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H-France Review Vol. 22 (October 2022), No. 173

Damian Catani. *Louis Ferdinand Céline: Journeys to the Extreme*. London: Reaktion Books, 2021. 392 pp. Bibliography, index, and illustrations. \$37.50 (hc). ISBN 9-78-1789144673; \$40.00 (eb). ISBN 9-78-1789144680.

Review by Rosemarie Scullion, University of Iowa.

“Timing,” as the saying goes, “is everything” and Damian Catani’s new biography of one of modern France’s most inventive and infamous authors arrives on the critical scene at a most opportune moment. Released in November 2021, Catani’s *Louis-Ferdinand Céline: Journeys to the Extreme* offers a comprehensive, rigorously researched and richly historicized account of his subject’s life and literature. In its timeliness, the study is also an invaluable resource for understanding the earthquake that recently rocked France when news broke that some six thousand pages of Céline’s unpublished writings had resurfaced three-quarters of a century after they had vanished from his Montmartre apartment. The story of how this priceless trove returned from the author’s wartime past to galvanize the present is as fraught as the circumstances under which these manuscripts disappeared after Céline and his spouse fled their home and homeland in June 1944 in the days following the Allied invasion of Normandy. The conditions that compelled this hasty departure are at the center of the controversy that has always swirled around Céline but especially so since the Nazi occupation of France when the author’s political sympathies joined with his literary renown to draw the wrath of Resistance partisans, who in the closing months of the war, clearly signaled they had him fixed in their avenging sights. Catani explains the how and why of Céline’s escape and recounts in page-turning detail the saga of exile and imprisonment that followed but not before setting the literary and historical stage on which this drama unfurled, providing along the way keys to understanding why these recently recovered manuscripts and the circumstances in which they went missing matter so much not just to French literary history but to French history *tout court*.

The close attention Catani pays to the waves of tumult that washed across the European continent in the early to mid-twentieth century gives readers a clear understanding of the conditions that formed Céline’s subjectivity and shaped a body of literature that was closely bound up with this roiling upheaval. Born in 1894, the year that saw the beginning of the Dreyfus Affair, which raged for a decade thereafter, and passing in 1961 just hours after putting the finishing touches on a trilogy of novels that chronicled the conflagration he saw engulfing the Third Reich at the end of the war, Céline lived in momentous times, and Catani shows his reader how swiftly and catastrophically things went off the rails for a writer like Céline who jumped into this fray and deployed his immense literary talents in remarkably creative but also breathtakingly destructive ways.

In measuring the force that history had in forming Céline the author, Catani posits that had World War I not occurred, Louis-Ferdinand Destouches would (p. 68) likely never have authored *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, the norm-shattering novel that appeared in late 1932 and quickly catapulted him from his unassuming existence as medical doctor serving the urban poor in a working-class suburb of Paris to the instant national fame he won under the pen name Louis-Ferdinand Céline. Other students of Céline's writing agree. In *Céline: Les derniers secrets* (Céline's Last Secrets), a compelling documentary film which aired for a national audience in the wake of the recovered manuscripts, Yoann Loisel weighed in on the mental state of a writer who, according to Elizabeth Craig, the American dancer with whom Céline co-habited while *Voyage* was in the making, would emerge after all-night writing sessions as if in a trance. Like Catani, Loisel surmises that Céline turned to writing as a means of managing inner turmoil that compounded the lasting effects of the physical injuries he suffered in the early months of the war, afflictions that kept his battlefield experience never far from mind. Loisel goes so far as to claim that Céline's electrifying prose was a direct expression of the author's constant state of "surexcitation nerveuse" (nervous agitation), a debilitating symptom, he concludes, of the author's war-induced PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder). What is certain is that the psychic energies that drove this catharsis generated an exhilarating new style of writing which captured the immediacy of the spoken word and reveled in the rhythms of the popular French slang that animated community life in the working-class quarters Destouches the doctor frequented and served.

Catani's first three chapters trace Céline's trajectory from his humble origins in the Parisian suburb of Courbevoie to his mid-thirties when he took up the pen while also practising medicine in a public health clinic on the outskirts of the city. Céline's turn to literature was as unforeseen as the medical career he began pursuing in the early 1920s. Catani shows how World War I and accidents of personal history decisively altered the future that Céline's petty bourgeois parents had envisioned for him in his youth. Rather than becoming the skilled artisan they thought he could be, Céline's life journey led him first to the frontline in 1914, to a second wartime assignment in the French consulate in London, to employment opportunities in colonial Africa and then, as his subsequent medical training progressed and his expertise grew in the 1920s, to Switzerland, where he worked to advance the League of Nations' health initiatives. In serving the organization, Céline was able to pursue his keen interest in social medicine, which took him back to Africa, to the United States and Canada, and then to numerous European cities where he investigated the noxious conditions in the continent's urban industrial regions and began envisioning what a modern public healthcare delivery system might look like (pp. 125-126). Readers will recognize in this chronology a sketch of the itinerary Céline's hapless anti-hero Bardamu follows in *Voyage au bout de la nuit* as he endures tribulations that begin on the front in 1914, follow him to Africa, and then to New York and Henry Ford's assembly lines in Detroit, before finally landing him in Rancy, the fictional Parisian suburb where he attends to the ill and witnesses the soul-crushing despair of his working class patients. Readers will also find in Catani's account of the social and situational contours of Céline's biography strands of the story the author tells in *Mort à crédit* of Ferdinand's harrowing childhood and then his later adventures as a young man knocking about London's underworld in *Guignol's Band*, the first volume of which appeared in March 1944, just months before the author fled his country. But Catani doesn't simply recount the facts of Céline's life story before *Voyage au bout de la nuit* ignited his ascent to literary fame; he also threads his biographical discussion with well-chosen passages from the author's novels and prolific correspondence, illustrating how aspects of Céline's childhood,

adolescence and early adulthood shaped his literary imagination. Readers come to see just how important lived experience was to Céline in a revealing statement he made to Lucienne Delforge in 1935, containing comments (p. 136) that convey the author's own sense of the hellishness of existence that spurred his writing: "I have to admit to you that for me reality is a constant nightmare and God knows how life has dished out to me more than my share of experiences! [...]. I have no wish to die without having transposed everything I have had to endure from people and things. That is more or less the sum total of my ambition."

If in mid-1935 Céline felt that life had treated him poorly, he would become even more aggrieved a year later when critics panned his second novel *Mort à crédit*, a stinging rebuke that many scholars see as the catalyst for the disastrous foray the author made into political pamphleteering shortly thereafter. One would think that what Catani sees as the deep empathy Céline had for the indignities his patients suffered in the impoverished communities he served would have made him a ready ally of the Popular Front and a champion of the better tomorrow which the movement promised France's working poor. This, however, was not the case. As the four political texts he wrote between 1936 and 1941 illustrate, Céline engaged with France's increasingly febrile and fractious political environment in terms that left many aghast to see him orbiting ideologically around France's racist and fascist-leaning right, forces that shifted into high gear when the stunning electoral gains the Popular Front made in the May 1936 elections handed power to Socialist Léon Blum, the country's first Jewish prime minister. The first step Céline took in this rightward direction was *Mea Culpa*, an essay he wrote upon returning from the Soviet Union in the early fall of 1936. The title told Céline's reader all they needed to know about the change of heart he underwent and the conclusions he reached after visiting a country where the appalling conditions he found, particularly in the medical facilities he toured, had him casting aspersions on a regime with which many on the French left were still enamored. However, this affront to Soviet sympathizers paled in comparison to the boldness of the move Céline made a year later in publishing *Bagatelles pour un massacre*, a work in which he spewed racist and antisemitic invective across hundreds of pages of incendiary prose. The literary style that had gripped Céline's readers in *Voyage au bout de la nuit* was now drawing thousands of others who made the journey the author invited them to take to the outer limits of bigoted thought and speech, and this at a moment in time when the social world seethed with discontent and political tensions were at a peak. While it was dread of another war and his drive to stop the kind of massacre he saw in the trenches of World War I that sparked his extended rant against Jews, the party he deemed responsible for the rumblings of war growing louder across the Rhine, the book, which became an instant bestseller, fed homegrown anxieties and resentments that had been stoked by the era's economic woes and political strife. Catani points out that racism and xenophobia were certainly no strangers to the mainstream of French life in this period. Yet in their pioneering study *Vichy France and the Jews* (1981), Michael Marrus and Robert Paxton cite Céline's pamphlets not as an exemplar of the era's normative discourse but as one expression of the rhetorical extremes that stretched the bounds of tolerated public speech in those troubled prewar years. They astutely observe that this sort of verbal excess allowed seemingly more moderate expressions of antisemitism to pass unnoticed, a more subtle dynamic that rapidly normalized the vilification of France's Jewish minority and primed the terrain for their wartime persecution.[1]

In his remaining four chapters, Catani handles this toxic subject matter with admirable clarity, critical insight and documentary precision. In effect, he is presenting to readers all the elements of the case that has been made for holding Céline and his literary legacy accountable for the fiery

racist discourse he lobbed into the public arena at a time when political passions were already ablaze. Catani closely examines, for instance, the genesis and reception of the four pamphlets, the author's wartime conduct, the charges of high treason which the French government formed against Céline in late 1945 while he was in hiding in Denmark, and the Danish response to the demand for extradition which landed the author in a Copenhagen prison for the eighteen months it took to adjudicate the matter. Catani also takes a close look at the slippery maneuvers Céline's French lawyers made in seeking the amnesty that allowed him to bring his six years of Danish exile to a close. After recounting the saga of Céline's criminal prosecution for wartime collaboration, Catani shifts attention to the circumstances under which Gaston Gallimard invited Céline to relaunch his literary career upon returning from exile when he also found himself facing the pariah status that would be his for the remainder of his life.

The agreement Céline reached with France's most prestigious publishing house just a month after he returned to France in July 1951 (p. 226) yielded five new novels whose literary worth and significance cannot, as Catani demonstrates, be denied. Ever a thorn in the establishment's side, all of the works Céline produced in this period conjured the specter of France's recent experience of war and occupation by a neighboring fascist power and recounted his own harried trek across Germany as the country was reduced to rubble in the final months of the war, subject matter that violated the strict taboo which Henry Rousso has shown the immediate postwar era placed on frank discussion and open debate about what had occurred during *les années noires*. As they appeared in print in the last decade of his life, Céline's postwar writings posed a question that, Catani recalls, has been raised time and again about the presence and place this author occupies in French literary history and cultural life: "Que faire de Céline," that is, what do we do about Céline? The headline of a 2013 article that appeared in *The Guardian* concisely identified the complexities involved in answering this query. In the aptly titled "Céline's Journey to the Cutting Edge of Literature," Tibor Fischer writes: "If the French demand bad behaviour from their novelists, they got more than they bargained for with the antisemitic Céline. But they were also getting the prose stylist of the century,"[2] a statement that echoes recent press commentary on the return of the missing manuscripts, where Céline is characterized as a French literary luminary who is at once "revered and reviled" in the contemporary world.[3]

In his final chapter, Catani does not provide a definitive response to questions concerning how Céline's status in the cultural life of the nation is to be determined, a problem that has dogged French society for decades, even at the highest reaches of government. He does, though, do a superb job presenting the stakes in the "Céline Culture Wars" he sees raging between those who hold that the author's vile racist prewar and wartime rants warrant tossing his memory and writings into the dustbin of history and those who favor some recognition of the redeeming value and artistic worth of the author's literary art and achievements. What is clear is that these battles are placing weighty choices before French policymakers and publishers who will need to decide in the very near future how to handle the availability of Céline's pamphlets which are about to enter the public domain. The importance and value of Catani's study lies in the wealth of information he provides and the thorough analysis he conducts in his six preceding chapters, knowledge that, in the end, puts these questions and presents these very problems to his own readers. We are living in times in which echoes of the past that drew Céline into the political maelstrom of his day are growing louder with each passing day and where we are also seeing the limits of tolerated speech once again being stretched to what until very recently were considered unthinkable extremes. Perhaps a second pressing question that Catani's study can help answer goes beyond the issue of what to do about a writer who used his artistic gifts to indulge his darker

impulses to ask how the society and experience that shaped him contributed to forming his racist imaginary and then gave him license to express it. In other words, the larger question Catani's study raises is: how did that happen? In effect, Catani asks his readers to travel with him across a fraught period of European history that gave rise to one of modern France's greatest literary talents. That trip down memory lane is instructive not just in helping readers understand why Céline and the controversy around him remains a hot button issue but in also reminding us just how swiftly social bonds can unravel and how fully enmity can flourish when crises arise, strife erupts and demagogues arrive on the scene, a historical reality that Céline's response to the turmoil of his times tragically illustrates. In this larger sense, *Louis-Ferdinand Céline: A Journey to the Extremes* might also serve as a wake-up call that jars contemporary readers into seeing the similarities between the sorry times in which Céline lived and wrote and our increasingly worrisome present. For readers who have little to no familiarity with Céline's writing, Catani's study is an excellent primer that also drives home the many ways in which the body of literature he studies is intimately bound up with its historical moment, one that has frightful parallels with our own. In this respect, Catani has made a significant contribution that extends well beyond his achievements in literary history and criticism in a remarkable work of outstanding scholarship and critical imagination which has valuable insights to offer the field of French literary studies, to French and European historians and more importantly, to the broader contemporary readership it richly deserves.

#### NOTES

[1] See Michael Marrus and Robert Paxton, *Vichy France and the Jews* (New York: Schocken Books, 1983), p. 42.

[2] See Tibor Fischer, "Céline's Journey to the Cutting Edge of Literature." *The Guardian*, 15 June 2013.

[3] See Léotine Gallois, "Newly Unearthed Work by a Revered and Reviled Novelist Causes a Stir in France." *The New York Times*, 26 October 2021. Gallois's report offers an overview of the circumstances under which the six thousand pages of Céline's manuscripts that went missing in 1944 resurfaced in 2021.

Rosemarie Scullion  
University of Iowa  
[rosemarie-scullion@uiowa.edu](mailto:rosemarie-scullion@uiowa.edu)

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ISSN 1553-9172