

The Legend of Céline

By Hélène Baty-Delalande

A meticulous historical enquiry reveals the liberties taken by the author of *Journey to the End of the Night* in recounting his war experience. These flattering inventions made it possible for him to disseminate his pamphlets in the 1930s and clear his name in the purge.

Reviewed : Odile Roynette, *Un long tourment. Louis-Ferdinand Céline entre deux guerres (1914-1945)*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, “L’histoire de profil” collection, 2015, 390 p.

Odile Roynette’s remarkably well-researched book is not, strictly speaking, a new biography of Céline or even a biography of a writer. As its title suggests, it is deliberately selective in its subject matter, focusing on a basic premise: although the pages devoted to the war in *Journey to the End of the Night* have been pivotal to his establishment as a leading novelist, the experience that Louis Destouches really had in 1914 was not equal to his reputation as a patriotic, heroic fighter, and indeed quickly and deliberately became part of his self-assertion strategy.

Above all, the references to his glorious past as a war veteran enabled him to ensure the best possible dissemination of the nauseating ideas contained in his pamphlets between 1930 and 1940, before being presented in defence of the outcast during the purge. We quickly realise, then, that this highly coherent and lively book is an indictment of Destouches, who carefully constructed his own overly flattering legend.

Debunking the myth

The documents referenced in Odile Roynette's book are numerous. Some are published, but the historian also relies on military and medical archives that are often overlooked in order to meticulously retrace the career of the young volunteer followed by his leaving for the war and first assignments up until the injury he sustained on 25 October 1914 – a date she corrects, wrongly stated in reference biographies.¹

The archives are cross-referenced with numerous published letters² as well as the soldier's personal diary, and compared with his accounts in *Cannon-Fodder* and *Journey to the End of the Night* in particular. An expert in military experiences, whether in the barracks or during the First World War,³ the author highlights the singularity of Destouches' military career.⁴ To start with, he benefited from special treatment until departing for war thanks to his parents' intervention – a far cry from the dark world described in *Cannon-Fodder* – then joined a regiment that was significantly less affected than others by the terrible losses suffered during the first months of the war.

While the historian does not question his courage under fire, her careful examination of his medical records leads her to considerably diminish the attacks and after-effects suffered by the former soldier. In particular, she refutes the claim that he sustained a head injury and suffered psychological trauma; apart from his arm injury, which was not serious despite the risk of amputation, which was quickly ruled out, Destouches emerged unscathed from the Great War.

The question of his discharge is then dealt with in a careful reconstruction of the stages involved: he was granted a discharge n° 2, which is usually reserved for those whose incapacity was not caused by warfare, which initially deprived him of a pension but permanently saved him from being sent back to the front. He was then “posted” in London, initially in an administrative office, before being released from service.

His subsequent departure for Africa was made possible thanks to his status as a seriously wounded veteran (*grand blessé de guerre*) and by his war medal, and here the author expresses doubts as to the conditions under which it was awarded (a recognition that, “as legitimate as it may have been, was of an exceptional nature in the light of the mildness of his injury”, she writes on p. 123). Over in Africa, the author asserts that Destouches once again acted as an

¹ This is particularly true of the latest biography, that of Henri Godard, *Céline*, Gallimard, 2011.

² See in particular *Devenir Céline. Lettres inédites de Louis Destouches et de quelques autres (1912-1919)*, ed. and afterword by Véronique Robert-Chovin, Gallimard, 2009.

³ See in particular Odile Roynette, “Bons pour service”. *L'expérience de la caserne en France à la fin du XIX^e siècle*, Paris, Belin, 2000.

⁴ In *Le Cuirassier blessé. Céline, 1914-1916* (Du Lérot éditeur, 1999) Jean Bastier offers a meticulous history of his career, with a certain indulgence, as Odile Roynette rightly highlights.

opportunist, profiting unscrupulously from the colonialist system and bitterly brooding over his war experience.

It was therefore his experience of war, the darkness of which is strongly questioned by the author in relation to the common experience, as well as his status as a heroic war veteran, also extremely dubious, that ultimately brought about the success of *Journey to the End of the Night* and which met the expectations of a society still in mourning, lapsing into pacifism and wallowing in “a victimist tropism on the verge of becoming dominant” (p. 81). Moreover, this connivance would have played a decisive role in the way in which the pamphlets were received.

However, it is above all as a defence, even as an alibi during the purge, that the reference to the veteran’s past was pivotal: “His career in the First World War was the cornerstone of a defence based on a flattering rewriting of services rendered to the fatherland” (p. 208).

As we can see, the “demythologisation of the [Célinian] biography” is radical to say the least, and is reminiscent of what another historian did in 2004 with the political career and personal life of Jean Genet⁵. Beyond the somewhat unpleasant aspects of Céline’s personality highlighted by the author, the investigation reveals the crucial part played by the Great War in the writer’s career, not so much as a founding trauma or a dark source of inspiration, but rather as a device he largely manipulated in order to establish his position in the literary field: enter it with a bang, disseminate his anti-Semitic theories and remain there, despite the ban and symbolic relegation following 1945.

Manipulation or fiction ?

As well-informed and persuasive as it may be, the author’s demonstration nonetheless gives cause for reservations. This is mostly due to some adventitious remarks revealing judgments that are made a little too swiftly, or are questionable at the very least. Can the extreme violence experienced by Destouches in Autumn 1914 really be diminished on the grounds that the “loss rate” for his unit was “only” 7%, whereas others reached 10% or even 30%? Can we be so quick to shrug off the trauma of a wound that might have required amputation by arguing that dismemberment was a common and socially accepted phenomenon? Can we refute all psychological trauma that the veteran might have suffered merely by reading his correspondence, which “testifies to a rapid psychological recovery that enabled him to consciously take control of his future by mid-November” (p. 113)?

The author’s meticulous dismantling of Céline’s proven manipulations of his military past seem to lead the author to deny him any authority whatsoever to write about the war. It is thus the book itself that is discredited as being false – a highly questionable view, once again,

⁵ Ivan Jablonka, *Les Vérités inavouables de Jean Genet*, Paris, Seuil, 2004.

of the writing of fiction. Making ironic comments on the pamphlets' publicity references to trenches that Céline would "not have experienced" (p. 187) is surely not the most effective way to challenge these texts.

However, her desire to dismantle a hagiographic discourse on the First World War hero does reflect on one's reading of *Journey to the End of the Night*. Certainly, one finds an "almost total disjunction between the transposition of Céline's personal experience in a book of which a primary characteristic was to play with autobiography and with what they [the readers of 1932] may have known about his past" (p. 70), but how does the undervaluing of Céline's experience enable one to better understand that disjunction? To be sure, the photographic archives showing Destouches and his unfortunate companions in hospital no doubt testify to their physical sacrifice, accepted with strength and dignity. But how does that inform the novelistic episode devoted to Bardamu's hospitalisation, by no means reduced to a satire highlighting "the ridicule of diminished and grotesque men" (p. 122). Where is the impossible contradiction here, which can apparently only be resolved by the manipulation hypothesis?

Texts are the bedrock of literary acclaim and of the definition of a writer's combined ethos and position⁶, particularly in Céline's case. However, one cannot settle for seeing the work of literature as an "object of history" (p. 20). Accepting to "complicate the historical narrative by continually playing on different temporalities – that of the biographical facts themselves, that of their utterance by the author, and that of their reception" by placing "these different temporal registers alongside another" (p. 23) means running the risk of overlooking the radical singularity of the literary expression and its relation with the subject, experience and time. It is to risk overlooking the core of what is being questioned in Céline's work, and underestimating the main issue of the debates that have centred on Céline for the past 20 years⁷.

The book does, however, have the great merit of resituating Céline's military career within the collective experience of the barracks and the Great War, enabling a better understanding of its singularity and thus radically dispelling any hagiographical temptations in that regard. It highlights the sociality of trauma beneath the overly stifling image of psychological trauma and emphasises the forms of an individual reappropriation of the collective catastrophe. Regardless of whether it is labelled opportunism, manipulation, a lie or a dangerous perversion of military-virile honour, this reappropriation enabled Céline to establish his position as a unique writer, first meeting the expectations of a society in mourning and then trying to restore his damaged image.

⁶ On the positions of a writer, see Jérôme Meizoz's book, *Postures littéraires. Mises en scène modernes de l'auteur*, Geneva, Slatkine, 2007.

⁷ The bibliography cites all the main works that raise the question of the ignominy that lay at the very heart of Céline's work: those of Henri Godard, Julia Kristeva, Jean-Pierre Martin, Yves Pagès, Philippe Roussin and Régis Tettamanzi, among others.

As an endless space of rumination in Céline's work, the Great War also enabled the writer to establish himself at the cost of others' doubtful ambivalence, which Odile Roynette is the first to express so clearly.

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