

David Hayman

When *Voyage au bout de la nuit* first appeared in 1932, critics began classing Céline with the naturalists, as a latter-day Zola. And, in fact, the doctor who had grown up in a semi-slum among the small shopkeepers of Paris and experienced war as a soul shattering event, the traveler who never quite left home, the writer who wrote to quiet the buzzing in his ears, was deeply concerned with reality. It frightened him. As he wrote Milton Hindus: "For me, real objective life is impossible, unbearable. It drives me crazy—makes me furious it's so ghastly. So I transpose it as I go along, without breaking my stride." Céline departs from the rather formulaic reality of a Zola to approach the cruel hilarity of a Villon, breathing deeply over the open cesspool of contemporary vice. He has fathered on our century a horde of gleeful and bitter heretics (Henry Miller, Samuel Beckett, Jack Kerouac, Raymond Queneau, William Burroughs, Jean Genet, J. P. Donleavy, etc.) and conquered for prose the language of clownish gestures, conveying with ease and gusto the inarticulate frenzy of the little man staggering through the first half of our apocalyptic century.

He always spoke of his vision as a version of the truth, but not till after World War II, prison and exile did he find words to describe his style and his vision. Only then did he characterize himself as a conscious artist. The spoken word, he claimed, does not sound true when written down unless it is manipulated. It is like "a stick in water," to use his own metaphor, "if it is to seem straight, you must bend it a little." The effect, whether contrived or natural, is a gutter style. The voice that comes from the lower depths, explodes through lips wet with spittle. His sentences, full of clusters of vocables, sounds, almost, are activated gestures, capable of projecting silent frenzy and audible rage yet pliable enough to fold neatly into a sigh. More significantly, the chaotic effects are shrewdly arranged, shaped, rhythmically coherent and self-reflexive. For all the lapses of taste and proportion, despite the tedium of certain passages, the bathos and self-indulgence of others, we are convinced that Céline was a shaping as well as an imposing presence behind his fictions and "chronicles."

Céline invented two terms, "lacework" and "emotive subway", to describe his technique. He told Robert Poulet that the writer should leave accurate reporting of life to the newspapers and omit "even from his imaginings" the insipid details of what the reader already knows. In his own work this results in lacunae, in missing transitions and explanations. He establishes "the basic outline, the landmarks; and surrounding them, holes . . ." achieves a "lacework" effect. There are two aspects to the "emotive subway" that Céline describes at length in his hilarious mock-interview with Professor Y. Unable to choose between surface

reality and subterranean truth, the author has decided to draw the surface down with him helter-skelter into a subway of his own invention, one that makes no stops and that, accommodating all experience, transports it on rails that are not straight. The omissions—"not everything can be transposed"—the inclusions, and the distortions characterize the vision of a man who wishes "to lay back the flesh" of his subject.

The result is a trammelled farce, giving us a view from below, an unbalanced and vertiginous postlapsarian glimpse of the possibly sublime through the certainly grotesque. It is no coincidence that in the most virulent of his hate pamphlets, *Bagatelles pour un massacre*, he includes several of his curiously airy and fragile ballet scenarios or that the slum doctor Bardamu in *Death on the Installment Plan* distracts himself by writing a cruel romance compounded of childhood longings and adult deceptions. This mingling of excessive attitudes (the melodrama conveyed through the posturing of the distraught clown) results in something more than outrageous assaults on human dignity and wish fulfilling comic destruction.

Céline's novelistic universe is multivalent and hence none of the things it seems to be. On the one hand he condemns the mores of his society through the subjective vision of a sort of *illuminé*, an anti-heroic version of that rebellious angel Arthur Rimbaud. With unmatched intensity and integrity he projects an inverted world where the outside constitutes a norm and where even the laughing reader must be considered as not only "mon semblable mon frère" but also a potentially vicious "other." The symbols of horror and hilarity are, however ambiguously, reversed. A carnival symbolizes the dreary false values of the society it distorts; an insane asylum becomes a haven for the balanced and enlightened; the concierge, that bane of the French city-dweller's existence, has a beautiful soul. We are torn between our more or less balanced sense of decorum and the positive appeal of the ugly and outrageous affronting our sensibilities, between the fascination with a complex comic surface and varying degrees of disgust and outrage. We are disarmed by a narrator who insists upon his hallucinated vision, his near madness, his wounds and maladies, his insignificance, his alienation and frenzy in much the same way the clown carries his cap and bells or wears his insane mask as a badge. On the other hand, Céline forces us to acknowledge the truth beneath the distortions, to admit to the serious and disturbing implications which we don't quite purge with our painful laughter. For he conveys directly, sensuously, through an intensely personal and fast paced rhetoric a Brobdingnagian universe from which we would normally avert our gaze. Whether he locates his naturalistic inferno in the *banlieu* of Paris, the London underworld, the mind of a collaborator, or in a Danish prison, he manages to involve us in his disgust and gusto while distancing us from himself and affirming the privacy of his vision. Thus in the introduction to *Guignol's Band* we read:

Up to you to understand! Get hot! "There's nothing but brawls in all your chapters!" What an objection! What crap! Watch out! Dopiness! By the yard! Fluttery twittering! Go get God excited!

Rub-a-dub-dub! Jump! Wiggle! Bust out of your shell! Use your bean, you little hustlers! Break open! Palpitate, damn it! That's where the fun is! All right! Something! Wake up! Come on, hello! You robot crap! Shit! Transpose or it's death!

Such tactics so effectively distance the reader that he can seldom feel more than sympathy (or distaste) for any character other than the narrator-persona in his past-present identities. By contrast, on the visceral level of response, Céline obliges us to participate in all manner of comic, perverse and revolting circumstances. Armed with the medical man's catalogue of horrors, but using conventional stimuli, the emotive clichés of the Gothic novelists and ad-men, he unerringly strikes the responsive nerve while invalidating the accustomed response. This is what he calls his "style emotif" or rather his style "rendered emotive." The result is often the literary equivalent of that most outrageous of all theatrical forms, Grand Guignol, where insane gaiety and brutal horror reign blatant, indelicate and unashamed. We, in our turn, are at once guilty and shameless in our quest for unpleasant thrills, grateful for the vomit we more than metaphorically eat, the spittle we lick, and corruption that oozes through our fingers. There is no denying the revolting but comic immediacy of Céline's description of a Channel crossing in *Death on the Installment Plan*:

 A stocky little character, a wise guy, is helping his wife to throw up in a little bucket . . . he's trying to encourage her.

 "Go on, Leonie . . . Don't hold back . . . I'm right here . . . I'm holding you." All of a sudden she turns her head back into the wind . . . The whole stew that's been gurgling in her mouth catches me full in the face . . . My teeth are full of it, beans, tomatoes . . . I'd thought I had nothing left to vomit . . . well, it looks like I have . . . I can taste it . . . it's coming up again . . . Hey, down there, get moving! . . . It's coming . . . A whole carload is pushing against my tongue . . . I'll pay her back, I'll spill my guts in her mouth . . . I grope my way over to her . . . The two of us are crawling . . . We clutch each other . . . We embrace . . . We vomit on each other . . . My smart father and her husband try to separate us . . . They tug at us in opposite directions . . . They'll never understand . . .

Here the emotive force of Céline's imagery, his grotesque eroticism outweighs the human predicament of the actors. We have seen similar moments portrayed in films from the twenties (though hardly in such detail or with such overtones). The point is of course that, like coitus, vomiting is a mindless activity, though, unlike coitus, it is relatively free of moral stigmas. It is no coincidence that this explosive moment follows a series of verbal explosions and precedes and foreshadows two sexual catastrophes: the rape of Ferdinand by the jeweler Gorloge's obese and lecherous wife and his sweet and terrible encounter with prim Nora Merrywin, each of them an ambiguously public, private event.

The second instance shows us how, while relying upon our visceral condi-

tioning, Céline can modulate his perverse farce, turning even the potentially solemn, tender, delicate moment into a feast of fools, rendering the fleeting instant through a series of stop-action frames, translating words into actions, actions into components of a landscape. When the longsuffering wife of the drunken English school master suddenly gives herself to a worshipping but mute adolescent Ferdinand, Céline cleverly reverses our expectations, fulfills the boy's desires not with bliss but with a storm of violent, desperate and unsatisfying caresses that turn love and affection into a grotesquery for the boy, while they elicit in the reader a perverse sympathy for the angel turned bacchante:

She's stopped talking. Christ almighty! I plunge, I slip in like a breeze! I'm petrified with love . . . I'm one with her beauty . . . I'm in ecstasy . . . I wriggle . . . I bite right into her tit . . . She moans, she sighs . . . I suck her all over . . . On her face I go looking for the exact spot next to her nose . . . The one that tortures me, the magic of her smile . . . I'm going to bite her there too . . . especially . . . I stick one hand up her ass, I massage . . . I dig in . . . I wallow in light and flesh . . . I come like a horse . . . I'm full of sauce . . . She gives a wild leap . . . She breaks loose, she's gone, the bitch! . . . She jumps backward . . . Hell! She's on her feet . . . She's in the middle of the room . . . She's making a speech . . . I can see her in the white of the street lamp . . . in her nightgown . . . all pulled up . . . her hair flying loose . . . I'm lying there flummoxed with my cock in the air . . .

The expectations of romance, the yearning after an instant of static fulfillment, clash with the programmed discontinuities of farce on both the sensual and the emotional planes. Thus we participate more or less willingly in the frustration of two antagonistic impulses. The result is the sort of thing we call black humor, an unstable amalgam of pleasure and pain which evolves from all manner of double refusals. When Nora rushes off to a suicide motivated by mute despair, we are jarred as much by the boy's reflexive insensitivity as by the poignancy of her act, but we are curiously disarmed by the sympathy underlying the mimesis of the moment:

She flits from one lamp to the next . . . Like a butterfly, the stinker! She's still yelling here and there, the wind brings back the echoes . . . And then for a second there's a terrible scream and then another, an awful scream that fills the whole valley . . . "Hurry up, boy," I tell the kid. "Our lady love has jumped in. We'll never make it. We're in for a dip. You'll see, kid. You'll see."

The immediate source of this attitudinal tension is obviously Céline's narrator, the semi-autobiographical Bardamu-Destouches. Hallucinated, obsessed, feverish, mad, a self-declared outsider, he is one of the most imposing and oppressive manipulating presences in 20th century fiction. His famous conversa-

tional tone appeals to us almost precisely to the degree we are affronted by it. Far more than the conventional satirist with his “pen dipped in bile,” Céline’s paranoid narrator is invariably the speaker as enemy. One thinks of the tone of Ezra Pound or Wyndham Lewis, but Céline’s persona is the self-declared, the loudly proclaimed vulnerable and victimized misanthrope, a masticator of miseries as well as a punisher of vices and a mocker of follies. If he makes repeated claims on our sympathy, he rejects our respect along with our affection, projecting himself onto the page theatrically, a gesticulating presence, turning us into a captive audience and unwilling actors in a claustrophobe’s nightmare. Like Rabelais and the carnival clown Céline’s narrator includes us in the act as not-quite spectators and silent adversaries. Like them, he captivates us by the brashness of his appeal, the challenge and the verve. But here there is another difference to note, for he projects as dominant the very terror and distress which underlies comic destruction and which is ordinarily obviated by our laughter at comic outrage. Further, he assumes a familiarity with journalistic naturalism and a social engagement inconceivable prior to the 19th Century. Even in his most outrageous utterance there is a singular indeterminacy which gives us pause where we might otherwise be liberated.

All of this implies a decorum which permits the artful manipulation of highly conventional materials but eschews intellectual and literary play for its own sake. Appropriately, Céline’s most elaborate fiction, *Death on the Installment Plan*, is a dark romance spoken by an increasingly frantic clown, a submerged but defiant outsider who remembers better days, which never were, with a cruel nostalgia and disturbing hilarity. Some of the implications of this stance are terribly immediate in the age of protests and revolutions led either by self-proclaimed clowns like Jerry Rubin and Abbie Hoffman or by defiant underdogs, men who make disruption a creed. But Céline, the clown of reaction, even at his wildest, in the inflammatory anti-Semitic “pamphlets” which were to cause him so much trouble after WW II, was always a loner, complete in himself. His words were and still are actions in their own right. They elicit no further disruption. For better or worse, this too distinguishes him from the satirist and social critic he claims to be and identifies him with the clown-in-his-place as artist rather than with the clown-in-society. Thus, through his strident but protean voice, we experience an uneasy truce with reason in a moral landscape where the sign posts have a way of reversing their directions. This much is clear even in the relatively muted prose of the prologue to *Death on the Installment Plan*:

Here we are, alone again. It’s all so slow, so heavy, so sad . . . I’ll be old soon. Then at last it will be over. So many people have come into my room. They’ve talked. They haven’t said much. They’ve gone away. They’ve grown old, wretched, sluggish, each in some corner of the world.

Yesterday, at eight o’clock, Madame Bérengé, the concierge died. A great storm blew up during the night. Way up here where we are, the whole house is shaking. She was a good friend, gentle and faithful. Tomorrow they’re going to bury her in the cemetery on the rue

des Saules. She was really old, at the very end of old age. The first day she coughed I said to her: "Whatever you do, don't stretch out. Sit up in bed." I was worried. Well, now it's happened . . . anyway, it couldn't be helped . . .*

I haven't always been a doctor . . . crummy trade.** I'll write the people who've known her, who've known me, and tell them that Madame Bérengé is dead. Where are they?

I wish the storm would make even more of a clatter, I wish the roofs would cave in, that spring would never come again, that the house would blow down.

The staccato rhythm, the short simple sentences of the first paragraph, each a gesture of sorts, each with its free-floating pronouns contributes an aura of mystery and uncertainty to an utterance which has the immediacy of direct address. The reader is brought in by the first word of the French version, "Nous voici encore seuls." Even if we fail to recognize this as a variation on the traditional greeting of the music-hall clown: "Nous voici encore," we are struck by the familiar tone of a speaker willing to share not joy but a *fin de siècle* world weariness ("seuls"). We may also note the assertion and retraction ("Ils ont dit des choses. Ils ne m'ont pas dit grand'chose."), the touch of informality in the punctuation, the direct address, and the affectation in the spelling of "grand'chose". Yet, though it breaks the frame of our daily existence and introduces us into a vaguely disturbing environment, this paragraph elicits neither smile nor laughter, nor does it seem to prepare us for what is to come. Its gentle tone disarms us. Its distanced rhetoric evokes with almost transcendental sadness the friends scattered to the far corners, dragging out their miserable existences, in aborted promise. While controlling our sentiments by virtue of his authority and our ignorance, the speaker is content to impose a mood that remains to be validated, to locate himself and us in a room that expands and contracts with our imaginations.

The friends, aging "chacun dans un coin du monde," are unlike the "fidèle amie" of the next paragraph, a figure whose demise derives symbolic amplitude from the discreet and doubtless ironic (if not irreverent) allusion to the cataclysm that followed the crucifixion. Are we the butts of a sly clown who inspires a muted respect bordering on affection while inculcating us in the death of a figure of fun? The tone of this paragraph shifts repeatedly as the narrator moves from past to present to future, from circumstance to omen to consequence. It is dominated however by a singularly unstable but pervasive sympathy for the concierge. (This quality is diminished in the otherwise strong Manheim translation which fails to conserve the rhythmic devices in "C'était une douce et gentille et fidèle amie," the efficient source of our attitude.) Kindness, gentleness and fidelity are not qualities one readily ascribes to the prying, acerb and querulous breed of concierges. Yet we are seduced to the point of being surprised when an

*In French "Et puis voilà . . . Et puis tant pis . . ."

**In French "cette merde."

implicit plea for mourners at the funeral to be conducted by "them" is undercut: "Oh well, she was very old." Such simplicity, clouding a tenderness for extreme age, prepares us to be further disoriented by the brief narrative of her illness delivered in the bromidic bedside manner of a concerned but world-weary doctor. Only later are we free to wonder why Bardamu, who has seen many more terrible deaths and so much suffering, should dwell on the least awesome of demises, the most natural. By then the old lady, already more than an object of perverse concern, will have joined the fringe community symbolized by the slums surrounding Paris, the infamous Zone, where Dr. Bardamu has his practice. For a moment we are jarred when the doctor's advice is punctuated by two virtually untranslatable phrases. The inevitable has happened ("Et puis voilà . . ."). Keeping her alive was at best a doubtful project. We must accept it philosophically. That's how things go in a rotten world. So let's dismiss it with a mild but remarkably powerful "Et puis tant pis . . .", a rhyming commonplace which transfers our sympathy from the mourned to the mourner. We may feel mocked for the emotional paces through which we have been put willy-nilly.

Flippant distress becomes bitter irreverence when, in the next paragraph, the renegade doctor proposes to write his acquaintances and "hers," resurrecting in the process his past. This is at once an exercise in clownish futility and a supreme act of reverence at variance with the expression: "cette merde," ("that shit") which breaks the decorum only to enlarge upon a pervasive raffishness. The death of the old lady is a symptom, part of a larger symbolic context, rather than the sole cause of the narrator's distress. The apparently realistic passage oscillates between the conventions of melodramatic romance (and cosmic allegory) and those of chaotic farce (and iconoclastic satire). Its significance is at once individual and universal, realistic and fanciful, ribald and grave. This is surely confirmed by the Villonesque "Ou sont-ils . . .", referring us back to shadowy friends of an unspecified past.

Isolated in his despair, the still unidentified speaker prays for an apocalypse in which he has little faith, uttering through clenched teeth an appeal for chaos which may also be a lament for order. It is as though the doctor were straining to equal the powers of the witch-crone in order to bring about his own end. We have as yet nothing to justify this Gothic jeremiad, but in relation to the first paragraph, the narrator's wish helps define the transcendental range of the novel or rather the extreme limits of its meaning. Against these limits Céline's style will strain in its ceaseless attempts to convey and enact a lower more seamy sort of dissolution, one inherent in the process of being human, a process which the doctor, who is a wizard only with words, finds infinitely repugnant and depressingly comic, but for which he feels a compulsive sympathy.

In the penultimate paragraph of his brief overture, the speaker explodes into ellipses over the letters which have deposited their load of grief in Mme. Bérénge's lodge. Their dead "sadness" ("*chagrin*") symbolizes for him not only the life of the concierge but all life and the putrefaction which surrounds him. Like the letters he feels obliged to write, they constitute a secondary reality pivoting about the fire that still warms the empty lodge:

For almost twenty years all the sadness that comes by mail passed through her hands. It lingers on in the smell of her death, in that awful sour taste . . . It has burst out . . . it's here . . . it's skulking through the passageway . . . It knows us and now we know it. It will never go away. Someone will have to put out the fire in the lodge. Whom will I write to? I've nobody left. No one to receive the friendly spirits of the dead . . . and let me speak more softly to the world . . . I'll have to bear it all alone. (I have replaced the ellipses dropped by the Manheim translation.)

It is appropriate that, after the prologue's enactment of isolation, the novel's overture opens with a reference to the doctor's "genre" or rather to the "thousands of unpleasant comments" he has had about the stories he tells at the clinic where he works. Are the stories, fictional narratives, tales relating to his practice, bits drawn from his writing, gossip? Can they really do him harm, as his cousin Gustin seems to suggest? The question is raised and then seemingly dropped when we turn to other concerns, but it *is* to the point, for the words written on this page are a clown's action just as the rhetorical gestures of the doctor at the clinic are a form of operation. Language is one with the unreasonable and unassuageable rage that generates it, one also with the sympathy that tempers rage and orders violence. The doctor is leading a double life which corresponds to the novel's double mode. He functions socially in a positive way while working out his negative urges through his narratives, reenactments of distress which allay his frustration behind a mask of inaction.

Already we note that dual intransigence, quite apart from the more violent style manifested briefly in the paragraphs cited above, constitutes the "meaningful" substratum of the novel if not all of Célinean utterance. This is, however, not the conscious goal of Céline's narrating persona, as distinct from the authorial persona. The former is of course the Doctor Bardamu, whose past will be adduced in order to explain his present mood and condition, verbally *making* him what he *is*. Though, in the overture, he sees himself as a writer, the author not only of *Le Roi Krogold* but possibly of *Journey to the End of the Night*, he does not present himself as the conscious craftsman but rather as the hobbyist writing to escape misery, terror and absurdity over which he has no control.

I'm not a Yid or a foreigner or a Freemason, or a graduate of the Ecole Normale; I don't know how to make friends and influence people, I fuck around too much, my reputation's bad. For fifteen years now they've seen me struggling along out here in the Zone; the dregs of the dregs take liberties with me, show me every sign of contempt. I'm lucky they haven't fired me. Writing picks me up.

For all his apparent innocence of literary method and aesthetic standards, we are willing to believe this speaker is writing the novel we read. I would suggest that he is actually at two removes from the source of the narrative, being

the puppet of a puppet. His immediate master is the speaker of the prologue, the distraught magus who has promised in the midst of a nocturnal storm to "tell stories that will make them come back, to kill me, from the ends of the world" so that "it will be over . . . all right with me" (my ellipses). Significantly, Mme. Bérenge's funeral does not take place in a book replete in climaxes which fail to punctuate the action. Neither the first narrative frame, that of the prologue, nor the second one (the overture) is closed except by implication when the youthful Ferdinand whose education comprises the body of the book decides to join the army, opting for an *assumed* order and discipline after the purgative process of his youth. Furthermore, the novel is neither the promised story-letter of the prologue nor an extension of the fever-induced hallucination which terminates the overture:

Then I was really alone!
Then I saw the thousands and thousands of little skiffs returning
high above the Left Bank . . . Each one had a shriveled little corpse
under its sail . . . and his story . . . his little lies to catch the wind
with.

It is rather the perfectly shaped artifact produced by a manipulative persona at one more remove from the action, a narrative persona of whom the other two are states of mind or existential projections. The invisible hand of this persona discreetly informs the apparent chaos of the other visions. It also controls the narrative surface as a youthful Ferdinand moves helplessly but predictably through a series of increasingly devastating climaxes, unsettling grave-comic explosions which modulate toward the instants of enlightenment so characteristic of *Bildungsroman* developments. In describing the art of Céline's narrator, therefore, we are really invoking the hidden arranger of the overt speaker's utterance, the engineer who has laid out the tracks of the "emotive subway." If he is virtually indistinguishable from the other voices and the youthful Ferdinand, he still controls and unifies the triune experience of his protagonist and imposes, on all rhetorical levels, tensions, conventions and structural interplay.

I am suggesting that the art of *Death on the Installment Plan* is ultimately the artifice of narration which maintains in delicate and shifting balance a variety of distinct but interrelated attitudes, developments and contexts. This implies a considerably tighter construction than is generally ascribed even to this, the most intricate and coherent of Céline's fictions. Thus the speaker of the prologue plays with and on the reader's sympathies, imposing attitudinal shifts which reveal (in the sense of document) far less than they convey. In quick succession he expresses gentle resignation, distanced bitterness, tender sentiment, sardonically overstated professional commitment, false callousness, belligerence, nostalgia, muted apocalyptic rage, paranoiac misanthropy, and comic bathos. . . . Each of these moods contains the seeds of its opposite, that is, not only juxtaposition but superimposition informs the mood painting of the prologue. In later passages, with the accretion of levels of narration and the expanding context, such rhetorical effects undergo enlargement, inversion, and transformation. Young

Ferdinand's progress is conveyed through discontinuous and irreverent prose as the tale of a helpless, if educable, fool in a mad world; yet beneath the farcical surface lurk heroism and sentiment. By the novel's end modifications in attitude and rhythm have prepared us to accept the failed magus, Courtial des Perieres, as a quasi-tragic figure. The "poor fool" who blew his brains out all over a frozen highway, reducing himself to a mass of meat, or shrunken Z, has become the tutelary diety of an inverted work, an affirmation of impotency, sad, serious, beyond laughter and even outrage. We are prepared, that is, to accept and understand the clown-magus who presides over the prologue, if not to bury the past.

For the narrator, the triune hero who brings us to this point, the novel has been a process of auto-generation or perhaps regeneration: the turning of a life into words and of words into pseudo-actions. This development involves us in a number of paradoxes. For one thing, the further we are from the present of the speaker, the closer we seem to be to the experience, the more impartially we share the sentiments. For another, the emotive power of the prose, its gestural immediacy increases as we move into an increasingly stylized and often catastrophic universe. Finally, the more immediate the expressive content conveyed through highly articulated conventions, the more meaningful it is to the evolving character of the triune narrator, the more real its impact on the reader. Based in the boy's experience, enriched by the fancy of the sick doctor, magnified by the magus' apocalyptic fury and despair, emotive realism dominates the book. It is tensed however against a steadier vision of the-world-as-it-is, a vision no less subject to the conventions of farce and romance, but lighter in tone. Long passages which collect and store energy and putrefaction serve to make the eventual release of disgust and horror seem almost pleasant, often hilarious, if not genuinely satisfying or cleansing.

Allied to and underlying all of the attitudes generated toward objects is a complex of attitudes toward the medium itself. Céline has faith in the efficacy of language, a faith undermined by his awareness of the futility of the gestures he has already made. Hence the ultimate paradox that even on the level of expression, hope vies with despair—for the utterance has in each case preceded the writing. In this sense, the novel, like the utterance, is self-reflexive and circular: the last yelp will be followed by the first whimper of a Ferdinand released in tears; the final sigh will be: "Here we are, alone again."

Soldier Céline

Louis-Ferdinand Destouches (Céline), doctor turned literateur and pamphleteer, was one of the most popular writers in pre-war France. His innovative style, a conscious reworking of lowerclass jargon, his consciously assumed role as castigator of contemporary mores, his adaptation of the conventions of farce, silent films and Grand Guignol to naturalistic and autobiographic subject matter, his tendency to render the worst aspects of reality as hallucination; all have been extremely influential ever since his first novel, *Journey to the End of the Night*

first appeared in 1932. In all, Céline wrote nine novels, a play, a biography of Dr. Semmelweiss, and three virulent pamphlets (two of them anti-Semitic). His anti-Semitism, his rather vague collaboration with German occupation forces and the Vichy government-in-exile, and his post-war incarceration in a Danish prison combined with a difficult and hostile and intransigent personality to cloud his post-war reputation in France though he continued to write and publish both before and after his return to France. At present, five of his novels are available in English translations, three of them in excellent versions by Ralph Manheim. Interest in his work has doubtless been spurred by the current vogue in outrageous or farcical fiction, but, however uneven his production, Céline's major novels will probably survive as 20th Century classics. Certainly, he merits closer critical scrutiny than he has thus far received.

The following texts, presented here for the first time in translation, deal with virtually the same subject matter but from opposite points in Céline's creative life. The first contains the sketchy and impressionistic jottings of a young recruit, taken in a notebook left with a comrade when Destouches-Céline was evacuated to a hospital early in WW I. These pencil notes, transcribed by B. Gobled and first printed in a special number of *Les Cahiers de L'Herne* (No. 5, Paris, 1965), were never intended for publication. Indeed, Céline did not turn to literature until the 30's. The second text, an extract from a fragmentary manuscript dealing with Céline's experience as a young recruit, was destined to form the sequel to his second novel, *Death on the Installment Plan*. Since Céline was a careful writer, a reviser, and there is no evidence that *Casse Pipe* was ever completed, we may assume that the fragment would not have been published in its present form. Nevertheless, it represents a good sample of the later manner and stands in sharp contrast to the youthful journal which could have served as a rough draft had the notebook been in the author's hands when he was writing his novel. Self-pity and adolescent aspiration have been replaced by irreverence and self-mockery. The life of the young recruit is here viewed from the other side of the looking-glass by an experienced writer. It is distress reprojected from turmoil.

D. H.

The Notebook of Cavalryman Destouches

- 1) I don't know how to say what makes me write down my thoughts.
- 2) To whomever will read these pages.
- 3) This dismal November evening takes me back thirteen months to the time of my arrival at Rambouillet far from suspecting what awaited me during my charming stay here. Have I then changed so much in one year, I think so . . .
- 5) . . . For barracks life instead of plunging me into a [P] (rage . . . sadness induced a state . . . like languor) a state from which I emerged with my spirit