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The Metaphors of Victimization in Céline’s
Bagatelles pour un massacre

In Bagatelles pour un massacre, Céline borrows metaphors of human pathology from late nineteenth-century medical discourse to portray himself as the victim of Jewish cultural imperialism. Yet, these metaphors unleash a “pathologizing” mechanism that infects the language of — as well as the thought behind — the text. Within the text Céline proves rather, to be the victim of the metaphorical language that he utilizes. Paradoxically, it is as the victim of his own writing that the author begins to resemble the victimizing, pathological Jew that he is denouncing. The pathological metaphors of Bagatelles illustrate the problematic relationship between victim and victimizer that is characteristic of anti-Semitic thought.

Initially celebrated among leftist circles for his highly acclaimed novel Voyage au bout de la nuit (1932), Céline radically altered the nature and content of his writing after he began to perceive himself as the victim of a Jewish conspiracy. In the opening pages of his first anti-Semitic “pamphlet” Bagatelles pour un massacre (1937), Céline makes it clear that his new vocation as an anti-Semitic “poet” is his response to setbacks in his literary career. Critics had recently condemned his second novel Mort à crédit (1936) for its exaggerated

1 The anti-Semitic pamphlet was a specific literary genre that flourished during the inter-war years and under the German Occupation. Alice Kaplan states that it “had an audience in both zones of France among those who blamed the Jews for France’s defeat” (“Literature and Collaboration” 967).
popular language and sordid content and rejected his anti-Communist tract *Mea culpa* (1936) as a whimsical retraction of what had been originally perceived by readers as the author’s leftist stance.

In addition, Céline began writing ballets in hopes of seeing them staged. However, he was repeatedly rejected by various impresarios (Vitoux 305). In response to his critics who, he concludes, are Jewish (“Ce sont des cons! Tous des sales cons, des Juifs!”), Céline seeks to justify the style and content of his writing while unveiling a Jewish conspiracy that is choking true artistic expression (*Bagatelles* 15). Writing out of anger and frustration, Céline argues irrationally that if his work has suffered harsh blows, it is certainly not because of his incompetence as a writer, but because of “Jewish imperialism” of Western art and literature.

To illustrate this “Jewish imperialism,” Céline employs metaphors of disease and contagion. In *Bagatelles*, the Jews are described as the source of ravaging diseases that physically weaken the Aryans’ body and mind. Yet, these metaphors of human pathology unleash a pathologizing mechanism that infects the language of — and thus, the thought behind — the text. As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have demonstrated in *Metaphors We Live By*, metaphors are not only created, they are also agents of a viable discourse that influence how one thinks and acts (and writes):

> Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature. The concepts that govern our thought are not just matters of the intellect. They also govern our everyday functioning [...]. Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people. Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities. [And] language is an important source of evidence for what that system is like. (3)

Accordingly, Céline becomes the victim not only of an imagined Jewish conspiracy, but also of the metaphorical language that he utilizes. Curiously, it is as the victim of his own pathological discourse that Céline begins to resemble the victimizing, pathological Jew that he is denouncing. In the following essay, I will examine Céline’s pathological metaphors as illustrative of the problematic relationship between victim and victimizer that is characteristic of anti-Semitic thought.