

CÉLINE

JOURNEY TO THE END OF THE NIGHT, translated by John Marks (*Chatto and Windus*, 8/6).

Céline's *Voyage au Bout de la Nuit* has already been fully reviewed in *Scrutiny* (*Scrutiny* II, 2). Here there is little necessity to do more than announce a translation, cleverly expurgated. It is something of a service to make the book available in any form, and Mr. Marks is on the whole to be congratulated on his difficult work. One had hoped, however, that he would do more for Céline. Translation can, I suppose, never be more than a second-hand substitute for a work of art. Mrs. Garnett's Gogol and Dostoevsky, Arthur Waley's *Poems from the Chinese*, are to a certain extent exceptions to this generalization because they have added something of themselves. Mr. Marks is competent, but does not often do justice to the balance and tone of Céline, and in parts reads not much higher than *Death of a Hero*. It is of course more a question of tone than of meaning. The meaning remains, but the essence escapes. The violence of the translation is a different thing from the violence of the original. It is 'clever,' and indicates a straining after effect wholly lacking in the *Voyage* itself. The vocabulary too seems strangely limited and lacking in emotive power, whereas the original's distorted idiom is one of its most remarkable merits. In translation, for instance, the unequalled account of the war does not surpass numerous other accounts: and the description of the American public lavatory becomes vulgar and sordid enough, but loses the apparently effortless rhythm and extraordinarily suggestive phrasing and use of words of the French. The *Voyage* appeals on many levels—which would account for its extraordinary success—among others on the *feuilleton* level. Often, as in the murder in the taxi, Mr. Marks succeeds only in reproducing this level.

Nevertheless, the book certainly deserves to be read by those to whom the French is inaccessible. At least it offers a hint of what Céline's book is.

WILLIAM HUNTER.

SOVIET LITERATURE

SOVIET LITERATURE. AN ANTHOLOGY. Edited and translated by George Reavey and Marc Slonim (Wishart, 8/6).

To say that this book is utterly worthless would be an exaggeration. But the worthless and worse than worthless in it is out of all proportion to the valuable. The latter is practically confined to the circumstance that the anthology contains a certain number of texts not hitherto translated into English and a few facts unknown to the English reader. But the texts are not well chosen, they are (with two exceptions) badly translated, and the facts are presented in a distorting perspective.

Mr. Reavey has made his publisher believe, and announce on the jacket, that he is bilingual. He is not. His knowledge of Russian would be sufficient to take second class honours in that language at an English university, but no more. As soon as the text becomes a little difficult, or unduly idiomatic he fails. His limitation is aggravated by his peculiar predilection for the most 'difficult' Soviet poets, like Pasternak. The person who can translate 'strokes of tower clocks' by 'battle of towers,' knows about as much of Russian as one would render in French 'high time' as '*un haut temps*.' As soon as the syntax becomes a little involved (and Russian syntax can be involved, though not quite so involved as Latin) he loses all his bearings. His favourite Pasternak is a master of exceedingly daring and paradoxical metaphor. It is nothing for him to speak of a pair of female arms as 'a shower of elbows.' Mr. Reavey, owing to sheer ignorance of Russian, misses the image. This, in a word-for-word translation, is Pasternak:

Twist together this shower of elbows, [that are] cold like the waves,

And of palms [that are as] satin-like as lilies and made powerful by their weakness.

This is Mr. Reavey: