

Louis-Ferdinand Céline: Trolling For Another Time?

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Numéro 118, printemps 2021

Infox, Fake News et « Nouvelles fauses » : perspectives historiques
(XVe – XXe siècles)

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081088ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081088ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Department of French, Dalhousie University

ISSN

0711-8813 (imprimé)

2562-8704 (numérique)

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Citer cet article

Warde, L. (2021). Louis-Ferdinand Céline: Trolling For Another Time?
Dalhousie French Studies, (118), 165–179. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081088ar>

Résumé de l'article

Cet article propose une lecture de Louis-Ferdinand Céline éclairée par le concept de « trolling ». Le trolling est un phénomène relativement nouveau désignant la pratique visant à susciter de fortes réactions négatives chez autrui par la provocation ou l'incitation. Indissociable des plateformes numériques qui lui ont donné naissance, le trolling repose sur certains dispositifs rhétoriques facilement identifiables : ironie, autoréférence, impertinence, agression, etc. Les trolls visent à cultiver une réputation fondée sur l'hostilité qu'ils se délectent à provoquer. Je voudrais suggérer que Céline a adopté une stratégie similaire dans la période d'après-guerre, et plus précisément dans la série d'entretiens qu'il a accordé à quelques journalistes dans sa maison de Meudon, juste avant sa mort. Alors que certains affirment que Céline, en se repentant, essayait de regagner la sympathie du public après sa condamnation pour avoir publié trois pamphlets furieusement antisémites, je propose que sa véritable intention était d'instrumentaliser sa notoriété pour son propre avantage, car, pensait-il, une part de son lectorat s'intéressait à lui, non pas en dépit de, mais pour son infamie. Mon analyse mobilise un ensemble d'études récemment publiées portant sur l'humour, les nouveaux médias et l'extrême droite.

Louis-Ferdinand Céline: Trolling for Another Time?

Luke Warde

Despite all the efforts of the prosecution, everybody could see that this man was not a “monster,” but it was difficult indeed not to suspect that he was a clown.

Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (54)

— Céline nous l’avons dit au téléphone, nous vous le demandons encore, jusqu’où vous pourrez aller dans l’égoïsme, la trahison, la lâcheté ?

— Oh, je vais très très loin chers amis !

— Oui, mais attention Céline, vous n’avez plus qu’une ultime chance ! Nous venons vous prévenir ! Ralliez-vous ! Sinon il sera fait justice ! fini ! fini ! les galipettes !

Céline, *Rigodon* (24)

Following the Second World War, Louis-Ferdinand Céline’s reputation was in shreds. Once feted across the political spectrum for having revolutionized French prose, Céline was now known primarily as a weebegone crank and notorious collaborator whose antisemitism was of an unparalleled virulence. Fearing retribution for his involvement with the Nazi occupiers during the War, Céline fled to Denmark shortly after the Normandy landings. He was detained by the government there, which complied with his wish not to be extradited back to France, where he was likely to face a similar fate to fellow collaborator, Robert Brasillach—the only writer to have been executed for treason by the French state exclusively for what he wrote. Exile in Denmark provided Céline sanctuary while France purged itself of its most despised traitors and enemies. Eventually convicted *in absentia* and fined the relatively small sum of 50,000 francs, he was in addition declared as existing “en état d’indignité nationale.” Having avoided the severest of sanctions, his proscription was thereby given state imprimatur.

Unsurprisingly, Céline fiercely contested the charges levelled against him. In fact, he saw himself as part of an illustrious lineage of *enfants terribles*, *provocateurs*, and *poètes maudits* unjustly persecuted for their convictions, from bawdy medieval poet François Villon to Victor Hugo, avuncular emblem of French Republicanism, as he framed it in his recently published *Cahiers de prison* (115). Yet even if he denied these charges, in particular that of Jean-Paul Sartre, who suspected Céline had been paid by the Nazis in exchange for lending his polemical talents to the cause of antisemitism, no explicit retractions or *mea culpas* were ever issued.¹ Granted an amnesty in 1951 amid curious circumstances—his lawyer, Jean-Louis Tixier-Vignancour, had cunningly used Céline’s birth name, “Destouches”, in his court filings, and so the presiding judge failed to make any connection between a “Destouches” and the writer, pamphleteer, collaborator, and notorious antisemite, “Céline”—he retreated to the Parisian suburb of Meudon with his wife

¹ In his essay, “Portrait de l’antisémite” (1954), Sartre had written of Céline: “Si Céline a pu soutenir les thèses socialistes des nazis, c’est qu’il était payé. Au fond de son cœur, il n’y croyait pas : pour lui, il n’y a pas de solution que dans le suicide collectif, la non-procréation, la mort” (47-48).

Lucette, from where he spent his final years furiously documenting his travails and venting spleen at his myriad enemies, real and imagined. Especially telling is that Céline took umbrage less with the substance of Sartre's (and others') portrait of him, and more with the assertion that a *quid pro quo* had in all probability taken place; this would have left him liable to prosecution for treason like Brasillach. Moreover, Céline seemed scarcely bothered about disabusing others of his infamy; like Dostoevsky's "Underground Man", he presented himself, to borrow a phrase from Lionel Trilling (1980), as somebody "who has arranged his own misery" (64).²

The valedictory interviews that Céline granted various literary journalists shortly before his death in 1961 became a kind of ritual exercise in self-abasement. In one with Louis Pauwels, he vituperated with abandon, ruminated nihilistically, at one point broke into song, and revealed what he claimed would bring him happiness: his own death. He stated that he only wrote in order to make a living, thus lending credence to Sartre's claim that he was ultimately motivated by venality. No attempt whatsoever was made either to propitiate his many detractors or to expiate his past transgressions. This was Céline "joué par lui-même": a carefully choreographed persona whose affectations and even physical deportment became more and more honed and refined, and which he staged for public consumption.³ This was the Céline with whom an encounter, as William S. Burroughs (Bockris, 1981) put it, was like "having walked straight into a Céline novel": he was "exactly as you would expect him to be" (15-16).

In his short work, *Entretiens avec le professeur Y* (1955), Céline's narrator assures his publisher, Gaston Gallimard, that he will "joue[r] le jeu": "passer à la Radio...aller y bafouiller" (12). Yet if Céline had decided to play the game, he had clearly opted to play by his own rules. His whole performance was a skewering of how we tend to think of the authorial interview: as a means of establishing friendly relations with a – hopefully – receptive reading public. Reflecting on what he considered to be an interrogation by Madeleine Chapsal of *L'Express*, Céline said the following to Jean Callendreau, who had also come to interview him:

Ah ! Ah ! *L'Express*... Ce sont des gens sérieux : ils sont venus avec une secrétaire-dactylographe et sa machine, un photographe... Terrible, la secrétaire... n'a pas laissé échapper un mot de ce que j'ai dit... Tout seul, la tête embrouillée, j'ai bredouillé, bafouillé, je me suis mal défendu contre leur machine enregistreuse. Tenez, ils l'avaient posée là, sur cette table... Mais vous venez les mains dans les poches... connaissez-vous seulement la sténographie ? Au fond, ce sera beaucoup mieux : vous pourrez raconter n'importe quoi sur mon

2 Trilling was here writing about Dostoevsky's Underground Man. The resonances between how Céline presented himself towards the end of his life and the rhetoric of Dostoevsky's Underground Man are striking and yet have not been analysed in serious detail, save Michael André Bernstein's (1992) *Bitter Carnival: Ressentiment and the Abject Hero*. In his analysis of Dostoevsky's novella, Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) writes of how what the Underground Man "thinks about most of all is what others think or might think about him; he tries to keep one step ahead of every other consciousness, every other thought about him, every other point of view on him [...]. He knows that he has the *final word*, and he seeks at whatever cost to retain for himself this final word" (52). Like the Underground Man, Céline performs what others think and expect of him – that he is monstrous, for example – and thereby appropriates and neutralizes their disapprobation. For Bakhtin, this represents a kind of extreme, if counter-intuitive pride, as well as an assertion of freedom, for in doing so, the Underground Man (and Céline) establishes total control over their own image: "[t]he destruction of one's own image in another's eyes, the sully of that image in another's eyes as an ultimate desperate effort to free oneself from the power of the other's consciousness and to break through to one's self for the self alone – this, in fact, is the orientation of the Underground Man's entire confession. For this reason, he makes his discourse about himself deliberately ugly" (232).

3 See Christian Dedet (1961): 35-37.

compte. C'est ce que je dis toujours : qu'on raconte n'importe quoi sur moi... ça confirme ma légende de traître halluciné délirant... (*Cahiers Céline II*, 41)

While in other contexts presenting himself as an impeccable patriot outrageously traduced—in *Entretiens*, he describes himself as having been variously “persécuté” (29), “copié” (35), “épuré” (44)—in these interviews he does little to belie the reputation he had acquired on the back of his political and intellectual enormities. Even where he appears to, his preening and self-pity are knowing and self-conscious, as it is in *Féerie pour une autre fois I* (1952) where he laments having not been admitted to the Académie Française.⁴ In fact, he was happy to provide yet more fodder for his biographers, to tee up their dark portraits. Milton Hindus, one of the first scholars to write about Céline outside of France and who went as far as travelling to Denmark to meet him, noted his perverse desire to flaunt his own “moral hideousness” (36), while his wife Lucette later admitted that her husband’s approach to cultivating a public image “faisait de lui-même sa propre caricature” (*Céline Secret*, 126-27). This was Céline’s public “posture”: a mode of authorial self-presentation the nature and purpose of which has been analysed in significant detail by Jérôme Meizoz.⁵

These interviews have nevertheless been read as attempts by Céline at sanitizing his much-sullied image. Odile Roynette (2015), for example, refers to a campaign “de reconquête médiatique” (236) on his part, the idea being to elicit his audience’s sympathy. While it is clear that an embittered and impenitent Céline sincerely believed that he had been betrayed and scapegoated by his countrymen, the extent to which his self-pity in these public appearances seems consciously imbued with an abject, even burlesque, quality, undermines or militates against such readings. Besides, Céline likely realized that any contrition on his part would be deemed inadmissible, not to mention pathetic.⁶ As relentlessly pessimistic as he was, he likely even considered himself beyond redemption, at least in the eyes of the public. Accordingly, why not, as he put it, simply “leur en donner pour leur argent”? In a typical instance of what Michel Lacroix (2009) has called “une surcharge volontaire de l’infamie et de l’impureté” (118), Céline told André Parinaud:

Tous ces cons qui me redécouvrent en apprenant que je viens de publier *D'un château l'autre*. Ils viennent visiter la ruine... pour voir si ça tient encore ! Si je ne sens pas trop mauvais. Mais je leur en donne pour leur argent. Je connais le truc, je réponds toujours à la demande. Doux comme un mouton le Céline, bavant ou crachant. Qu'est-ce qu'il vous faut aujourd'hui ? Il y a *L'Express* qui est passé par Meudon. J'avais pavoisé la gare de toute ma dégueulasserie pour le recevoir. Il a dû être content ! Vont pouvoir édifier leurs lecteurs et avoir bonne conscience. Je me suis roulé dans ma fange de gros cochon puis *Match*... Je suis devenu le fait divers à la mode. (*Cahiers Céline II*, 37)

Notable here is the vocabulary of marketing and branding that Céline deploys: he wants to give his interviewers and their audiences “their money’s worth”; he has become *the* fashionable news item. This appeal of sorts was *not* premised on the retrieval of some erstwhile benign (“doux comme un mouton”) reputation – something which never existed, in any case. Rather, Céline realized that he could leverage his notoriety by performing, in Thomas C. Spear’s (1991) words, “a ludicrous exaggeration of his public reputation (racist, paranoid, scapegoat, enraged victim etc.)” (361). This has proved a rather effective, if

4 Céline writes: “je ne veux pas décéder puant d’âme !...La charogne c’est rien, c’est l’ingratitude qu’est tout !... Je veux reconquérir l’estime !...ma propre estime !...plus en surplus celle de mes pairs !...une place à l’Académie !...Au pire !...n’importe laquelle !...” (104).

5 See Jérôme Meizoz (2016): 171-186.

6 Greg Hainge (2005) points out that Céline “actually mimics those critics who pretend that his motivation in writing this book (*Féerie pour une autre fois I*) is to escape punishment [...]” (19).

counterintuitive, strategy: once Céline's depravity had become endemic to his appeal (at least for some), he in turn became immune to the kind of dismissal, on moral grounds, of which his detractors considered him worthy. If a desire to scratch a contrarian itch were already priced into the appeal that he exerts over some of his readers, then further reprobation, he likely reasoned, might in fact bolster this lurid attraction, thus perversely redounding to his benefit.

In what follows, I analyze this dynamic. This article is especially interested in the problematic confluence between depravity, provocation and a certain kind of humour – or what is framed as such. There has been ample discussion in our contemporary cultural and political context around phenomena like online “trolling” and its appropriation of rhetorical and aesthetic strategies that we might once have more readily associated with a transgressive and, broadly speaking, emancipatory politics.⁷ In particular, irreverent humour and other “shock” discursive modes have played an important role in the ascendancy of the reactionary right in recent years, especially in the United States, but also in France and elsewhere.⁸ Why has this strategy been effective? Much as Céline managed to turn his own notoriety to his advantage, certain kinds of extreme humour can be weaponized because humour itself, along with its political valence, is contested, contrary to the assumption that it might be somehow an essentially benign discursive mode.⁹ Precisely because humour has for long been closely associated with notions like lightheartedness, “relief”, and unseriousness (however inaccurately), as well as an emancipatory politics, it can be deployed by actors cognizant of this, who know full well that they can capitalize on a) its ambivalence and b) the alibi it might afford. As film and media scholar Damon Young (2019) recently argued, in this case referring to one Milo Yiannopoulos, a “troll” *par excellence* of recent years, humour invested with knowing cynicism and bad faith entails an oscillation as insidious as it is cunning between avowal and disavowal. Ostensibly harmless “jokes” can be modified by double negations that render indeterminate their initial semantic valence; these “jokes” relationship to any extra-textual referents is thus highly equivocal.¹⁰ As we shall see, Céline was no stranger to such meta-ironic strategies, which he put to use in his antisemitic pamphlets. Moreover, he later reflected back upon such uses in a way that, dizzyingly for us, might itself have been ironic. Is the dangerously non-ironic thus simply masquerading under the aegis of irony?

Across this article, I will show how the challenge of dealing with such figures and scenarios is not as unprecedented or radically new as it might at first seem, nor are the

7 In a recent piece in the *London Review of Books* that directly compared Alfred Jarry's Ubu to Donald Trump, the art critic Hal Foster (2020) concluded with the following questions, which invoke precisely this issue: “[w]hat is the left to do when the right appropriates its cultural-political strategies? How are artists and writers who have long assumed a monopoly on transgression to respond?” While a primary concern among critics had been, up until quite recently, the neutralization (by commodification) of a transgressive and openly contestatory avant-garde by, in Martin Crowley's words, “the digestive force of accumulation”, the situation is now, as Foster articulates, even more concerning: whereas before the tactics of the avant-garde were rendered impotent by their appropriation as elements of a mere “spectacle of opposition”, such strategies are now actively harnessed by the reactionary right to forward their agenda. See Martin Crowley, 99-109.

8 See in particular: Whitney Phillips (2015), *This is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture*; Angela Nagle (2017), *Kill All Normies: The Online Culture Wars from Tumblr and 4chan to the Alt-Right and Trump*; Phillips and Ryan N. Milner (2017), *The Ambivalent Internet: Mischief, Oddity and Antagonism Online*; Richard Seymour (2019), *The Twittering Machine*; chapters 8 and 9 of Justin Smith (2019), *Irrationality: A History of the Dark Side of Reason*; and Andrew Marantz (2020), *Antisocial: How Online Extremists Broke America*.

9 See Smith (2019): 230-237.

10 See Damon R. Young, “Ironies of Web 2.0”. The examples that Young draws attention to are curiously enumerative refrains like “LOL JKJK.” In such cases, a previous statement is recast and ironized by a supplemental “JK” (“just joking”), the intention being to further undermine a referential stability that was likely already in doubt.

aesthetic, representational, and rhetorical modes at play solely the diabolical product of technology and social media platforms, as a certain Luddite critical narrative might have it. Indeed, contemporary avatars of what we have come to call a “post-truth” world such as Yiannopoulos or, for that matter, former US President Donald J. Trump, are far from the first to piggyback on these ambivalent cultural and aesthetic discourses, or to dismiss truth itself; Céline, for one, as early as 1933 and shortly after the publication of his first novel, *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, had written to Joseph Garcin that “la vérité n’est plus d’époque” (1987, 53). As he constantly reminded readers, his aim as a writer had never been, in any case, the conveyance of reliable or verifiable truths, but the elicitation of affective or emotional responses: “Au commencement était l’émotion !”, not *logos* (*Le style contre les idées*, 63).

Le rire carnassier

In a 2019 article in which he offers a wider reflection on the prospect of Gallimard publishing Céline’s antisemitic pamphlets—a project subsequently postponed *sine die* by Antoine Gallimard, following an outcry spearheaded by Serge Klarsfeld, president of the *Association des fils et filles des déportés juifs de France*—Philippe Roussin notes how the status of humour has for long shaped attitudes towards these controversial texts. He remarks, for instance, on the fact that “le rire et le comique sont aujourd’hui un argument souvent invoqué par nombre de lecteurs et de critiques favorables à la republication des pamphlets, rire et comique valant ici comme témoins et gages de l’innocuité, sinon de l’innocence, d’un discours et d’un style” (86). This is nothing new: “[v]oici ce qu’il en était en 1937-1938” (86). He then writes that “il y aurait une histoire à écrire de la manière dont le rire de ces années-là sous ses diverses formes a contribué à miner et à détruire la République et les valeurs démocratiques” (86), before helpfully sketching something just like this. Roussin refers, for example, to various publications on the French far right which feted Céline’s particular brand of humour. In *L’action française*, Brasillach declared that he had been “royalement amusé” by Céline’s first pamphlet, *Bagatelles pour un massacre* (1937), and claimed that this screed was fundamentally innocuous in its intentions, concluding that he, Céline, and their allies sought but “la permission de nous amuser” (3). This was but one appeal, as Roussin demonstrates, to a certain mode of extreme humour that Roussin dubs “le rire carnassier”, and which became increasingly prevalent among various *groupuscules* and their ancillary publications on the fascist right in the 1930s. He sketches this constellation, which included those reviews and journals under the editorship of figures like Léon Daudet, Brasillach and Lucien Rebatet:

Le rire carnassier des caricatures et des articles de la presse française de la fin de l’entre-deux-guerres voyait converger de multiples traditions : l’anti-républicanisme, l’anarchisme fin de siècle, la bohème, l’esprit de fumisterie des revues et des cabarets montmartrois, où l’intérêt pour la politique se mariait constamment au refus de la prendre au sérieux. (131)

The claim that Céline’s *Bagatelles pour un massacre* was essentially one big joke, we should note, was not exclusively the response of ideological sympathizers. André Gide, for one, wrote that Céline “faisait de son mieux pour avertir que tout cela n’était pas plus sérieux que la chevauchée de Don Quichotte en plein ciel” (630). For Gide, the presence of rhetorical devices like extreme hyperbole and rampant self-contradiction were hard to reconcile with what he understood to be bona fide antisemitism. Moreover, if Céline was

not joking, Gide asserted, then he must be simply mad (“complètement maboul”, 630).¹¹ While Céline’s ravings, as Alice Kaplan has pointed out, everywhere “declare their own ridiculousness, their own eccentricity”, Gide’s insouciance is nonetheless remarkable as well as troubling. Writing on this topic to friend and colleague Max Horkheimer in April 1938, Walter Benjamin (1994) noted that although he recognized “Céline’s lack of seriousness”, Gide seemed interested only in “the intention of the work, not the consequences. Unless, that is, Gide’s satanic side has nothing against those consequences” (753). What Benjamin intuits here is how apologist and detractor alike can weaponize putative intention for their own interpretative purposes; Céline could be selectively quoted, because he was constantly contradicting himself, as Kaplan points out. This makes any critical vantage point from which to adjudicate authorial intention difficult to establish, as Céline intended.

This was not the first time that Benjamin tackled the question of humour and how Céline used it to his advantage, often in the most unsavory of ways. In “The Bohème”, the first essay on Baudelaire in his book-length study of the poet, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (1973), Benjamin stresses presciently, again with direct reference to Céline, how humour or what he calls the “*culte de la blague*” and fascism are by no means mutually exclusive; in fact, the former is “integral” to the latter’s propaganda efforts (14). As Nicholas Hewitt puts it, summarizing Benjamin’s point:

Céline’s anti-Semitism, from *Bagatelles pour un massacre* onwards, was always devious, self-protective, camouflaged, and for that reason ambiguous: the epitome of that tantalisingly elusive quality of fascist propaganda [...] The fascist writer becomes innocent victim: victim because unjustly persecuted, and persecuted because the innocence and playful quality of his language have been misinterpreted by humourless readers. (Hewitt, 96)

Benjamin’s line of argument was echoed by Jean-Paul Sartre in “Portrait de l’antisémite”, which was published in his 1954 book, *Réflexions sur la question juive*. In this essay, Sartre describes how the antisemite strategically disregards even the pretense of rhetorical, discursive, or communicative decorum; the manifest absurdity of their modes of argumentation is a feature, not a bug, of their discourse. One passage in particular from Sartre’s essay has received much attention in recent years, and was cited, for example, by Jeet Heer (2016) in a widely shared piece in *The New Republic* on far right trolls in the United States. In the original French, Sartre writes:

Ne croyez pas que les antisémites se méprennent tout à fait sur l’absurdité de ces réponses. Ils savent que leurs discours sont légers, contestables ; mais ils s’en amusent, c’est leur adversaire qui a le devoir d’user sérieusement des mots puisqu’il croit aux mots ; eux, ils ont *le droit* de jouer. Ils aiment même à jouer avec le discours car, en donnant des raisons bouffonnes, ils jettent le discrédit sur le sérieux de leur interlocuteur ; ils sont de mauvaise foi avec délices, car il s’agit pour eux, non pas de persuader par de bons arguments, mais d’intimider ou de désorienter. (23)

For Sartre, the antisemite’s knowing unseriousness is an attempt to arrogate to themselves what we might call a “joker’s veto” on the necessity of good faith in dialogue. The antisemite is fully aware that under conventional discursive conditions they are largely powerless, and so they must try to recalibrate the rules to their advantage.

¹¹ Gide is of course here invoking the argument from madness. Clinical readings of a “delirious” Céline have also been used as a means of exculpating him from responsibility for his racism and antisemitism.

Sartre was writing, of course, after the war, and so his analysis is essentially retrospective. As Roussin remarks: “[e]n 1938, très rares étaient les écrivains à même de comprendre la signification réelle du mouvement de dérision qui était en train d’emporter la société” (132). Those who did voice concern included figures like Georges Bernanos, Jean Giraudoux and Raymond Queneau.¹² It is to the latter whom I now turn, and in particular to a short essay from which Roussin quotes, and which was published by Queneau in *Volontés* under the title, “L’humour et ses victimes” (1938).¹³ Queneau extrapolates—inadvertently, of course—from Benjamin’s comment that there exists a relationship between humour and political malice, which is cynically camouflaged under the ostensibly benign façade of comedy. Especially compelling in his essay, and which Roussin underscores, is the genealogy or lineage that Queneau traces between forms of humour encouraged by the Dadaists and Surrealists and those of antidemocratic reactionaries of the 1930s. Queneau writes:

[...] une fois que l’on s’est bien mis à l’abri, on se croit indélogeable. L’humour, le vrai, imposant le sérieux par le comique, il est aisé pour des roublards de se prétendre sérieux ou comiques selon les occasions : c’est un bienfait lointain de la dialectique, bienfait d’autant plus appréciable que les dits roublards n’ont en réalité rien de sérieux à proposer. Ils ont fini par envelopper du rien avec du moins que rien. Se tenir dans une attitude constante de refus ricanant vis-à-vis de toute chose existante n’est pas, il est vrai, à la portée de tout le monde [...] par ailleurs, cette attitude, loin de participer à quelque valeur suprême n’est que l’assez pauvre expression de certaines conditions économique-historiques et l’après-guerre vit confluer certains sous-produits de Dada et les réjouissances montmartroises [...] avec ça, l’excuse est facile. (82)

As Sartre later did in his “Portrait de l’antisémite”, Queneau is here describing those “roublards” who traffic in certain kinds of humour as a way of conferring on themselves impunity for whatever they might say; “[q]uoi qu’ils fassent, l’excuse est prête”, as he puts it (82). Humour in this mode simply becomes a catch-all excuse: “commettent-ils une saloperie, c’est par l’humour [...] commettent-ils une lâcheté, c’est aussi par humour” (82). Humour, Queneau feared, was being dangerously monopolized in this period by its most misanthropic, cynical, and irresponsible exponents: those whose goals were “purement[s] destructeur[s]” (84). What allowed this, Queneau implies, is the fact that humour was still considered to be either innocuous—insofar as it pertained to politics at all—or resolutely on the side of emancipation. Hence André Breton, drawing on Freud and the Rabelaisian tradition, could extol its apparently revolutionary virtues in his *Anthologie de l’Humour noir* as late as 1940.¹⁴ Yet as Roussin points out, Breton’s Pollyannaish account ignores “la

12 See Georges Bernanos (1939), *Scandale de la vérité : Essais, pamphlets, articles et témoignages*; Jean Giraudoux (1941), “Caricature et satire”, *Littérature*, 147-148; and Raymond Queneau, “L’humour et ses victimes”, *Volontés*, 2, January 20th 1938, later published in *Le voyage en Grèce*, 80-88.

13 It goes without saying, of course, that Queneau himself was far from some humourless killjoy who would have sought to dismiss comedy and its significance. Indeed, as Henri Godard (2020) put it recently, “[d]ans l’image quelque peu flottante qui a été longtemps celle de Queneau dans l’opinion, le rire tient toujours la première place, comme il est encore aujourd’hui la première réaction des lecteurs qui découvrent son œuvre” (231).

14 For a critique of the view that certain varieties of humour, and especially that of a Rabelaisian, “carnavalesque” kind, are by definition emancipatory or productively subversive, see Eric Griffiths’ lecture, “Beasts”, published recently in the collection, *If Not Critical*, 65-85. Griffiths argues that Mikhail Bakhtin’s reading of Rabelais – itself an influence on Julia Kristeva’s account of Céline in *Pouvoirs de l’horreur* (1980) – in his influential book, *Rabelais and His World* (1965), is premised on a historically dubious account of laughter and comedy’s political valence in the medieval period and beyond. More specifically, Griffiths attacks Bakhtin’s presumptive conflation of laughter and the carnivalesque with benevolence. Thus had comedy become “for many critics the ‘nice guy’ of the literary world – affable, acquiescent, endlessly forgiving, joyous etc.” (73) For Roussin,

part de violence et de férocité destructrices que le rire pouvait contenir”, preferring instead to emphasize “sa dimension *libératrice, sublime et élevée*” (132). Even without the benefit of hindsight, Queneau, long before Sartre, recognized that a post-war nihilistic spirit of which Dadaist and Surrealist iconoclasm were but one manifestation might leave a dangerous and exploitable void in its wake.¹⁵ “Tout ce qui est grand ayant été nié, il ne reste plus qu’eux”, he wrote (84).

Given Queneau’s essay was published in January 1938, one of “eux” was very likely Céline, whose explosive and best-selling *Bagatelles pour un massacre* had appeared just one month earlier. I will now turn to this text and point to some of its features that have been identified as humorous. This will *not* entail any qualitative judgement on whether or not there is something actually funny about this text. Rather, I am interested in those aspects of *Bagatelles* that would lead somebody like Philippe Sollers, a champion of Céline as a writer but far from an apologist for the kinds of ideology he espoused, to write, apropos of the pamphlet: “c’est un livre que l’on peut juger abominable, mais auquel on rit malgré soi” (2009: 11). Sollers, interestingly, refers back to Gide, noting the latter had assumed that the book “était une blague”, as if this interpretation was some paragon of critical rectitude regarding this particular text.

Anchoring Sollers’ reading seems to be a view that humour is essentially redemptive and can never be truly pernicious. Undeniably, there are sections of *Bagatelles*, which I will now sketch, that are imbued by Céline with textual and rhetorical features—extreme hyperbole and exaggeration; absurdity and caricature; forms of irony and parody that are often disarmingly self-reflexive and self-contradictory—that in his other writings elicit hilarity and are celebrated for doing so. To claim otherwise, indeed, would be to hive off the pamphlets as somehow aberrant vis-à-vis his other published literary works, a critical move whose disingenuity Philippe Muray exposed in his 1981 book-length essay, *Céline*. Yet the question that ought to be posed when approaching these rhetorical strategies is: does it matter if he is joking? An assumption that we should reject is that by merely pointing out the presence of humour or elements of levity in a text like *Bagatelles*, we are somehow attenuating Céline’s responsibility for whatever nefarious use to which it is then put. If anything, it is through spotlighting where and how he instrumentalizes humour’s ambiguity that we might achieve a critically rigorous appraisal of Céline’s pamphlets and their impact. This line of argumentation is close to Philip Watts’s critique of what he called the “postmodern Céline.” For Watts, the historically revisionist ideology that Céline’s later works sought to convey—in particular, *D’un château l’autre*—was reliant on “textual strategies of fragmentation and self-reflexivity” (210-11). As Watts points out, “it is not by discounting” these tactics and reverse engineering, as it were, the texts into something like historical coherence, that we arrive at a satisfying “historical or ideological reading of his works.” Rather:

It is precisely when Céline’s texts seem most displaced and heterogeneous and when they most consciously draw attention to the writing process – when, in

Breton’s heavy emphasis on the salutary dimensions of laughter is itself a symptom of this kind of assumption. It should be noted that this is a relatively recent apprehension of laughter and its psycho-social valence, which has long been contested. Many of those who have written philosophically on laughter across history, including Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, Descartes, Freud and Bergson, were often highly critical of its role in culture and society, for laughter was very often an expression of scorn, ridicule, malice, or derision; it was usually seen as an attempt to assert one’s superiority over another, as Hobbes, for instance, argued (*Leviathan*, I. 6).

15 As an example of this we could here cite Tristan Tzara’s declaration in his 1918 Dada manifesto: “I say unto you: there is no beginning and we do not tremble, we are not sentimental. We are a furious wind, tearing the dirty linen of clouds, preparing the great spectacle of disaster, fire, decomposition. We will put an end to mourning and replace tears by sirens screeching from one continent to another.” See Tzara, 140.

other words, they most distinctly open themselves to a postmodern reading – that they are also most loaded with a troubling historical and political meaning. (210-11)

Mutatis mutandis, it is where Céline's texts are at their most ridiculous, untruthful, and absurd that they are perhaps most politically and ideologically menacing, for their veneer of comedy and choreographed ambiguity is insidiously operative in promoting their hateful message. A naïve Gide overlooked this entirely, instead insisting that *Bagatelles* be read as "une farce énorme", which was meant, in Swiftian fashion, to "ridiculise[r] et discrédite[r] l'antisémitisme" (Desanges, 1978; 88-89), rather than propagate its noxious agenda and, if possible, circumvent censure.

Hyperbole stretched to the point of nonsense is the most obvious "humorous" feature of *Bagatelles* that might provoke such an interpretation. One of the more outrageous examples is a passage in which he classifies a transhistorical array of writers and artists, including Montaigne, Racine, Stendhal, Zola, Cézanne, and Maupassant, as being all "Jewish" or "Jewified" writers ("enjuivés") (*Bagatelles* 125). In *L'École des cadavres* (1938), which followed *Bagatelles*, he went even further, ludicrously accusing Charles Maurras, Jacques Doriot, and François de la Rocque, themselves antisemites—albeit of a less virulent and racialized tenor—of being "accomplices" of the Jews, writing:

Nos redresseurs nationaux, les hommes comme la Rocque, comme Doriot, Maurras, Bailby, Marin, la suite... [...] C'est en somme les complices des Juifs, des empoisonneurs, des traîtres [...] le Juif et la chair de leur chair. (133)

As Nicholas Hewitt (1996) argues, the transparent absurdity of such passages does not in any meaningful sense lessen Céline's culpability, for it allows him (as propagandist) to have it both ways: "to implant the seeds of hatred by disguising the serious as a joke" (29). In a later article (2003), Hewitt described this as Céline's "insurance policy against further retribution, allowing him precisely the alibi of irony" (32). Surely the author of *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, as someone like Gide might have reasoned, could not actually believe such rubbish?

It is hard to ignore the resonances here with more contemporary deployments of humour and jokes by the neo-fascist right, especially online. Writing in the *London Review of Books* (2016), Richard Seymour describes contemporary internet trolls' "innovation" as having been "to add a delight in nonsense and detritus: calculated illogicality, deliberate misspellings, an ironic recycling of cultural nostalgia, sedimented layers of opaque references and in-jokes." Moreover, he writes that "[t]rolls are distinguished from their predecessors by seeming not to recognize any limits." Céline and his popularity in the 1930s France confounds this, for *Bagatelles* contains all the elements that Seymour mentions here.

First, there is "calculated illogicality". Alice Kaplan, whom I mentioned earlier, has written of this in relation to *Bagatelles*: "Céline", she writes, "has a talent for cancelling out his most meaningful errors [...] if you quote an anti-Semitic passage, chances are you can find another sentence in the same paragraph or chapter, or certainly in the next book, that will contradict it" (107). Régis Tettamanzi, author of one of the most detailed and incisive studies of Céline's pamphlets in Kaplan's wake (1999), has called this Céline's "logophagie": a manipulative discursive manoeuvre whereby the narrator's voice is "dévotée par celle d'autrui". He categorizes this as "pur mensonge rhétorique" (427-31).

Second, there is "deliberate misspelling". Nicholas Hewitt (1987) has pointed to the clearly self-conscious and persistent erroneous spelling of Céline's notorious antisemitic forerunner, Édouard Drumont, as "Drummont." This is not to mention the many scabrous and frequently adolescent neologisms, solecisms, and puns interleaving *Bagatelles* and its

sequels, such as those denoting Léon Blum (“Bite-Blum”, “Bloom-Bloom”, “Blaoum”, “Bloum”) and his education minister in the Popular Front, who was later murdered, Jean Zay (“je vous Zay”). In the case of Drumont, as Raymond Bach (1992) has suggested, there is implicit in Céline’s irreverence an anxiety of influence (120): the latter means to mock the institutional forefather that his pamphlet and its “vulgarized antisemitism” has set out to topple.¹⁶ More broadly, the shocking violence of Céline’s antisemitic texts was a reaction against what he saw as the milquetoast “antisémitisme de salon” of a previous generation—that of Maurras and Daudet, for example. This dynamic is echoed today in the alt-right’s scorched-earth insurgency against the very (from their perspective) sclerotic conservative “establishment” whose prejudices, pieties, and policies nevertheless laid the groundwork for their ascendancy and the latter’s own supersession. As Angela Nagle puts it in her 2017 book, *Kill All Normies*, which charts this evolution in contemporary reactionary and far right sensibility: the alt-right’s mode of expression “is more in the spirit of the foul-mouthed comment-thread trolls than it is of Bible study, more *Fight Club* than family values” (57).

Third, Céline’s pamphlet is abrim with “sedimented layers of opaque references and in-jokes” in the form of blatant plagiarism and appropriation. As Kaplan painstakingly documented in her 1987 study, *Relevé des sources et citations de Bagatelles pour un massacre*, much of the pamphlet is strikingly unoriginal, save its violence, recycling the hoariest of antisemitic tropes from a hinterland of hacks, grifters, and opportunists. This reverses what we might expect: Céline, the *ne plus ultra* among antisemites, purloining his acolytes rather than the other way around. Again, one might compare this to today’s much discussed “echo chambers” of recursively shared fake news and disinformation, where content seems to gather virulence in proportion to its viral propagation.

Innervating all this is a tone that Seymour and others who have written on the topic of contemporary online trolling nonetheless insist is something frighteningly newfangled: a disastrous, “incipiently fascistic” (171) byproduct of social media and the anonymity its various platforms afford. This tone is defined by a *schadenfreude* of the most extreme kind and a rhetorical mayhem over which one will invariably struggle to gain critical purchase. Yet are terms like “the lulz” and “shitposting” used by contemporary critics like Seymour or Whitney Phillips (2015) not merely novel iterations of more inveterate discursive, rhetorical, and affective strategies? Are the “lulz”, that which is supposed to ultimately motivate a troll’s extreme cruelty, and which Phillips defines as “acute amusement in the face of someone else’s distress, embarrassment, or rage” (57), not a contemporary version of the “rire carnassier” or “rire destructeur” (131) of which Roussin, mentioned earlier, has written?

What he and others already cited want to foreground, broadly, is that laughter is (and has for long been) a contested and ambivalent affective response or mode: as is often said, laughter, humour, and ridicule can punch either “up” or “down.” In the pamphlets, Céline betrays the misanthropic comedy he had so honed in his earlier works and capitulates to a sadistic variety of humour whose target, tragically, becomes more and more circumscribed, however vague his use of the term “Jew” and its vile cognate epithets. The essential comedy of *Voyage au bout de la nuit* and *Mort à crédit* had been that nobody is spared our indiscriminately apportioned misery-in-common; Céline’s humour in these works did not so much punch “up” or “down” as punch everywhere, everyone, and everything. As Justin E. H. Smith puts it in his recent book, *Irrationality: A History of the Dark Side of Reason* (2019):

16 See Raymond Bach, “Céline, Anti-Semitism and the Limits of Textual Subversion”, 120. See also *L’École des cadavres*, p. 33: “[j]e n’ai rien découvert. Aucune prétention. Simple vulgarisation, virulente, stylisée.”

All good humour that is cruel is also self-cruel, and always remains aware of the fact that whatever is being said of the other loops back, at least potentially, upon oneself. To laugh at, say, the unattractiveness or illness of others, or to laugh at it wisely is, it might be suggested, to do so in a way that recognizes that the person who is laughing may just as easily take the place of the joke's butt. (233)

Smith confides that he was once willing to defend traditions of humour and comedy even when perceived as having "gone too far" on the above grounds. While fundamentally ambivalent and thus open to abuse, on balance humour and its spirit might potentially serve liberatory ends. For him, this was especially the case with the genealogy of French humour to which a publication like *Charlie Hebdo* pledged fealty—that of Rabelais, Voltaire, Daumier and Jarry.

Yet following the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States and the aftermath of the attacks on the offices of *Charlie Hebdo*, Smith came to renounce what he now saw as his erstwhile naivety. In a 2019 op-ed published in the *New York Times*, Smith wrote that too easily is "one person's satire another's propaganda." The means of propagation of information on social media platforms preclude any of the disclaimers and provisos that served to frame, and thus render tenable, the kind of humour that satirical publications like *Charlie Hebdo* expound. Most worryingly for Smith, as Queneau and others mentioned earlier had themselves realized long before, was that the world of political reality had come to ominously cross-pollinate with textual fantasy: "alt-right personalities were now gleefully acknowledging that their successes [...] relied precisely on the inability of media consumers to distinguish between the sincere and the jocular, between an ironic display of a swastika and a straightforward one." Here we are back with Brasillach: "nous ne demandons que la permission de nous amuser." Such claims are an attempt by the self-appointed joker to slyly reframe a scenario as demonstrating not their own, but their critics' shortcomings: the joker is a mere joker, harmless by definition. Their opponents, however, are po-faced prigs and killjoys, as the stereotype goes, who simply "can't take a joke" or don't "get it." No wonder we are admonished to disengage: "don't feed the trolls!", as the dictum goes.

My intention here is not to argue that Céline is merely some internet troll *avant la lettre*; indeed, his status as a fiction writer firmly within the French literary canon is surely enough to distinguish him from the average Twitter guttersnipe. Rather, following the Jamesonian exhortation to "always historicize!", I have sought to demonstrate the extent to which Céline used humour and his own depravity as a way of—hopefully for him—obviating the very real possibility of his literary and public oblivion, much as an array of controversialists, political, literary, and otherwise try to do today.¹⁷ This dead-end strategy was in large measure something foisted upon Céline: "je ne peux pas descendre plus bas", he told André Parinaud in a 1953 interview. Or as the narrator of *Nord* (1960) writes:

Le petit succès de mon existence c'est d'avoir tout de même réussi ce tour de force qu'ils se trouvent tous d'accord, un instant, droite, gauche, centre, sacristies, loges, cellules, charniers, le comte de Paris, Joséphine, ma tante Odile, Kroukroubezeff, l'abbé Tirelire, que je suis la plus grande ordure vivante ! de Dunkerque à Tamanrasset, d'U.R.S.S. en U.S.A... (494)

17 A figure like Michel Houellebecq is perhaps closest to Céline in this regard, albeit not as a writer so much as *qua* media strategist. A recent example of the dynamic I sketch above is Houellebecq's provocative article, "Donald Trump is a Good President", which appeared in *Harper's Magazine*, hardly a hotbed for supporters of the current US President. The article was for long one of the website's "most read", yet given the political profile of the average *Harper's* reader, its popularity is unlikely to have been for reasons of ideological sympathy. See Michel Houellebecq, "Donald Trump is a Good President".

The status of being almost universally despised, “la plus grande ordure vivante”, is described here, oddly, as a “success”; elsewhere, “dans le fond [...] idéale.”¹⁸ Readers, he likely reasoned, even before he had outed himself as a uniquely virulent antisemite, had hardly flocked to him for comfort or agreeableness in the first place, but perhaps for other, darker reasons; some might even have chosen to read him not in spite of his monstrous political positions, but, disconcertingly, *because* of them. Accordingly, he could “engross by appalling” (122), as Michael André Bernstein (1992) put it. This antagonistic approach might not only continue to appeal, but also allow him to perform the very impunity he was seeking to requisition himself through these performances. While rarely addressing the issue of his antisemitism head-on in either the interviews or in his later writings, he behaved and wrote in such a manner that made him seem, even in his later guise, in no way incompatible with the kind of swivel-eyed loon that we imagine was behind *Bagatelles*. Thus could he retain and build on his lurid allure, all the while refusing to address the specificities of his antisemitism, discussion of which in the interviews, at least, he tended to filibuster with long monologues on other topics.

By the end of his life, Céline was an adept at sending up, “avec une superbe mauvaise foi, les sorniseries de la pose” (14), as Philippe Sollers (2009) put it. Sollers gets the joke, and this is the tonal caveat which for him lets Céline off the hook. Nonetheless, one can realize how the latter mocks his own attempts at seeking redemption while yet recognizing that by doing so, he is merely cynically fomenting as much confusion as he can. Hence he can write in *Féerie pour une autre fois I*, ventriloquizing his detractors, “son délire est simulé !” or “oh, mais au fait ! vous évadez !” (52), while conscious of the fact that he *does* exaggerate and he *does* evade and prevaricate.¹⁹ Céline is here being, to borrow James Wood’s (2009) coinage, “unreliably unreliable”; he dangles before us our own confused groping in the dark; absent are any clear signs of “authorial flagging” (7), leaving open the possibility of a double negation: that he is lying that he is lying, or is lying that he lied in the first place: “pauvres gens ! des siècles vous resteriez perplexes... nous mystifia-t-il ? fia pas ? drôle fut-il ?” (*Féerie*, 116).

This approach to his reading public presents a major difficulty for those who might wish Céline were banished from literary history *tout court*. Despite all we know about his antisemitism and other indefensible views on the back of past and recent work by literary scholars and historians, he remains nevertheless among the most read authors in France.²⁰ Indeed, in a recent survey by *Le Monde* that asked some 26,000 of its readers to list their favourite books, Céline’s *Voyage au bout de la nuit* was placed second, after J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series, and just ahead of Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu*.²¹ While many of these readers are of course drawn to him for his vaunted literary style, we should be slow to dismiss other factors, even the notion that, disturbingly, he might be read in part because of what he represents: the proscribed, the taboo, the *persona non grata*. If an element of his appeal is precisely his extremity, it is quixotic to think that simply by portraying him as monstrous in as historically accurate and truthful a manner, we might rid ourselves of Céline, he who remains quite uniquely both “infréquentable” and “incontournable.”

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¹⁸ Céline, quoted by Jérôme Meizoz, in “Posture et biographie : *Semmelweis* de L.-F. Céline”.

¹⁹ See Greg Hainge, 19–20.

²⁰ The most obvious example of this kind of scholarship is Durauffour and Taguieff’s monumental, *Céline, la race, le Juif: légende littéraire et vérité historique*. This “livre à charge” sets out to conclusively debunk all varieties of apologetics on behalf of Céline and to show him as being truly deserving of the status of “infréquentable.”

²¹ “De « Harry Potter » à « Voyage au bout de la nuit », les 101 romans préférés des lecteurs du « Monde »”.

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