War and Rebellion in the Work of Louis-Ferdinand Céline and Sebastian Barry

Eamon Maher

Technological University Dublin, eamon.maher@tudublin.ie

Follow this and additional works at: https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ittbusbks

Part of the Other English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Business and Humanities at ARROW@TU Dublin. It has been accepted for inclusion in Books/Chapters by an authorized administrator of ARROW@TU Dublin. For more information, please contact yvonne.desmond@tudublin.ie, arrow.admin@tudublin.ie, brian.widdis@tudublin.ie.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 License
WAR OF THE WORDS:
LITERARY REBELLION
IN FRANCE AND IRELAND

Publication du CRBC Rennes-2
Université Européenne de Bretagne

A publication of the CRBC, Rennes-2,
European University of Brittany
INTRODUCTION

Revolution and rebellion have always been at the heart of literature. From the earliest stories of Prometheus and Pandora's Box and Adam's taking of the apple in the Garden of Eden, down through literary and cultural history, the rebellion of the individual against some form of unjust system has been an abiding literary trope. Some of the greatest characters in literature across all cultures have been rebels, and some of the most resonant lines from literature have been those wherein characters voiced their desire to break free of a system which they found oppressive or constricting. One only has to think of John Milton's Satan and his resonant lines in *Paradise Lost*:

The mind is its own place, and in itself
Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.
What matter where, if I be still the same,
And what I should be, all but less than he
Whom thunder hath made greater? Here at least
We shall be free; th' Almighty hath not built
Here for his envy, will not drive us hence:
Here we may reign secure; and, in my choice,
To reign is worth ambition, though in hell:
Better to reign in hell than to serve in heaven.¹

Here we see the image of rebellion as beginning in the mind and then progressing into the world of social and cultural interaction. To personify Satan in this way was quite radical and of course this portrayal has the famous imprimatur of another great Romantic rebel, William Blake:

Note, the reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of
Angels & God, and at liberty when of Devils & Hell, is because he was a true Poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it.²

As a medium for the expression of an alternative viewpoint, literature has long been the home of rebellion. Its resonant ambiguity and foregrounding of the aesthetic dimension of language can allow it to voice political perspectives that, in a different genre, could well have negative consequences for the author. Also, Milton is able to voice the negative connotations of rebellion while at the same time making a subtle point about the fear of change that is to be found in his own revolutionary culture while ostensibly writing about the depths of a mythological and imaginary hell:

He above the rest
In shape and gesture proudly eminent,
Stood like a tower; his form had yet not lost
All her original brightness, nor appeared
Less than archangel ruined, and the excess
Of glory obscured: as when the sun new risen
Looks through the horizontal misty air
Shorn of his beams, or from behind the moon
In dim eclipse, disastrous twilight sheds
On half the nations, and with fear of change
Perplexes the monarchs.

The same can be said of Shakespeare, who has given voice to some of the most emblematic images of rebellion and revolution in literature, but like Milton he too points to the darker consequences of rebellion:

[Aside] The Prince of Cumberland! that is a step
On which I must fall down, or else o'erleap,
For in my way it lies. Stars, hide your fires;
Let not light see my black and deep desires:
The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be,
Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see.

By the end of the play, the image of the doomed rebel, risking all on one final act is expressed in the ringing lines:

---


3 *Paradise Lost*, I, II, 499-509.

Arm, arm, and out!
If this which he avouches does appear,
There is not flying hence nor tarrying here.
I gin to be aweary of the sun,
And wish the estate o’ the world were now undone.
Ring the alarum-bell! Blow, wind! come, wrack!
At least we’ll die with harness on our back.

In an Irish context, perhaps the most famous rebellion in Modernist literature as Stephen Dedalus uses a translation of the very language of the Catholic Church, Latin, to voice his personal rebellion against the strictures of that Church, and the allied constraints of identitarian politics. In keeping with the rebellion of Paradise Lost, Stephen is taught about the rebellion of Lucifer but from a very Catholic and religious perspective, and the rebellion here is seen from a theological perspective: “Theologians consider that it was the sin of pride, the sinful thought conceived in an instant: non serviam: I will not serve. That instant was his ruin”6. Stephen learns this lesson but not in the way his teacher might have expected. Later in the book, as he ponders the role of the artist in society, he gives voice to the words of Lucifer but in a very altered context: “I will not serve that in which I no longer believe, whether it call itself my home, my fatherland, or my church”7.

Of course, in all three of these examples, the cultural is always already imbricated in the political, as we can see in Milton’s subtext about the consequences of political change, and Shakespeare’s nod towards James the Second in Macbeth, and of course in Stephen’s mention of the term ‘fatherland’, with all of the attendant associations of political patriarchy that this term invokes. And the same is true of the issues discussed in the present book.

In the French context, literary creation has always been linked to rebellion in one way or another. When one considers how Flaubert set about writing a novel that would be held together by style alone and where the novelist would remain like God in nature, always present but nowhere visible, it is not an exaggeration to say that he was breaking with the approach of his illustrious

---

6 Macbeth, V (v) 38-51.
8 A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, p.283.
predecessors, Balzac and Zola. Flaubert is only one in a long list of French writers who saw in the art of creation a rebellious act. Baudelaire expressed his desire in *Les Fleurs du Mal* in the following manner:

\[ \text{Plonger au fond du gouffre, Enfer ou Ciel, qu'importe?} \]
\[ \text{Au fond de l'inconnu pour trouver du nouveau!} \]

Clearly, innovation and art are synonymous for many artists. Baudelaire’s quest to discover what was new and original is typical of the manner in which French writers sought to push the boundaries of language to their limits. Joyce and Beckett felt comfortable in a Parisian environment where experimentation was the order of the day and where writers were not afraid to declare themselves dissatisfied with the power of traditional language to convey reality. Hence, it is no surprise to have Nathalie Sarraute writing about ‘l’ère du soupçon’ in the 1950s. By the 20th century, writers and critics were becoming increasingly suspicious of all the carefully constructed mythology associated with literary traditions. A writer like Jean Sullivan (1913-1980) gives voice to the profound dissatisfaction with traditional approaches in a novel like *Joie errante* (1974), where the narrator makes no attempt to hide his presence in the text and provokes the reader with remarks like the following:

\[ \text{Votre trouble m’émeut. Tous ces va-et-vient dans l’espace et le temps... Vous aimeriez un ouvrage plein qui vous happe ! Je ne veux pas mentir à ce point. Pourquoi me laisserai-je conduire par la mécanique d’une intrigue? [...] Pourquoi vous tendre ce piège, tandis que je me tiendrais derrière la paroi lisse de l’écriture, glace sans tain, à vous regarder vous regardant, combles par mes impostures?} \]

Sullivan and his generation of French writers display a marked distrust of accepted literary canons. Devices such as plot, organic development of characters, objective narration, are all abandoned by Sullivan for a type of conversational style where the point of view alternates between the narrator and the characters. Similarly, one often encounters in his work the breakdown of syntax and punctuation as the novelist searches desperately to find the style that will best capture the intense experiences he is trying to describe. “Pour trouver du nouveau”, to repeat Baudelaire’s phrase, it is necessary to break

---

with the past, to rebel against what others have done, to start again from zero. Writing about the Nouveau Roman at the end of the 1950s, Olivier de Magny stated:

> Si nos romanciers actuels, entrés dans l'ère du soupçon, dans l'ère où tout est soupçonné faux, ont un trait en commun, le voici : ils écrivent tous quand une connaissance véritable des hommes et du monde n'est plus possible, quand la vérité n'est plus possible.²

It is at such moments of uncertainty and doubt that great literature can emerge, as was most certainly the case in France in the latter half of the 20th century, a time of rebelliousness and innovation. French writers have always played a pivotal role in the political and intellectual life of their country in a way that their Irish counterparts have not tended to do to the same extent. In the 20th century alone, the names of Bernanos, Mauriac, Proust, Gide, Sartre, Camus, de Beauvoir, Genet, Céline, Drieu and Malraux are synonymous with agitation of one kind or another, whether it be to do with the cultural, social or political domains. In his study of Occupied France, Frederic Spotts makes the following observation:

> Failure to understand the importance of culture in a nation's life was not a mistake Hitler made. Culture was not peripheral but central to his Occupation policy. In the arts he saw a narcotic to be used to pacify the French and make them amenable to collaboration while he was busy with his war in the Soviet Union. ... But he had a further aim. Hitler's racial theories compelled him to assert German cultural supremacy over the French and in that way to challenge their self-confidence and to weaken their sense of national identity.¹¹

It is doubtful if Hitler succeeded in the latter objective. While some writers and artists were happy to appear to accept the Nazi presence in their country, many others used the tools of their trade, most often words, to fight German attempts at acculturation. Defending their cultural patrimony became a rallying cry among many French intellectuals who jealously guarded their intellectual independence. In this, there are more than a few similarities with their Irish

---

equivalents who, while apparently assimilating the culture of the colonial power, nevertheless retained many traits that were quintessentially Irish. Thus Joyce’s special form of Hiberno-English came to be acknowledged as being distinctively ‘Irish’ rather than ‘English’. Joyce thus corresponds to the model contained in that well-coined phrase, “The Empire wrote back!”

Long before the 20th century, however, Ireland had looked to France for its inspiration. Connections between Ireland and France have been long-established at all levels of societal, linguistic and cultural interaction. In terms of historical specificity, the French Revolution has long been seen as a template for the actions and ideological position of the United Irishmen whose 1798 rebellion in Ireland owed a lot, in both form and substance, the revolution that begun in Paris on July 14th, 1789.

These connections were both political and cultural. Theobald Wolfe Tone said that political position was influenced largely by the French Revolution, which, as he wrote later, ‘changed in an instant the politics of Ireland’, dividing political thinkers from that moment into ‘aristocrats and democrats’12. Perhaps the central socio-political influence of the French Revolution was the libertarian and emancipatory thrust of its informing secular Enlightenment ethic. The writings of Enlightenment thinkers were disseminated thoroughly throughout different parts of Ireland, especially in the North of Ireland, where they found a receptive reading public among Presbyterians. The work of Tom Paine was especially influential, with four Irish newspapers reprinting The Rights of Man, a work labelled by Tone as the Koran of Belfast13. Enlightenment theories of society and government, embodied in practice by the French Revolution, offered an example of how a seemingly stratified and hierarchical society could be completely changed according to the will of the people. They also offered an ethical demand that alterity, in the shape of the people, be protected by the force of law.

It was through the shaping of this will of the people that the United Irishmen sought to achieve their aims. Drawing again on the example of revolutionary France, the press would be a forum wherein conflicting ideas

12 William Theobald Wolfe Tone (ed.), Life of Theobald Wolfe Tone, 2 volumes, (Washington, 1826), I, p.43.
and ideologies would be debated and mediated. They were intent on creating a climate of informed opinion, analogous to Habermas's culturally produced social sphere, and again, theirs was a centrifugal impulse drawing comparative inspiration from the revolutions, and revolutionary philosophies of America and France. Indeed, this form of educational improvement was central to the Enlightenment project, specifically Kant's “What is Enlightenment?”, where what came to be known as the credo of the Enlightenment, Sapere Aude, “have courage to use your own reason”, was first enunciated.14

That most of the sources of this Enlightenment knowledge came from locations outside Ireland further underpins the cosmopolitan impetus of the United Irishmen, and the French connection. To this end, pamphlets, which distilled the writings of Enlightenment thinkers, were distributed among the peasants of the north of Ireland, between 1795 and 1797, which contained the writings of Godwin, Locke (especially his notion of the implied contract between ruler and ruled), and Paine as well as those of Voltaire and De Volney.15 The selection of writers distributed and read by the United Irishmen makes for an impressive list of liberal thinkers on social and political issues, and further reinforces the claim that their views on identity were necessarily pluralist—their aim was to broaden the notion of Irishness so that it might be inclusive of the different socio-religious traditions of Catholic, Protestant, and Dissenter. The Francophone origin of so many of these writers further underscores the point: Montesquieu, Schiller, Raynal, Condorcet, Rousseau, Diderot, Sieyès and de Montesquieu.

Print and reading were crucial to the disseminating of such ideas and the logistics of this enterprise were impressive, with a whole print-based culture set up to broadcast the United Irishmen’s agenda. Whelan cites at least fifty printers in Dublin, thirty four Irish provincial presses and some forty newspapers in print, all of whom were sympathetic to the United Irish cause. The United Irishmen’s own paper, the Northern Star, a vehicle for the spread of Enlightenment and revolutionary ideals, at its peak sold some 4,200 copies per

issue. It is reckoned that, due to collective reading of each copy by at least ten people, the effective readership was some 42,000\textsuperscript{17}. And of course there was also the prospect of a more practical form of French aid. Guy Beiner, in his book describing the effect of the landing of a French army under General Humbert in Killala Bay, county Mayo, on August 22, 1798, makes the point that “Songs hailing the imminent arrival of French troops on vessels prepared the ground for reception of radical ideologies influenced by the French Revolution and anticipated poetic descriptions in Irish of the French invasion attempts in 1796 and 1798”\textsuperscript{18}.

The revolution is paradigm-shift in terms of influence on Ireland, but it would be a mistake to locate this influence purely and simply in the historical past. As Slavoj Žižek notes, the ‘real’ effect of the French Revolution is more lasting:

> The real Event, the dimension of the Real, was not in the immediate reality of the violent events in Paris, but in how this reality appeared to observers and in the hopes thus awakened in them. The reality of what went on in Paris belongs to the temporal dimension of empirical history; the sublime image that generated enthusiasm belongs to Eternity.\textsuperscript{19}

And Walter Benjamin makes the point that the true task of Marxist historiography, apropos the French Revolution, is “to unearth the hidden potentialities (the utopian emancipatory potentials) which were betrayed in the actuality of revolution and in its final outcome (the rise of utilitarian market capitalism)”\textsuperscript{20}.

This collection is an embodiment of Žižek’s position that the French Revolution has been a significant influence on world culture. The chapters here, dealing with politics, literature and culture, will trace the connections and influences that exist in a Franco-Irish public and cultural sphere. It is our hope, as editors, that the collection will proceed, in a small way, the Žižekean idea of a fairer and more utopian present and future.

\textsuperscript{16} *The Tree of Liberty*, p.63.
\textsuperscript{17} *The Tree of Liberty*, p.66.
This current volume is the 5th in the annual series inaugurated by the Association for Franco-Irish Studies (AFIS). Like its predecessors, it is the fruit of a conference, this time the highly successful gathering at University College Cork in May 2009. Our sincere thanks go to all those who contributed to the success of this conference, most particularly Professor Grace Neville and Mary O’Rourke, whose organisational acumen has become legendary at this stage! The theme of ‘rebellion’ seemed most apposite at a venue located in the heart of ‘The Rebel County’, but there was no conflict in the unanimous appreciation among the conference delegates of the huge effort and good humour expended by Grace and Mary to ensure a most enjoyable stay in Cork.

Thanks also must go to all at the highly efficient TIR publications in Rennes2 for producing such an attractive tome so quickly. It would be remiss of us not to mention the superb international editorial board consisting of Yann Bévant, Scott Brewster, Anne Fogarty, Anne Goarzin, Peter Guy, Sylvie Mikowski, Paula Murphy, Grace Neville, Mary Pierse and James Rogers, all of whom worked tirelessly on vetting and proofing texts. Enfin, nous voulons exprimer notre sincère gratitude aux Services Culturels de l'Ambassade de France en Irlande pour leur généreuse aide financière des activités de l'AFIS.

EAMON MAHER and EUGENE O'BRIEN
When it comes to literary notoriety and the depiction of the Great War, the French writer Louis-Ferdinand Céline and his Irish counterpart Sebastian Barry would seem not to have a huge amount in common. Céline’s masterful *Voyage au bout de la nuit* was inspired by his personal experiences as a decorated war hero who subsequently chose to excoriate 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*, in the words of Tom Quinn, caused a storm of protest at the time of its publication in 1932 mainly because of the irreverence it displayed:

The memory of the Great War, like the later memory of the Holocaust, was kept, as it still is, with extreme solemnity. To laugh at the war and the memory of the war was to infringe a taboo. Céline’s laughter thus disturbs the sanctity of the collective war memory. He uses humour to strip it of its redemptive layers.¹

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), p.284. Quinn’s magisterial study, based on his doctoral dissertation, is the best available treatment of the role the Great War played in the composition of Céline’s masterpiece and is the inspiration of this chapter.
Not only was *Voyage* apparently poking fun at the memory of the Great War, but it was also doing so in a colloquial, slang-filled language that was completely revolutionary for the time. We will see that Céline felt he had to develop a new oral style that would be in keeping with the approach he wished to adopt, which was in essence one that sought to debunk the mythology surrounding a conflict that as a war veteran he felt had nothing to recommend it. Céline did not doubt the heroism of the soldiers in the trenches, their bravery under fire, their harrowing deaths. Rather, he saw the loss of so many lives (over three million died on the Western front alone) for a spurious cause both wasteful and degrading. The way in which this disgust is registered—and in this he is different from Barry—is through the development of a style that breaks with all literary norms. Henri Godard is one of the best analysts of Céline's use of language and he notes: 'Il est de ces livres qui surgissent dans l'histoire de la littérature en rupture avec la production contemporaine et qui s'imposent à l'instant. Avec les années, ce qu'ils perdent en pouvoir de scandale, ils le gagnent en profondeurs peu à peu découvertes.'

This is an important observation that states that a work like *Voyage* moves from its initial status as 'un succès de scandale' to reveal depths that take time to sink in. Godard's view is that the rebellion evident in Céline's language, which is a vital ingredient of *Voyage:*

*L'accent propre de Voyage au bout de la nuit est d'abord celui d'une formidable protestation, dont la force tient à la fois à la diversité des facteurs d'écrasement contre lesquels elle s'élève, et à la langue dans laquelle elle se formule, ce français populaire que Céline réintroduit dans la littérature.*

Sebastian Barry's *A Long Long Way* was published in 2005 and it highlighted in a vivid manner the Irish involvement in the Great War, an involvement that has caused embarrassment for those who would prefer to forget that thousands of Irish soldiers volunteered to fight on the side.

---

3 Godard, p.11.
of the Allies during this conflict. By juxtaposing the exploits of those who rebelled against British colonial rule during the 1916 Rising with the Irish soldiers who fought in the British armed forces in World War I, Barry succeeds in making his readers critically evaluate the motives of both groups. He also throws into question the issue of what constitutes a just war. His approach is obviously very different to that of Céline. His classical style is a joy to read and yet the horror of his subject matter and his exploration of what goes through men’s minds when faced with the prospect of death allows room for a fruitful comparative study.

The two novels treat of the Great War and the impact it exercises on the main protagonists, Bardamu and Willie Dunne, but in the case of the latter there is also the added issue of the 1916 Rising, a seismic event in Irish history. The Northern Ireland poet and critic Tom Paulin has stated his frustration with the obsession he observes in southern Irish culture in relation to the Rising. In his view, you cannot open The Irish Times or attend a cultural event without someone standing up and saying that their grandfather was in the Post Office in 1916. Some discussions of the uprising fail to take into account the fact that the insurgents did not enjoy popular support at the time for their actions. Declan Kiberd maintains that those who did take up arms had a definite grievance with British occupation: ‘The frustrations of all the fighters were cultural: they wanted a land in which Gaelic traditions would be fully honoured’. He continues: ‘They rose in the conviction that further involvement by Irish people in the Great War would lead to far more bloodshed than their Rising, which they hoped would take Ireland out of the war altogether’.

So there was a sense in which the leaders of 1916 were attempting to turn public opinion against Irish involvement in the Great War. If Willie Dunne’s and Bardamu’s experience is anything to go by, the horror of the

---

trenches would easily surpass the idealistic and fatally doomed Dublin rebellion. At least there was idealism among those who made a symbolic strike for freedom, heroism in the stoicism with which their leaders accepted their plight and faced up to execution. Their cause seemed noble to them, something that would be hard to say about the ordinary soldiers who were butchered during the Great War and who ended up, if they survived any length of time, wondering what really separated them from the soldiers at the other side of No Man’s Land. A number of factors contributed to the change in the public reaction to the 1916 rebels. First of these was the rash decision taken by the authorities to execute the leaders, who suddenly assumed the mantle of martyrs. But there was also the symbolism of their choice of Easter for the playing out of the street theatre they were initiating:

The selection of Easter Monday—when most British soldiers were on furlough at Fairyhouse Races—was not just a sound tactic, but another brilliant symbolization, since it reinforced Pearse’s idea of the cyclical nature of history. Easter brought renewal, spring-time, new life to a dead landscape: and so it helped to justify and explain all previous abortive uprisings, for it wove them into a wider narrative, a myth of fall, death and glorious redemption. 6

Céline’s hero, or anti-hero, Bardamu, enlists in the army after witnessing a group of soldiers marching past the café where he is seated with his friend, Arthur. Overcome with enthusiasm, he decides to join their ranks. Soon they are far from the cheers of civilians on the streets and Bardamu begins to regret his decision. But is too late: “They’d quietly shut the gate behind us civilians. We were caught like rats”. It is in this way that he inadvertently and rather foolishly finds himself in the midst of a most bloody conflict. The disillusionment kicks in quickly:

---

6 Kiberd, Inventing Ireland, p.207.
7 Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Journey to the End of the Night. Translated by Ralph Manheim (London: John Calder, 1988), p.16. All subsequent references will be to this edition, with the page numbers in brackets.
'No two ways about it. I was suddenly on the most intimate terms with war. I'd lost my virginity. You’ve got to be pretty much alone with her as I was then to get a good luck at her, the slut, full face and profile. A war had been switched on between us and the other side, and now it was burning!’ (19). In the case of Barry's Willie Dunne, the motivation for enlisting is nobler. He joins the Royal Dublin Fusillers because of his loyalty to the British monarch. His father, a Catholic member of the Dublin Metropolitan Police, a force that contained very few Catholics at the time, is proud of his son’s decision. The Dunnes belong to the Irish Catholic loyalist tradition, a group to which Barry's own family can also be traced, and a dilemma arises for them when events in Ireland (mainly revolving around the repercussions caused by 1916) begin to fuel anti-British sentiment, placing Willie's father in an awkward position vis-à-vis the angry citizens of Dublin and making Willie himself wonder if the cause to which he has signed up is fatally flawed.

Thousands of Irish nationalists joined the British army at the outbreak of World War I in the belief that such a display of loyalty would be rewarded at the end of the conflict by Home Rule being granted. The Dunnes, however, were not that keen on severing links with the British Crown. On arriving in Belgium, Willie notes:

'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.'

Such certainty wanes as the war progresses: 'When they came into their trench he felt small enough. The biggest thing there was the roaring of Death and the smallest thing was a man' (24). The enemy doesn’t seem all that different from those wearing the uniform of the Royal Fusillers. When Willie kills his first German soldier, he realizes that this

---

8 Sebastian Barry, *A Long Long Way* (London: Faber & Faber, 2005), pp.22-23. All subsequent references will be to this edition, with the page numbers in brackets.
man is a mere pawn in the German war machine. All the soldiers are
dehumanized by what they are forced to 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' (101). They experience all manner of pain and
horror, see things that no human eyes should have to contemplate. The
poisonous gas that curls menacingly in the trenches is described as 'a
long monster with yellow skin' (48), something at once threatening and
alluring. But then Willie realizes 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' (49).
Such thoughts must have struck many in similar circumstances. What
were they doing in such a hell? Was this the end of the world, the
apocalypse?

It is only natural when one returns home on leave after such
experiences as those endured by Willie that one should feel different,
changed. The violence that erupts on the streets of Dublin while he is
there throws Willie into added turmoil, however. The tracts of paper he
and other members of his regiment see stating the 1916 rebels' support
for their 'gallant allies in Europe' (95) evoke disbelief and anger. Are
they not representing their countrymen in the fight against these so-
called 'gallant allies'? Willie then witnesses the death of a 19 year-old
rebel who says to him: "I only came out to win a bit of freedom for
Ireland. ... You won't hold that against me?" (93) Everything now
becomes blurred. The sight of Dublin's buildings ablaze and the
Volunteers being rounded up stay with Willie and the other soldiers
as they return to their posting in Belgium. In an illuminating article
on Barry's portrayal of Irish history, Roy Foster notes the unjustified
attacks that have been made on the writer. For example, Foster takes
issue with John Kenny who in a review of A Long Long Way accused
Barry of providing 'in-service reading for a fairly standardized brand of
revisionism'. Another reviewer, Elizabeth Cullingford, claimed that he
was recognized as 'an ideological ally by the conservative British paper
the Daily Telegraph', a view that Foster considers equally unjust. He
argues instead that the 'complex layers of Barry's versions of Irish history [...] come more clearly into focus in A Long Long Way' and he further maintains that the writer's view of Ireland's part in the Empire 'is very far from a simple effort at rehabilitating a forgotten tradition'. There is still a residual reluctance among certain critics to accept a presentation of Irish history from what is a non-traditional viewpoint. For example, Barry's treatment of Michael Collins in other work as a charismatic lost leader is read by Cullingford as 'a way of attacking Republicanism, both the historical and the contemporary varieties'. Foster is of the view that it is doubtful that 'such a parti pris political judgement would be leveled at—for instance—Neil Jordan'. It is thus necessary to be aware that A Long Long Way, like Céline's Voyage, though to a far lesser degree, had the capacity to divide public opinion, especially in relation to its portrayal of historical events. The impact the Rising has on Irish soldiers serving in the British army is evident in their divided views on the matter. Willie questions his comrade in arms Jesse Kirwan about whom exactly the insurgents represent:

'Those volunteers you mentioned, your crowd', said Willie, 'were they the crowd firing at us?'

'What? No, you gammy fool, that's the other Volunteers. You got to keep up, William. We were one and the same up to the war breaking out, and then some of us said we could do what Redmond said and fight as Irish soldiers, you know, to save Europe, but a few of them—well, they didn't want that. You know. A handful really.' (95)

The situation was complex, even for those who lived through those times and were acquainted with the motives of various groups. While understandably annoyed that the rebellion should have taken place at

---


10 Foster, p.187.
a time 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 wondered at, and mourned, all in a confusion complicated infinitely by the site of war' (144). During his next leave in Dublin, Willie is scorned by a section of the inhabitants because of the uniform he is wearing and cold-shouldered by his father for daring to express in a letter his anxieties about war and the executions. To cap it all, he is abandoned by his fiancée, Gretta, who was informed in an anonymous letter (written by his friend O'Hara) that Willie was with a prostitute in Belgium. O'Hara is driven to this foul deed by Willie's horrified reaction to the story of what his friend and another soldier did to a young Belgian woman at the beginning of the war. She had had her tongue cut off and had been raped repeatedly by the Germans. In a moment of brutal violence, the Allied soldier raped the woman again as O'Hara held her shoulders to keep her still. Willie reflects on the dehumanizing impact of war:

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 war. (169)

Which brings us to Céline's powerful portrayal of war. Whereas Barry's Willie Dunne experiences a strange calm on hearing Fr. Buckley's powerful invocation of God to the troops as they depart for the front, Céline had no faith in the healing power of words. 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 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 people with ideas of glory and patriotism, before sending them forth to meet their horrible fate. Tom Quinn charts the difficulty involved in presenting an alternative view of the Great War in the years immediately after its conclusion. The attempts made to preserve a particular glorious image of the conflict coincided with the
objectives of the political elite, especially in France, to justify the loss of so many soldiers, the cost of such carnage. Slowly, however, the silence was broken:

In 1928, as traditional memory massively commemorated the Great War, its silences began to crumble. In 1929, a series of literary accounts of the war appeared, whose voices, breaching traditional memory, allowed pain, disillusionment and protest to be heard. These narrative accounts favoured imagination and story over direct telling and revealed a public need for story as a means of remembering and mediating the experience of war. The works of Remarque, Hemingway and Graves were a site of shared memory of war and forerunners of *Voyage*. Their books, to a greater or lesser extent, offered a dissenting counterpoint to the way the war was remembered within the exalting framework of official commemoration. *Voyage*, when it appears in 1932, enters this dynamic of dissent.\(^\text{11}\)

The 'dynamic of dissent' that Céline became part of when composing *Voyage*, inevitably exposed him to public outcry, most significantly by those who were seeking to control the 'memory' that was propagated of the Great War. In the person of his anti-hero Bardamu, the writer charts the path from enthusiasm to despair in a quest that rarely provides enlightenment for its main protagonist. Drunk on his meaningless rhetoric during his conversation with Arthur, Bardamu subsequently finds himself trapped in the army. As already noted, Céline uses comedy to convey what was a deadly somber business. But there are instances where one detects a serious tone.

After a while the flame went away, the noise stayed in my head, and my arms and legs trembled as if somebody were shaking me from behind. My limbs seemed to be leaving me, but then in the end they stayed on. The smoke stung my eyes for a long time, and the prickly smell of powder and sulphur hung on.

\(^{11}\) Tom Quinn, *The Traumatic Memory of the Great War*, p.87.
Having had direct experience of the war, some of Céline's descriptions of the conflict have an obvious ring of authenticity. Nevertheless, he was distrustful of the danger of falling into propaganda. Between 1914 and the publication of Voyage in 1932, the writer had struggled to come to terms with what he had seen of the war, with the trauma that words could not adequately convey. That is why he chose humour, a better tool than anger to register his disquiet. One should never underestimate the pain that went into the novel's composition. Writing about the war was in a very real way remembering and reliving it. The American to whom Voyage is dedicated, Elizabeth Craig, witnessed the toll it 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. It made me wonder: Is that Louis? (Quinn, 139)

I should explain that Céline's real name was Louis Destouches. Although—or maybe, because—the hero is closely modeled on himself, Céline does not intend for us to take him too seriously. This is why there is so much tongue-in-cheek about the way in which Bardamu portrays himself as a coward who, once he discovers what war is really like, seeks every means at his disposal to escape from its grasp. The eeriness of the setting is counterbalanced by the humour:

I know only one thing about the blackness, which was so dense 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. (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' (V, 22). The matter-of-fact tone, totally unsuited to his material in so many ways, explains why French people were outraged when Voyage was first published. The colonel is shown to be stupid because of his refusal to take cover when the shells start landing all
around them: 'When you have no imagination, dying is small beer; when you do have imagination, dying is too much' (23). When Bardamu meets Robinson, his alter ego, for the first time, the latter is not afraid to tell him that he is a deserter. During 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 and says: “Mama! Mama! Fuck your mama”... Just like that, on my way past, out of the corner of my mouth!” (44).

Raw descriptions and vulgarities are prevalent in *Voyage*. Language is reduced to its bare essentials and there is no attempt made to prettify or romanticize what is happening: ‘Blood and more blood, everywhere, all over the grass, in sluggish confluent puddles, looking for a congenial slope’ (25). The important thing 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 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. (28)

An unusually serious note is struck in these lines, one that should encourage us to contemplate their meaning most carefully. Céline wishes to describe what he experienced during the war without masks or artifice, without embellishment of any kind. Veterans of the war were tormented by the fear that their sacrifices would be forgotten and that people who had no active participation would control the memory of what happened. The reality of death is as ugly as it is arbitrary. It reduces man to an animal screaming with pain. According to Patrick McCarthy: ‘In *Voyage* there are no famous last words, dignified mourners and graveside eulogies. Such things would lighten the burden. Céline stresses that death has absolute dominion’¹². Thus, when Bardamu returns from the front, he is shocked to discover that people at home

---

are infected with the same fever that had led him to enlist. As someone on whom a *Médaillé Militaire* has been bestowed, he is well placed to profit from the general frenzy surrounding war. The American nurse Lola finds him irresistible until she discovers that he has no desire to go back to the front. He knows that this is because of the lies that are being told in newspapers, posters and on the radio. 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 effort to pass for a lunatic’ (62). Which is exactly what he does to ensure he is not sent back to fight.

What awaits Willie Dunne at home is also less than wholesome. His father has lost some men in the Dublin riots and knows that the old order is under serious threat from this new wave of nationalist fervour. He this turns his bile 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.’ (247)

Willie returns to the front with these harsh words ringing in his ears. The subsequent letter of apology written by his father never reaches him, as he is killed before it arrives. War has changed everything in his life: his relationships with his father, fiancée, country. Politics do not mean much when you’re up to your waist in mud, excrement and dead bodies. Perhaps it’s as well to die rather than to carry memories like the following with you: ‘Willie could feel the pulverized flesh still in the destroyed uniforms sucking at his boots. These were the bodies of creatures gone beyond their humanity into a severe state that had no place in human doings and the human world’. (174)

The problem for Bardamu is similarly how to live with the images of ‘creatures gone beyond their humanity’ after his involvement with the war is over. The voyage of the title of the novel is a metaphor for his journey towards an accommodation with the world, an accommodation
that is never properly attained. In Africa and America, where his travels take him, he sees the same corruption of human nature was evident during the war in France. When he practices as a doctor in the Parisian suburbs (where Céline also practiced medicine), the death of an innocent child, Bébert, rekindles the futility of his struggle with evil. Writing, however painful, however futile, is necessary, as is clear from the following 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 said once and for all.’ (290) The literary process was a catharsis of sorts for Céline who, in the view of Patrick McCarthy, is closely aligned to the fictional Bardamu:

The reader is left with a nagging question. Who is Bardamu and what is his relationship to his creator? It is clear that Céline is an autobiographical writer. His novels draw closely on his life and he never fails to use the first person narrator. As already seen, his novels are an extension of his life and also a distortion of it. This means that the narrators are neither Céline himself nor objective characters. When Céline goes into his hallucinated, creative fit he brings out of himself other selves. It is a process of self-transformation, of projecting one part of himself into the realm of his imagination. Characteristically he sees it in terms of death: the man Destouches dies and the fictional character, Bardamu, replaces him.13

In an interview with Kevin Myers, Sebastian Barry railed against how so many Irish men who served in World War I could be written out of history in the way they were: ‘These men deserved a most wondering thanks for their ordinary, divine courage. That they were not thanked when they came home was a profound indictment of a state that could not find in its narrowing heart—though in its own way a brave narrowing heart—to include them’14. There is a fair degree of indignation in this

---

13 McCarthy, Céline, pp.80-81.
14 “My War”. Interview between Kevin Myers and Sebastian Barry, in The Irish Times, 4 April, 2005.
comment, justified indignation when one considers how the sacrifice of these men was often occluded in a censored version of Irish history. Willie Dunne is derided for being in the army by his own countrymen and feels like ‘he was a man with bits of himself broken’ (281-2). Barry wanted to tell the story of this neglected group of Irish men and the success of his novel did much for their rehabilitation in the public psyche. Céline emerged from the war with a gaping wound that would never subsequently heal. Patrick McCarthy notes: ‘He (Céline) searched for a truth which no one wished to hear and which finally destroyed him’.

Tom Quinn goes further and supplies a most appropriate summary of the points this chapter has been endeavouring to make:

He could never forget, never accept, never forgive 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.

I hope this discussion of two works of fiction that approach the topic of war from different perspectives conveys enough similarities for the reader to see value in the comparison. Good art transcends the boundaries of time and culture and conveys experiences that strike a chord in all human beings. It is impossible to fake the revulsion inspired by the needless death of so many men and the pain of those who felt their loss so keenly in the course of the Great War and its aftermath. Trauma, rebellion, desolation, incomprehension are but a few of the nouns that could be used to sum up the reaction of the characters of Voyage au bout de la nuit and A Long Long Way. In evoking such emotions, the novelists must have immersed themselves in the mud and corpse-filled landscape.

15 McCarthy, Céline, p.31.
16 Quinn, The Traumatic Memory of the Great War, p.356.
that transformed the lives of a generation. They must have heard the haunting, plaintive cries of the dying, felt the piercing pain of bullets or bayonets sinking into human flesh and experienced the agonizing despair of hell on earth. Their fictional depictions allow us to experience vicariously what it must have been like to live through such horror and for this we owe Céline and Barry a debt of gratitude.