Céline’s ‘Journey to the End of the Night’

by Pedro Blas González (March 2023)

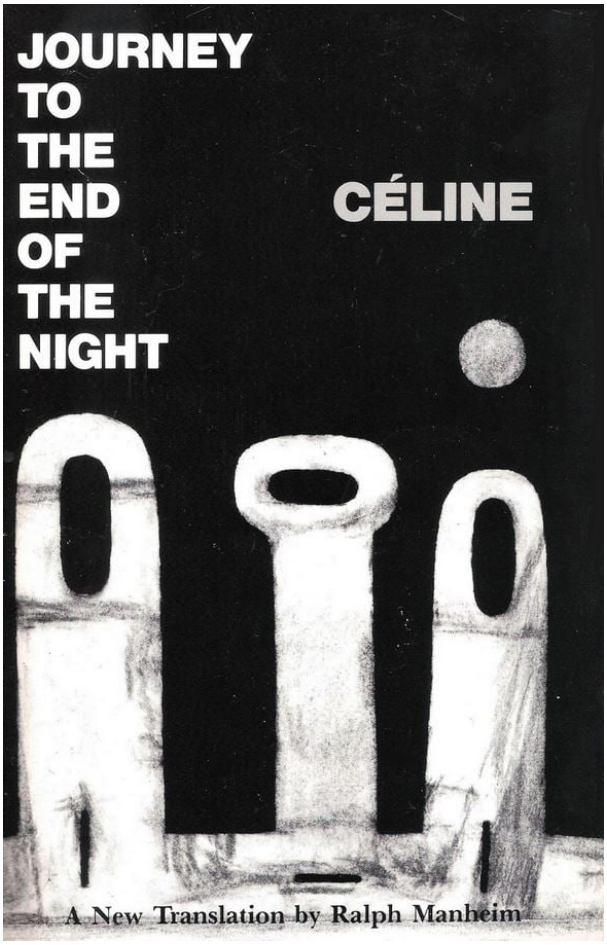
Trains du Soir, Paul Delvaux, 1957

> *Everything’s changing, they say. But it isn’t true. Nothing has really changed. They just go on being impressed by themselves and that’s all. Which isn’t new, either. A few words have changed—but not many of them, even. Two or three little ones here and there…”* —Céline, *Journey to the End of the Night*

With the noted exception of Nietzsche, no other writer or thinker better foretells the advent of the decomposition of

Western values in postmodernity than Louis-Ferdinand Céline. While some readers may become distracted by the nihilistic exploits of Ferdinand Bardamu, the semi-autobiographical physician protagonist of *Journey to the End of the Night*, Céline's first novel, the author is carefully mapping the psyche and self-destructive values of postmodern man.

In addition to accurately foreshadowing man's existential collapse in the twentieth century, Céline is a poignant and vivid chronicler of the moral-spiritual bankruptcy that defines postmodernity. Few writers are as explicit about postmodern man's embrace of aberrant meaninglessness and lack of purpose. *Voyage au Bout de la Nuit* was first published in France in 1932. The novel brings to light Céline's early days as a medical doctor after WWI.



Instead of recounting Bardamu's and Robinson's—his best friend—existential inquietude, their need to move about, from being soldiers during WWI, and Bardamu's love affair with Lola, an American volunteer nurse, to his rubbing shoulders with lowly men and women in the Paris slums, his working on a merchant marine ship, becoming romantically involved with an American prostitute named Molly and being employed by the Ford Motor Company in Detroit, Céline's genius aptly describes the daily inner turmoil of his characters and their moral decay. As proficient as Céline is in crafting his stories, his greatest asset is his understanding of human nature.

What has changed since the beginning of the twentieth century?

What form of corrosive existential inquietude has man embraced that Céline is so adept in pointing out? *Journey to the end of the Night* paints a lucid picture of human nature, as values and ideas become squeezed to accommodate the demands of relativism; the latter being the manifestation of oppressive nihilism.

Bardamu is a geographer of the soul, a wayfaring interloper of the underlying sources of human morals and deviant behavior. He meddles in the lowliest rungs of society and lives to tell his vivacious tales of experiencing the makeup of high and low classes. Bardamu sketches the postmodern world, where dysfunctionality is not only normalized but cherished by the decadent molders of values and popular opinion. The latter is the meeting ground of the high and low classes, regardless of the protestation of the elites.

Bardamu's night is long; the end is nowhere in sight. Why does he embark on such an existentially vacuous journey to begin with? The restlessness that comes from bankrupted moral-spiritual values? Fear of a settled existence? Bardamu's inability to embrace the contingencies of domestic life? The inability to experience happiness, if not contentment, in the minutiae of human experience?

Bardamu and the motley cast of degenerates that Céline populates his novel with merely want to get through the day. This is what Céline's readers gather about the plight of the protagonist. Perhaps the ever-expanding darkness that Bardamu encounters is what he brings upon himself.

Does Bardamu not know better than to go gallivanting through a world that has lost its moral compass, in a century consumed by the gods of pleasure-seeking perdition?

Journey to the End of the night begins with WWI. However, readers should not be too quick to overestimate the importance of the war to the insights into the human condition that

Céline provides. WWI was the result of flourishing nihilism that found its niche in modernization and mechanization; the springboard for nihilism to expand quickly and overwhelm all aspects of postmodernity.

For Céline, WWI served as a laboratory of human nature and the corrosive worldly conditions that degenerate values create: the self consumed by a meaningless and banal worldly existence. *Journey to the End of the Night* is rife with explicit examples of this tortured self: "You see, Bardamu, the war, affording as it does various incomparable means of testing nervous systems, acts as a wonderful revealer of the human spirit. We have been given recently enough material in the way of pathological discoveries to last us a century of careful meditation and absorbing study…"

WWI is a menagerie of the human condition in lieu of existential, moral, and spiritual exhaustion. When meaning and purpose are exchanged for the alleged exhilaration and liberating tonic of nihilism, daily toil becomes a center-less regime of psychological, moral, and spiritual violence that deforms the human person. Céline's characters are morally crooked and existentially vapid. He elaborates:

> *Up until now we had done no more than suspect the treasures of Man's emotional and spiritual make-up. But now, thanks to the war, we have won through! We have broken into the innermost precincts of Man's mind, painfully, it is true, but as far as science is concerned, providentially, decisively…As soon as the first revelations were to hand, for me personally the duty of the modern psychologists and moralist was no longer the least in doubt. We need to overhaul completely all our psychological ideas.*

Bardamu seeks adventures, he needs to move about the world to

quench his existential malaise, the same malaise that has come to define postmodern life: abhorrence of the burden of free will, and its attenuated moral-spiritual ennui. The only way out of this all-consuming angst is for Bardamu and the other characters to give themselves up to the next fix, whatever form that takes. Bardamu recognizes the hold that his predicament has on his life:

> *I had always suspected myself of being almost purposeless, of not really having any single serious reason for existing. Now I was convinced, in the face of the facts themselves, of my personal emptiness.*

This admission demonstrates a rudimentary understanding of the self that is trapped in a maddening whirlwind of nihilism. However, Bardamu's admission is a rare event in the life of one who embraces the moral-spiritual liberation that nihilism promises. Ortega y Gasset argues in *The Revolt of the Masses* (1930) that nihilism is bold in demanding that aberrant moral-spiritual disquiet and existential vacuity become normalized and accepted by everyone. This is the form of violence, Céline suggests, that the twentieth century introduced to the human psyche. Bardamu continues:

> *In surroundings so much too different from those in which I had previously had my meagre being, it was as if I had at once fallen to pieces. I discovered that now that I no longer heard mention of familiar things, there was nothing to prevent me from slipping into an irresistible condition of boredom, a sort of sickly, terrifying collapse of the mind. It was a disgusting experience.*

The ‘sickly, terrifying collapse of the mind’ is Bardamu’s response to his center-less existence. *Journey to the End of the Night* is the expression of human existence shaped by meaninglessness. Being a physician, Céline often describes the existential exhaustion of his characters in a fashion that he calls ‘alimental psychiatry.’ Evasion from reality is one of the dominant traits that Céline’s characters share.

Journey to the End of the Night brings to light the violence and pessimism that nihilism foster, which serve to feed its appeal for postmodernity. The dark night that Céline foreshadows the future will become is made explicit and freighting in the conversation between Bardamu and Baryton, the old proprietor of a mental asylum.

Baryton is disgusted with fashionable trends in psychiatry. He recalls a time when “… Doctors didn’t consider it incumbent on themselves to go off their heads at the same time as the sick people committed to their charge …”

Baryton is horrified of the normalization of mental illness. “Where will all this lead us? To please, to humour them? I ask you … By being more astute, more morbid and more perverse than the most crack-brained of our asylum inmates, by wallowing with a sort of muddy pride in all the various insanities they parade before us, where will that lead us? Are you in a position to reassure me, Ferdinand, as to the fate of our human reason? Or even of mere common sense? At this rate, how much common sense shall we have left?… It’s clear to be seen … None at all!”

Baryton eventually leaves his mental asylum to be managed by Bardamu. He develops an aversion to the string of mental illnesses that the collapse of values has ushered in the first third of the twentieth century: “Ferdinand, is it not true that in the face of a truly modern intelligence, everything in the end assumes equal importance? Nothing’s white … nor black either … it’s all unraveled. That’s the new system! It’s the

fashion! Then why not, for a start, go mad ourselves? And boast of it to boot?”

The defining essence of *Journey to the End of the Night* is the culmination of monstrous values that have been unleashed in the world, which Baryton calls ‘diabolical.’

While Baryton’s and Bardamu’s conversation merits an essay of its own, it is fruitful to cite some of the most poignant moments of this conversation, which is the ultimate expression of Céline’s genius in *Journey to the End of the Night* and his other works. In retrospect, this conversation signals a time before the morally devious and intellectually anemic literature that would come to dominate twentieth and twenty first century literature.

Baryton, reluctant owner of a mental asylum, a moral dinosaur and keeper of the flame of common sense, has the final word:

> *Possessed, malignant, captious and cunning, these favourite exponents of modern psychiatry, by dint of superconscious analyses, are thrusting us down into the abyss!*
>
> *For we are overreaching ourselves, sublimating ourselves, bludgeoning our brains, and we shall have crossed the borderline of intelligence, to the other side, the fearful side from which there is no return …*
>
> *We have our hands full of the remnants of our human understanding, sticky with them, grotesque, contemptible, putrid…Everything will crumble, Ferdinand; everything is crumbling. I predict it, I, Baryton, an old man, and it won’t be long now, either!*

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Pedro Blas González is Professor of Philosophy at Barry University, Miami Shores, Florida. He earned his doctoral degree in Philosophy at DePaul University in 1995. Dr. González has published extensively on leading Spanish philosophers, such as Ortega y Gasset and Unamuno. His books have included *Unamuno: A Lyrical Essay*, *Ortega's 'Revolt of the Masses' and the Triumph of the New Man*, *Fragments: Essays in Subjectivity, Individuality and Autonomy* and *Human Existence as Radical Reality: Ortega's Philosophy of Subjectivity*. He also published a translation and introduction of José Ortega y Gasset's last work to appear in English, "Medio siglo de Filosofia" (1951) in *Philosophy Today* Vol. 42 Issue 2 (Summer 1998).

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