Louis-Ferdinand Céline

Castle to Castle

D’un château l’autre

Presented by: Ivan Silobrčić

It is one thing to create a fictional verbal world where each individuality collides with the other, where, as Paul Valéry put it, it is a miracle when two souls agree upon anything; it is quite another, as Louis-Ferdinand Céline did, to write anti-Semitic instruction manuals (*Bagatelles pour un massacre*, *L’école des cadavres*), biographies of Nazi ratlines (*D’un château l’autre*, *Rigodon*, *Nord*), revanchist war memoirs (*Voyage au bout de la nuit*, *Guerre*), to be persistently engaged in the formalities of novels while verbalising historical, political reality. Life is not a biography, as Pascal Quignard put it; history, on the other hand, is a story. *Castle to Castle* (*D’un château l’autre*, 1957) is the story of an entire state’s machinery and prolixity confined in a damp Danubian castle.

After Paris dodged by a hair’s breadth being blown into the sky, the Vichy government – ministers, functionaries, secretaries, state intellectuals, state artists, journalists, even prisoners – were evacuated into Germany, but with a task: to continue Vichy France’s legal existence, to deny the Allies a neat chronology of French statehood. France was duplicated, a state of affairs it did not suffer from since the Wars of Religion: this other, *alternate* France was stuffed into the damp, claustrophobic castle at Sigmaringen on the Danube, not far from its source. A Potemkin’s *château*, between the fall of France in 1940 and the liberation of France in 1944, the state was officially called, for the first time in its bipolar history, *l’État français* – the French State, a grey term for an otherwise colourful political history. The story of the French state is a seesawing between, depending on how one counts them and to what extent one takes them at face value, several royal dynasties in a twice-restored kingdom, two empires under one family, and five (and counting) republics. France, the paradigmatic European state, is remarkably, stubbornly hexagonal for a state whose constitutions are perpetually treated as drafts – invariably with a powerful monarchic-presidential head, be it a royal head of state, an Emperor of a Republic, a monarchist general or a president who uses prime ministers and parliament as human shields; the last time a woman was permitted to govern this exceedingly centralised state was at the tail-end of the Renaissance.

Two legal Frances, one of them a legal fiction: this legal fiction was a paper France, inhabited by the paper lion Pétain, who ritually strolled along the Danube, followed by the shadows of his ministers (192), unwilling to govern what is ungovernable. Unable to surrender, having nothing to surrender, Pétain’s France was cowed into Sigmaringen; it was forced to decree, to cut down forests’-worth of paper, miming state machinery, throwing empty punches against the crisis of legitimacy it got itself into – but without a state. Like the *Little Prince*’s boisterous king, France’s theatrical history was finally put on a stage – in the form of a *château* other than the Louvre or Versailles. Sigmaringen’s paper France provocation to General de Gaulle’s France was the collision between two *certaines idées de la France*: one elitist, hypocritical, running an empire, presidential, Classical, bourgeois; the other peasant, deindustrialised, being run by an empire, militaristic, patois, rural.

What Céline was witness to was nothing worth writing home to, but he did it anyway, like a cameraman, Céline-the-character spies on the gossip which circulated like stale air about the medieval walls of Sigmaringen – about 'Bolsheviks' such as Picasso and Sartre ('Tartre' in the novel) (81), and rolling in racial stereotypes, from Mongols to Sephardic Jews (80). The decrepit, defeated French State was a proxy for German diplomacy: what really went on there was the hysterics of a crowd, of the density of a collapsing star. It is a barely translatable novel, nonetheless it has been translated into some of the major European languages: verbally highly unusual within the French canon, Céline, who draws himself into a group portrait with Rabelais and Zola, makes use of non-classical, in fact, anti-classical French: it is the non-Cartesian-Calvinist patois that is 'real' French, vernacular French, which so seldom rears its head in print, even in the pluralistic 20th century (Fumaroli 2006: 31). Peculiarly for French political discourse, Céline and Vichy did not demonetise words, they did not hyperinflate them, like *liberté, égalité, fraternité*; they simply showed how tendentious and terse they can be without the straitjacket (as per Emil Cioran) that classicism gave to the French language: *travail, famille, patrie* (work, family, fatherland).

The imagery of Vichy France, which continued to be printed, stamped and blasted from radios from Sigmaringen, was that of a 'popular' France, anti-elitist, in fact totally provincial. In other words, the opposite of the habitual French state-building project, whose foundation is a bipolar, but invariably grand historical past. Hence, the problematic of Vichy France in today's national myth-building: *Castle to Castle* is a literary document (paradoxical as that is), which makes use of the amorphous nature of the novel in order to encapsulate a time and a place. And yet France was not abolished during the war, neither while it co-governed slices of the hexagon with the SS, nor when it was a body without organs inside the Black Forest. Céline was the chronicler of these seven hectic months, composed of several thousand moments – to paraphrase Lautréamont's autopoetic turn on frenetical writing – with every page salted with ellipses and peppered with exclamation points, the novel is an unravelling of French political, literary and linguistic habits: the entire work is a drowning, elliptical exclamation of an alternate *certain idea of France*.

LANGUAGE: French / Français

CENSORSHIP STATUS: