

“Stupefied by Céline”

*Conversations with Professor Y*

Louis-Ferdinand Céline

Translated by Stanford Luce

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by Jeff Bursey

Considered a “crippled giant” in Milton Hindus’ well-known phrase, branded as a fascist, an anti-Semite, and a collaborator, an anti-Nazi and anti-Communist, and a writer who deliberately set out to make the world a grimmer place, Louis-Ferdinand Céline (1894-1961) and his works are laden with conflicting connotations. It sounds almost naïve to agree (partially) with the remarks of his most vehement detractors, and then to say their judgements don’t matter when one looks at how significant his works are. What does it say that such poison and so much cathartics are present together, and that a reader has to come to terms with both?

Present in each of Céline’s books is vitality, freshness, dark comedy, distress, rage, and some unforgettable imagery (found also in the novels, polemical writings, and paintings of Wyndham Lewis, another artist with fascist leanings who possesses a long rap sheet). For French letters his style was considered revitalizing, or an affront, depending on one’s point of view. Disdaining the style of academicians, Céline set about to capture how people spoke, mixing in argot as well as scientific terms from his studies and practice, and jamming words together to create new ones. This exciting mélange he set down amidst a riot of ellipses and exclamation marks. French literature changed, completely and irrevocably, with the publication in 1932 of his first novel, *Journey to the End of Night*. Its quasi-autobiographical view of the First World War, loosely based on Céline’s experiences in battle, in Africa and Detroit, his cynicism and despair, gave form and voice to what many others felt.

His second novel, *Death on the Installment Plan* (1936), contains bizarre incidents and riotous episodes that, again, appear quasi-autobiographical (the scene where Ferdinand, as a boy, and his parents cross the stormy Channel, with everyone feeling the results of the rough waves, can never be forgotten, once read). An anti-Communist pamphlet appeared next, guaranteeing him the abiding hatred of French Communists. Between 1937 and 1941 there came three anti-Semitic pamphlets that wrecked his reputation and permanently stained his character. During the Occupation he addressed Nazis in public meetings in the same rough way he did other groups; he continued to treat patients, often for free; and he never revealed to the authorities the whereabouts of collaborators. But he never repented, and the self-inflicted damage could not be repaired.

In his concise introductory essay, Stanford Luce writes: “When the Occupation years drew to a close Céline started receiving a number of death threats and deemed it unwise to remain in Paris. Indeed shortly after the liberation of the city the publisher of his pamphlets, Denoël, was assassinated...” Céline, his wife Lucette, and their cat, Bébert, fled, racing through Germany to eventually arrive in Denmark, where he was imprisoned for a year and a half. After being freed, he was unable to return home for fear of being killed, so he and his family lived on the Baltic coast for

years. In 1951 Céline was granted amnesty and returned to France, where he set to work reminding the literary world that he had something to offer, while guard dogs patrolled his yard. A handful of new books were poorly received, prompting his publisher, Gaston Gallimard, to suggest he “play the game.” Viewed by many as a criminal and a traitor, Céline decided that being interviewed would be in the spirit of what Gallimard wanted. The result is *Conversations with /22/ Professor Y* (1955), in which the Céline-like narrator seeks out a suitable person to interview him.

Professor Y is a “very hostile” figure, standing in for every critic of Céline’s, but Professor Y is such a poor interviewer that his subject has to manage most of the conversation. Early in their exchange Y says that there can’t be talk of politics, to which Céline replies, “Don’t worry!... Don’t be afraid! politics is anger!... and anger, Professor Y, is a mortal sin!” Naturally enough, Céline is somewhat quieter here than he had ever been, or would be in the astonishing trilogy *Castle to Castle, North and Rigadon* (1957-1969). He is bent on regaining an audience for future works. The two men move into what would be the meat of the matter for most writers, a discussion about ideas, but Céline will have none of that. “I have no ideas, myself! not a one! there’s nothing more vulgar, more common, more disgusting than ideas! libraries are loaded with them! and every sidewalk café!... the impotent are bloated with ideas!... and philosophers!... that’s their trade turning out ideas!... they dazzle youth with ideas!”

Céline soon tells, in the vaguest way, that his contribution to literature has been:

“Emotion through written language!... written language had run dry in France, I’m the one who primed emotion back into it!... as I say!... it’s not just some cheap trick, believe me!... the gimmick, the magic that any asshole can use in order to move you ‘in writing!’... rediscovering the emotion of the spoken word through the written word! it’s not nothing!... it is miniscule, but it is something!...”

To which Professor Y retorts (probably along with many original readers), “You’re so pretentious you’re grotesque!” It’s hard to argue against what Céline writes about himself as he anticipates every objection and turns the interview process inside out, for he doesn’t care what he looks like so long as the professor gets one hundred pages in.

After hearing more of Céline’s claims, Y says: “Well, I can sober you down, your wild claims! you want to know what people think? what everybody thinks!... you’re nothing but a sclerotic old man, playing the same old harp, embittered, pretentious, done for!...” This does little to stop their conversation, which eventually touches on Céline’s profligate use of ellipses:

“Okay!... my three dots! have people ever reproached me for them! they’ve slobbered on about my three dots!... ‘Ah, his three dots!... Ah, his three dots!... He can’t finish his sentences!’”

A real interviewer for *The Paris Review* said to Céline, “Your style shook a lot of habits.” To which he replied: “They call that inventing.”

The conversation with Professor Y is comic in many ways. It begins in a park, the only place the professor will meet such a litero-criminal (to use a Wyndham Lewis term). Y is duller than Céline expected—“How about some pizzazz, Professor Y!... a little sparkle... please!”—but smugly assured of his views, and of Céline’s utter wrongness, egotism, and offences. Further exposure acts negatively on Y. He loses control of his bladder, his composure, his sobriety, and

eventually his notes. Céline takes them off the drunk and stupefied Y: “let me write the thirty...forty pages myself...enough for the interview! and readable! readable! no drier than anything else!”

*Conversations with Professor Y* is an engaging and amusing primer to Céline’s major novels. Those familiar with his work will be glad to see a reissue of the out-of-print, and hard-to-get, original bilingual edition from 1986, with the French facing the English (maybe space constraints meant that endnotes, rather than footnotes, were used). Dalkey has put back into print an absorbing work by one of the greatest writers of the last century.

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