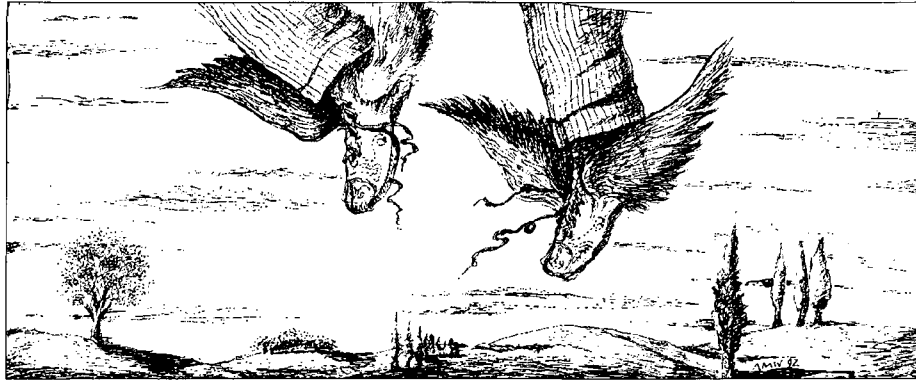


# Céline and French Reactionary Modernism

by Thomas Molnar



Anna Mycek-Wodecki

Reactionary literature in France today—as opposed to earlier varieties, for example the romantic, two centuries ago—is distinguished by its despair, its radical style, its exploration of new worlds, its almost science-fiction approach to life and letters. Its most powerful motive is unquestionably despair: of democratic vulgarity, the machine civilization, the social monotony that spreads over the happily consumerist landscape. What is unusual with modern literary reactionaries is that they no longer claim an aristocratic taste, feelings not shared by the masses, or membership in a Proustian milieu for refined intellectual and emotional palates. Spengler and Ortega are not their patron saints. On the contrary, their anti-modern attitude expresses itself in a radical, at times populist style, similar to that of leftist protesters, at times to a Surrealist provocation. As a general explanation, I offer a statement by François Huguenin, young editor of the recently launched magazine *Réaction*: “We are in a paradoxical situation: life under a regime [the liberal-socialist of France] claiming total freedom of thought, yet enforcing an ironclad ideology at all levels, schools, media, culture, consumerism. This imposed uniformity is such that we are not even permitted to be curious.”

Such sentiments were essential to the works of Céline, and help explain why Céline is today number one on the French literary horizon, although he died a generation ago and even then belonged to the prewar firmament. Céline was all the things that the *république des lettres* repudiated and detested: antidemocrat, antibourgeois, antimilitary, antiwar, anti-Semite. From 1932 when he broke into the limelight until his death in 1961, he claimed for himself the status both as whip and whipping boy, truth-sayer and martyr, and as a writer who was superior to Proust and Gide, his refined but easily moth-eaten older contemporaries. Céline’s was the generation of Georges Bernanos, the filmmaker Marcel Pagnol, the Provençal Jean Giono, the pagan/Roman Montherlant, and the satirist Marcel Aymé—a mixed bag: Bernanos was militantly Catholic; Montherlant classically Roman; Giono and Pagnol, coming

from France’s south (*le midi*), were calmly but relentlessly traditionalist, enemies of industrial society (there being no consumer society yet).

Some of these men, Montherlant and Pagnol, became in due time members of the Académie Française, the others won prestigious literary prizes. In other words, even in the eyes of the progressive establishment, they were by no means outcasts, and even Céline was an important prizewinner, with novels published by Gallimard. They were the right wing of the literary establishment, and their defiance of the left wing may be best captured with the vitriolic label attached by Céline to Sartre: “A worm wriggling in a test tube.” (In French it is shorter and more deadly, considering Sartre’s gnome-like appearance: “*l’agité du bocal*”).

In spite of his numerous handicaps—the already mentioned anti-this, anti-that—Céline, the exiled (who for a decade after 1945 was not allowed to return from a Danish exile), has now: a) a place in Gallimard’s Pléiade collection, next to all-time classics; b) been imitated by an entire generation for his bitter, mordant style; and c) had his works recognized as best-sellers, although the purity and inventiveness of his language, qualities rarely seen together, is a monument to the French literary *esprit*. Céline’s influence is such that even his violent anti-Semitism has not, in the end, harmed him; his spectacular character defects have been forgiven, and he is acknowledged as the anti-Sartre, the stylistic model for dozens of Young Turks in French letters, the so-called “hussars” for whom he had a particular tenderness: Michel Déon, Roger Nimier, Antoine Blondin, Jacques Laurent, Michel Mohrt, Jean Raspail, and others. These names, and that of Céline himself, are practically unknown to the American reader who is kept at a safe distance by publishers. Yet this literature exists, and it has been the only lively and active one because “the other side” offers only sex, psychoanalysis, and ideology, and legions of intellectuals sharing their time among the three.

What is the secret of Céline’s attractiveness? His *Journey to the End of the Night*, today a classic of modernity, combines desperate pessimism and a loud “yes” to life, iconoclasm, adventure, the mocking of the individual as a nonentity, and a strangled cry over the fate of the little man. The novel (or is

Thomas Molnar’s latest book is *The Church, Pilgrim of Centuries* (Eerdmans).

it a memoir? a pamphlet? a lament over the century?) is a lyrical yet never sentimental tableau of the human condition; it is perhaps significant that its publication coincided with Malraux's ultrapoliticized thus ephemeral *La condition humaine*. Malraux, however, was an intellectual infected with the century's utopia, revolution, and illusion-chasing, while Céline talks about real people: the tired waitress who has an illegitimate child and who accommodates the sex demands of Arab clients; the low-ranking colonial official who kicks the pants of Africans since they are inferior even to him; the stowaway in New York who watches from a park bench the unattainable secretaries and their false glitter; the doctor in the *banlieues* of Paris to whom wretched neighbors bring their physical and moral abjection. (In real life, Céline was Dr. Louis-Ferdinand Destouches, a physician in a popular *quartier*.)

What is modern and reactionary in this? The fusion of the smell and taste of real life with the robust argot of the people, the discovery that bourgeois "values" are a facade for the misery that people drag behind them; the organic tie, good and bad, between people in no need of an ideology to tell the difference; and, in France, the stamp of modernity and reaction was the language that Céline used, not that of *agregés* but of high and low classes, shopkeepers and countesses, of people like Marius, César, and Fanny in Pagnol's movies, and their immortal common sense, cries, and laughter. Asked what good French was, 17th-century grammarian Vaugelas answered that it was Versailles-vocabulary daily nourished by the down-to-earth speech of crate-carriers from Les Halles, the busy market of Paris. Céline could masterfully use this refined and earthy tongue, adjust to the humor, the savor, the cynicism, the street-level tragedies, without ever becoming vulgar, cynical, or ungrammatical. The way his contemporary, Bernanos, fashioned and accredited the speech of saints from the everyday, Céline recreated the language of the *quartier*, of the *concierge*: never offensive, always genuine, carrying in its current the bistro's smell and the housewives' gossip. This, mind you, at a time when it was fashionable to invent the pseudopoor, the pseudoworker, the whole salon-proletariat, symptoms of bourgeois self-flagellation.

Without the German occupation, Céline's modernism and reactionary writing would have had an uninterrupted influence deep into the postwar decades. As it turned out, reaction was outlawed, and modernism was taken over by the left. How could a right-wing writer, with fascist or Vichyst sympathies, be anything but a decrepit defender of all *anciens régimes*? How could he have a popular style, not dictated by Moscow's interests and by socialist realism? The new affirmation was that one could be a great writer *and* a right-winger, partly because *la droite* was free, its writers did not protect little sinecures, ministerial posts, reputations made by visits to Havana, Peking, and various peace-congresses; partly because leftist writers became the new Establishment, ex-rebel Malraux becoming de Gaulle's minister of culture and Sartre a wealthy bourgeois.

The turning point came in 1968, on the streets of Paris where the newest new class, the students, proved to be but conditionally leftists, since they incorporated a series of rightist demands and watchwords in their manifestos. *L'imagination au pouvoir* was, after all, nowhere to be found in the Marxian corpus. A typical illustration of the turnaround was the life of Régis Debray, Che Guevara's companion in the Bo-

livian adventure. When Debray was released after a half-dozen years in the jungle-jail, he became the closest thing allowable to a social-nationalist, although he soon started serving in Mitterrand's entourage. From playboy to jungle fighter to nationalist pamphleteer, ready to take a role in a Céline novel! In other words, after 1968, things loosened up. Céline, Bernanos, Montherlant, Anouilh, Kléber Haedens, Giono, and Aymé became first grudgingly accepted, then the dominant influence in literature, theater, and thought—and all were pureblood reactionaries. Their style, unencumbered by slogans—style is man himself, said Buffon—showed none of the marmoreal qualities of the *Nouvelle Revue Française* generation of Proust and Gide. It was not studded by nationalist slogans as the novels of Barrès, and it tore with hungry teeth into the language of reality. While Céline himself was consecrated by publisher Gaston Gallimard (Céline set his own royalties and number of copies printed), a phalanx of young writers took his succession. Their identification card was stamped with the following credentials: they took life, war, and peace in both hands, lived the tragic carnage of Indonesia and Algeria, became writer-mercenaries in Angola, and wept over lost comrades and the lost empire at Dien Bien Phu. They were heavily political, in fact violently opposed to de Gaulle and his lies and treachery; they were jailed, censored, forced into exile—but always remained true to literature. In short, they lived Célinian lives, taking risks, mixing brutality and tenderness; they cynically dismissed causes, and were ready to die for them.

Today, in the exceptionally shallow years of Giscard's and Mitterrand's liberal-socialist-consumerist republic, the universal boredom announced by Fukuyama is compelled to make a little place for the only worthwhile literature still tolerated. Since nothing happens in Mitterrandia, except elections, invectives, and corruption (come to think of it, this describes not France alone), the novelist is led once again to the exploration of the imaginary. Is Jean Raspail the closest in succession to Céline? Hard to say since the latter was a force of nature and a chameleon, at home in bistros and on African slave ships—imagine a Joseph Conrad with a roaring humor—armed with a style that makes you cry and laugh after innumerable rereadings.

Raspail, on the other hand, combines the plasticity of the moviemaker and the daring, rare today, of the explorer of ancient/new lands and legends. His *Camp of the Saints* has, however, Célinian dimensions as it relates the pouring of millions of wretched Hindus into France, unresisted by cowardly drawing-room humanists until the invaders take over, first the Provence, then Paris—in the name, one assumes, of human rights. It is a rich and hilarious drama, aching to be filmed, if filmmakers were not cowards. Raspail's literature leaves France for the pampas of Patagonia, the high seas, half-imaginary kingdoms, the last breath of freedom in a world closing in on us with unsmiling GNPs, national debt, and "no smoking" signs. In the steps of Raspail, Dominique de Roux, and Jacques Laurent one sees traces of Céline's winged boots. While Sartre has become illegibly passé, predictable, and boring—except, of course, to the professional leftist mourners—Maurice Clavel is the new (posthumous) hero of the post-1968 crowd that fused left and right with a reactionary message. Maurice Clavel fired their imaginations, since he too combined leftist indignation with Catholic orthodoxy, and denounced derelict bishops in the wake of Vatican II.

In short, the domination of leftism in postwar literature is broken, although the agony and the burial took an inordinately long time. The media are still ruled by the Marxist epigones, the recycled liberal-democrats, the conformist little bureaucrats ready to cash in on any regime's handouts. With an admirably executed about-face, they now turn not to Moscow but to Washington, from where invitations and checks are expected. From Kremlin to White House, Gorbachev-style. But talent can only be found on the right. I speak here of literature, not of essays, pamphlets, scholarship, historiography, sociopolitical analysis—fields today, at long last, unclassifiable as to ideological commitment. From war's end to the mid-70's—the date of Solzhenitsyn's still well-remembered Parisian visit and television debate—the period was leftist/bourgeois, utopian, and unoriginal. Since then, France has witnessed a reactionary renaissance, and books hidden under the veil of hypocrisy have found the channels of public acclaim. Ideology slowly yielded to life—at whose description Céline, Anouilh, Rebattet, and Aymé were masters. Modernity came finally to mean not communist Aragon's and feminist Beauvoir's mind-killing volumes, or the *nouveau roman*, empty of characters and peopled by geometrical descriptions, or ideological elucubrations, but immersion in life and, above all, in a style, a language. The message was clear to those able to read: the way of writing, of approaching things, must convey the way of living. The latter was no longer to be confined to alcoves, protest marches, and the signing of pro-Mao manifestos. "Reaction" became an act of living. As Bernanos once wrote: "Of course I am a reactionary! Only a corpse does not react—but then it is covered with worms!"

The word "reactionary," less familiar to the reader, at least in its literary use, than "modern," should acquire meaning when put in the context of time. The great schools of romanticism, realism, and naturalism raised the novel to its highest achievement, but in the last half-century the genre has declined and has been in search of a philosophical base in which it could make sense once again, in which the term *story* can be appreciated. But we have been living in an overly analytical age, with dozens of theories and labyrinthine detours—Freudian, semiotic, structuralist, deconstructionist—

all flying around us like airplanes out of control. As in modernist exhibits of art, we no longer know "what is what"; titles, contents, and shapes offer no clues; words abolish each other.

Let us call it an absence of meaning, perhaps a deliberate one. It is, at any rate, a cult of the subjective, an exclusivist cerebration, a series of game theories. The "reactionary" act in literature (and art) is then the *restoration of meaning*, hence of objects, images, people, and of their relationships, passions, fears, and hopes. Reactionary literature is not today not something simplistic, rudimentary, fearful of verbal risks; it is a turn to the "story" of the literary text, the rooting of characters in the world common to the reader and writer. "Reactionary" literature was the novels of Thackeray and Balzac, Hamsun and Tolstoy and Chekhov, the plays of Ibsen and Shaw, although they did not bear this label, since there was no vast, victorious, and dominant counter-novel, counter-drama. And it is untrue that their public was as puzzled by their novelties as today's public is: it merely had to adjust, as publics before them, to a new style, plot, and characters. There was no need for professors of semantics to explain what it was all about, while their academic rivals prepared a counter-explanation that was just as farfetched.

Why were Flaubert and Dostoyevsky reactionaries? Because they worked with the assumption that literary creation is not a mere system of signs, that people understand other people, and that the modern reader knows what Homer or Sophocles were also writing about: human beings. Solzhenitsyn, too, is a reactionary: sabotaging the ukase to write about idealized tractor drivers, he fashioned flesh-and-blood Ivan Denisovitches. What would we readers gain by knowing (gratuitously guessing) Ivan's dreams, Oliver Twist's castration complex, Aliosha's sublimated envy of Ivan or vice versa?

Modern reaction in literature is thus the talent and the courage to write again on the human level, a return from piled-up theories and layers of the sub-, un-, and proto-conscious. Only the mediocre writer allows language and grammar to dictate his text. The reactionary novelist is aware that after a never-ending apprenticeship he is master of the word, that he and his characters forever mingle in inspiration.

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## His 'Life'

by Richard Moore

Quip upon quip  
in "smarty ass" one-upmanship  
until our clown  
*experienced* death's clever put-down.