

Buffoons of the Apocalypse

Castle to Castle, by Louis-Ferdinand Céline, translated from the French by Ralph Manheim (Delacorte. 359 pp. \$7.50), is the first of the famous French novelist's late works to be published in this country. Erika Ostrovsky, who teaches French at New York University, has published "*Céline and His Vision*," a critical study of the author, and is now completing his biography.

By ERIKA OSTROVSKY

THE DISCOVERY OF AN UNKNOWN PHASE in the writings of a great novelist—long obscured—is a rare treat, guaranteed to stimulate even the most jaded of literary appetites. Louis-Ferdinand Céline burst into world-wide fame and notoriety more than thirty years ago. *Journey to the End of Night* and *Death on the Installment Plan* are already classics, yet they remain as pertinent and incisive as when they were written, as fecund as their varied progeny implies: Burroughs, Miller, Modiano, Queneau, Sartre, Simenon. . . . Now, after decades of relative oblivion, Céline emerges to astound us with a new vision in *Castle to Castle*, written in the last years of his life and evidence of the final, exacerbated flowering of his literary genius.

Published under the more *argotique* title of *D'un Chateau l'autre* in France (1957), the novel marked Céline's return from several forms of exile—political and literary—and years of condemnation by silence. The preceding decades had been filled with suspicion, accusations, prosecution, persecution. Publication of several racist and antiwar pamphlets, trips to Germany at the height of World War II, denunciation for alleged collaboration and imprisonment in Denmark—although mitigated by exoneration and return from exile—had branded Céline. He came back broken, ill, embittered, to spend his remaining years as a total recluse in a suburb of Paris. The only remaining link with life appears to have been his writing. Several works, one begun during solitary confinement in the Vesterfængsel prison in Copenhagen, precede *Castle to Castle*. It is only on its publication, however, that Céline was restored to the ranks of major writers in France. The novel forms the initial section of a trilogy that includes *Nord* and the still-unpublished "*Rigodon*," describing the author's unique experiences transformed into a literary adventure of nightmarish dimensions. *Castle to Castle* is the American reader's passport for a journey to the end of all possible nights, the point of entry into a trap it took almost thirty years to perfect.

Addicts of the writer's early works

will find a very different Céline: a hunted, gasping, moribund giant who—though appearing "crippled" to some—uses his crutches with the deadly accuracy of a fencer and spews out all the terror, the filth, the grotesque laughter of atomic doomsdays. Autobiographical at its roots yet constantly bursting into delirium, the work leads us through the twisted paths of a lay hell which matches the visions of Ernst and Bosch, the tortured worlds of Kafka, Adamov, or Beckett. Its curious structure—107 initial pages written in a halting, weary drone and filled with obsessive reiterations of past and present misery; an explosive central portion, set in the heart of devastated Europe, and marked by hallucinatory intensity; a short final section that reverts to the original tone—seems designed to illustrate the several ways in which the world may end: both in a bang and a whimper. Its music is scored for a fitting orchestration of what Céline once called his "opera of the deluge." Chronological leaps, frequent in the novel, serve a similar purpose: to provide a total view of the catastrophe and enclose us in a circular time-trap where past, present and future are equally devastating. The fragmented nature of the narrative, the gaps, pauses, hesitations, even the redundancies accentuate the vision of a world torn to shreds, tottering on the brink of extinction. On that narrow ledge, bordering the void,

Céline's horrendous tragi-comedy takes form.

Ushered in by a hallucination where a riverboat on the Seine turns into Charon's bark, and an old actor friend becomes the dread boatsman—who sports a gauchito costume and gaily "debrains" his passengers in the best Jarry tradition—there follow, panel by panel, fragment after fragment, scenes from a burlesque of hilarious annihilation, a deathbed farce, which may unsettle even the most fervent aficionados of mind-blowing. The central setting might come straight out of a modern gothic tale: the Hohenzollern castle in Siegmaringen with its labyrinth of underground passages, portrait galleries of monsters, lavish, abandoned banquet halls. As on a revolving stage, the scene now shifts to the Hotel Löwen, with its rooms and toilets overflowing and the air filled with the stench of cabbage, excrement, semen, and blood; now we are taken to a "croakarium" where the dead and dying are displayed in show windows, or railway cars once built for shahs and now used for the insane masquerades of Vichy ministers. The set changes and a train station becomes the scene for orgies of lusty nymphets, and pregnant prisoners, with the sex-starved males arriving in carloads of "fresh meat" from all the frontlines of Europe.

The characters, however, outdo the
(Continued on page 63)



"OK, Mort, you won the bet."

Secrets of a Genius

A Portrait of Isaac Newton, by Frank E. Manuel (Harvard University Press, 478 pp. \$11.95), the first major life of the great scientist to appear since 1934, seeks to delineate and account for the wellsprings of his genius. Peter Gay, whose *"The Enlightenment: An Interpretation: The Rise of Modern Paganism"* won the 1966 National Book Award, is William R. Shepherd Professor of History at Columbia University.

By PETER GAY

NEWTON'S PLACE IN THE FRONT RANK of the shapers of our world is beyond dispute; in the Enlightenment, the philosophes, who were his worshipful disciples, called him the greatest man who ever lived, and while we are inclined to disdain such games, we understand, I think, what the philosophes meant, and accept their verdict. Yet there has not been a full-scale life of Newton since L. T. More's solid, old-fashioned, and occasionally inaccurate biography appeared in 1934, though the Newton industry has produced a magnificent edition of Newton's mathematical papers, an authoritative edition of Newton's instructive correspondence, and occasional editions of rarer papers. Scholarly appraisals and popular short biographies apart, no one has tried to synthesize all this rich and complex material. Now Frank Manuel, returning to familiar ground after his excellent short book on Newton as a historian, has attempted to write a general and detailed study of his life. As an intellectual historian rather than a historian of science, he has concentrated more on the general ideas, but since his subject is intimately interwoven with science, he has tried to do justice to the technical aspects of Newton's work as well. This alone would make his book a welcome and important addition to the writing of intellectual history. But Manuel has gone further. Proceeding with due caution and protecting himself with disclaimers, he has plunged into a genre of historical writing that is becoming increasingly popular and increasingly controversial: the psychoanalytical study.

I do not want to make his book appear forbidding; it is in fact almost strenuously informal. Obviously, Manuel has chosen his title with deliberation: a portrait it is, drawn with broad if precise strokes, and moving easily back and forth across the canvas of Newton's life. If the book has a flaw, it is that Manuel permits the machinery of his scholarship to show rather more than an accomplished essayist might; the book, with its references in the text to this notebook now in one library, that interpreter worth fol-

lowing, appears rather like a work of modern architecture in which the architect has exposed the structural elements of his building, not so much because he wants to insist on it for esthetic purposes, but because he has not quite seen the way clear to concealing it.

Yet this is a minor, almost trivial objection in view of Manuel's impressive achievement. Newton's external life was not very eventful. It appears here in three distinct stages: there is (to quote Manuel's headings) the "lad from Lincolnshire," followed by "the Lucasian Professor" at Cambridge, followed by the sage and government official "in London town." There were dramatic moments in that existence, moments of discovery and controversy. But the real drama was in Newton's mind, and it is this drama that Manuel seeks to delineate, and, as far as possible, explain.

To explain the workings of men's minds is always difficult; to explain genius, as Freud himself modestly said, is almost impossible. Yet to deal with Newton is to deal with genius. It may be too much to say that there are as many theories of genius as there are geniuses, but there are none that have convinced all, or even the majority, of psychologists and historians. "The recent literature on genius," Manuel rightly warns, "is vast, provocative, respectable, and necessarily inconclusive."

With this caution, he then sets forth some tentative hypotheses concerning the mainsprings of Newton's brilliant theorizing. But, as Manuel well knows, behavior tends to be overdetermined; there are usually more than enough reasons for any single act, or taste, or pronouncement: "The predominance of crimson in the furnishings of Newton's London chambers, listed in an inventory of his belongings made soon after his death, has been remarked upon: there were crimson mohair hangings, a crimson mohair bed 'compleat with case curtains of crimson Harrateen,' a crimson settee. A quick inclination to relate this to bloody fantasies should be checked by

the realization that crimson was also the color of royalty and the aristocratic status to which this yeoman's son always aspired. Perhaps both elements were at play, and the rival claims of a psychological or a sociological interpretation can be conveniently adjudicated."

Manuel's conclusion here may seem a little opaque and deliberately elusive, but this is a minor stylistic fault. Far more important is Manuel's attitude toward his material, and that I cannot praise too highly. Psychoanalysis is a powerful, a magnificent interpretative instrument; in the hands of sensitive and intelligent historians it promises to yield results that even optimistic followers of Freud do not yet foresee. But, unfortunately, much of the recent work in this field has been done by historians with the boldness of Freud unchecked by his experience and unilluminated by his genius; it has been either vague and therefore meaningless speculation or literal-minded and therefore worthless drudgery. Erik Erikson and his circle are now doing careful pioneering work; Manuel's book may claim the same high status.

Fortunately for the biographer inclined to see man psychoanalytically, Newton left behind some instructive material, and Manuel has used it well. He later recalled that his mother had often told him how small and frail he had been at birth; he also remembered that his mother remarried (his father had died before Isaac's birth) when he was three, and then had other children. Traumas enough for anyone, and Newton recorded them. In a series of word lists some of them copied from a model book but others free associations, Newton gave vent to his rage and to his destructive urges, ambiguously directed either against the outside world or against himself. None of this, of course, made Newton a genius—the history of the world is full of people who experienced, roughly, what Newton experienced, and never discovered anything—but it helped to make him the kind of genius he was. Utilizing these word lists, other equally elusive evidence, and—with exceptional skill—Newton's letters, Manuel conducts the reader on a detailed and well-documented tour of Isaac Newton's life and work, and does so convincingly. Even those who do not subscribe to Manuel's psychological theories will find it possible to enjoy the experience. After all, he claims little: "The innermost secrets of Isaac Newton," he writes, "have not been uncovered. Though the curtain may be raised briefly, one goes away burdened with doubt about what has actually been seen in that fleeting moment." Who can resist such a disclaimer—especially when it is made by someone who so obviously knows his Newton well?



—Mezzotint by John Faber, from the book.

Isaac Newton, 1726—the real drama was in his mind.