in Copenhagen, having been rescued by the Red Cross. Of course, this ending is just another horrifying beginning when we read it against Céline's autobiography (which he quite freely embellishes throughout the entirety of the trilogy). After all, the longed-for safe-haven of Copenhagen turned out to be a very real jail cell for Céline.

In his later works Céline scrupulously avoids discussing both the Jewish question and his anti-Semitic pamphlets. Instead of "repenting" for his incendiary messages, or even acknowledging his politics, he portrays himself as the sacrificial victim of the new liberal intelligentsia. He simply ignores the historical and political issues that surround him, namely that the hate-filled prose of his pamphlets may well have made an ideological contribution to the Nazis' Final Solution. Ironically, especially in his wartime trilogy, the postwar Céline must endure the cruel retribution of his detractors, not answer questions about his past. At certain points in his exchange with Milton Hindus (embedded into Hindus's book *The Crippled Giant*), Céline claims that he has become a friend of the Jews. After all, does he not share aspects of his life in exile, whether truthful or not, with the young American Jewish professor? Whenever pressed about the pamphlets and his own anti-Semitism, Céline vociferously retreats into a vision of his own victimization. To his dying day, he would never



retract his words. Inescapably, the notorious pamphlets continue to plague Céline's reputation as both a writer and a historical figure.

Even today, over forty years after his death, Céline's biography haunts his literary reputation. From his early "autobiographical" novels to the blatancy of his final first-person saga of flight, he situates himself at the center of his literary universe, continually misleading and confounding his reader. Céline's works ask us to consider the intricate ways in which fiction both conditions and participates in the production of biographical and historical "facts." When we read Céline, we struggle to separate the author's life from his imaginative writing. Are Céline's words and visions merely the rambling of an enraged petit bourgeois and misanthrope? Or does his difficult and eclectic body of work illustrate the intimate connections that exist between art and life? Both of these unresolved questions continue to be explored by readers and critics alike. What is certain about Céline is the contribution that he made to the trajectory of contemporary literature—from the new novel in France to postmodern work in the U.S. Céline may well be the embodiment of "the writer who doesn't pimp along, peacefully plagiarizing . . . everybody hates him!," but these same people continue to engage his emotionally charged language, images, style, and versions of truth.

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