The Politics of Modernity: Céline and French Literature between the Wars

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Philippe Roussin, *Misère de la littérature, terreur de l'histoire. Céline et la littérature contemporaine*. NRF Essays. Paris: Gallimard, 2005. 754 pp.

Philippe Roussin's study of Céline and French literature of the 1930s is as ambitious in scope as in volume. Its readings of Céline in the context of the literary and political debates of the prewar years, reasserting the central importance of his political pamphlets in defining his understanding of literature, shed considerable new light on the author of *Journey to the End of the Night*. While this is no slight accomplishment, the book's real object of study, as laid out in the preface, is not so much Céline as modernity itself, "the turnaround by which literature decided to take as its object the very substance of politics in a democratic order: ordinary life and its riddles, the common world and the conflicts between its shared values" (14)[1] and, generally, the ideology of literature in the 1930s.

Roussin draws on an impressive amount of sources quoted at length, mainly reflections by writers, intellectuals, and politicians on the respective status of literature and politics within the context of rising nationalism and communism. His hypothesis is that, as democratic politics gained ground in the 1920s, the "great writer" removed from the world, as theorized by the avant-gardes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, came under increasing criticism; on the contrary, writers advocated

1. All translations from French sources are my own.

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taking ordinary life as the subject of literature so that common people and their language would find a place in it. Céline's use of slang (argot) should be read within this context of literature resorting to the shared language of democratic politics, with an aim to creating some sort of national community. But by asserting the pragmatic position and power of literature within and above the political arena, so runs the argument, Céline in the 1930s came to define writing as an act of absolute authority, indeed of terror. He rejected not only the avant-garde writer figure removed from the world, but also the "commonplaces of democracy," using slang not so much to transcribe the world and create commonality as to attack the status quo of reality and to bestow upon the writer a new type of exceptionality allowing him or her to reshape the world. On this basis, Roussin argues that the break between the modernist avant-gardes of the 1920s and the "mass art" of the 1930s should be reassessed: literature in the 1930s sometimes reformulated its claim to exceptional powers within the democratic arena rather than renouncing it, claiming authority no longer on the basis of the separation between the writer and the masses, but of the authenticity of the language they used (for example, argot), which reflected the essence of the common people and the nation. This shift from the "misery of literature," left powerless by its detachment from the world by the avant-gardes, to the "terror of history," in which literature asserts its absolute authority to write and make history, is what defines the ideology of writing in the 1930s.

The book follows a roughly chronological order, moving back and forth between Céline's writings and the intellectual context. The first part, following a trend in recent scholarship, investigates the role of Céline's identity as a doctor and a hygienist and generally the legitimacy that he claims for his writing on the basis of this status. Quoting Mayakovsky's assertion that "the streets are our brushes, the squares are our palettes," Roussin begins by situating Céline within the shift away from the nineteenth-century genius figure, which is replaced by a variety of types, from the bourgeois "gentleman of letters" to the writer as inventor (in surrealism) or engineer (in constructivism). Céline always thought of himself as a doctor, an outsider to literature, who in the 1930s fictionalized the same subject matter he had written about in his hygienist pamphlets in the 1920s. But whereas his medical discourse of hygienism represented a form of utopia, literature focused on the decay and disenchantment of urban modernity, taking as its subject the community of outcasts or untouchables whom the doctor-writer purports to speak for by virtue of his "pastoral power" (Foucault).

The second and third parts of the book focus on Céline and the question

of language. While Adorno and the Frankfurt school famously attacked mass culture and entertainment, particularly cinema, as "kitsch" compromised with capitalism, a clear trend existed among French (and francophone) writers of the 1920s and 1930s in favor of popular language and culture. Breaking with Valéry's rejection of "ordinary language," Cendrars, Giono, Queneau, or Ramuz sought to reintegrate literature within the community by writing "spoken" or even "vernacular" language, as they sometimes called it. This trend was in some cases accompanied by a preference for the "purity" of popular language and criticism of the overly normative or universal character of classical French. Céline clearly asserted his identification with preclassical Rabelais, who attempted to "democratize the language," while classical writing was contaminated by Latin and other "foreign" influences, as in what he termed Proust's "fussy franco-yiddish, absolutely *outside all French tradition*" (in "Propos sur Rabelais"; quoted on 351). Roussin here makes a convincing case for the central position of anti-Semitism (as it had developed in the nineteenth century) in Céline's idea of literature (367) as the ideal of a racially pure language steeped in popular culture, excluding foreign influence (Faulkner and Joyce) and transnational categorizations such as the proletariat. Therefore, writing in slang was not a conciliatory gesture for Céline but, rather, the full expression of the social conflicts and hatred obscured by the bourgeois lies of literature and culture produced by the "internationalized elite." His use of slang is conflictual, denying the existence of a common language and history among the readers, rejecting the possibility of objectively representing reality, and asserting instead the power of language to attack reality, of bestowing on literature "the force of continuous, unlimited, almost mystic abuse" (400). Drawing on Denis Hollier's seminal analysis of "authoritarian speech acts" in fiction of the 1930s (Hollier 1993), Roussin concludes that Céline's form of realism and use of language are primarily designed to take possession of his reader, who is left powerless as the author persuasively whispers into his or her ear.

The fourth and fifth parts of the book deal with what Roussin calls the "politics of terror." While arguing that neither Céline nor Artaud were prepared to defend artists and the specificities of the cultural sphere against totalitarian politics, he nonetheless contrasts their responses to the rise of totalitarian politics. On the one hand, Céline plunged into the debate by publishing the pamphlet *Bagatelles pour un massacre*, wholeheartedly defending the higher importance of politics over literature and art. Artaud, at the same time, chose to retreat to the asylum of Rodez, thus effectively avoiding to take sides. Roussin's reading of *Bagatelles* stresses its claim to authenticity and its use of argot as a justification for saying "everything," to the

applause of the intellectual elite who, like André Gide, praised its style and "sincerity." Showing how Céline used medical metaphors and hygienist rhetoric to legitimize his biological anti-Semitism, he leaves no doubt as to the close connection between Céline's understanding of literature and his political convictions.[2] Céline tellingly again highlighted his status as a doctor when replying to accusations of collaboration after the war, dismissing his pamphlets as "merely literature," just as the narrator saves himself at the end of *Rigodoon* by posing as a doctor who has saved a group of children with Down syndrome.

The conclusion of the book brings out some of its most interesting aspects but also reveals shortcomings in some of the theoretical conclusions it draws (or sometimes omits to draw) from a mass of sometimes conflicting empirical evidence. By situating Céline in the context of changing views of literature, Roussin has made a significant contribution to an overall understanding of his work that includes his anti-Semitic pamphlets, medical writings, and socially critical fiction. Breaking both with a mainly intertextual reading of Céline (Bellosta 1990 and Godard 1985) and the many studies focusing either on his politics or his fiction but insufficiently connecting the two, Roussin conveys a sense of coherence and stimulating readings of individual works.

Zooming out to the larger literary landscape, he distinguishes between two conflicting versions of modernism in French literature: while Paulhan (and others like Queneau) defended the rhetorical nature of literature, which firmly anchors it in common discourse, Valéry affirmed the independence of art by rejecting all common, democratic forms of language in favor of a poetic utopia that was ultimately intransitive, not written to be read, at least not by ordinary readers. Blanchot took this view one step further by defining literature as an amoral antidiscourse ("hors loi"), paving the way for Barthes's view of literature as a nonalienated form of language, developed in *Leçon* (1978). A clearer distinction is perhaps necessary at this point between Céline's individual writing and prevailing views of literature: Céline represents a paradox in that, while purporting to place common language at the center of his work, he in fact reasserts the absolute authority of his own discourse by virtue of its "authenticity." Roussin subtly underlines that, in the underlying tension between poetics and rhetoric which in his view structures modernism, Céline's authenticity is a form of "rhetoric" rather than of "poetics." In this respect, the strategic importance of this notion of "rhetoric" in linking Céline's literary values and his

2. Roussin seems to have omitted an interesting study on Céline's racism by Pierre Birnbaum (1993), who situates Céline in the context of other theorists of biological racism.

politics could perhaps have been underlined more clearly, as well as his originality in "importing" the absolute authority of the avant-garde writer into the democratic arena of fiction written in common language and about common people. This re-creation of antidemocratic ideas within a democratic context certainly deserves further study.

How then is one to situate Céline's exact position between the avant-garde and the "return to order" of 1930s realism? This question is in fact part of a larger controversy on the politics of modernism, recently rekindled by Antoine Compagnon's *Les Antimodernes* (2006). In a famous indictment of modernist art, Eric Hobsbawm (1998) held that the early-twentieth-century avant-garde artists' (he cites Picasso, Braque, and cubism in general) failure to renounce their status as genius creators and come to terms with democratic modernity led to the irreversible disappearance of art as such within the consumer society. Hobsbawm attributes this failure to the artists' choice of expressing revolt against the world by rejecting representation, thereby alienating their audience. Uri Eisenzweig (2001) makes a similarly interesting argument in favor of the intrinsic relationship between modernism and anarchism, linking Mallarmé's intransitive writing and interest for "intransitive" politics, as best expressed by bomb-throwing anarchist terrorism. The paradoxical nature of Céline's both democratic and antidemocratic fiction should probably be seen in the light of these ambiguities, and Roussin might have underlined more forcefully that, as suggested by Hobsbawm, the disturbing affinities between the affirmed exceptionality of literature and antidemocratic thought, which Roussin traces back to Valéry (and which continue to resonate in Barthes and Blanchot), contradict the notion that there is any intrinsic connection between aesthetic modernity and democratic politics.

Nevertheless, Roussin's central opposition between "rhetoric" and "poetics," while useful and stimulating, is perhaps somewhat simplified. Although evidence to the contrary is quoted in the course of the study (for example, 261–63, on William Carlos Williams), the symmetry of his conclusion suggests that "democratic" forms of writing are somehow less modernistic, while the avant-gardes are not democratic: "Terror, the mode in which literature operated under early modernism, as a result of the separation between the poetic and the rhetorical, highlights the tension between the exceptionality of literature and the common discourse of democracy" (648). Roussin's analysis of Williams and George Orwell (255ff.) could be generalized on a theoretical level: not all writers who defined themselves as modernists, in the sense that they believed in the power of language, used this power in the service of an antidemocratic ideology. Moving outside the French context, Arnold Weinstein (1993) has shown convincingly

how American modernism, epitomized in Scott Fitzgerald's *Great Gatsby*, endorsed fiction's absolute power of creation (unlimited by morals, aesthetics, or ideology) as part and parcel of the "American dream." One hopes that Roussin's careful readings of several American writers in this study will lead him to engage in a full-scale discussion of Weinstein's central contention that in American literature, in particular its "three modernists" Fitzgerald, Faulkner, and Ernest Hemingway, the exceptionality of literary discourse and fiction does not set it apart from the world but, on the contrary, shapes a central belief in freedom of writing and of making the self that is germane to American democracy.

Jean-Pierre Morel (1985) presents another side of this debate in his study on modernist writers and the Comintern. He criticizes the canonical narrative of modernism that associates it with left-wing ideology, arguing that "modernists" were usually noncommunist left-wing writers like Alfred Döblin, typically condemned by the Comintern in the name of socialist realism in the 1930s.[3] This condemnation reveals an ambiguity of modernism itself: in Morel's view, communist writers and critics, from the late 1920s, associated the avant-gardes exclusively with technical modernity, implicitly denying the connection between modernism and a full realization of the autonomy of art. By overemphasizing the superficial resemblance between technical modernity (cinema and its montage techniques, abstract photography) and literary modernism, communist writers and critics were able to reject the avant-garde (and its democratic aspirations) as "formalistic" and endorse an antimodernist aesthetics of realism. This discussion is relevant to Roussin's conclusion insofar as Morel argues that there is no canonical definition of modernism, it diffracts into a variety of individual writers questioning, in different ways, the legitimacy of literature in a new historical context associated with the "era of revolutions" and the rise of popular demand to exercise power in government (Morel 1985: 453–54). For example, Döblin's use of the "common language" of democracy, indeed of Berlin slang in *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, was neither authoritarian nor formalistic, no more than his engagement with democracy is relevant to "rhetoric" rather than "poetics." Situating Céline and French modernism within this broader European and American context could perhaps lead to a more nuanced rendering of the complex relations between modernism and democracy as a whole.

3. These attacks began at the behest of the journal *Die Linkskurve* in Berlin in 1929 and were amplified during the Congress of the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers held in Kharkov in 1930 (the projected Russian translation of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* was suspended). The first Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934 pronounced its final condemnation of avant-garde writers by officially adopting socialist realism (Morel 1985: 275–79).

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