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An Irishman's Diary on a classic novel of the Great War

Eamon Maher

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As we begin the process of marking the centenary of the outbreak of the first World War – or the Great War, as it is often called – I wonder how many commentators will dwell on Louis-Ferdinand Céline's (1894-1961) classic novel, *Journey to the End of the Night* (*Voyage au bout de la nuit*), published in 1932? Céline, whose real name was Destouches, served with distinction in the French Cuirassiers but, following an injury received not long after assuming active duty, he was hospitalised and subsequently awarded a Médaille Militaire. However, instead of feeding his patriotic fervour, his experience at the front led to Céline venting his anger on the propaganda war machine in [France](#) that placed on a pedestal something he knew to be nothing other than the mindless butchery of soldiers whose lives were sacrificed to further their political leaders' ambitions.

Voyage not only openly poked fun at the memory of the Great War, but it did so in a colloquial, slang-filled language that was completely revolutionary for the time. Céline clearly felt that he needed to develop a new oral style that would lend itself to the type of approach he wished to adopt, one that sought to debunk the mythology surrounding a conflict that in his view was purely barbaric. He did not doubt the heroism of the soldiers in the trenches, their bravery in the face of death, their stoicism. However, he found the loss of so many lives (over three million died on the Western Front alone) wasteful and degrading.

At the beginning of *Voyage*, Bardamu, the hero or anti-hero of Céline's narrative, is sitting with his friend Arthur in front of a café as soldiers march past. Caught up in the emotion of the moment, Bardamu decides to enlist. Once away from the cheering crowds, the reality appears stark. When they arrive at the front, Bardamu knows that his one desire is to escape from this hell-hole: "I knew only one thing about the blackness . . . namely, that it was full of homicidal impulses".

While the humour is strong in Céline's novel, it only serves to call into question people's preconceptions about the glory of sacrifice and the majesty of dying for a noble cause. Writing about the war was not therapeutic for Céline – it was a way of reliving the horror to which he and millions of others were exposed. His American companion, [Elizabeth Craig](#), to whom *Voyage* is dedicated, witnessed the toll the book took on its author: "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". One can only imagine what nightmarish images returned to haunt Céline as he mined the harrowing memories and made them into words.

But while readers are amused at Bardamu's cowardice, his unashamed efforts to escape from the front under any pretext, Céline had a more lofty ambition – to ensure that people would 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 realising how far people can go in the way of nastiness. When the grace 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 human viciousness we've seen without changing a word".

No masks or artifice, no embellishment of any kind, this is what Céline sought to achieve in *Voyage*. He could never accept the manner in which patriotism and justice were wrapped up in lies and deceit to hide the ghastliness of what really happened.

The critic Patrick McCarthy argues that Céline was an autobiographical writer whose novels were "an extension of his life and also a distortion of it". Writing, for him, was "a process of self-transformation, of projecting one part of himself into the realm of his imagination". While this is undoubtedly true, it is [Tom Quinn](#), whose 2005 study of *Voyage* remains by far the most insightful I have read, who captures the writer's achievement most succinctly: "*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".

Classics are always worth revisiting, and for anyone interested in the Great War, *Journey to the End of the Night* is an essential reference point.

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