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A Franco-Irish View of the Great War: Louis-Ferdinand Céline and Sebastian Barry

EAMON MAHER

THIS ARTICLE draws its inspiration from a strange coincidence. At the time I received a review copy of Tom Quinn's impeccably researched and scholarly study, *The Traumatic Memory of the Great War, 1914-1918, in Louis-Ferdinand Céline's Voyage au Bout de la Nuit*,¹ I had just completed Sebastian Barry's *A Long Long Way*.² It struck me immediately that there was a rich area for a comparative study of the treatment of war in Céline's masterpiece and this very moving and beautifully written novel by Barry.

Neither writer pulls his punches about the horror of life in the trenches, the butchery of millions of men on the Western Front (over three million died on the Western Front alone), the disillusionment of those who survived (like Céline himself, who was a decorated hero) and tried in vain to resume a normal life after the apocalyptic events to which they were witnesses. As a war veteran, Céline wanted to denounce the propaganda machine in France that set about building a romantic, patriotic and heroic image of war. In France, Catholic writers like Péguy and Psichari had emphasised the Christian notion of heroic sacrifice. The cause was far from heroic in Céline's experience: if anything, it was as mindless as it was needless. Christians murdered

1. Tom Quinn, *The Traumatic Memory of the Great War, 1914-1918, in Louis-Ferdinand Céline's Voyage au Bout de la Nuit* (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2005). This is an absolutely mesmerising account not only of Céline's masterpiece but of the impact of wars in general.

2. Sebastian Barry, *A Long Long Way* (London: Faber&Faber, 2005). All subsequent references will be to this edition, with page numbers in brackets.

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other Christians in a way that had never been experienced before and for a cause that became dimmer as the war went on.

Contrast this to Barry's hero, Willie Dunne, who joins the Royal Dublin Fusillers because of his loyalty to the British monarch and his belief that he is doing the right thing. His father, a member of the Dublin Metropolitan Police, is proud of his son's decision but as events in Ireland (mainly 1916) begin to fuel anti-British sentiment, Willie is left wondering if the cause he signed up to was fatally flawed.

The Dunes are Catholic loyalists, a group of people who have been excised to some extent from Irish history – as such, they are very closely modelled on Barry's own forebears. Thousands of Irish nationalists joined the British army in the belief that there would be Home Rule for Ireland at the end of the war – this was apparently the assurance that had been given to John Redmond, leader of the Home Rule Party. However, the Protestants in Northern Ireland fought for the opposite reason: to prevent Home Rule. The Dunes didn't really want Home Rule either. As he arrives in Belgium, Willie observes:

It was this country he had come to heal, he himself, Willie Dunne. He hoped his father's fervent worship of the King would guide him, as the lynchpin that held down the dangerous tent of the world. And he was sure that all that Ireland was, all that she had, should be brought to bear against this entirely foul and disgusting enemy. (pp. 22-23)

Such certainty blurs as the war progresses. The enemy doesn't seem all that different from those wearing the uniforms of the Royal Dublin Fusillers. When Willie kills his first German soldier, he realises that this man is merely a pawn in the German war machine with little or no understanding of the politics that led to this catastrophe. All the soldiers end up dehumanised by what they endure:

The war was like a huge dream at the edge of this waking landscape, something far off and near that might ruin the lives of children and old alike, catastrophe to turn a soul to dry dust. (p. 101)

They experience all manner of pain and discomfort, see things that no human should have to contemplate. The poisonous gas that curls

menacingly in the trenches is described as 'a long monster with yellow skin.' (p.48) It is almost alluring when one first sees it. But then Willie realises its sinister symbolism: 'He thought horribly of the Revelation of St John and wondered if by chance and luck he had reached the unknown date at the end of the living world.' (p. 49)

Such thoughts must have come to many in similar circumstances. Why were they there? What were they fighting for? Was it the end of the world? The fact that he witnesses the political agitation in Ireland while home on leave only adds to his doubts. The tracts of paper the soldiers discover declaring the 1916 rebels' support for their 'gallant allies in Europe' (p. 95) evoke disbelief and anger. Willie witnesses the death of a 19-year old boy in a doorway who says: 'I only came out to win a bit of freedom for Ireland... You won't hold that against me?' (p. 93) This young man is the same age as Willie and a fellow countryman. What is to say that the cause he dies for is any less valid than Willie's? And if that is the case, what is Willie doing in Flanders?

The scenes in Dublin, with the buildings ablaze and the Volunteers being rounded up, stay with him after he has returned to his posting in Belgium. While understandably annoyed that the rebellion should have taken place at a time when they were putting their lives on the line in Flanders, there is still disquiet among the Irish soldiers at the news that the 1916 leaders have been executed:

The executed men were cursed, and praised, and doubted and despised, and held to account, and blackened, and wondered at, and mourned, all in a confusion complicated infinitely by the site of war. (p. 144)

Willie expresses his anxieties in a letter to his father, thus causing a rift between them.

On his next leave in Dublin, he is scorned by the inhabitants of his native city because of the uniform he is wearing, cold-shouldered by his father for the seditious stance he has adopted in relation to the 1916 leaders, and, to cap it all, he is abandoned by his fiancée, Gretta, who has been informed in an anonymous letter (written by his friend O'Hara) that he was with a prostitute in Belgium. O'Hara betrays him in this way because of Willie's horrified reaction to a story

he tells him about a young Belgian woman he and another soldier encountered and abused at the beginning of the war. This woman had had her tongue cut out and had been raped repeatedly by the Germans. The other soldier, frightened by the prospect of his imminent death, proceeded to rape the woman again as O'Hara held her shoulders to keep her still. Willie reflects once more on what the war has done to people:

There had been hundreds, thousands of the people from all these ravaged districts killed no doubt, women like that woman, and old men and their women, and the children of Belgium, all swallowed up in the mouth of the war. And if O'Hara and his pal did that at the start of the war, what would he be able to do now? What would Willie be capable of himself? (p. 169)

War brings nearly everyone down to the most primeval level. Willie is clear sighted enough to know that he could, under certain circumstances, act in as base a manner as O'Hara. He too has been morally deformed by what he has witnessed. He does find some healing in Fr Buckley's invocation of God, however:

He wondered suddenly and definitely for the first time in his life what words might be. Sounds and sense certainly, but something else also, a kind of natural music that explained a man's heart or heartlessness, words as tempered as steel, as soft as air. He felt his sore back lighten and his legs strengthen. It was as strange to him as the sight of death. He hoped the words would work on the dead and be a balm to them also. (p. 174)

Céline would not have had the same faith in words as Barry displays here through his character. For him, the truth of this world is death, and silence is thus the only reasonable choice open to man. All too often words have been used in order to justify war, to make it inevitable, attractive, heroic. Just as the idea of 'death sacrifice' had an appeal to the 1916 rebels and their leaders, so it is that countries on the brink of war stir up men with ideas of glory and patriotism and send them forth thus fortified to meet their horrible fate. When, at the beginning of *Voyage to the End of the Night*, Bardamu is inspired by

the sight of the marching soldiers to sign up for the army, he becomes another victim of the power of propaganda. When they leave the city streets behind them, the mournful reality of war hits home:

Pretty soon there was nobody but us, we were all alone. Row after row. The music had stopped. 'Come to think of it', I said to myself, when I saw what was what, 'this is no fun any more! I'd better try something else!' I was about to clear out. Too late! They'd quietly shut the gate behind us civilians. We were caught like rats.³

Unlike Barry, Céline adopts a comic tone to convey what is a deadly serious business. As already stated, he witnessed the Great War first hand, was injured and decorated for bravery, but between 1914 and 1932, the year he published *Voyage*, he struggled on a daily basis to come to terms with what he had experienced, the trauma that words could not adequately describe. This is why he chose comedy, a better tool than anger with which to register his disquiet. The humour should not hide from readers the pain that went into the novel's composition. Because writing about the war was in a very real way remembering and reliving it. The American woman to whom *Voyage* is dedicated, Elizabeth Craig, saw the impact writing the book had on Céline. He visibly aged from the effort:

As soon as he closed the door to his studio he became a different man ... Hunched over his papers, he looked like an old man, his face looked old, everything about him looked old. It made me wonder: *Is that Louis?*⁴

Although – perhaps because – the hero is closely modelled on his own experiences, Céline doesn't intend for us to take him too seriously. This is why there is so much tongue-in-cheek in the way in which Bardamu portrays himself as a coward who, once he discovers what war is really like, seeks every means as his disposal to escape from its grasp. The eeriness of the setting is counterbalanced by the humour:

3. Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Voyage to the End of the Night*, translated by Ralph Manheim (London: John Calder, 1997), p. 16. All subsequent references will be to this edition, with the page number in brackets.

4. Quoted by Quinn, p. 139. Céline's real name was Louis-Ferdinand Destouches.

I knew only one thing about the blackness, which was so dense you had the impression that if you stretched out your arm a little way from your shoulder you'd never see it again, but of that one thing I was absolutely certain, namely, that it was full of homicidal impulses. (*Voyage*, p. 27)

He sees his colonel laid low by a shell blast, his belly 'wide open and he was making a nasty face about it. It must have hurt when it happened.' (*Voyage*, p. 22) The matter-of-fact mode of narration is not what one expects from an account of the Great War.

This partly explains why people in France were so divided when *Voyage* was first published. It was hard to know who exactly was targeted. Certainly, the military do not escape ridicule. The colonel is depicted as stupid because of his refusal to take cover when the shells start landing around them: 'When you have no imagination, dying is small beer; when you do have imagination, dying is too much.' (*Voyage*, p. 23) When Bardamu meets Robinson, his *alter ego* whom he will encounter in the most unlikely circumstances at various points in the novel, the latter is not afraid to tell him that he has deserted rather than face certain death. In his flight, he comes across his captain, whose stomach is open and who is passing blood from every orifice while screaming for his Mammy. Robinson feels no pity for him: 'Shut up!' I tell him. "Mama! Mama! Fuck your mama'....Just like that, on my way past, out of the corner of my mouth!' (*Voyage*, p. 44)

This type of raw description is synonymous with Céline. Language is reduced to its bare essentials and there is no attempt to prettify or romanticise what is happening: 'A war had been switched on between us and the other side, and now it was burning!' (p. 19); 'Blood and more blood, everywhere, all over the grass, in sluggish confluent puddles, looking for a congenial slope' (p. 25). The difficulty is to give a true record of exactly what happened, because one must not forget:

The biggest defeat in every department of life is to forget, especially the things that have done you in, and to die without realizing how far people can go in the way of nastiness. When the grave lies open before us, let's not try to be witty, but on the other hand, let's not forget, but make it our business to record the worst of the hu-

man viciousness we've seen without changing one word. (p. 28)

An unusually serious note is struck in these lines, which encourage us to contemplate their meaning. They are an example of Céline outlining what it is exactly he seeks to achieve in this literary enterprise. He wants to say it as it was, without any masks or artifice, without trying to embellish or soften the trauma that is war.

When Bardamu returns from the front, he notices that people at home are infected with the same fever that had led him to enlist: 'The civilians back home were infected with the idea of glory, they had picked it up from the soldier boys and they soon learned how to bear up under it, bravely and painlessly.' (p. 49) As someone on whom the *Médaille Militaire* has been bestowed, Bardamu seeks to profit from the general frenzy around him. With Lola, an American nurse, talk of the war is a type of aphrodisiac: 'To Lola's way of thinking, France was some sort of chivalrous being, not very clearly defined in space or time, but at the moment dangerously wounded and for that very reason very exciting.' (p. 52) She cannot comprehend Bardamu's reluctance to return to battle. This, Bardamu knows, is largely because of the lies that were being told in the newspapers, on posters and in general conversation. In such circumstances, it is impossible to make the truth be heard: 'At a time when the world is upside down and it's thought insane to ask why you're being murdered, it obviously requires no great effort to pass for a lunatic.' (p. 62) The fact that he so obviously has 'no vocation for death' is a grave disappointment to Lola who moves on to new territory.

What awaits Willie Dunne in Dublin is far less wholesome. His father has lost some of his men in the riots in Dublin and knows that the old order is under serious threat from this new wave of nationalist fervour. He launches a verbal assault on his son:

'You stand here, Willie, in the uniform of your gracious king. Under solemn oath to defend him and his three kingdoms. You stand here in your own childhood home, your father a man that has strove to keep order in this great city and protect it from miscreants and the evil of traitors and rebels, for love of you all and in memory of your mother. (p. 247)

Willie returns to battle with those harsh words ringing in his ears. The letter his father subsequently writes to apologise and declare his love never reaches its recipient, as Willie is killed before reading it. War has changed everything in his life: his relationship with his family, his fiancée, the world around him. Politics don't mean much when you're up to your waist in mud, excrement and dead bodies. Perhaps it's as well to die than to carry memories like the following with you throughout your life:

Willie could feel the pulverized flesh still in the destroyed uniforms sucking at his boots. These were the bodies of creatures gone beyond their own humanity into a severe state that had no place in human doings and the human world. (p. 174)

The problem for Bardamu (and who is Bardamu if not a caricature of Céline himself?) is precisely that he has to live with the images of 'creatures gone beyond their humanity' after his involvement in the war is over. The voyage is a metaphor for his journey towards an accommodation with the world that is never properly realized. In Africa and America, where his travels bring him, he sees the same blind pursuit of money, the same corruption in human nature as was evident during the war in France. When he practises as a doctor in the Parisian suburbs, the death of an innocent child, Béberty, rekindles the futility of his struggle with evil, which always seems to win out over good. Writing, however painful, however futile, is necessary, as he outlines in the following famous quotation:

There's nothing terrible inside us or on earth or possibly in heaven itself except what hasn't been said yet. We won't be easy in our minds until everything has been once and for all, then we'll fall silent and we'll no longer be afraid of keeping still. That will be the day. (*Voyage*, p. 290)

Sebastian Barry provides a stark depiction of the detrimental impact of war on individuals, families and the world at large. Wille Dunne is a man catapulted in a cataclysm that utterly transforms his existence and makes him an outsider to the world at large:

Between your own countrymen deriding you for being in the army, and the army deriding you for your own slaughter, a man didn't know what to be thinking.... He knew that he was a man with bits of himself broken. (pp. 281-2)

Céline followed a similar trajectory and ended up with a gaping wound that never subsequently healed. Tom Quinn supplies a summary of the war's impact on Céline that provides food for thought:

He could never forget, never accept, never forget the cruelty of the war's sacrifice, the folly of its blood-letting, the staggering, belling brashness of its lies, the pantomime of its pretences, the awfulness of the truths it revealed about humanity.... His memory of war, so long a prisoner to silence, could not be held at bay. *Voyage* surged from beneath Céline's own traumatic memory of death, replete with its cargo of fear and nightmare, static, circular, horrendously unrelenting and unforgiving, informed by the unique genius of its own despairing art.⁵

5. Quinn, p. 356.

Laos and laity – *There is a real sense in which the words 'lay' and 'laity' should have no place in the discourse of the People of God, or at least as descriptive of any part thereof....*

It is the use of 'lay' as implying 'non-professional' which is, I hold utterly unsuitable to the Christian community as such. For our common vocation, the 'universal call to holiness' (Lumen Gentium) rules out any such distinction. To regard those who practise the threefold ministry of bishop, presbyter and deacon as the professional minority in a Church the vast majority of whom are amateurs is surely close to blasphemy.

It is particularly and ironically unfortunate that the original Greek word laos means all the people.

Seán Mac Réamoinn, 'Laylines', January 1987, in *Laylines 1980–1996: Partial Views of Church and Society*, Dominican Publications, 1987, p. 81