
Céline: Unembellished Man

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Céline: A Biography, by Frédéric Vitoux. Translated by Jesse Browner. *Paragon House*, 1992. 601 pp. \$34.95.

In his "Preface" to his New Directions translation of Louis-Ferdinand Céline's *Death on the Installment Plan*, Ralph Manheim notes that Céline's "blackness is further intensified by his literary attitudes and by the literary personality he composed for himself. He believed that literature had side-stepped man's baseness as he knew it, that writers had resolutely embellished man, that *his* experience was the truth, which it was his mission to tell. His purpose in writing, he once said, was to blacken himself and others; we should all be freer if the whole truth about human 'crumminess' were finally told."

Céline was never able to renounce anything, and his life would seem a strategic entry on those ledger sheets accounting the balance of the years between World War I and World War II. He lived as a man torn asunder, a tormented person of opposite tendencies whose torment became necessary

lest an aesthetic weakness override his literary art, which it very largely does not. He is a major writer to whom Genet, Joyce, Burroughs, Grass, Mailer, Roth, and Vonnegut openly acknowledge debt. He is obsessed with the demonic in various mixtures; he is little concerned with the angelic or with a moral equilibrium he would have renounced as superficialized humanism. If the existentialists, Dostoevsky, Mann, Kierkegaard, propose moral claims and moral unity, Céline's vision is destructive of moral claims and moral unity. He knows neither shrinking nor half-heartedness but ruthlessly imposes his unembellished man into the midst of twentieth-century history.

Chronicling such a life is, one might say, a mean task. Assembling the brutal experiences, the tempestuous life and times of Céline, let alone distilling the mythical and the self-created, the scandalous and the polemical, into

a superb and exhaustive biography seems heroic. Originally published in French as *La Vie de Céline* in 1988, Frédéric Vitoux's extraordinary portrait was awarded the Goncourt Prize for biography. Jesse Browner's 1992 Paragon House translation is unobtrusive and undistracting.

Céline often said that he regarded himself primarily as a stylist with a perfected spoken style but still marked by the shifts of direction characteristic of everyday speech. Vitoux's biography opens with much the same style but also is reminiscent of Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* as well as Céline's own style in *Death on the Installment Plan*. The ellipses which appear throughout *Death*, marking the incompleteness, the abruptness, the sudden shifts, appear in the opening pages of Vitoux's biography. Tone in the opening pages matches tone. *Death* begins "Here we are, alone again. It's all so slow, so heavy, so sad . . . I'll be old soon." Vitoux adopts a narrator's posture in the opening pages of his biography similar to the opening pages in *Death*: "First there was Courbevoie . . . It would be hasty, however, to see Courbevoie as a merely fortuitous setting, and thus without significance. If we wish to speak of Céline, to evoke his life, to discuss his reference points, we must first refer to Courbevoie . . . He was from Courbevoie and that said it all. That was his calling card."

There is also an uneasy sense in the narrator's tone as he begins his story. He seems aware that he is about to begin talking about an untouchable and he is accusatory: "Let us recall the

opening of *D'un château l'autre* [Castle to Castle]: 'Frankly speaking, between us, my end is even worse than my beginning . . . Oh, I didn't start off too well. . . . I was born, I repeat in Courbevoie, Seine . . . I'm repeating it for the thousandth time.' . . . The thousandth time indeed . . . Let us reread his interviews."

Vitoux's narrator, in other words, is prosecuting his subject at the beginning of what appears to be something of a trial. But the story is also lyrical. There are Céline's own distortions of the early years of his life which the narrator stands ready to correct. There are also the narrator's impressions and emotions which are intermingled with what he believes objectively happened in Céline's life. After all, he writes, "Our image of Louis-Ferdinand Céline is of a man forever on the run, harried, proscribed, exiled, restless, a seeker of fame, of adventures, of clearings at the other end of society or on the other side of appearance, between two wars, from continent to continent."

There is also the "velocity of language." Céline "is the man who bevels sentences, disarticulates syntax, who warps and straightens words so as to hurl them at great speed toward emotion, the ultimate target. But that is not all. There is also, first and foremost, the velocity of his life (and to retell that life is to throw oneself into frenetic pursuit). Céline involves himself at every instant. Acts of impulse, acts of folly, subterfuges, deliria, in the army, heading for London, in black Africa, in New York, in Leningrad. He is forever dreaming of open spaces. At

the drop of a hat, a rejection, a hope, a deal to negotiate, a woman to see again, a ship setting sail, the sea and the wild blue yonder—that's where he wagers his comfort and his everyday life. Indeed, until 1951—the move to Meudon, old age and weariness prematurely born after prison and his Danish ordeal—Céline is on the move."

The lengthy passage is a good example of Vitoux's orchestral introduction. The style tends to match Céline's style with the poetical lyricism continuing throughout the first two chapters which cover Céline's life to adolescence. It seems an innocent, Proustian prelude soon to be transposed into a plane of delirium. For a reader already familiar with large portions of Céline's life, the irony is implicit, given the soon-to-follow river of muck in which Céline lives during the cataclysm of World War I.

Vitoux, however, also spends a good amount of time describing Céline's education, his mother's ambition "to make him a department store buyer," his introduction to Parisian vices—before the age of 18. He is not yet Céline but Louis Destouches; he is not yet Céline but he seems something of a voyeur and an exhibitionist. Vitoux, on the other hand, is careful to suggest that Louis was more likely a "big lad of seventeen and a half, a little pimply, no doubt," paying "eye to the great *cocottes* or the *petites-bourgeoises*, the blushing brides or the uncompromising *demi-mondaines*." "The truth, more simply, is that we know precisely nothing about" Céline's early age.

Any resemblances between the young Louis Destouches and the hero of *Death on the Installment Plan* are most likely purely accidental. Vitoux does argue that in Céline's later writings from Africa, he openly discusses his education and his reading. Vitoux believes he is not yet on his guard, not yet inventing and mythologizing. He is not thinking of becoming a writer and he hasn't learned all that unhappiness. He speaks readily of having read Pascal, Goethe, Talleyrand. "The least one can say is that his curiosity is vast and unoriented. He reads the classics and illustrated editions of his contemporaries. He is moving with the utmost haste, and, in the case of the moderns, toward the most obvious works."

The years of World War I and the 1920s were, Vitoux makes clear, final preparations before *Journey*. "In reference to Louis Destouches' doctoral dissertation on Semmelweis, Professor Brindeau said of his student: 'You know, he's made for this. . . . He's made to write . . . That's all there is to it.'" *Voyage au bout de la nuit* was begun in 1929. "A disturbing coincidence," Vitoux suggests, "exactly halfway between the two world wars. . . . As if Louis was finally able to describe his war of 1914, in which he had been wounded, and what came after, at the precise moment when his alarm would rattle French literature, and then find a new screen placed before him, a new fear, a new echo to justify his concerns and redouble his fury."

The biographer's own style is less lyrical in this section, mapping instead the novelistic reality of Céline's own

direct expression. Vitoux interposes himself, personally implying that Céline was as great a sinner as he was a writer: "Louis had set himself against Fernand [his father], no doubt. He had wanted to emancipate himself from his father's narrow-minded morality, his suffocating concern for economy, his chilly, reactionary prejudices. But he was to come to resemble him more and more. He would have no one left against whom to assert himself. He would be able to reconnect, in his own way, with his petty-bourgeois rejections, his immoderate yearning for the past, his xenophobia. . . . And Louis cried like a baby. Should that surprise us? On hearing of his mother's death in 1945, having escaped from Germany, he would sob once more. Without false shame. Without that displaced modesty of men uncertain of their virility, who believe it unworthy to express sorrow. It was simply that, as he didn't like to display his feelings, his pain, his sorrow, Louis preferred to be alone when giving free flow to his grief, or to remain alone in the company of the admirable, faithful, silent Lucette, who understood, who accepted all his excesses and who remembers him still, stretched out on a bed, holding her hand and giving way to a sadness that rocked him like waves And so we may put to rest the ready-made image of the writer hardened against suffering, sarcastic, stoical, expressing his most secret pains only through that unfathomably churlish sneer. Louis cried, and that's all there was to it."

The result of such interposition

seems at times an inverse biography, the biographer rising above his source by becoming like the novelist himself, especially since, as in the case of Céline, there is so much to handicap the biographer. It is his business to discuss Céline's life and it is his business to deal with the biography as one might deal with poetry or the novel, making sense of it all in something like a final ordering. Vitoux is, in that respect, not a mere dustman reassembling the dust. He does create a life out of all the years of research but less in the sense of the life told as a transcribed act of criticism and more in the sense of an illusion, the biographer/narrator creating a kind of second life springing from the evidence of Céline's life until the figure of Céline begins to live in our imagination. It's an extraordinary process, revealing the full portrait-like dimensions of Céline.

And of course it's tragi-comic. In the years after Céline publishes *Journey*, Vitoux submerges his subject in all the paradoxical cross currents of the years between the world wars and, after World War II, the years of Céline's imprisonment in Denmark. The story of the life is thus an interesting juxtaposition of the history of the times and the life of the writer, not as if Céline takes center stage in the history of the period but as one who was both terrified and fascinated by the sheer magnitude of the historical spectacle. Vitoux pursues that terror and fascination and spectacle in a metapoetic language that conveys the legacy of this flawed, crippled giant.

In the concluding chapter to his bi-

ography, Vitoux plunges on as Céline plunges on, the paragraphs shorter, the paragraphs elegant but fatal. Both the book and the life are at the end of their tethers. Céline completed *Rigodon* on June 30, 1961, a year after he suffered a partial stroke. The text, Vitoux suggests, suffers from inconsistencies and surprising ellipses in the thread of the discourse. The plot chronology, too, is whimsical. It is as if Céline has erratically decided to change trains. "In any case, he knew that it was all over, that he would go no further, that the journey was drawing to an end. *Rigodon* would not have the breadth of his earlier novels. *Tant pis*. He would not relate therein his life on the Baltic shores, which, as several pages of the book attest, had been his intention. . . . Death was present, watching, losing patience. He didn't want to keep it waiting. What was the

use?" And we can sense death's un-wavering presence between the lines and pages he was writing at the time."

In his "On Céline Once More," Milton Hindus writes that what Céline seems to have lacked "more than anything else is what Whitman describes as 'the antiseptic of the soul,' namely faith in his fellow human beings." For Céline the very stones seemed to drip venom and he himself was evidently early poisoned by doubt and cynicism. Vitoux illuminates this doubt and cynicism with an accuracy that breaks the generic bindings of form; the biography is poetic, it is novelistic, it is history, tragedy, comedy, all told with admirable authority. The book's insights are insights into our century, and what strikes us most is that it is life and not just a marble tribute.