

Style and Otherness in L.-F. Céline's *Rigodon*

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The novelist Louis-Ferdinand Céline demonstrates a preoccupation with the question of style in virtually all of his non-fictional writings—in much of his correspondence, for example, and in his racist, anti-Semitic pamphlets as well as in interviews, real and fictional.¹ Indeed, Céline's constant and consistent allusion to style is one of the most striking characteristics of his thoughts about literature and the writing of novels. His remarks are varied, but also limited in their variation. They express repeatedly his insistence on the absolute importance of style for the modern novel; they describe unfailingly the features of his own style and of his own conception of style; and, inevitably, they present his criticism of other styles, or what may be understood as the "others of style."

Furthermore, this preoccupation is also apparent in Céline's works of fiction. At times, allusion to style occurs overtly as when, for example, an interrupting narratee comments on or expresses dissatisfaction with the manner in which the story is being told. On the other hand, as is the case with the two passages from *Rigodon* (1969) which will ultimately concern us here, aspects of the author's thoughts on style are figured by details of descriptions which on the surface, at least, seem unrelated to the question of style.

In a 1947 letter to Professor Milton Hindus, Céline first indicates to what extent style is important to him personally, and suggests those other things to which he opposes style: "Le fait que vous me trouviez styliste me fait plaisir—je suis avant tout cela—point penseur nom de Dieu! ni gr écrivain mais styliste je crois l'être. . . ." "The fact that you consider me a stylist makes me happy—I am that above all—not a thinker, good God! nor a great writer, but I do believe I'm a stylist . . . (73)"² In this letter, Céline readily accepts, indeed expresses appreciation for, the epithet

“stylist” which the American professor had apparently employed to characterize his activity as writer. At the same time, wishing to be considered neither a “thinker” nor a “great writer,” he places distance between himself and other terms which might be used to describe writers. His dismissal of these other epithets, combined with his elaboration of a categorization of terms based on the opposition of nature and culture as presented in the next section of the letter, serves to introduce to us his understanding of the term “stylist,” and the phenomenon “style”:

Je suis bien l'émotion avec des mots je ne lui laisse pas le temps de s'habiller en phrases . . . je la saisis toute crue ou plutôt toute poétique—car le fond de l'homme malgré tout est poésie—le raisonnement est appris—comme il apprend à parler. . . .

I follow emotion closely with words and don't give it the chance to be put in sentences . . . I grab it in its raw or poetic state—because the essence of man after all is poetry—he learns how to reason like he learns how to speak. . . . (“Correspondance” 73)

For Céline, a stylist is a writer who devalorizes thought and ideas, and who has a certain antagonistic relationship to formal prose, one could even say to “writing” itself. On the contrary, “style” would be the product of efforts to capture emotion in its most primitive or natural form, this form likened to poetry and opposed to reason and representing, in turn, man's original and innermost being.

The contents of the letter just referred to constitute a brief, quasi-telegraphic version of what Céline spent most of his public life pronouncing about writing. Ten years later, in 1957, Céline was asked to present his impressions of the contemporary French novel for a recording which would later acquire the title “L.-F. Céline vous parle.” In this oral exposé, the importance of style is reiterated and becomes generalized: what Céline considered as a personal accomplishment in his letter to Hindus is presented here as a prescription for the mission of the modern novel. After discounting for the present the past roles played by the novel such as source of information or psychological study, Céline declares that style should be one of the focuses, if not the principal focus, of the novel:

Je crois que le rôle documentaire, et même psychologique, du roman est terminé, voilà mon impression. Et alors, qu'est-ce qui lui reste? Eh bien, il ne lui reste pas grand-chose, il lui reste le style, et puis les circonstances où le bonhomme se trouve.

I feel that the roles of the novel are no longer documentary or even psychological, that's what I think. So what is left for it? Well, not much besides style and the situations in which the guy finds himself. (932)

He then goes on to characterize what passed for style at the moment he was speaking:

Alors, question de style . . . Le style de tous ces trucs-là, je le trouve dans le même ton que le bachot, dans le même ton que le journal habituel, dans le même ton que les plaidoiries, dans le même ton que les déclarations à la Chambre, c'est-à-dire un style verbal, éloquent peut-être, mais en tout cas certainement pas émotif.

As for style . . . I think the style of all that stuff has the same tone as the bac, the same tone as the daily newspaper, the same tone as courtroom speeches or speeches before the legislature, that is, eloquent maybe, but in any case certainly not emotive. (932)

All of the styles to which Céline here likens that of the novels of his contemporaries—that of the *baccalauréat*, newspapers, court and legislative arguments—are described as having a certain “tone” and being “verbal”; in both cases, reason enough to condemn them as “certainly not emotive.” Further clarifying what is presumably the style, or non-style, of the “thinker” and the “great writer” mentioned in the letter to Hindus, these remarks describe the formal and logically developed presentation of a set of ideas written in solid prose.

As much as admirers of Céline's fiction would prefer to disregard his pre-war pamphlets, it is significant to note that they contain the most revealing of his written remarks concerning the importance of style and his conception of it. Although, for example, his 1937 pamphlet *Bagatelles pour un massacre* is perhaps better, if not best, known as one of his most scurrilous designations of the Jews as perpetrators of the, for him, lamentable conditions of modern society and culture, it is also one of the original contexts for his thoughts about style, a fact which is not, as we shall see, of ancillary interest for us here. According to Céline, one of the situations that inform the deplorable state of modern life—and one of the themes to which he devotes sixty of *Bagatelles*' four hundred or so pages—is a complete lack of style on the part of his contemporaries in literature. Coincident, because absolutely synonymous with their lack of style, is these writers' lack of emotion. As he himself states: “Un style c'est une émotion, d'abord, avant tout, par-dessus tout . . . Ils ont jamais

eu d'émotion . . . donc aucune musique" 'A style is an emotion, first, especially, above all . . . They have never felt any emotion . . . so no music' (164). Again according to Céline, a writer's status as stylist is absolutely dependent upon his possessing emotion and the ability to convey it. Here, in fact, style *is* emotion.

Continuing through the pages of *Bagatelles* which deal with the crisis in literature, we uncover what exactly Céline believes has replaced emotion in the non-stylist, in the "thinker" and in the "great writer." It is first a question of a lack of direct contact with life, with lived experience, and a corresponding excessive amount of reading in books the accounts of other people's experiences. The lack of emotion is thus symptomatic of a larger phenomenon or process in which experience is not only rationalized but also textualized, and thereby rendered inauthentic. As he writes:

[Ces grands écrivains] ne feront que "penser" la vie et ne "l'éprouveront" jamais. . . . Ils n'ont jamais éprouvé que des émotions lycéennes, des émotions livresques ou familiales. . . .

[These great writers] will only "think" life and will never "experience" it. . . . They have never felt anything but schoolboy emotions, emotions learned from books or with their families. . . . (165-66)

Here, the terms of Céline's oppositional categories proliferate: on the side of nature or the natural, we find lived experience in addition to style, emotion and poetry; on the side of the non-natural, reading joins stylelessness, reason, and formal prose. Furthermore, in *Bagatelles pour un massacre*, the latter category will receive also the terms "bourgeois" and then, finally, "Jew" as supposed personifications, promoters and perpetuators of the terms that are here devalorized. In this representation of Céline's view, then, the "others of style" are also and originally "others" in the sense that this word acquires in the context of racism and prejudice, that is, various embodiments of the negative: the inhabitants of the "outside," marked by "difference" and the foreign. As Philippe Muray points out in his *Céline*, Céline's anti-Semitic writings are the translation of a struggle against "otherness":

Bagatelles, *L'école des cadavres*, *Les Beaux Draps* sont des tentatives pour devenir enfin son ami au genre humain—ami du genre humain voulant toujours dire protecteur contre l'altérité, exterminateur de

Bagatelles, L'école des cadavres, Les Beaux Draps are attempts to finally become mankind's friend—mankind's friend meaning its protector against otherness, an exterminator of otherness. . . . (16)

It was therefore in reaction to a specific type of writing and in quasi- or pseudo-philosophical opposition to the parameters defining the "otherness" of this writing that Céline conceived of and elaborated his own style. This style involves the promotion of the emotional as intimacy and the inside at the expense of the rational as outside and the textual, the spontaneity of living speech against the immobility of the written word, and direct experience against language as mediation. As he writes to Professor Hindus, again in 1947:

Mon apport aux lettres françaises? rendre le français plus sensible, plus émotif, le désacadémiser. . . . Resensibiliser la langue qu'elle palpite plus qu'elle ne raisonne TEL FUT MON BUT!

My contribution to French literature? I made the French language more sensitive, more emotive, I de-intellectualized it. . . . I resensitized the language so that it quivers more that it reasons THAN WAS MY INTENTION! (75)

and explains to Professor Y, when asked what he had invented:

L'émotion dans le langage écrit! . . . le langage écrit était à sec, c'est moi qu'ai redonné l'émotion au langage écrit! . . . retrouver l'émotion du "parlé" à travers l'écrit! c'est pas rien! c'est infime mais c'est quelque chose! . . .

Emotion through written language! . . . written language had run dry in France, I'm the one who primed emotion back into it! . . . rediscovering the emotion of the spoken word through the written word! it's not nothing! it is miniscule, but it is something! . . . (16; 17)

Variouslly dubbed by the author "un langage parlé idéal" 'an ideal spoken language' or "le style rendu émotif" 'style made emotive,' the result is a writing designed to create the illusion that it is spoken language, uttered by a narrator who is intent upon conveying the emotion, not only of the present moment of narration but also, especially in the later works, that of the moment experienced in the past: "Le truc consiste à imprimer au

langage parlé une certaine déformation de telle sorte qu'une fois écrit, à la lecture, IL SEMBLE au lecteur qu'on lui parle à l'oreille" "The trick is to deform the spoken language in such a way that once written, and while it is being read, IT SEEMS to the reader that someone is speaking in his ear" ("Correspondance" 75).³

Additionally, from the descriptions and explanations in which Céline characterizes his activities as a stylist, two specific categories emerge; one is revelation and the other is invention. From one perspective, the creation of an ideal spoken language is accomplished through a sort of physical violation of, a breaking and entering into, the "diamond mine" of speech, through an unveiling which is also a theft, an exteriorization of its intimate secret, or secret of intimacy which is intimacy itself:

C'est "la fleur des nerfs," la mélodie spontanée, la musique de l'âme que j'essaie de capter du langage parlé et de faire passer en écrit—En réalité, il y a peu d'éclairs dans le langage parlé—J'essaie de les capter et de refaire ainsi artificiellement en écrit un "langage parlé idéal" . . . Pour y parvenir je passe, par un truc, dans l'âme même du langage parlé, par effraction, pour ainsi dire, je lui vole son secret . . . je fais le trust des diamants vivants du langage parlé . . .

It is the "flower of the nerves," the spontaneous melody, the music of the soul that I try to take from speech and put into writing—In reality, there are few sparks in speech—I try to capture them and to recreate from them in writing an "ideal spoken language" . . . In order to do so, I break and enter, by a trick, into the very soul of speech, so to speak, I steal its secret . . . I form a trust of the living diamonds of speech . . . ("Correspondance" 99)

Style as revelation, therefore, is the activity of a sort of archeologist, uncovering or exposing what is already present in the inner recesses of the language, but hidden: "[T]out est dans l'intimité de la langue! sans le 'rendu émotif' du style" "Everything is in the innermost parts of the language! without the "made emotive" of the style" ("Correspondance" 75) or, as Céline again expresses more precisely:

Je ne crée rien à vrai dire—je nettoie une sorte de médaille cachée, une statue enfouie dans la glaise—Tout existe déjà . . . il faut seulement nettoyer, déblayer autour—faire venir au jour cru. . . .

I really don't create anything—I clean off a sort of hidden medallion, a statue buried in clay—Everything is there already . . . all I need to

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do is clean it off, clear away around it—bring it out into the daylight.
 . . . (“Correspondance” 103)

Excavating from within the soul of language its natural treasures, its emotional gems; liberating its hidden medallions from the worthless material which encases them; mediating, finally, between the depths of its inside and the outside's light of day, Céline's activity as a stylist is, on the one hand, sterile; it is not so much creation (“I really don't create anything”) as a kind of midwifery, one might say, a displacement from one space to another of that which has already been formed. On the other hand, the “archeologist”/“midwife” declares himself “inventor.” As he explains during his fictional interview with Professor Y, for example, the invention of a new writing style is comparable to that of a “technique”:

J'essayais de vous faire comprendre que l'inventeur d'un style nouveau est que l'inventeur d'une technique! d'une petite technique . . . mon truc à moi, c'est *l'émotif*! le style “rendu émotif” vaut-il? fonctionne-t-il? . . . je dis: oui! . . .

[I was] trying to make you understand that the inventor of a new style is but the inventor of a technique! of a little technique! . . . my little gimmick, my own, is emotion! is it any good? style made emotive? does it work? . . . I say it does! . . . (*Entretiens* 30 & 32; *Interview* 31 & 33)

At first glance, these two images, as fascinating as they might be in themselves, pose more questions than they answer. It is first unclear how the activities of the archeologist might be compatible with those of the inventor: one reveals what is given but hidden; the other studies what is given, experiments on it, and finally alters it in order to fabricate the as-yet-nonexistent. It is, moreover, not clear in what way these images relate to the details of Céline's other comments about style. It is my belief, however, that these two images are figured by descriptive passages found in Céline's final novel, *Rigodon*—passages that elaborate those images, offer a possible elucidation of their relationship with the most important specifics of Céline's thoughts on style as have been discussed here, and indicate, perhaps in spite of the author, some of the paradoxical features of these thoughts.

The first passage corresponds to style as invention. It is a description of the assassination method devised and practiced by the character Horace Restif, a French commando leader operating in wartime Germany during Céline's stay there:⁴

[Restif] ne parlait jamais de sa technique, vous en parliez, il s'en allait . . . tout de même cette fameuse technique? . . . technique en deux temps . . . premier temps, harponner votre homme, la tête en arrière, lui renverser! . . . deuxième temps, lui trancher les carotides . . . les deux! . . . en somme la guillotine arrière! mais plus vite! tout était là! harponner le sujet et vzzz! . . . que les deux temps ne fassent qu'un geste! . . . la tête en arrière, deux jets de sang! . . . c'est tout! . . . ah, l'arme? . . . une faucille extrêmement fine! rasoir . . . vzzz pas un cri, même pas d'hoquets . . .

[Restif] never talked about his technique, if you brought it up, he walked away . . . but what about this famous technique? . . . operation in two steps . . . step one, harpoon your man, push his head back! . . . step two, sever his carotids . . . both of them! . . . in short, the guillotine in reverse! but quicker! that was the whole trick! harpoon the victim and fsss! two steps, one movement! . . . head back, two jets of blood! . . . that's all! oh yes, the weapon! . . . a very fine sickle! a razor . . . fsss! not a cry, not even a hiccup . . . (802-803; 114)⁵

On the level of content, though it is probably extreme to suggest that Céline considered the death of another—the reader, for example—to be the ideal effect of his style, it does seem reasonable to argue that Restif's destruction of the enemies of his political cause is homologous to Céline's stated opposition to certain qualities which we have identified as "other," and to his intention of neutralizing "otherness" as found in literature.⁶ Thus, on the level of method—the term Céline's narrator employs is "technique," as for his own invention—Restif's slashing of his victim's heart-to-brain arteries certainly translates Céline's devalorization of reason, thought and ideas—in sum, anything that distances the individual from experience, according to Céline—and his localizing of value in the heart, emotions and direct experience. It is indeed the ambition of Céline's "emotive style" to fix reactions in the heart and to impede operations associated with the brain, the source of reason, transcendence, and mediation.

Furthermore, both Restif's assassination technique and Céline's writing style involve the creation of an illusion. Paralleling the illusion produced by Restif's method—that the two separate actions of exposing his victim's neck and slashing his carotids should ideally occur at the same time—is the illusion that Céline's writing is speech. This illusion can, in theory, become even more complicated, for if at the same time that

as it may be recalled, spoken language is valued solely for itself. Rather, the value of speech lies in its ability to contain and transmit emotion or the "sensation" born of experiencing life directly. Indeed—and the profile of Céline's style as product becomes quite complex at this point—what takes place at the same time that one reads Céline's writing is the sound of speech being uttered by the narrative voice, the transmission of the emotion contained in this voice, and the sensation of having direct experience of an event which this voice describes as having occurred in the past.⁷

Other features of Restif's technique also participate in the figuring of this "reduction of the trace," this "detextualization" of experience. Since the narrator's description of Restif's technique calls attention first to the assassin's reluctance to discuss his method—and then, later, to the silence of the victim from whom one hears no screams—it may be argued that this technique is associated from the beginning with the absence of speech. It is also linked to the absence of writing: thanks to the razor-sharpness of Restif's weapon, not only is precision guaranteed, but the traces left on his victim's body are nearly imperceptible. Likewise, Céline's "weapon," his style, in order to realize the desired illusions, must reduce its own traces; the reader should be made as unaware as possible that what he is in fact experiencing is *writing*.

The second passage in *Rigodon* figures Céline's conception of style as discovery and excavation. It is the account of how a group of retarded German children, for whom the protagonist Céline and his traveling companions had assumed responsibility during his last days in Germany, discovered food and other necessary supplies under the rubble of bombed-out Hamburg and how they managed to transport these to the surface:

prong! en tout cas ça sonne! . . . du gong! . . . j'insiste pas . . . ça va! . . . je suis ébranlé, je veux dire: j'y suis plus . . . j'entends plus rien, je perds connaissance, je devrais commencer à m'y faire, j'ai honte, je défaille pour presque rien . . . c'est le coup de brique! . . . Hanovre, cette façade . . . aux autres de se donner du mal! . . . comateux suis! . . . les autres? Lili, Felipe . . . pour une fois j'avoue, je bouge plus . . . je crois qu'ils essaient de me réveiller . . . et même ils me secouent . . . il me semble . . . et puis peu à peu, j'entends . . . oh, je ne vais pas remuer! . . . qu'ils s'agitent! . . . j'entrouvre un oeil . . . je vois un môme . . . deux . . . des nôtres . . . ils sortent du fond . . . c'est vrai, ils étaient au creux de cette crevasse . . . la preuve! . . . cinq . . . six . . . et qui portent chacun quelque chose . . . ils vont vers où? . . . Felipe leur montre . . . je comprends, ils doivent porter leurs paquets à

l'extérieur . . . camelote de quoi? . . . de qui? . . . sûr des boîtes de lait! . . . une épicerie? . . . une pharmacie? . . . j'y vois mieux . . . chacun une boîte . . . et pas que du lait, aussi des boules . . . et encore des confitures . . . ils vont vers l'entrée . . . Lili, Felipe viennent, m'aident . . . oh, c'est un coup de "hardi petit"! je comprends tout de suite . . . voilà! j'y suis! . . . la même crevasse . . . d'une paroi l'autre . . . que ça glisse! . . . tout en descente . . . la glaise mouillée . . . et voici le jour . . . le plein jour! . . . c'est là! . . . c'est ça! . . . j'avais bien deviné! . . . ils font que ça nos mômes! . . . ils apportent tout du bout de cette crevasse, leur va-et-vient, des planques des boutiques, les qu'on avait vues . . . enfouies dans la glaise, pharmacie? . . . épicerie? . . . j'ai jamais su . . .

ding! dong! anyway I hear bells! . . . gongs! . . . I say no more, that's enough! . . . I'm shaken, I mean I'm out for the count . . . my hearing's gone, I lose consciousness, I ought to be getting used to it, I'm really ashamed of myself, I faint at the drop of a hat . . . it's that brick! . . . in Hanover, that house front . . . the others can take over! . . . I'm in a coma! . . . the others? Lili and Felipe . . . for once, I admit, I'm really out! . . . I think they try to wake me up . . . they even shake me . . . I think . . . and then little by little my hearing comes back . . . oh, no intention of moving! . . . they can move! . . . I half open one eye . . . I see a kid . . . two . . . our kids . . . they're coming out . . . it's true, they were down in that crevasse . . . that's where they're coming from . . . five . . . six . . . and all carrying something . . . where are they going? . . . Felipe shows them . . . I get it, he wants them to take their bundles outside . . . bundles of what? . . . looks like condensed milk! . . . grocery store? . . . pharmacy? . . . I can see better now . . . they've all got an armful . . . and not just milk . . . no, bread and jam and . . . they're heading for the entrance . . . Lili and Felipe come over and help me . . . the "chin up, kid!" routine, I get it . . . there! I'm up! . . . same crevasse . . . same walls . . . it's slippery! . . . we're going downhill . . . this wet clay . . . and there's the light . . . broad daylight! . . . this is the place! . . . I'd guessed right! . . . that's what the kids have been doing! . . . their return trips! toting the stuff out here from those stores we'd seen . . . hidden under the clay . . . pharmacy? . . . grocery store? . . . I never found out . . . (871-72; 196-198)

The activity of the successful stylist as conceived by Céline is mirrored by that of these mentally and, as the narrator notes on more than one occasion, linguistically deficient children.⁸ Their journey into a crevasse

materials needed for their survival, and their transport of these to an outer space bathed in sunlight echoes the stylist's entrance into the bowels of language, his extraction of those secret properties which sustain its vital relationship to emotion, and his translation of them into writing.

Another feature of this passage that signifies the attenuation of narrative distance and of the mediating role of language is the fact that the events and activities depicted are focalized by the character Céline who, just prior to the beginning of the passage quoted above, was struck on the head by supplies falling from the shop's shelves and is only semi-conscious.⁹ For a certain amount of time during the narration of the past events depicted, then, the focalizing character's mental incapacity renders uncertain the significance of what he is able to perceive. As the passage progresses, this uncertainty is transformed into the cognitive realization of what is and has been happening around him. Thus, while the children's movements and activities are at first mere objects of perception, mysterious and meaningless, they eventually do acquire significance.

These two passages, which we believe figure certain of the more salient aspects of Céline's thoughts about style, both illustrate these thoughts and comment upon them. On one level, the passage relating to Céline's characterization of his style as "technique" and "invention" indeed illustrates the manner in which Céline views the otherness he wishes to correct or neutralize. Restif's victim is exterior to and separate from himself, and possesses properties which he himself presumably does not share and which, for the assassin, make of him a justifiable target. Restif's victim is an "other without." However, on another level, while Restif's assassination technique does suggest the eradication of thought, reason, and writing as embodied in and by an "other"—and does result, figuratively, in a state that Céline might deem more "natural"—as technique and as invention itself, it also figures as well a certain blurring of the line between the self and this otherness. The inventor is a technician whose tools and materials are gimmicks and gadgets and whose activities include artifice and illusion; Céline's spoken style is, of course, the product of much calculated, almost scientific working of and with the written. Like an English garden, the wild, unchecked, and spontaneous naturalness characteristic of Céline's style is in reality the result of much "cultivation," indeed, of a certain *deformation* of nature and the natural. These activities cannot but signify the author's participation in the very otherness from which he sought above all to separate himself and, through his style, to reverse.

Similarly, though perhaps more subtly, the passage we linked to

Céline's conception of style as archeological excavation places into

question its own apparent significance. The journey in search of food made by mentally impaired children and their not-so-lucid guardians into a chamber deep within the ruins of a city corresponds quite neatly to the figurative excursion of the stylist into the inside of language in order to uncover what has naturally formed there, namely those features that ultimately link it to emotion.¹⁰ Moreover, the loss of consciousness experienced by the protagonist at exactly the moment when the food supplies are discovered—unconsciousness figuring here both immanence and the non-rational—reinforces the value that the text clearly places on the children's powers of instinct and intuition, associating these, as it does, with survival, with the obstinate continuation of life in the face of great odds.¹¹ The movement from the outside to the inside, from language to emotion and, finally, as one could argue, from otherness to the self, is positive and is rewarded with discovery.

Yet neither the task of the archeologist nor that of the writer ends in the mere unearthing of precious treasures. In the passage, the discovery of the food and its subsequent displacement from the inside to the outside—which repeats the evolution of the character's own mental capacity from a state of unconsciousness to one of perceptual and cognitive confusion and finally to one of understanding—represent precisely that figure that is devalued in Céline's thought. It is the movement from the natural to all its "others," from "presence" to all sorts of mediation; from emotion to reason, experience to language, the self to other, and so forth. An element common to one of the passages in which Céline likens his activity as a stylist to one of excavation and to this passage in *Rigodon* is allusion to the "light of day." It is both that to which the stylist exposes his linguistic finds and the sight—"and there's the light! . . . broad daylight! . . ."—that strikes the protagonist of the novel as he emerges from the ruins and from his state of semi-consciousness, thereby symbolizing his regained lucidity. Can we not read in this image the absence, or the death, of emotion?

Again represented here is one of the paradoxes inherent to the role of the stylist. Uncovering the secrets of language in its relationship to emotion and translating them into writing exposes emotion to the hazards of the outside; once expression has taken place, it is inevitably implicated in the otherness of language, textuality and meaning. What Céline is again determined to maintain separate from himself and from his style, despite what he believes he is saying, is here inscribed as being an unavoidable consequence of his writing activity itself. The other has always already been within.

Notes

1. I am referring here, of course, to Céline's *Entretiens avec le Professeur Y* (1955) in which the author presents a fictional interview that he himself created between a fictive professor and his own not-so-fictional persona.

2. Unless otherwise indicated, the English translations of the French quotations are my own.

3. This hybrid focus on both the present of narration and the presence of the past is described also by Henri Godard in his study of Céline's poetics:

Même s'il a à coeur d'évoquer par moments sa vie présente à la Fondation Linuty ou à Meudon, pour l'essentiel Céline narrateur raconte rétrospectivement des aventures passées. Mais, les racontant, il les revit de telle manière que tout se passe toujours comme s'il s'agissait d'une narration simultanée, contemporaine des faits.

Even if his desire is to evoke from time to time his present life at the Linuty Foundation or in Meudon, Céline as narrator mostly gives a retrospective account of his past adventures. But, by telling them, he relives them to such an extent that one has the impression that he is narrating the facts at the same time that he is experiencing them. (220)

4. As mentioned in the first volume of Céline's wartime trilogy, *D'un château l'autre* (1957), his hero first meets Restif in Sigmaringen, Germany, where a community of French pro-Pétainists is waiting out the war. Restif's political cause is here described as being based on an eventual post-war purge of pro-Allied sympathizers:

ils sont à part, Restif, ses hommes, on les a groupés dans une ferme . . . en "commando" . . . ils doivent il paraît à l'heure Z procéder aux "exécutions" . . . tout de suite dès notre retour en France . . . "épurer"! . . . régler tous les comptes! . . . le "Triomphe des purs" canton par canton! . . . tous les vendus à l'Angleterre, à l'Amérique, à la Russie! . . .

Restif and his men are off by themselves in a farmhouse . . . a special "team" . . . in charge, so it seems, of the great Z-Day executions . . . the minute we get back to France . . . the great "purge" . . . the final accounting! . . . the "Triumph of the Pure," canton by canton! . . . all the people who sold out to England, America, Russia! . . . (265; 308)

In *Rigodon*, Restif is characterized as a sort of "Jean d'Arc" as he and his forces prepare to "repandre la France" 'take France back' from the English and their allies (802; 113).

5. Restif's technique is described in a similar fashion in *D'un château l'autre* when the character is first introduced. However, immediately following the

description in *Château*, and absent in *Rigodon*, is the narrator Céline's allusion to his own style, comparing his attitude toward it to Restif's toward his technique:

Restif lui-même absolument pas bavard! . . . lui, personnellement, tenait pas à être admiré . . . du tout! . . . il trouvait son petit truc, pratique, expéditif! . . . c'est tout! . . . comme moi je trouve mon style, pratique, expéditif certes! c'est tout! . . . j'en fais pas pour ça des montagnes!

Restif himself never opened his mouth . . . he personally didn't care about being admired . . . not in the least! . . . he thought his little trick was practical and expeditious! . . . no more, no less . . . same as I think my style is practical and expeditious! no more, no less! . . . I don't blow it up into a mountain! (266; 309)

6. Although Céline's descriptions of Restif's political ideology are certainly parodic in spirit and in tone, these activities are what post-war France would deem acts of treason (see note 4). Louis-Ferdinand Céline was, of course, tried on similar charges based on his pre-war and wartime activities and apparent sympathies. This fact, combined with one of the contentions which we are developing here, namely, that Céline's "technique" was intended, in part at least, as a means of "purifying" the style of the French novel, points to additional similarities between the author and his character Restif.

7. The one example of the implementation of Restif's technique—the murder in a darkened train station of a General Swoboda—is described in a passage that itself illustrates the tendency of Céline's style to abolish (or at least to attenuate) the distinction between the past as narrated recollection on the one hand and as present experience on the other, and to transmit the emotion of this experience as it is generated:

le général a annoncé qu'il allait dormir . . . dans la salle d'attente ça jacasse . . . ils sont beaucoup . . . combien? . . . eux ont pas de paille, ils pourraient venir nous en demander . . . à peine j'y pensais, un est là! un passe . . . passe par la fenêtre! . . . et puis deux . . . trois . . . des hommes à Restif . . . je les avais pas vus enjamber . . . ils sont là . . . dix . . . douze . . . je comprends pas mais j'entends . . .

"Ooouah!"

C'est tout! . . . je comprends . . . j'ai pas vu mais j'ai entendu . . . que je voie! ils ont pas fini de l'étouffer . . . Restif me montre . . . deux giclées! . . . des deux carotides . . . son scalpel fin, courbe, en faucille . . . je peux voir . . . oui . . . mais le sang? il a pas fait de bruit mais du sang jusqu'à la porte . . .

the General said he was going to sleep . . . people yacking in the waiting room . . . a lot of them . . . how many? . . . they haven't any straw, maybe they'll come and ask us for some . . . just as I'm thinking about it, one of them shows! in through the window! . . . and two . . . three . . . Restif's men . . . I hadn't seen them coming . . . but here they are . . . ten . . . twelve . . . I don't understand, but I hear . . .

"Waa-ah!"

That's all! . . . I get it . . . I didn't see a thing but I heard! . . . he's not dead yet . . . Restif shows me . . . two streams . . . from the two carotids . . . his fine scalpel, curved like a sickle . . . I can see . . . sure . . . but all this blood! . . . he didn't make any noise, but there's blood all the way to the door . . . (810; 122-23)

8. In one of the allusions to the children's inability to speak or to understand language, the protagonist is questioning the character Odile Pomaré, the children's current guardian and from whom he will eventually acquire them:

Quelle langue ils parlent? . . . oh ça, aucune! . . . ils bredouillent n'importe quoi . . . elle pourtant Mlle Odile avait la connaissance des langues, germanique et russe, et même des patois . . . ces mômes ne comprenaient rien du tout, elle avait tout essayé. . . .

[I wonder] what language they speak . . . that's easy, none! . . . they just babble any old thing . . . Mademoiselle Odile was a linguist, she knew Russian and Germanic, even the dialects . . . these kids didn't understand a word, she'd tried everything. . . . (843; 164)

9. This head injury only exacerbates the confused mental state of the character. Earlier in *Rigodon*, while walking from one train station to another in Hanover, he had already been struck on the head by a brick loosened from the ruins by the sudden detonation of an unexploded shell (823-24; 138-39), an incident alluded to in our second passage: "It's that brick! . . . in Hanover, that house front . . ." On numerous occasions, moreover, the narrator Céline insists on attributing to this first head injury the apparent textual incoherence (digressions, repetitions) that follows his *character's* mishap, for example: "je peux pas vous raconter dans l'ordre, voici! la brique et ma tête . . ." "I can't tell you this in the right order! it's the brick and my head . . ." (855; 177). This confusion between the misfortune of the character and the discontinuity of the efforts of the narrator echoes and further reinforces the deliberate confusion between the temporal levels of the narrative, between the narrating and narrated moments.

It is interesting to note as well that injuries to the head figure as a recurrent motif in Céline's work, as do other medical conditions that might alter the perception of reality. Though at times harmful or even life-threatening, these conditions are valued for their relationship to what Michel Beaujour has called

the author's "quête du délire" 'quest for delerium' (279) or "suspension de sa lucidité" 'the suspension of his lucidity' (282) to which Céline refused himself access through any but "natural" or "accidental" means:

le Dr Destouches est un laïque de la vieille école, sans foi laïque: dépouillé *a priori* de toute illusion possible. Il lui reste ce que la nature, la guerre et quelques pérégrinations tropicales lui ont donné: la maladie, la fièvre, les maux de tête, les divagations du médecin trépané et surmené.

Dr. Destouches was a layman of the old school, without the faith of the layman: stripped *a priori* of all possible illusions. What was left for him is what nature, war and his wanderings in the tropics gave him: illness, fever, headaches, and the ravings of the overworked and trepanned doctor. (281)

10. The diminished mental capacity of the protagonist is, of course, a characteristic that metaphorically links him to the retarded children. This is made overtly apparent by the narrator himself during his depiction of the group—the children, Felipe, and Céline who stumbles along from the effects of his brick injury—as they begin their journey in search of food:

je suivais Felipe, sa bache en paquet sur sa tête . . . les petits crétins avaient pas compris mon français mais ils demandaient pas mieux que de me suivre . . . tituber plutôt . . . buter . . . nous étions aussi crétins qu'eux . . . ils en savaient autant que nous . . . eux au moins sortaient d'un asile, nous de je ne sais où . . . aussi vacillants, baveux qu'eux . . .

I'm following Felipe with his tarp rolled up on his head . . . the little cretins don't understand my French but they're only too glad to follow me . . . reeling, staggering . . . we were just as idiotic as they were . . . they knew as much as we did . . . they at least had come out of an asylum, where we came out of nobody knew . . . drooling and wobbling as bad as they did. . . . (855; 178)

Furthermore, Felipe himself, though caricatured and puppet-like in the narrator's descriptions of him, is also associated with certain elements valued by Céline's style. As an Italian brickmaker, he is linked to the state of mental confusion suffered by the protagonist as a result of his brick injury. Additionally, like that of the children, Felipe's relationship with language is at best tenuous. He can barely speak French (and when he does, it is with a very heavy Italian accent), and the protagonist suspects that he is illiterate: "je ne suis pas sûr que Felipe sache lire . . ." 'I'm not sure Felipe knows how to read' (846; 168). Positioned on the figurative level, then, these qualities make of Felipe a suitable companion during the search through the rubble and an appropriate co-guardian for the children.

11. Significantly, it is the character Céline's resigned willingness to undertake the responsibility for these children that assures, in addition to his survival in

Germany as described in this discussion, his passage out of Germany into Denmark, which he believed to be a safe haven from the war. Near the end of *Rigodon*, having convinced an official that the children were Swedish orphans, he was permitted, along with his wife and the children, to board a Red Cross train formed specifically for the repatriation of Swedish children (894-95; 223-28).

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