

Yves Pagès

Céline and Anarchist Culture

It is important to remember one's first impressions of a book. When I first read *Voyage au bout de la nuit* at the age of sixteen, I felt as though I were entering into an uncensored language, one that bypasses the usual split between the spoken and the written; above all, I felt as though I had encountered a work whose rebellious nature and resistance to social norms and mores confused the boundaries between poetry and politics. Soon after, I learned that the author, who had described *Voyage* as a text that was "too anarchistic," if not the only novel of the century to have a "communist soul," had, since 1937, also written three anti-Semitic pamphlets and had thus effectively collaborated, at least by writing these impassioned tracts, in the xenophobic massacre of the 1940s.¹ From then on, we needed only to choose our side. For some people, Céline was the inspired destroyer of the dominant order, the acerbic critic of "the end of the night" of modern misery. For others, he was the filthy loudmouth, author of racist slurs and herald of the imminent

The *South Atlantic Quarterly* 93:2, Spring 1994.
Copyright © 1994 by Duke University Press.
ccc 0038-2876/94/\$1.50.

massacre. It was thus necessary to forget one or the other, if not to reclaim one instead of the other, since his work seemed to be forever irreconcilable with itself. Unlike Rimbaud, who destroyed his pen so that he could become an arms dealer, Céline left us an oeuvre that is neither incomplete nor repudiated. On the contrary, it oscillates between several incompatible impulses that Céline, the genius of one or two books, would definitely have subordinated to the level of unresolvable ideological debates. After reading *Guignol's Band*, however, it seemed to me that this schematic view of the Célinean dilemma missed the essential point. Published in 1944, just a few years after his racist pamphlets, Céline's English saga continued the insidious undermining initiated in *Voyage*; this was accomplished by the double critique of dominant social norms and of the registers of literary writing. Thanks to his obsessive rhetoric, the emergence of anti-Jewish, anti-black, anti-homosexual, anti-communist banalities did not diminish the rebellious spirit of his first book. The anti-Semitic rant did not replace the iconoclastic novelist; from beginning to end, they more or less coexisted, constructing, work by work, an ambivalent oeuvre that was often contradictory and wrought by political turmoil.

As ambivalent as it may be, this Célinean ideological jumble is not timeless; it belongs to a very specific period. Its reactionary or leftist temptations are related to an important historical time lag produced by World War I. In his fiction, Céline never stopped reproducing the frozen, nostalgic image of the early 1900s as an Eden, in addition to feeding his racist obsession with a visionary pacifism taken from his apocalyptic lessons in murderous bellicosity. In other words, he polemically interpreted and fictionally transposed the epochs through which he lived not according to the political divisions of the 1930s and 1940s, but by means of a double psychic universe: the idealism of the pre-1914 world and the trauma of the Great War.

If we were to try to locate the links between, for example, Drieu la Rochelle's or Barbusse's ideology and Céline's, we would run the risk of missing the true stakes of the latter's ideology. By returning to the sources of the extremist discourses specific to the years 1871–1914, however, we can examine the raw forms of the two original tropes in Céline's political statements. The first comes from an ultra-

right-wing discourse that enjoyed a brief popularity amidst the racist fervor of the Dreyfus affair and was given a second wind during the early 1900s by numerous ultra-patriotic, corporatist, and racist movements. The second evolves within a composite libertarian discourse driven by a variety of forces, from anarchic unionism to radical individualism, which attained its moment of glory in the 1890s before gradually declining during the belle époque. The resurgence of a pre-1914 xenophobic and generally reactionary discourse in Céline's pamphlets of 1937–41 and in his post-1945 novels is clear. This discourse contributes to a fundamental coherence in Céline's work that is impossible to ignore. It still remains to be seen whether the libertarian resurgence of the early 1900s, the relatively unknown side of the pre-Célinean political universe, furnishes his work with another sort of coherence.



We can discern three axes within the remnants of libertarian thought: *the critique of normative knowledge*, which is based on the denunciation of the dominant scholarly and academic cultures; *the critique of the notion of progress*, which is characterized by a certain defiance toward the cult of mechanized and alienating work; and *the critique of the working class* and its proletarian messianism, which is linked to a rejection of the oppressive laws of social conformity and of the idea of class consciousness. But this schematic classification poses a new problem. These three axes essentially resume beating, term for term, the dead horses specific to the themes found in pre-1914, ultra-right-wing discourse: anti-intellectualism, which critiqued the decadence of the democratic intelligentsia in the name of a more or less aristocratic elitism; reactionary antiprogressivism, which rejected Enlightenment thought and applauded the return to ancien régime values; and moralistic antimaterialism, which denied class antagonism in the name of a systematic and corporatist conception of national community. The convergence of anarchic and ultra-right-wing foundations in Céline's work is not simply a coincidence. The referential ambivalences of his extremisms seem to share a single ideological core, which the historian Zeev Sternhell labels "pre-fascist" in his book *Ni droite, Ni gauche*.² One could say that, thirty years later, Céline re-

turned to the sources of the revolutionary right's laboratory of ideas by going down the same convoluted paths of this initial synthesis between the antidemocratic left of the post-Dreyfus era and the moral neocorporatism of the Action Française. Céline in turn used the pretext of rhetorical anarchy in order to camouflage the ultra-right-wing essence of his texts. His seemingly ideological contradictions thus conform to the framework of a superseding coherence, that of the "national populism" of the turn of the century.

This a priori, seductive hypothesis seems nonetheless to omit an essential aspect of Célinean ambiguity. In Céline's work, fascinating polemical filiations tend to become purely backward-looking, conservative, and racist litanies without giving rise to any new, right-wing system of values. His reactionary babbling does not become truly Pétainist or pro-Nazi enthusiasm, giving his blessing to family, work, and triumphant Aryanism. The only gesture that his satirical verse borrows from ultra-right-wing thought is that of a totally self-contained, redundant denunciation: "a system of hostilities with no way out."³ Céline does not follow this positive element found within the fascist agenda, the Spartan utopia that for certain people included the notions of eugenics and pan-Europeanism; in fact, he embraces only their rage for nihilist devalorization. It is thus essential that we ask ourselves if the libertarian affinities of his discourse do not also feed a voracious, critical negativity. It is not a question of simply detecting the slightest "revolutionary" positivity in the sense of a collective, social emancipation; however, it does seem that the momentum of anarchic subversion that surfaces in Céline's fiction almost imperceptibly valorizes certain ethical or existential perspectives that are by nature antiauthoritarian.

The critique of scholarly and academic norms of knowledge manifested in all of Céline's work seems at first to exist for the sake of a socio-literary exchange value: authenticity. In opposition to the professional dilettante, Céline offers the model of an "authentic" author who attempts to reconcile the existence of the narrator with the idealized life of his characters. This model closely resembles that of the proletarian writer glorified in the late 1920s by Barbusse or Poulaillie. But, in the final analysis, we see that Céline's work does not follow this agenda of social realism, which is supposed to represent the

misery of working-class conditions while actively participating in its fight for emancipation. A stranger to this literary valorization of class consciousness, Céline, like the Paris Commune writer Jules Vallès before him, uses authenticity as a stylistic weapon. As antibourgeois as it may claim to be, this weapon challenges only a single experience, either marginal or "irregular," which is in perpetual opposition to the classical, mimetic, and conformist uses of the dominant language. This is where Céline gets his repeated praise—that is to say, for "direct emotion"—which, associated with his verbal lynching of the so-called sophisticated intelligentsia in *Bagatelles*, tends to be mistaken for the irrational and anti-intellectual rhetoric of a Barrès and his fascistic spiritual sons. However, in Céline's novels, on the periphery of the pamphleteer's diatribes against the dominant cultural cartels, we sense the emergence of figures who can be seen as alternatives to knowledge: the "bohemians" and "inventors" of *Death on the Installment Plan*; the visionaries and street musicians of *Guignol's Band*; or the wanderers and vagabonds who appear throughout his work. These contrasting silhouettes converge in the virtually clandestine model of the autodidact, the person who has reappropriated culture without passing through the mediation of a uniform, scholarly knowledge. It is in this way that the characterization of the intellectual, who is systematically deconstructed, does not culminate in a purely "emotional" nihilism, but rather in the covert revalorization of a type of apprenticeship without master—the autodidacticism that was one of the characteristic traits of the anarchic ideas in circulation at the beginning of the century. Within the unofficial culture of these libertarian spheres, it is possible to distinguish three particular pre-Célinean cases: the artisans, who acquire partial savoir-faire; the vagabonds, who, in pursuing their itinerant experiences, survive by means of an eclectic knowledge; and the orphans and social outcasts, who waver between various skewed registers of knowledge. We must add that slang, the corporate language of laborers, the idiom of hoboes, and the debased linguistic register of all marginal people, constituted a privileged, minor art of anarchic discourse during the belle époque. The critique of normative knowledge thus leads to a principal model that is subversive in a constructive way: the autodidact's existential fusion of knowledge.

In Céline's work, like that of Vallès, the satire of intellectual conformity is fomented by a violent diatribe against the educational system. For the anarchists of the early 1900s, school was like an "antechamber of the barracks," a place for "licking into shape," a place of "pesky, puritan, and sullen oppression";⁴ for Céline, school emblemizes "the disaster of enchantment [*féerie*]."⁵ These parallel attacks inevitably conclude in a purely negative critique, which closely resembles, once again, the ultra-right-wing harangues against "state education." Nevertheless, a number of Céline's novels depict the childlike extravaganzas that seem to survive the wreckage of this failed academic space: the "Meanwell College" episode in *Death on the Installment Plan*; that of the "Orphans of the Red Cross" in *Castle to Castle*; or that of the "idiotic kids" in *Rigadoon*. The apparent nihilism in his critique of school allows a space for intermediary communities "peopled by children who are at their games and little nothings and giddy pleasures and showy stuff," which reminds us of the atmosphere of the "free areas" that the anarchists established during the belle époque.⁶ We know that the young Destouches, as a cavalryman stationed at Rambouillet, had an opportunity to come into contact with "La Ruche" (The Beehive), established by the libertarian pedagogue Sébastien Faure according to the principles of "integral" education propagated by the Fourierists. The episode of the "agricultural phalanstery" in *Death on the Installment Plan*, inspired by this experience, allows Céline to revalorize another type of playful, eclectic, and noncoercive apprenticeship to knowledge: the "passionate" pedagogy of the utopian socialist Charles Fourier. The emancipated brats of Blême-le-Petit, who "discipline themselves" and "no longer understand obedience," like the "little hordes" of "phalangette" Fourierists, are the New Men of one of the rare utopias that Céline spares from his apocalyptic polemics.⁷

The critique of the illusion of a working class begins with a meticulous deconstruction of the concept of the proletariat: "The misfortune in all this is that there are no 'common people' in the poignant sense that you understand. . . . The heroic, egalitarian proletariat does not exist," Céline concludes in a letter to Elie Faure dated March 1935.⁸ This pithy remark defines the alleged proletariat as an obvious expression of the nothingness of human nature, a pure dynamic

of voluntary submission, and a collective "hypnotic" violence. By reducing the popular entity to the level of vicious proles, to a subservient mass or hallucinating crowd, without proposing in return the slightest aristocratic relief, Céline engages only in an exercise of purely nihilistic devalorization. It nevertheless seems that certain unspoken anarchic/individualistic assumptions within this denunciation of proletarian messianism harbor some ethical outlets at the heart of a social space that Céline describes as a game of the "Roman arena" and of "massacre."

In the moralizing satire concerning public cowardice and voyeurism—which, as M.-C. Bellosta notes in *Céline ou l'art de la contradiction*, is borrowed from a profoundly reactionary version of neo-Jansenism⁹—Céline isolates several rare exceptions to the rule of human nature's false virtues. These exceptions, as in the case of the soldiers Bardamu and Robinson, or their insubordinate and self-mutilated alter egos of the years 1914–18, demand the right to "fear," that is to say, the right to an active cowardice. While watching villages burn, they practice a "voyeurism" that distances them from the insane bellicosity. Princhard's monologue at the beginning of *Voyage* establishes the minimum agenda for this ethical alternative: it consists of an opposition between collective cowardice and a simple, passive resistance "without ideal," between the honors earned via social struggle and a "fundamental unworthiness," between a "formal disgrace" and an "automatic dishonor." Permitting oneself to "stink" in order to remain "pacifist," to be "disgusting enough to disgust the Nation"¹⁰—these are the paradoxically positive principles of Célinean *resistant stoicism* that we also find in the writings of André Colomer, the insubordinate libertarian who wrote in 1916:

I was not fleeing the battle by deserting, rather, I was looking for it. Staying in the melee would have been, in every way, a cowardice for me. . . . By denying myself to the Nation, I was eliminating the possibility of all effects and all repairs. I was declaring my own state of war. I was positioning myself not merely outside their melee, but against their melee.¹¹

Behind Céline's satire of mass servility, reactualized in the pseudo-Freudian form of a "sadico-masochistic" death drive, lay another

critical reference, to *Discours de la servitude volontaire*, written by Montaigne's friend, the humanist Estienne de La Boétie. In this text, which lays bare the masses' "unrelenting will to serve,"¹² we find Céline's principal insight: "Men cling . . . to all of their sadness, and we cannot coax them to let go."¹³ For the sixteenth-century humanist, the "decision to be a serf" is a direct result of the familiar custom of "cretinization" through the games of the Roman arena and of the reproduction of despotic relations throughout the social pyramid. By stigmatizing the sadomasochistic inertia of the masses in accordance with these same principles, Céline reappropriates one of the most characteristic positions of attack within the individualist anarchy of the belle époque. Interestingly enough, during this period, La Boétie's *Discours* was paradoxically transformed into a bible for the call to rebellion. In the final analysis, we can see that the Célinean critique of the proletariat's desire for bondage does not attempt in any way to justify a natural social hierarchy, but instead seeks to revalorize an alternative subversion that rejects both the revolutionary illusions of the workers' movement and the Stations of the Cross of state reform. In his own way, Céline reappropriates the spirit of provocation that emblemized certain belle époque "outlaws/scoff-laws" who were similar to the anarchist Jules Bonnot; in April 1912, Bonnot converted his own death into a war machine to be deployed against the double rule of tyranny and servitude after he was besieged at Choisy-le-Roi by hundreds of police and gawking vigilantes. As early as 1910, the young libertarian and Nietzschean Victor Serge explained this pre-Célinean *politics of the worst*, in all its positivity, as a need "to make the ignominy of masters, or even the ignominy of subjugation, felt through our obstinate independence."¹⁴

Céline's critique of the idea of the proletariat was inspired by Gustave Le Bon's early version of sociology; beginning in 1895, Le Bon proposed the theory of a "psychology of the crowd" in opposition to that of Marxist materialism.¹⁵ According to this psycho-sociologist, the masses are incapable of both initiative and rebellion and are thus nothing but a mob displaying "irrational" behavior, which, in the end, does nothing but unconsciously follow the "suggestions" of a "leader." This theory would become reactualized by the massive tyrannies of the twentieth century, all of which, from Leninism to

Nazism and on through the fascisms of Mussolini and Sorel, developed an intimidating manual of totalitarian propaganda out of the art of governing by "collective hypnosis." It is true that Céline's work constantly divides the proletariat into "hallucinating" hordes, but it does not culminate in a celebration of the leader or the modern Prince of Public Opinion. Instead, Céline celebrates a "transversal" perspective, which aligns the charisma of the leader with the manipulated crowd so as to emphasize an *individual path that goes against the current* of the dominant order's commands and the slavish imitation of the dominated; this is the perspective that the Stirnerian anarchist Albert Libertad summarized in 1905: "We love the man, we hate the crowd. We reiterate the cry of this pamphlet: *Against the shepherds, against the flocks.*"¹⁶

If Céline's harangues against the shams of the intellectual and the proletariat have much in common with the critical nihilism of right- and left-wing extremists, they do not lead to an enthusiasm for the national populism of the belle époque, but rather to the paradox of ethical and existential figures who exhibit underlying affinities with libertarian thought: the autodidact, who embodies a notion of apprenticeship without a master and the pedagogical utopias of the Fourierists; and the *resister*, who glorifies pacifist counter-heroism and active neutrality when confronted by the dead ends of voluntary servitude and the obedience of the masses. We could carry out the same analysis with respect to Céline's critiques of the idea of progress and of the symptoms of social "degeneracy"; these also present unusual individual alternatives. Two examples would be Doctor Semmelweis's experimental skepticism, which haunts Céline's entire oeuvre, and, among others, Mère Henrouille's "gay knowledge," which suggests the glorification of categorical idiocy. It is only in terms of this theoretical agenda that we can distinguish his anti-Semitism, which does not generate any covert libertarian perspective and does not reveal the underside of the utopian setting. Céline's anti-Semitism is not the departure point for all of his political uncertainties, as has often been said, but, on the contrary, it signifies the specific moment when Céline silenced his creative uncertainties at their source and sentenced himself to a racist univocality that closed in on itself, an ideological rhetoric that henceforth became

a shield, blocking all the outlets that his antiauthoritarian affinities had previously unlocked.

It is important to reiterate the way in which Céline literally re-appropriated fragments of libertarian sensibility; their significant substance was derived from perspectives that did not present themselves as a doctrine of political concepts, but rather as marginal, partial, and eccentric figures, actors in an interior phantasmagoria who are like ethical or existential indices immersed in a fictional space. Anarchy was never more than potential ideological material, a series of banalities that needed to be reenergized with the help of a subversive imagination and writing. The reactionary side of Céline's work, culminating in the pamphlets of the late 1930s, expressed itself in an ostentatiously political way, which tended to radically simplify Céline's system of thought, to subsume his imagination within a univocal ideological paradigm. In this Célinean game of hide-and-peek between politics and literature, we need to read beyond the evidence or proof of supposedly "engaged" texts and look instead to the political unspoken, which probably engages the mental universe of the writer even more profoundly than that which is stated: those liberating scenarios that a literary oeuvre creates, and not the declarations of ideological faith, which essentially serve as decoys for the work; those norms and conventions that the oeuvre cunningly subverts under the guise of certain motivating norms and prejudices—the utopias of intimate asides masked by official slogans.

—Translated by Gayle Levy

Notes

- 1 "[My book] is too anarchistic": Louis-Ferdinand Céline, letter to "N—," 5 November 1932, in *Cahiers Céline 5: Lettres à des amis*, ed. Colin W. Nettelbeck (Paris, 1979), 81; letter to Georges Altman, 27 October 194–? in *Cahiers de l'Herne* (Paris, 1972), 195.
- 2 Zeev Sternhell, *Ni droite, Ni gauche: L'idéologie fasciste en France* (Paris, 1987 [1983]). Among the master thinkers of this precursor trajectory of "socialist and national" fascism, Sternhell points particularly to Georges Sorel, theorist of revolutionary Syndicalism and author of *Reflections on Violence* (1908); Georges Valois and Edouard Berth, members of the Cercle Proudhon, the "socialist" branch of L'Action Française; and Henri Lagardelle, founder of the journal *Le Mouvement Socialiste*, which, after 1906, veered onto an ambiguous "anti-democratic" path.

- 3 Louis-Ferdinand Céline, "Les Derniers Jours de Semmelweis," in *Cahiers Céline 3: Semmelweis et autres écrits médicaux*, ed. Jean-Pierre Dauphin and Henri Godard (Paris, 1977), 94.
- 4 Emile Janvion, *L'École, antichambre de Caserne et de Sacristie*, periodical of the Colonie Communiste d'Aiglemont (January 1908): 28, 30. For a critique of the norms of "scholarly knowledge," see also Sébastien Faure, *Propos d'éducateur* (Rambouillet, 1910).
- 5 Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Les Beaux draps* (Paris, 1941), 160.
- 6 Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Guignol's Band*, in *Romans*, Vol. 3, ed. Henri Godard (Paris, 1988 [1944]), 106.
- 7 Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Mort à crédit*, in *Romans*, Vol. 1, ed. Henri Godard (Paris, 1981 [1936]), 1015, 1053.
- 8 Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Letter No. 17 to Elie Faure, 2 March 1935, in *Cahiers de l'Herne 5*, ed. Dominique de Roux (Paris, 1965), 57.
- 9 Marie-Christine Bellosta, *Céline ou l'art de la contradiction* (Paris, 1990).
- 10 Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, in *Romans*, Vol. 1, ed. Henri Godard (Paris, 1981 [1932]), 67, 70.
- 11 André Colomer, *A nous deux, Patrie!* (Paris, 1925), 28–29.
- 12 Estienne de La Boétie, *Discours de la servitude volontaire* (Paris, 1983 [1547]), 139.
- 13 Céline, *Voyage*, 295.
- 14 Victor Serge, "En attendant le dictateur," *l'anarchie*, No. 293 (17 November 1910); cited in *Le Rétif* (Paris, 1989), 184. [N.B.: *l'anarchie* is a journal whose title is uncanceled in accordance with the wishes of its founder, Albert Libertad.]
- 15 Gustave Le Bon, *Psychologie des foules* (Paris, 1988 [1895]).
- 16 Albert Libertad, "L'Homme et la Foule," *l'anarchie* (18 May 1905); reprinted in *Le Culte de la charogne* (Paris, 1975), 87–89. On the critique of "proletarian messianism and its voluntary servitude," see Georges Darien, *La Belle France* (Paris, 1978 [1900]). See also Zo d'Axa, *De Mazas à Jérusalem* (Paris, 1895), in *Ende hors* (Paris, 1974).