

JOURNEY TO THE END OF THE NIGHT

Louis-Ferdinand

CELINE

NEW DIRECTIONS PAPERBOOK

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JOURNEY TO THE
END OF THE NIGHT



TO
ELISABETH CRAIG



Travel is a good thing; it stimulates the imagination. Everything else is a snare and a delusion. Our own journey is entirely imaginative. Therein lies its strength.

It leads from life to death. Men, beasts, cities, everything in it is imaginary. It's a novel, only a made-up story. The dictionary says so and it's never wrong.

Besides, every one can go and do likewise. Shut your eyes, that's all that is necessary.

There you have life seen from the other side.

*Notre vie est un voyage
Dans l'Hiver et dans la Nuit,
Nous cherchons notre passage
Dans le Ciel où rien ne luit.*

(Chanson des Gardes Suisses 1793)

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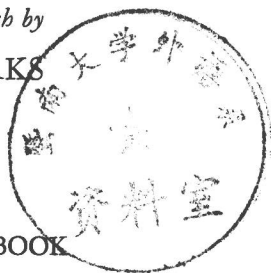
JOURNEY TO THE END OF THE NIGHT

BY

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Translated from the French by

JOHN H. P. MARKS



A NEW DIRECTIONS BOOK



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IT ALL BEGAN JUST LIKE THAT. I HADN'T SAID ANYTHING. I HADN'T said a word. It was Arthur Ganate who started me off. Arthur, who was studying medicine the same as me, a pal of mine. What happened was that we met on the Place Clichy. After lunch. He seemed to want to talk to me. So I listened. "Don't let's stay out here," he said. "Let's go inside." So I went along in with him. "It's grim," he said, "out here on the *terrasse*. Come this way." We noticed that there was nobody in the streets because of the heat; no traffic, nothing. And when it's very cold there's nobody about, either; why, I even remember that it was he who said to me, speaking about this, "Everybody in Paris seems to be busy but actually they only walk about all day, and the proof of it is that when the weather's bad, when it's too cold or too hot, they disappear; they're all inside cafés, drinking white coffee or bocks. Isn't that so? They talk of this being an age of rush and hurry. How d' you make that out? Everything's changing, they say. But it isn't true. Nothing has really changed. They just go on being impressed by themselves and that's all. Which isn't new, either. A few words have changed—but not many of them, even. Two or three little ones here and there . . ." And very proud at having come to these important conclusions, we sat back, feeling pleased with life, and watched the ladies of the café.

Afterwards, conversation turned on President Poincaré, who that morning was going to open a show of lapdogs, and from him to *Le Temps*, where we'd read about it. "Now there's a really great paper for you!" said Arthur, trying to get a rise out of me. "There isn't another paper like it for defending the interests of the French race."

"And I suppose the French race needs it, seeing that it doesn't exist!" said I promptly, to show that I knew what I was talking about.

"But of course it exists! And a very splendid one it is too!" he insisted. "It's the finest race in the world, and don't you believe any fool who tells you it isn't!" He had started in to harangue me for all he was worth. I held my ground, of course.

"That's not true! What you call the race is only that great heap of worm-eaten sods like me, bleary, shivering and lousy, who, coming defeated from the four corners of the earth, have ended up here, escaping from hunger, illness, pestilence and cold. They couldn't go further because of the sea. That's your France and those are your Frenchmen."

"Bardamu," he said to me then, gravely and a little sadly, "our fathers were as good as us; you mustn't speak of them in this way. . . ."

"You're right, Arthur, you're right there. Venomous yet docile, outraged, robbed, without guts and without spirit, they were as good as us all right. You certainly said it! Nothing really changes. Habits, ideas, opinions, we change them not at all, or if we do, we change them so late that it's no longer worth while. We are born loyal and we die of it. Soldiers for nothing, heroes to all the world, monkeys with a gift of speech, a gift which brings us suffering, we are its minions. We belong to suffering; when we misbehave, it tightens its hold on us. We have its fingers always round our throats, which makes it difficult to talk; you have to be careful, if you want to be able to eat. . . . The merest slip and you're strangled. . . . Life's not worth living. . . ."

"But there is still love, Bardamu!"

"Love, Arthur, is a poodle's chance of attaining the infinite, and personally I have my pride," I answered him.

"Talk about yourself, you're nothing but an anarchist!" Always the little devil, you see, and just about as advanced as possible.

"You said it, fathead; I *am* an anarchist! And to prove it, there's a sort of social prayer for vengeance I've written. You can tell me this minute what you think of it. 'Wings of Gold' it's called." And I recited it to him:

"A God who counts the minutes and the pence, a desperate God, sensual and grunting like a pig. A pig with wings of gold

which tumbles through the world, with exposed belly waiting for caresses, lo, 'tis he, behold our master! Embrace, embrace!"

"That little piece of yours doesn't make sense in actual life. Personally, I'm for the established order of things and I'm not fond of politics. Moreover, if the day should come when my country needs me, I certainly shan't hang back; it will find me ready to lay down my life for it. So there." That was his answer to me.

At that very moment War was drawing near to us without our realizing it, and I wasn't at all in a sensible mood. Our short but exciting argument had taken it out of me. On top of that too, I was a bit put out because the waiter had seemed to think I had under-tipped him. Anyway, I made it up with Arthur, so as to put a stop to all this nonsense, once and for all. We agreed about almost everything, really.

"You're right," I said, wishing to be conciliatory. "You're quite right of course, really. But after all, we *are* all in the same boat, we are all galley slaves together, rowing like the devil—you certainly can't deny that. Sitting on nails to it, too. And what do we get out of it? Not a thing. A big stick across our backs, that's all, and a great deal of misery, and a hell of a lot of stinking lies poured into our ears! 'A fellow must work,' is what they say. It's the lousiest part of the whole business, this work of theirs. You're stuck down in the hold, puffing and panting, all of a muck-sweat and stinking like polecats. . . . And up on the bridge, not giving a damn, the masters of the ship are enjoying God's fresh air with lovely pink ladies drenched in perfume sitting on their knees. They have you up on deck. Then they put on their top-hats and let fly at you as follows:

"'See here, you set of sods!' they say. 'War's declared. You're going to board the bastards on *Country Number 2* yonder and you're going to smash them to bits! Now get on with it. There's all the stuff you'll need aboard. All together now. Let's have it—as loud as you can make it: "God save *Country Number 1!*" You've got to make them hear you a long way off. There's a medal and a coughdrop for the man who shouts the loudest! God in Heaven! And if there's any of you who don't want to die at sea, of

course, you can go and die on land, where it takes even less time than it does here.'"

"You've just about hit it," agreed Arthur, who'd certainly become very easy to convince.

Whereupon, damn me if a regiment of soldiers didn't come marching past the café where we were sitting, with the colonel in front on his horse and all, looking simply fine and as smart as you make them. I gave just one great leap of enthusiasm.

"I'll go and find out if that's what it's like!" I cried to Arthur, and off I went to join up, as fast as my legs would carry me.

"Don't be such a bloody fool, Ferdinand!" yelled Arthur after me, annoyed, I suppose by the effect my heroic gesture was having on the onlookers.

I was rather sick that that should be the attitude he took toward it, but that didn't stop me. I was striding along in step. "Here I am and I'll see it through," I said to myself.

"We'll see, you mutt, you!" I managed to get in at him, before we turned the corner, with the regiment marching along behind the colonel and the band. That's exactly, word for word, how it happened.

We went on marching for a long time. There were streets then there were still more streets, with civilians and their wives cheering us as we passed, and throwing flowers to us from the café tables, by the stations and from the steps of crowded churches. What a lot of patriots there were! And then, after a bit, there began to be fewer patriots. . . . Rain came down, and there were fewer and fewer of them, and then finally no one cheered at all, not another cheer along the road.

Were we all by ourselves then? A column of men, in fours behind each other? The music stopped. Then I said to myself, as I saw how things were going, "It's not such fun, after all. I doubt if it's worth it." And I was going to go back. But it was too late! They'd shut the gate behind us, quietly; the civilians had. We were caught, like rats in a trap.

ONCE ONE'S IN IT, ONE'S IN IT UP TO THE NECK. THEY PUT US ON horseback and then, after two months of that, they put us back on foot. Perhaps because it cost too much. Anyway, one morning the colonel was looking for his horse; his orderly had gone off with it, no one knew where, somewhere no doubt where bullets sang less merrily than in the middle of the road. Because that's exactly where we finished up, the colonel and I, plumb in the middle of the road, with me holding the forms on which he wrote out orders.

Far away up the road, as far as you could see, there were two black dots, in the middle of it, like us—only they were two Germans, very busy shooting. They'd been doing that for a good quarter of an hour.

The colonel perhaps knew why those two fellows were firing and the Germans maybe knew it too; but as for me, quite frankly, I didn't at all. However far back I remembered, the Germans had nothing against me. I had always been quite friendly and polite to them. I knew the Germans a bit, I'd even been to school with them as a kid, near Hanover. I'd talked their language. They were then a lot of noisy little idiots, with the pale and furtive eyes of wolves; we all used to go and neck the girls in the woods near by, where we'd also shoot with bows or with the little pistols you could get for four marks. We used to drink sweet beer. But that was one thing and now letting fly at each other, without even coming over to talk first, and right in the middle of the road, was another,—not the same thing at all. It was altogether too damn different.

The war, in fact, was everything that one didn't understand. It couldn't go on.

Had something extraordinary then come over these people? Something which I didn't feel at all? I must have failed to notice it.

At any rate, my feelings towards them had not changed. In spite of everything, I felt I wanted to understand their brutal behaviour; but even more I wanted, I terribly wanted, to go away, it all suddenly seemed so much the result of a tremendous mistake.

"In this sort of business there's nothing for it; the only thing to do is to shove out of it." That's what I said to myself. After all. . . .

Over our heads, an inch or half an inch away, one after the other those long tentative steel strings which bullets make when they want to kill you came twanging in the warm air of summer.

Never have I felt so futile as among all those bullets in that sunshine. A vast, a universal ramp.

I wasn't more than twenty at the time. In the distance were deserted farmhouses and open and empty churches, as if the peasants every one of them had left these hamlets for the day, to go to some gathering at the other end of the canton and had left in our keeping all they possessed, — their countryside, their carts with upturned shafts, their fields and patches, the road, the trees and even the cows, a dog on its chain, everything. So that we should not be disturbed and could do what we wanted while they were away. It seemed a kindly thought on their part. "All the same," said I to myself, "if only they hadn't gone off, if only there was still somebody about around here, we surely shouldn't be behaving so badly — so disgracefully! We wouldn't have dared with them here. Only there's no one to see us. We're by ourselves like newly married folk doing dirty things when every one's left."

And I thought too (behind a tree) that I should love to have the biggest Jingo of the lot here with me, to explain what *he* would do when a bullet hit him slap in the pan.

These Germans, squatting on the road, sniping away so obstinately, weren't shooting well but they seemed to have ammunition enough and to spare, stacks of it obviously. No, the war wasn't by any means over. Our colonel, I must say, was showing amazing coolness. He walked about, right in the middle of the road, up and down in the thick of these bullets, just as carelessly as if he

were waiting for a friend on a station platform; a little impatiently, that's all.

As a matter of fact, I may as well admit that I've never liked the country, anyway; I've always found it depressing, with all its endless puddles and its houses where nobody's ever in and its roads leading nowhere. But with a war on as well, it's intolerable. The wind had come up fiercely from both sides of the embankment, the gusts in the poplar leaves mingling with the rustle that was directed against us from up the road. They were missing us all the time, these unknown soldiers of ours, yet they put a thousand deaths round about us so close that they were almost a garment. I didn't dare move.

What a monster that colonel must be, though. I was sure that, like a dog, he had no idea of death. It struck me at the same time that there must be lots like him, as gallant as he, in our army, and as many again, no doubt, on the opposite side. One wondered how many. A million — or two? Several millions in all, perhaps. From that moment, my terror became panic. With creatures like that about the place, this hellish idiocy might go on indefinitely. . . . Why should they stop? Never had I felt the way of men and things to be so implacable.

Could it be that I was the only coward on earth, I wondered. The thought was terrifying. Lost in the midst of two million madmen, all of them heroes, at large and armed to the teeth! With or without helmets, without horses, on motor bicycles, screeching, in cars, whistling, sniping, plotting, flying, kneeling, digging, taking cover, wheeling, detonating, shut in on earth as in an asylum cell; intending to wreck everything in it, Germany, France, the whole world, every breathing thing; destroying, more ferocious than a pack of mad dogs and adoring their own madness (which no dog does), a hundred, a thousand times fiercer than a thousand dogs and so infinitely more vicious! What a mess we were in! Clearly it seemed to me that I had embarked on a crusade that was nothing short of an apocalypse.

One is as innocent of Horror as one is of sex. How could I possibly have guessed this horror when I left the Place Clichy? Who could have foreseen, before getting really into the war, what

was inside the foul and idle, heroic soul of man? There I was, caught up into a general rush towards murder for all, towards fire. . . . It was a thing that had come up from the depths and here it was on top of us.

All this while the colonel never faltered; I watched him receive little messages from the general, there on the embankment, where he straightway tore them up after reading them without haste, amid the bullets. Did none of them contain the order to put an immediate stop to this frightfulness? Was he not being told by H.Q. that there was some misunderstanding, some ghastly mistake? That the cards had been wrongly dealt and something was wrong? That we were meant to have engaged on manœuvres, for fun, and not in this business of killing? Not at all.

"Carry on, Colonel! Go right ahead as you are." That must be what General Des Entrayes, our Chief of Division, was telling him in these messages which were brought to him every five minutes by a runner, who each time looked greener and more liverish. He could have been my brother in fear, that boy; but there wasn't the time to fraternize, either.

What, was there nothing wrong then? This shooting at each other like this without a word, — it was all O.K. It was one of the things you can do without getting hauled over the coals good and proper. It was actually accepted, it was probably encouraged by decent folk, like drawing lots in conscription or getting engaged or beagling! There was nothing for it. I had suddenly discovered, all at once, what the war was, the whole war. I'd lost my innocence. You need to be pretty well alone with it face to face, as I was then, to see the filthy thing properly, in the round. They'd touched off the war between us and the other side, and now it was flaring! Like the current between the two carbons in an arc lamp. And it wasn't going to be put out soon, either. We would all be going through it, the colonel along with the rest, for all his fine airs, and his guts would look the same as mine when the current from opposite flashed through his middle.

There are a lot of ways of being condemned to death. What wouldn't I have given at that moment to be in gaol instead of where I was! If only, fool that I was, if only I'd gone and stolen

something, looking ahead when it was still so easy, when there was still time. One thinks of nothing! You come out of gaol alive, but not out of a war. That's a fact and everything else hot air.

If only I'd still had the time, but I hadn't it any longer! There was nothing left to steal. How cosy it would be in a dear little prison cell, I told myself, where no bullets ever came. No bullets, ever. I knew of one all ready and warm, facing the sun. In my mind I could see it, the Saint-Germain it was actually, close to the woods; I knew it well; I used to pass by it often at one time. How one changes! I was a kid in those days and the prison used to frighten me. I didn't yet know what men were like. I shall never again believe what they say or what they think. It is of men, and of them only, that one should always be frightened.

How long would the delirium of these monsters need to last for them to stop in the end, exhausted? How long could a fit of frenzy like this go on? A few months? A few years? Perhaps until every one was dead, every one of these madmen. To the very last of all? Well, since things were taking this desperate turn, I decided to risk everything at one throw, to try the final, the supreme move, and on my own, alone, to try and stop the war! My small section of it, at any rate.

The colonel was walking about, two yards away. I would go and speak to him. I'd never done that before. Now was the time to dare to do it, though. Where we were, there was hardly anything further to lose. "What do you want?" I could see him saying it, very surprised, of course, by my cheek in interrupting him. Then I should explain it all to him as I saw it. We'd see what his views on the matter were. The all-important thing in life is to say what's in your mind. And two heads would be better than one.

I was about to take this decisive step when, at that very moment, hurrying along towards us came a dismounted cavalryman (as they were called in those days), limping, hobbling, with his upturned helmet in his hand like a blind beggar, and properly spattered with mud, his face even greener than the company runner's. He was muttering as if sick at heart or as if he were suffering the pains of hell, and was trying somehow to struggle

up out of a grave. So here was a ghost who disliked the bullets as much as I did, eh? Perhaps he could foresee them, like I could.

"What's up?" The colonel savagely stopped him short, glaring coldly at this apparition. To see this deplorable trooper in such slovenly undress and shuddering with excitement thoroughly irritated the colonel. Fear was not to the colonel's liking in the least, one could see that. And then above all, that helmet held in his hand like a felt hat, when ours was a front-line regiment, a regiment on the attack, — that was the last straw. He looked as if he were taking off his hat to the war, this cavalryman, as he walked into it on foot.

Under this stare of disapproval, our uncertain messenger came to attention, with his little fingers along the seams of his trousers, which is the proper thing to do in such cases. He stood there on the road, stiff and swaying, with the sweat running down his throat, and his jaws were working so hard that he uttered little grunting cries like a puppy dreaming. You couldn't make out whether he wanted to say something to us or whether he was crying.

The Germans squatting at the end of the road had just changed weapons. They were now carrying on their pranks with a machine gun; it crackled like a lot of big boxes of matches, and infuriated bullets swarmed all around us, pricking the air like wasps.

All the same the man managed at last to get out something intelligible.

"Quartermaster Sergeant Barousse has been killed, sir," he said in one gasp.

"Well?"

"He was killed on his way to meet the bread waggon on the Étrapes road, sir."

"Well?"

"He's been blown up by a shell."

"Well, good God, and what then?"

"Well, that's what it is, sir."

"Is that all?"

"Yes sir, that's all, sir."

"And what about the bread?" asked the colonel.

That was the end of the conversation, because I distinctly remember that he had time to say, "And what about the bread?" Then that was all. After that there was only a flash and then the noise that came with it. But it was the sort of noise that you never would believe existed. My eyes, ears, nose and mouth were so full of it suddenly that I really believed it was all over and that I had been turned into fire and noise myself.

But no, after a while the fire had gone and the noise stayed a long time in my head, and then my arms and legs were shaking as if some one from behind me were wagging them. They seemed to be leaving me but in the end they stayed where they were. In the smoke which pricked my eyes for a long time the smell of powder and sulphur was strong enough to kill all the bugs and fleas in the whole world.

Directly after that, I thought of Quartermaster Sergeant Barousse who the other fellow had told us had been blown up. That was good news. So much the better, I thought to myself. "That's rid the regiment of one more bastard." He'd tried to have me up for a tin of jam. "Every one has his own war to wage," I said to myself. Looked at in some ways, there seemed at times to be some point in the war. I certainly knew of three or four other swine in our company whom I'd have been very willing to help find a shell, like Barousse had.

As for the colonel, I had nothing against him. Nevertheless, he was dead too. I couldn't see where he was at first. He'd been flung onto the embankment on his side and the explosion had thrown him into the arms of the despatch bearer, who was dead also. They were in each other's arms and would continue the embrace for ever, but the cavalryman hadn't his head any more, only his neck open at the top with blood bubbling in it like stew in a pot. The colonel's stomach was slit open and he was making an ugly face about that. It must have been painful when that happened. So much the worse for him. If he'd gone away when the firing began, he wouldn't have had it.

All this heap of flesh was bleeding like the deuce. Shells were still bursting to right and left of the picture.

I wasn't slow to leave the place after that. I was delighted to have such a good excuse to clear out. In fact, I sang a bit as I walked, tottering slightly as one does after a hard afternoon's rowing when one's legs are behaving rather funnily. "Just one shell; it doesn't take long for just one shell to do the trick," I told myself. "Well, I'm damned!" I kept repeating all the time. "Well, I'm damned!"

There was nobody left at the end of the road. The Germans had gone away. But just that once had taught me pretty quick to keep to the cover of the trees in future. I was in a hurry to get back to the lines to find out whether any others in our lot had been killed while out reconnoitering. Besides, I went on, there must be some pretty smart ways of getting yourself taken prisoner! . . . Here and there wisps of bitter smoke were wreathed around the earth clods. "Perhaps they're all dead by now." I wondered whether they were. "As they're such obstinate fools, that would be the best and most practical way out, that they should all have been killed without delay. . . . Then we should be through with it at once. . . . We'd go off home. We'd go through the Place Clichy again maybe, in triumph. . . . The two or three of us who had survived . . . That's what I hoped. Just a few good fine-looking fellows swinging along with the general in front. All the others would have been killed. Like the colonel — like Barousse, like Vanaille (another sod) and all the rest. . . . They'd cover us with decorations and flowers and we'd march through the Arc de Triomphe. We'd walk into a restaurant and they'd serve us free. We'd never have to pay for anything any more, never again. 'We're your heroes,' we'd say, when the bill came, 'the saviours of our country!' And that would be enough. Little French flags would do for payment. Why, the girl at the cash desk would refuse to take money from heroes; she'd even make us a present of some and kiss us as we went past her till. Life would be worth living."

As I was escaping, I noticed that my arm was bleeding, but only slightly, from a scratch, not a decent wound. It wouldn't be enough; I should have to carry on.

It began to rain again and the Flemish fields seemed to dribble

