

NARRATIVE, THEMATIC, AND SYMBOLIC  
STRUCTURES IN CELINE'S  
VOYAGE AU BOUT DE LA NUIT

by

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## ABSTRACT

Adopting certain principles of modern formal criticism, this thesis examines in depth Céline's first and probably most important novel, Voyage au bout de la nuit. As the text itself is the primary object of study, historical, biographical, and other external referents are not included in this analysis of the novel's significant structures. An attempt is made both to respect the polysemous nature of the literary object and to demonstrate that a deep coherence and unity underlie the novel's apparent formal looseness and fragmentation. Three distinct but interrelated components of the text are analysed: the formal properties of the narrative; the novel's ideational or thematic content; the rôle of imagery in the production of a work of art that is simultaneously plural and unified.

An important structural aspect of the narration is the double narrative focus through which the story is refracted and communicated to the reader. The elements of the anecdote are perceived both by the protagonist and by his older, more experienced self, the narrator-observer. This narrative duality is echoed within the story itself by a number of factors, among them the ambivalent attitude of Bardamu towards his personal quest for truth and knowledge and by implication towards life itself. A somewhat similar ambivalence characterizes the protagonist's relationship with his friend and alter ego, Robinson Léon. This latter's absolute refusal of existence

allows him to go to the "end of the night"; Bardamu, on the other hand, appears to compromise with reality. For him, the only possibility of not being totally defeated by life seems to be in the telling of all that he has seen and experienced. By transforming himself into teller and his adventures into discours, Bardamu may transcend his personal egotism and inauthenticity -- through an artistic creation which is also a radical denunciation of both man and the world -- and thereby justify his existence.

In addition to an analysis of point of view, the narration is examined in terms of its seemingly loose episodic structure. A close study of narrative "morphology" and "syntax" reveals that a rigorous pattern underlies the surface formlessness often apparent in novels related to the picaresque genre. The narrative consists of structurally similar episodes which are necessarily linked in a theoretically infinite chain of action and reaction, of confrontation with and escape from the world.

A second section of this study attempts to elucidate the principal aspects of the vision of reality expressed in the novel. A "biological" vision informs the work's thématique: man is a prisoner of the body's inevitable impulsion towards dissolution and death. Human nature and behaviour are determined by biological factors, both at the social and metaphysical levels of being-in-the-world. Life is absurd, ridiculous, and intolerable; human activity is characterized by a refusal to confront such truths and by a generalized recourse to rôle-playing and various forms of inauthentic behaviour.

The final section of this study deals with the structure and operation of imagery in the novel. Imagery may function: (a) descriptively (sensual



imagery), to create a concrete atmosphere or tone; (b) thematically (figurative imagery), to convey the work's ideational content; (c) productively (symbolic imagery), to organize and in a sense generate the text's capacity to signify. This generative function is carried out by the core images (archetypes) of the Journey and the Night. These extended symbols serve both to provide the text with a deep structural unity and to "produce" the work in all its variety and multiplicity.

This study reveals the operation at different levels of the text of a tension or conflict between the tendency towards fragmentation and plurality on one hand, and an opposing movement towards structural unity and coherence. It is perhaps in this interaction of antithetical tendencies -- the one arising from the data of existence, the other from the demands of Art -- that one can locate the ultimate source of the novel's unquestionable power and greatness.

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## INTRODUCTION

How then is the reader to divide his interest between the value of the assertion and the special way it is made? Isn't the wording everything? And yet, must not the wording itself be judged by its adequacy to state the author's ideas?

- Susanne K. Langer<sup>1</sup>

Il y a longtemps qu'on s'en doute: l'art réside dans cette solidarité d'un univers mental et d'une construction sensible, d'une vision et d'une forme.

- Jean Rousset<sup>2</sup>

After a relatively lengthy period of neglect, the works of Céline have become in recent years the object of renewed critical interest. The sequestration of Céline -- doubtless the result of his unpopular and reactionary political and racist views -- has been succeeded by the belated recognition of the writer's importance in the history of modern French literature: "C'est l'écrivain qui a eu le plus d'influence entre les deux guerres, le plus d'importance aussi" (Maurice Nadeau); "Céline est peut-être le plus grand écrivain d'entre les deux guerres" (Alain Robbe-Grillet).<sup>3</sup>

The explanation of Céline's importance and influence has been held to lie in the modernity of his vision of reality. His deeply pessimistic view both of human nature and of man's global metaphysical situation places him in the mainstream of the so-called "absurdist" school of writers. Thus, Céline's

<sup>1</sup> Feeling and Form (New York, 1953), p. 208.

<sup>2</sup> Forme et signification (Paris, 1962), p. I.

<sup>3</sup> These appreciations appeared in Le Nouvel Observateur, No. 15 (25 February, 1965), p. 27.

prestige can be related to his rôle as a prophet of doom, as an apostle of the anarchical and the purely negative: "There can be no doubt that Céline belongs in the ranks of the great destroyers. Uprooting secure concepts of existence and literature at the same time, he commits what for many is an unpardonable sin -- that of leaving no refuge of any kind, no exit from the trap he has shown our world to be."<sup>4</sup>

While most recent critical studies of Céline have concentrated on discovering the principal themes which convey a vision of the world closely related to the existentialist current of French literature, a few of these studies have also noted the importance of stylistic<sup>5</sup> and formal<sup>6</sup> elements in the elaboration of this vision. Although the content (ideas, themes, "messages", etc.) of the novels remains the primary object of study, nevertheless a certain recognition of the importance of technique, form and structure is evident.

Increasingly the tendency is to interpret Céline's works according to formal rather than ideological criteria. This tendency is reflected in the appearance of studies -- such as the present analysis -- which examine a single work, usually the author's first novel, Voyage au bout de la nuit. The advantages of a specialized study lie in the possibility afforded for in-depth analysis, a possibility not offered to the study which attempts to deal with a writer's total output. Moreover, by concentrating upon a single work, the critic affirms the text's status as an autonomous, self-contained verbal construct, possessing its specific modes of functioning and patterns

<sup>4</sup> Erika Ostrovsky, Céline and His Vision (New York, 1967), p. 18.

<sup>5</sup> Marc Hanrez, Céline (Paris, 1961).

<sup>6</sup> Allen Thiher, Céline: The Novel as Delirium (New Brunswick, N.J., 1972).

This essentially thematic study also contains interesting insights into the function of the Célinian narrator.

of meaning. The comprehensive study, on the contrary, is obliged to disregard the autonomy and integrity of the single text. In order to clarify the author's Weltanschauung or to trace the development of stylistic and rhetorical techniques, the general study too often lapses into the superficial, emphasizing only the most obvious thematic and verbal elements.<sup>7</sup> It ignores the formal specificity and complexity which confers upon the literary text its authentic status as an object of aesthetic appreciation. While not wishing to denigrate the importance of the Célinian vision, the present study is ultimately most concerned with the formal characteristics of Voyage au bout de la nuit, with this novel as a work, not of ideas, but of art.

The approach adopted here follows the general orientation of what has been termed new or formal criticism. The basic postulates of contemporary critical methodology -- the primacy and relatively autonomous functioning of the text, the avoidance of both the biographical and the intentional fallacies, the acceptance of the polysemous nature of literary language and the concomitant presence of ambiguous structures in any given literary work -- these postulates are taken as basic starting points for my analysis. Yet, if my approach is resolutely formal, this is not to deny that the novel signifies, that it has meaning. What interests me principally here is the manner in which the work signifies.

Many literary critics have adopted the position that the essential characteristic of a literary text is its plurality.<sup>8</sup> For such critics the polysemous nature of the literary work is fundamental, the consequence of the capacity of verbal elements of the text to enter into multiple relationships

<sup>7</sup> The advantages of limiting a stylistic analysis to a single work can be judged by the usefulness of such recent studies as:

a) Günter Holtus, Untersuchungen zu Stil und Konzeption von Celines "Voyage au bout de la nuit" (Bern, 1972); and  
 b) Yves de la Quêrière, "Effets de mots dans le Voyage au bout de la nuit de Céline", unpubl. diss. (Columbia, 1969).

<sup>8</sup> Roland Barthes speaks of "ce texte absolument pluriel" in S/Z (Paris, 1970), p. 12.

with one another. This plural status does not, however, necessarily imply formlessness or a total fragmentation of meaning. The text may -- and according to some must -- contain and manifest laws of formal organization which determine a tendency towards unity of signification. Thus, whereas a novel may well express a reality which appears chaotic and amorphous, certain literary principles are at work within the text itself to counteract this apparent tendency towards formlessness: "Mais tandis que la structure du réel est ébranlée par la fiction, qui en révèle la désorganisation, la structure du livre, en revanche, révèle au lecteur attentif ses lois extrêmement précises d'organisation."<sup>9</sup> It is the task of the critic to discover and describe these principles whose presence does not necessarily result from a conscious intention on the part of the author; rather, the presence of such laws is in some sense inherent in the mode of existence of a literary text. These principles can be considered as "autant de générateurs qui conditionnent le texte, le commandent de l'intérieur."<sup>10</sup>

In the approach to Voyage au bout de la nuit adopted in this study I accept and seek to synthesize these two points of view with regard to the text: the work is examined both as a plurality of possible meanings and as an aesthetic whole exhibiting strong tendencies towards a unified structure of meaning. An attempt is made to codify, or discover the underlying pattern or structure of certain fundamental components of the text -- narrative perspective, themes, imagery -- and to indicate the various interrelationships of these component-structures. This interaction of codes is essential insofar as it designates an internal impulsion of the text towards integration and

<sup>9</sup> Françoise van Rossum-Guyon, "Michel Butor et le roman comme instrument de connaissance", in Positions et oppositions sur le roman contemporain (Paris, 1971), p. 172.

<sup>10</sup> R. Bourneuf and R. Ouellet, L'Univers du roman (Paris, 1972), p. 205.

coherence. The novel can thus be seen not simply as containing a multiplicity of internal patterns or structures, but as an integrated system or network of interrelated elements, "un réseau simultané de relations réciproques."<sup>11</sup>

The format of this study reflects the double project of identifying both formal and significant structures and of indicating their functioning in the production of a text which is both plural and unified. The analysis is divided into three sections. The first two describe respectively the essential structures of the novel's "form" and "content".<sup>12</sup> The third seeks to synthesize the discoveries of the preceding sections by examining the text as it functions as a kind of generative mechanism, "comme une machine qui fonctionne, qui crée du sens."<sup>13</sup>

The first part of this analysis is concerned with the formal properties of the narrative: its point of view, its "morphology" and its plot-structure. The interaction of these formal structures with aspects of the fiction such as the rôle of Robinson and the ambiguous character of the protagonist is underlined.

In Part II ("Thematic Structures"), the emphasis is in a sense reversed. Rather than examining formal structures and their influence upon the work's content,<sup>14</sup> I begin with the text's ideational substance -- the novel's vision of reality as conveyed by its dominant themes -- and attempt to discover the form or pattern assumed by this substance. Thus the thématique of Voyage is organized around the interrelationship of a subjective (the protagonist's consciousness) and an objective (the external world) reality. This

<sup>11</sup> Jean Rousset, Forme et signification, p. xiii.

<sup>12</sup> This terminology as well as the artificial dichotomy it implies is used for purposes of convenience only. This study is in part concerned with demonstrating the essential inseparability of these two aspects of the text.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Bouissac, "Analyse sémiologique et analyse littéraire", in Problèmes de l'analyse textuelle (Montréal, 1971), p. 57.

<sup>14</sup> Or, to use a more contemporary vocabulary, the interaction of the discours with the récit, of the signifiant with the signifié.

interaction of subject and object is realized on three levels or modes:

- a) the concrete or physical: the self and the body;
- b) the metaphysical: the self and the conditions of Being;
- c) the social: the self and the others.

The fact that a similar dynamic is operative at the three levels indicates the structural unity of the thematic material and serves to confer coherence and forcefulness upon the work's vision of reality. Moreover, the parallelisms which appear to operate between the narrative and thematic structures offer an implicit indication of the text's organic coherence, of the ultimate unity of its diverse elements. Thus the existence of what has been termed "une forme du contenu"<sup>15</sup> demonstrates that as well as expressing a particular vision of the world, the thematic content is participating in the formal elaboration of the text.

By means of an examination of the patterns and functions of imagery in the novel, the third and final part of this study seeks explicitly to establish the simultaneous movement of the text towards multiplicity and structural unity. Imagery in Voyage is shown first to function in what might be termed a traditional manner; that is, to concretize the text and to express indirectly (figuratively) the novel's principal themes: "... it often happens that an author will rely on similes and metaphors to formulate the main themes of his novel with the maximum of precision, concreteness and expressive force. Imagery may therefore take the critic by a straight route to the very core of the work of art, and the metaphors arising around these central themes may develop into major symbols."<sup>16</sup> In addition to the descriptive (literal) and expressive (figurative) functions of the imagery in the novel,

<sup>15</sup> Gérard Genette, "Raisons de la critique pure", in Les Chemins actuels de la critique (Paris, 1968), p. 137.

<sup>16</sup> Stephen Ullmann, The Image in the Modern French Novel (Oxford, 1963), pp. vii-viii.



a third function is examined in some detail: the organizational or generative function.<sup>17</sup> Here the image, and particularly the extended figurative image -- the symbol or the archetype -- is considered as an essential element of the text's formal unity and coherence. This organizing function may be viewed as either a reductive or as a productive process; that is, the symbol (or archetype) can be seen either as the universal all-encompassing element which contains the multiple components of the text or as a kernel structure which by means of associative and transformational operations generates the text in its plurality. In either case, the analysis of its various modes of functioning indicates that the novel's imagery possesses its own specific structure and that it embodies precisely the dual tendency of the text towards fragmentation and coherence, towards plurality and unity of signification.

It would be remiss on my part not to mention in this introduction the existence of a critical interpretation of Céline by F. Vitoux<sup>18</sup> which, like this study, seeks to integrate formal and thematic considerations and to demonstrate the unified and plural nature of the Voyage. Vitoux posits a single underlying theme (la misère) in the novel, a global theme which is revealed or "encoded" in the text through the divers uses made of la parole by the novel's characters. While Vitoux' analysis leads him to conclusions similar to some arrived at in this study, the critic's general approach to the work and the framework within which he inserts the novel are radically different from those employed here. Vitoux does not, for example, examine the novel's imagery in a systematic manner, nor is his approach to the

<sup>17</sup> See Jean Ricardou, "Esquisse d'une théorie des générateurs", in Positions et oppositions sur le roman contemporain, pp. 143-150; and by the same author, Pour une théorie du nouveau roman (Paris, 1971), pp. 118-158.

<sup>18</sup> Frédéric Vitoux, Louis-Ferdinand Céline: Misère et parole (Paris, 1973).

thematic material similar to that adopted here. Vitoux' study marks perhaps a turning point in Célinian criticism and certainly contains the most competent structural analysis of Voyage yet to appear in print.

This study, like that of Vitoux, gives scant attention to the novel's external referents. The autonomy of the text, its innate capacity to contain and engender its own signification, its essentially self-enclosed nature -- such factors have guided this analysis. Thus no attempt is made to relate textual elements to either historical fact or biographical data. For while the novel may in part reflect or express a vision of reality, it seems probable that the historical or ideational (thematic) content of the novel cannot explain either the power or the merit of the novel. Céline himself attributed the force of his work not to any message it may be held to contain<sup>19</sup> but rather to his personal, original style: the utilization of argot, of la langue parlée, of a staccato and elliptical syntax. It is my contention that while the author's vision and his style are evidently important (and inseparable) aspects of the work, the ultimate secret of the text resides in its formal or structural properties, in the existence of significant patterns, in the interaction of textual components, in the interrelationship of its multiple elements. It is this secret that this study seeks, not to discover, since the mystery of a text is finally inviolate, but at least to approach and, hopefully, to illuminate.

<sup>19</sup> Entretiens avec le Professeur Y (Paris, 1955), pp. 19-22.

PART I

NARRATIVE STRUCTURES AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE

## CHAPTER I

## NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Les romans sont habituellement écrits à la troisième ou à la première personne, et nous savons bien que le choix de l'une de ces formes n'est nullement indifférent; ce n'est pas tout à fait la même chose qui peut nous être racontée dans l'un ou l'autre cas...

- Michel Butor<sup>1</sup>

An important characteristic of the modern novel has been the development of new narrative forms. The origins of these technical innovations lie in the need to find alternatives to the traditional omniscient mode of narration where the narrator possesses a god-like knowledge of events, motivations and desires. Modern novelists have objected to this omniscience because of its implication that the certitude and infallibility claimed by the narrator are in fact attainable in this world. This more or less absolutist outlook appears somewhat anachronistic in an age which has accepted the death of God, celebrates the sovereignty of relativism, and is still reeling under the philosophic blows delivered by Darwin, Marx, Einstein, and Freud. In order to remain faithful to an intellectual revolution which affects not only our ideas and values but also our total conception of reality, novelists have felt the need to transform radically their methods of re-creating this reality. Therefore, in place of the conventional omniscient mode of narration, modern

<sup>1</sup> Essais sur le roman (Paris, 1969), p. 73.

literature has witnessed the birth of numerous new techniques of narration: the stream of consciousness, the Jamesian central intelligence, the shifting narrator (Faulkner), the complex first-person narrator (Proust), and so on.

But are such formal innovations just a case of new bottles for old wines? Perhaps not. For it cannot be denied that the subject matter of a work of art is in some way influenced by such technical transformations. The medium is inseparable from the message. A change in the narrative point of view, for example, can be expected to engender an altered fictional content. A limited -- because human -- first person narrator (who may also be the central object of the narration: the hero) is clearly incapable of knowing and interpreting reality in the manner of the traditional all-knowing narrator. For even the elements which are finally chosen to be narrated will be determined to a large extent by the situation of the narrator; that is, by his position inside or outside of the events recounted, his personal prejudices and interests, and so on.

It should be remarked also that changes in the technique of relating a story will affect elements of literary communication other than the message, or content. The rôles of both the sender and receiver of the fictional message -- the author and the reader -- undergo a substantial modification. In many contemporary fictions for example the author, who traditionally is indistinguishable from the detached omniscient narrator, finds himself as it were exiled from his own creation and replaced by a narrator (or narrators) who is often a specified character within the fictional universe. This dramatized narrator may either present or betray the author's personal views.

In the latter event an ironic relationship is established between the author and his usually reliable narrator.<sup>2</sup> Although it remains true that the author ultimately controls the narration, one should not forget that the modern narrator often mediates the author's personal vision in terms of his own independent existence.

The reader's role too will be transformed by alterations in the narrative form. Normally, the reader acquiesces to the conventional omniscience of the narrator, accepting this latter's selection and interpretation of facts and events without question. With the appearance of the fragmented and subjective narrative viewpoint however, the reader may no longer remain in this state of pure acceptance and comfortable passivity. He is obliged, on the contrary, to suspect the narrator -- because the latter has lost his divine status -- and to reinterpret actively the narration. Since events and characters are now imaged and refracted through a limited and perhaps unreliable subjectivity, the reader must become an active participant in the decoding of the text and in the creation of its meaning.

In short, the selection of a certain narrative form, and particularly the choice of a narrative perspective will tend to affect profoundly all aspects of the work. Both the disposition of elements within the text and the relationship of the reader to the text are modified by the presence of a specific point of view. Indeed it would not be an exaggeration to contend that it is precisely this element of the narration that determines in large measure "toute l'économie générale de l'oeuvre."<sup>3</sup> Consequently, this study

<sup>2</sup> A good example is the pastor in Gide's La Symphonie Pastorale, who, while expressing many of the values of gidisme, is also the victim of an interior blindness which Gide indirectly condemns. Consequently, an ironic relationship exists between Gide and his first-person narrator. The pastor cannot be fully trusted.

<sup>3</sup> Roland Bourneuf and Réal Ouellet, L'Univers du roman, p. 75.

of Voyage au bout de la nuit begins with an examination of the narrative modalities of this novel.

### Point of View

The narrative point of view adopted in Céline's first novel may be described as first-person retrospective. In the manner of an autobiography the narrator recounts his life from the moment of his enlistment into the army just prior to the outbreak of World War I up to the death of his friend Robinson some twenty years later. The narrator is thus dramatized; that is, he has an autonomous existence within the narrative. As the novel's central character he functions as the focal point of the narration since it is through his consciousness that events and characters are perceived and given meaning.

In general the retrospective mode of narration tends to create a bifurcation in the narrative perspective. On one level the narration is assured by an observer who recalls and organizes his past from a position outside and after the events he is relating. But on a second level, the protagonist experiences this past as a concrete and chaotic present which he confronts daily. Clearly therefore the "je" of the narration possesses a twofold reference: first, to the teller of the tale recollecting in tranquillity (more or less), whose relationship to the events and characters he recalls is mediated by a temporal and a fortiori psychological distance; and second, to the protagonist whose relationship to these same events is existential, direct and unmediated.

Such a division of the narrator into two entities may very well appear somewhat arbitrary and artificial. After all, are not these two narrators ultimately a single identifiable character (Ferdinand Bardamu)?

The answer is both yes and no. For present purposes what is important is the fact that the narrative form utilized in Voyage offers the framework in which two radically different narrative perspectives can cohabit. The protagonist, for example, will perceive existence as a succession of confrontations with reality obliging him to modify his attitudes, to react, and in short, to become. The observer, on the other hand, is concerned mainly with relating -- that is, organizing -- the destiny lived by the protagonist. The observer's primary function is to give form to the reality which has in a sense formed his "other self".

The narrative dichotomy I am describing is doubtless inherent in all instances of the first person retrospective form of narration. Normally such a duality functions as a formal cadre for a basic fictional motif: the growth and evolution of a personality from, for instance, a state of innocence to one of experience.<sup>4</sup> This, as we shall see, holds true for the novel under study. Moreover, this dual perspective affords the observer the advantage of hindsight over the protagonist and creates thereby the possibility of an ironic relationship between the two. Indeed, it is this ironic function of the narrator-observer that is emphasized in the Voyage.

In most narratives of this type the teller is content simply to organize and show events and characters; the reader is left free to draw the conclusions and make the judgments he deems suitable. A singular aspect of Voyage however is the aggressiveness of the observer. The narrative is constantly interrupted by the editorializing of the narrator whose commentaries

<sup>4</sup> "If the problem is one of tracing the growth of a personality as it reacts to experience, the protagonist narrator will prove most useful..." points out Norman Friedman in "Point of View in Fiction: the Development of a Critical Concept", in The Novel: Modern Essays in Criticism, ed. R.M. Davis (Englewood Cliffs, 1969), p. 166.



form a kind of contrapuntal relationship with his recollections of the past. These interventions impose a second temporal register upon the narrative: the present of the narrator-observer. Accordingly, such interventions are designated by a switch from the normal past tense of narration to the present tense.<sup>5</sup> Normally, these interruptions of the story take the form of either definitive judgments concerning a specific event or character, or a general definition or moral lesson based upon a particular set of circumstances. The following are but a few of the many examples of the integration into the text of narrative recollection and narrative commentary. Chosen at random, these examples are taken from the episode aboard the Amiral Bragueton:

Quand on a pu s'échapper vivant d'un abattoir international en folie, c'est tout de même une référence sous le rapport du tact et de la discrétion. Mais revenons à ce voyage. Tant que nous restâmes dans les eaux d'Europe, ça ne s'annonçait pas mal (p. 111);

Se sentir nourri, couché, abreuvé pour rien pendant quatre semaines consécutives, qu'on y songe, c'est assez, n'est-ce pas, en soi, pour délirer d'économie? Moi, seul payant du voyage, je fus trouvé par conséquent... nettement insupportable (p. 113);

On n'est jamais assez craintif. Grâce à certaine habileté je ne perdis que ce qu'il me restait d'amour-propre. Et voici comment les choses se passèrent. Quelque temps après les îles Canaries... (p. 113);

On ne m'y reprendrait plus à voyager avec des gens aussi difficiles à contenter. Ils étaient tellement désœuvrés aussi, enfermés trente jours durant avec eux-mêmes qu'il en fallait très peu pour les passionner. D'ailleurs, dans la vie courante, réfléchissons que cent individus au moins dans le cours d'une seule journée bien ordinaire désirèrent votre pauvre mort... (p. 116).

<sup>5</sup> The present tense is also employed in the novel for purposes of dramatization; thus the present is employed at the moment of the decisive meeting with Arthur Ganate which opens the novel: "On se rencontre donc place Clichy... Il veut me parler. Je l'écoute" (p. 11). N.B. All textual references in this study are to the 1962 edition of the collection "Bibliothèque de la Pléiade", published by Gallimard.

The double narrative (and temporal) register is often evoked in an even more explicit manner, as when the narrator-observer underlines the differences between the past he is recounting and the today of which he is expressly conscious:

Et puis il s'est passé des choses et encore des choses, qu'il n'est pas facile de raconter à présent, à cause que ceux d'aujourd'hui ne les comprendraient déjà plus (p. 49);

Sa haine pour l'Agent général Directeur me semble encore aujourd'hui, à tant de distance, une des passions les plus vivaces qu'il m'ait été donné d'observer chez un homme (p. 135);

Je n'oserais pas affirmer que je puisse aujourd'hui décrire ces jardins sans commettre de grossières et fantastiques erreurs (p. 180).

Similarly, the narrator may choose to emphasize the remoteness of the events he is relating, thereby throwing into relief the duality of the narrative:

... c'était un spectacle à remplir l'Alhambra d'alors, il aurait éclipsé Fragon, dans l'époque dont je vous parle une formidable vedette, cependant (p. 23);

Mais à ce moment-là, dont je parle, il était encore salement vivant le Pinçon (p. 25);

Au moment dont je parle, tout le monde à Paris voulait posséder son petit uniforme (p. 51).

By explicitly separating himself from the period he is recounting the observer underlines his status as a semi-independent character with attitudes and opinions radically different from those of his earlier self.

Yet another technique employed to contrast the outlooks of observer and protagonist can be located in a series of derisive outbursts which the teller directs at the hero. This rhetoric of self-abuse appears most frequently in the early sections of the work, corresponding to the period of greatest temporal separation between the two narrative perspectives. In the novel's

opening episode at Place Clichy, for example, the narrator immediately, although implicitly, dissociates himself from the other "je" by ironically presenting the smug naïveté of the youthful Bardamu and his friend Arthur Ganate who are carrying on a lively discussion on the state of the world:

Bien fiers alors d'avoir fait sonner ces vérités utiles, on est demeuré là assis, ravis, à regarder les dames du café (p. 11).

On numerous occasions thereafter, the protagonist will be corrected, ridiculed and condemned by the observer, and consequently will be devalued in the eyes of the reader:

Peut-être étais-je à plaindre, mais en tout cas sûrement j'étais grotesque (p. 39);

Pour que dans le cerveau d'un couillon la pensée fasse un tour, il faut qu'il lui arrive beaucoup de choses et des bien cruelles. Celui qui m'avait fait penser pour la première fois de ma vie, vraiment penser, des idées pratiques et bien à moi, c'était bien sûrement le commandant Pinçon, cette gueule de torture (p. 30);

J'ai cru longtemps qu'elle était sotte la petite Musyne, mais ce n'était qu'une opinion de vaniteux éconduit (p. 78);

Il ne me répondait même pas sur cette question du mariage. C'était, c'est vrai aussi un conseil bien niais que je lui donnais là (p. 293).

Clearly therefore the narration offers a double perspective, a duality the function of which is primarily contrastive and ironic. But what is the significance of this polarizing configuration? Why this schism dividing the teller from the protagonist? It would appear that a satisfactory response to these questions requires an examination of "non-formal" elements, or more precisely, of those meaningful elements in the text which present correspondences or parallels with the dual narrative structure we have been observing. In short, one must seek out examples of radical dichotomies within the fiction, and attempt to relate them to the dichotomy narrator-observer/narrator-protagonist

which characterizes the narrative perspective of the novel. The presence of such examples would tend to underline the interaction and basic inseparability of technique and content within the text.

### Bardamu and Robinson

Thus far we have seen that the narration in the Voyage is structurally dualistic. The utilization of the first-person retrospective form in itself infers a double narrative and temporal register. The marked separation of the narrator into two often conflicting characters strengthens and underlines the dual nature of the narration. Given the premise basic to this study, namely that formal and significant structures are intimately related, it is not surprising to discover that this formal dichotomy is mirrored in the content of the narrative. Most obviously, the formal scission serves to place in sharp relief the limits of the development of Ferdinand Bardamu from adolescent protagonist to adult observer. Here we recognize the fundamental narrative motif of the maturation and evolution of the hero in the course of his experiencing the world. Secondly, we will see that the recurring juxtaposition within the narration of the conflicting views of the double narrator corresponds to a constant psychological ambivalence within Bardamu. And finally the form-content parallel is manifest in the ambiguous relationship linking Bardamu with Robinson. We will observe that this strange friendship is closely related not only to the hero's development and to his psychic duality, but also to the formal structure of the narration.

### Bardamu's evolution

It has already been noted that the narration of the novel is at once chronological (retrospective) and yet also discontinuous, since the teller constantly breaks up his recollections of the past with comments and generalizations drawn from his "present". Significantly, the pattern of the hero's development parallels this pattern of the narrative. For while the evolution of the hero is basically linear and progressive it is also resisted and at times even refused.

On one hand, Bardamu's development corresponds to the straightforward archetypal progression from innocence to experience, from naivety and enthusiasm to knowledge and resignation, from youth to age. The older narrator comments in retrospect upon the virginal innocence of the youthful Bardamu with respect to his knowledge of the horrible nature of reality: "On est puceau de l'Horreur comme <sup>on l'est</sup> de la volupté" (p. 17). The Flanders episode, for example, appears to function as a kind of initiation ritual wherein the young Bardamu is deflowered and deprived of any possible illusions as to the true nature of war: "Rien à dire. Je venais de découvrir d'un coup la guerre tout entière. J'étais dépucelé" (p. 18). The references to transformations in the hero's outlook as he travels in time and space from one adventure to another are both explicit and implicit. Overt allusions to the protagonist's becoming, for example, are scattered throughout the text:

Il suffit en tout et pour tout de se contempler  
scrupuleusement soi-même et ce qu'on est devenu en  
fait d'immondice (p. 210);

C'est vrai aussi ce qu'elle disait que j'avais bien  
changé. L'existence, ça vous tord et ça vous écrase  
la face (p. 216);

Alors à force de renoncer, peu à peu, je suis devenu  
comme un autre... Un nouveau Ferdinand (p. 226);

Dans ces moments-là c'est un peu gênant d'être devenu  
aussi pauvre et aussi dur qu'on est devenu (p. 486).

On a less explicit level the progressive nature of the hero's evolution is clearly discernible. Thus the numerous critical comments about "youth" which appear towards the middle of the work function not just as editorial generalizations offered by the (relatively) old observer, but also as indirect allusions to the hero's growing out of his youthful phase and to the gradual movement towards unity with his more mature other self. Rather than applying solely to man in general therefore, the blanket condemnation of one's past refers equally to the hero's particular situation and as such signals his arrival at a new stage in his development:

Pendant la jeunesse, les plus arides indifférences, les plus cyniques mufleries, on arrive à leur trouver des excuses de lubies personnelles et puis je ne sais quels signes d'un inexpert romantisme. Mais plus tard, quand la vie vous a bien montré tout ce qu'elle peut exiger de cautele, de cruauté, de malice pour être entretenue tant bien que mal à 37°, on se rend compte, on est fixé, bien placé, pour comprendre toutes les saloperies que contient un passé (p. 210);

On découvre dans tout son passé ridicule tellement de ridicule, de tromperie, de crédulité, qu'on voudrait peut-être s'arrêter tout net d'être jeune, attendre la jeunesse qu'elle se détache, attendre qu'elle vous dépasse, la voir s'en aller, s'éloigner, regarder toute sa vanité, porter la main dans son vide... (p. 284).

In spite of such clear allusions to a progressive (and chronological) development, the hero's evolution is complicated by his own ambiguous attitude towards the world. This ambiguity reveals itself in Bardamu's reaction to the loss of youthfulness. For although this period may well be "ridicule" and filled with illusions, it is also a time of lyricism and great enthusiasm. To grow out of youth represents therefore both a gain and a loss: "Plus de

mystère, plus de niaiserie, on a bouffé toute sa poésie puisqu'on a vécu jusque-là" (p. 210). Although maturation may well imply an end to illusion and to superficiality, it also means an end to sensual joy and perhaps even to happiness. Consequently, Bardamu's attitude to the loss of youth is ambivalent:

C'est content facilement les jeunes, ils jouissent comme ils veulent d'abord c'est vrai!

Toute la jeunesse aboutit sur la plage glorieuse, au bord de l'eau, là où les femmes ont l'air d'être libres enfin, où elles sont si belles qu'elles n'ont même plus besoin du mensonge de nos rêves.

Alors bien sûr, l'hiver une fois venu, on a du mal à rentrer, à se dire que c'est fini, à se l'avouer (p. 370).

In short, the narrative perspective does indeed encompass the conventional development of the hero from a state of innocence to one of knowledge of the world. However, much as the narrative perspective of Voyage is complicated by the interruptions of the observer, so the hero's development ceases to be "linear" as contradictory values are placed upon his experiences by Bardamu himself.

#### Bardamu's inner conflict

The protagonist's ambivalent attitude towards youth reveals a basic internal dichotomy which appears to underlie almost all his actions. In the novel's opening episode, for example, Bardamu suddenly enlists into the army although he has just declared himself unalterably opposed to all social institutions: "Tu l'as dit, bouffi, que je suis anarchiste!" (p. 12). Moreover, Bardamu has just condemned vehemently the iniquitous organization of society into the masters and the slaves, as illustrated by the image of the galère (p. 13). How can we account for such a stark contradiction between

word and deed, between thought and action, except in terms of some sort of deep-seated ambivalence before the facts of reality?

Throughout the novel, Bardamu appears to oscillate between a desire to refuse the world and to rebel,<sup>6</sup> and an opposing inner need to conform and submit to authority:

Aussi, décidai-je en ce qui me concernait de me surveiller désormais de très près, et puis d'apprendre à me taire scrupuleusement, à cacher mon envie de foutre le camp, à prospérer enfin si possible et malgré tout au service de la Compagnie Pordurière (p. 139).

In the war episode for example, the hero is torn between a powerful impulsion toward revolt -- "Dans une histoire pareille, il n'y a rien à faire, il n'y a qu'à foutre le camp" (p. 16) -- and an equally strong fear of the gendarme whose repressive actions aimed at keeping potential rebels in line constitute in a sense the real war, "la profonde, la vraie de vraie" (p. 33). Later in Africa, Bardamu hesitates between "la terreur des comptes irréguliers" (p. 174) which keeps him loyal to the Company and the wish to desert his ramshackle hut and take to the forest. A similar ambivalence of attitude is evidenced by the protagonist in connection with the plan to murder la belle-mère Henrouille. Bardamu is both intrigué by his possible complicity in this act of evil and empoisonné by his fear of "toutes les sales histoires, les sales chichis que remue la Justice au moment d'un crime rien que pour amuser les contribuables, ces vicieux..." (p. 310).

Towards the end of the novel the protagonist reaches a state of almost total resignation. The impulse towards revolt seems to have been totally repressed. To be right or wrong is no longer important, rebellion is just a

<sup>6</sup> "Le cimetière, un autre encore, à côté, et puis le boulevard de la Révolte. Il monte avec toutes ses lampes droit et large en plein dans la nuit. Y a qu'à suivre, à gauche. C'était ma rue" (p. 287).



memory:

Les choses auxquelles on tenait le plus, vous vous décidez un beau jour à en parler de moins en moins, avec effort quand il faut s'y mettre. On en a bien marre de s'écouter toujours causer.... On abrège... On renonce... Ça dure depuis trente ans qu'on cause... On ne tient plus à avoir raison... Il suffit désormais de bouffer un peu, de se faire un peu de chaleur et de dormir le plus qu'on peut sur le chemin de rien du tout (pp. 447-448).

One may postulate therefore the existence of a fundamental dichotomy within the protagonist resulting from the conflict of the contradictory forces of rebellion and submission. The impulse towards rebellion results from the intolerable nature of the reality encountered by Bardamu. But the tendency towards an attitude of submissiveness is extremely powerful particularly as it is related to the influence upon him of the hero's mother:

Certainement je devais tenir cette terreur de ma mère qui m'avait contaminé avec sa tradition: "On vole un oeuf... Et puis un boeuf, et puis on finit par assassiner sa mère." Ces choses-là, on a tous mis bien du mal à s'en débarrasser. On les a apprises trop petit et elles viennent vous terrifier sans recours, plus tard, dans les grands moments (p. 174).

Much of the novel will in fact deal with the search for a resolution of this radical ambivalence manifested by the protagonist. Doubtless the fictional element which reflects most significantly this internal dichotomy is the hero's complex and ambiguous relationship with Robinson Léon.

#### Robinson and Bardamu

Whereas Bardamu is "double" in the sense that his behaviour is best understood in terms of an inner conflict between the urge to revolt and the compulsion to conform, Robinson's acts and outlook are characterized by a certain singlemindedness. From the attempt at desertion in Flanders during the war to the abandonment of the Compagnie Pordurière in the jungle of Africa, from the hints of a life of petty crime in America to the initially

unsuccessful and then successful attempts to murder the belle-mère Henrouille, and finally to a kind of suicide at the novel's end, at all times Robinson's position is constant: he consistently refuses his situation and rebels against it. In a very real sense Robinson can be viewed as a reflection, or better as a projection (upon the "story") of that part of the hero which also tends to refuse the world, but which is strongly opposed by powerful pressures towards conformity and resignation.<sup>7</sup>

Robinson's function as the projection of a basic attitude of the protagonist is underlined by the non-naturalistic manner in which Robinson is often presented and described. At the moment of their first encounter in Flanders, for example, Robinson seems more a phantom than a "real" character. He appears at first as a "changement dans la disposition de l'ombre" (p. 43), then as a "silhouette sortant des herbes" (p. 44). Less a physically well-defined being than a more or less disembodied voice, Robinson possesses a kind of supernatural status which endows him with a certain prestige:

Je ne voyais pas sa figure, mais sa voix était déjà autre que les nôtres, comme plus triste, donc plus valable que les nôtres. A cause de cela, je ne pouvais m'empêcher d'avoir un peu confiance en lui (p. 44).

This unreal or rather surreal status accorded Robinson recurs in the African episode. The hero is at first strangely unaware that this precursor is indeed the same Robinson he knew in Flanders and again in Paris (pp. 108-110). When finally Bardamu succeeds in identifying Robinson, the latter has disappeared. Significantly, the hero perceives the precursor to be less an individual than a type, an attitude towards life:

<sup>7</sup> Whereas Bardamu's attitudes have been strongly influenced by his mother, Robinson appears to lack the protagonist's respect or fear of la mère and of authority in general. Thus the attitude of Robinson towards the dying officer in Flanders to whom he remarks: "Maman! Elle t'emmerde!" (p. 45).

Je ne l'avais pas bien regardé en arrivant... . Mais je lui trouvais, en l'observant, par la suite, une figure décidément aventureuse, une figure à angles très tracés et même une de ces têtes de révolte qui entrent trop à vif dans l'existence au lieu de rouler dessus, avec un gros nez rond par exemple et des joues pleines en péniches, qui vont clapoter contre le destin avec un bruit de babillage. Celui-ci c'était un malheureux (p. 163).

As in the Flanders episode, the result of this more than realistic presentation is to accord Robinson a more than human status. Thus when Bardamu feels certain he will soon be seeing Robinson in Detroit -- "Dès lors, je me suis attendu à le rencontrer à chaque instant le Robinson. Je sentais que ça venait" (p. 231) -- or when he associates the presence of Robinson with the return of insomnia and feelings of Angst -- "On me retirera difficilement de l'idée que si ça m'a repris ça n'est pas surtout à cause de Robinson" (p. 268) -- it seems clear that Robinson's rôle and powers go far beyond those of a normal character. Robinson appears to function as a kind of psychic projection (alter ego) of the protagonist; he is presented as a force, as a kind of mysterious symbol which Bardamu finds difficult to interpret: "C'était pas comme un malade ordinaire, on ne savait pas comment se tenir devant lui" (p. 487).

In the course of the narrative, an ambiguous relationship develops between the protagonist and Robinson. In the early episodes, when the world is shown to be intolerably oppressive and the impulse to rebel is correspondingly strong, the hero perceives Robinson as a benefactor and guide who can understand, explain and perhaps even overcome the traumatic difficulties imposed upon the individual by the world:

J'aurais bien voulu qu'il m'explique celui-là pendant qu'il y était, ce réserviste, pourquoi j'avais pas de courage non plus moi, pour faire la guerre... (p. 44).

In Africa, Robinson precedes the hero in rebelling against the commercial representative of the colonial system:

Foutez-vous donc des affaires de la "Compagnie Pordurière"  
comme elle se fout des vôtres... (p. 166).

Often Bardamu will find himself obliged to recognize his indebtedness to Robinson: "Décidément, d'avoir suivi dans la nuit Robinson jusque-là où nous en étions, j'avais quand même appris des choses" (p. 305). At the novel's end, moreover, the hero seems still to accept a position inferior to that of his friend:

Et cependant j'avais même pas été aussi loin que Robinson moi dans la vie!... J'avais pas réussi en définitive.  
J'en avais pas acquis moi une seule idée bien solide comme celle qu'il avait eue pour se faire dérouiller (p. 489).

Clearly, therefore, Robinson's anti-social activities and metaphysical revolt against life possess a certain attraction for Bardamu. The hero admires particularly Robinson's capacity to "go all the way", to follow his rebellion to its logical and absolute conclusion. To some extent, this uncompromising attitude is precisely the quality which Bardamu lacks. Thus, in the following quotation, it seems probable that the reference to "les autres gens" is indirectly a reference to the protagonist as well:

La vocation de meurtre qui avait soudain possédé Robinson me semblait plutôt somme toute comme une espèce de progrès sur ce que j'avais observé jusqu'alors parmi les autres gens, toujours mi-haineux, mi-bienveillants, toujours ennuyeux par leur imprécision de tendances (pp. 304-305).

But as I have already pointed out, Bardamu's general outlook is profoundly ambivalent. This ambivalence is soon manifest in the hero's attitude towards Robinson. For although following Robinson has taught Bardamu much, nevertheless the pressure to conform and the fear of authority which are the hero's legacy from the preceding generation provoke a reaction

against Robinson who gradually comes to represent an obstacle to the hero's search for a modus vivendi with reality. Indeed as early as the African encounter, Bardamu's attitude towards Robinson is dominated by fear, apprehension and hostility:

Je n'étais pas très sûr que ce soit réel, tout ce qu'il me racontait là, mais toujours est-il que ce prédécesseur me fit l'effet instantané d'être un fameux chacal (p. 166).

Henceforth, all encounters with Robinson will be disagreeable to the protagonist. In Detroit for example, Bardamu's immediate, instinctive reaction upon being greeted by his friend is one of distaste:

... il m'a semblé qu'on m'appelait par mon nom: "Ferdinand! Hé Ferdinand!" Ça faisait comme un scandale forcément dans cette pénombre. J'aimais pas ça (p. 232).

Back in France and now a doctor in the poor district of Garenne-Rancy, Bardamu associates Robinson with a recurrence of the depression and anxiety he had known in New York. In the hero's mind, Robinson is intimately involved with the misfortune and unhappiness which have been the hero's lot for many years:

De le recontrer à nouveau, Robinson, ça m'avait donc donné un coup et comme une espèce de maladie qui me reprenait.

Avec sa gueule toute barbouillée de peine, ça me faisait comme un sale rêve qu'il me ramenait et dont je n'arrivais pas à me délivrer depuis trop d'années déjà (p. 268).

While in the earlier adventures Bardamu had followed Robinson, actively seeking him out in New York and Detroit, now it is Robinson who chases after the hero:

Il était venu retomber là, devant moi. J'en finirais pas. Sûrement qu'il m'avait cherché par ici. J'essayais pas d'aller le revoir moi, bien sûr... J'osais même plus sortir de peur de le rencontrer (p. 268);

Une fois seul avec lui j'ai essayé de lui faire comprendre que je n'avais plus du tout envie de le revoir Robinson, mais il est revenu quand même vers la fin du mois et puis alors presque chaque soir (p. 291).

As the novel progresses this hostility comes to characterize and dominate the hero's reactions to the presence of Robinson:

On ne se parlait pas beaucoup, on n'avait plus grand'chose à se dire (p. 293);

Je le regardais avec ses yeux clignants, encore un peu suintants au soleil, et je me disais qu'après tout il n'était pas sympathique Robinson (p. 383);

Je ne l'écoutais plus. Il me décevait et me dégoûtait un peu pour tout dire (p. 385).

In résumé then, the attitude of Bardamu towards Robinson is ambivalent, if not quite contradictory. He admires and fears him, seeks him out as a guide, yet fears that his presence portends unhappiness. The explicit association of Robinson with misfortune goes back to the African episode:

Je décidai, malgré l'état où je me trouvais de prendre la forêt devant moi dans la direction qu'avait prise déjà ce Robinson de tous les malheurs (p. 176).

This ambivalence is evident when the hero reacts to Robinson's project to help the Henrouille family get rid of the elderly mother-in-law: "Somme toute, j'étais intrigué et empoisonné en même temps" (p. 310).

To the extent that Robinson functions as a projection of one pole of the hero's interior dialectic (revolt/obedience), clearly the hero's growing hostility towards his comrade implies a gradual subordination of the will to rebel to the search for a way to live with reality. Bardamu, in short, compromises with existence, a step which of course Robinson refuses to take. Thus the hero will leave his solitary position at the edge of society and by becoming a doctor will be integrated into the social framework. The choice of medicine as a career is itself significant if seen as the attempt to combine the need for integration into the world with the rebellious element of the hero's nature -- medicine constituting in some measure an expression of man's refusal to

accept the inevitable triumph of disease and death.

When this attempt to combine conformism with reformism fails — with the death of the child Bébert — the hero appears to evolve away from the spirit of rebellion and towards a feeling of apathy and resignation: "Résignons-nous! Laissons la nature tranquille, la garce!" (p. 299). The voluntary exile into the Asile continues this movement away from active revolt and towards silence (Parapine) and indifference:

Au fond, j'étais devenu de plus en plus comme Baryton, je m'en foutais... On a beau dire et prétendre, le monde nous quitte bien avant qu'on s'en aille pour de bon (p. 447).

Here the hero seems content to play the rôle of an obedient assistant, satisfied to avoid additional conflicts and misfortunes:

En principe, pour toujours et en toutes choses j'étais du même avis que mon patron. Je n'avais pas fait de grands progrès pratiques au cours de mon existence tracassée, mais j'avais appris quand même les bons principes d'étiquette de la servitude. Du coup avec Baryton, grâce à ces dispositions, on était devenus bien copains pour finir, je n'étais jamais contrariant moi, je mangeais peu à table. Un gentil assistant en somme, tout à fait économique et pas ambitieux pour un sou, pas menaçant (p. 411).

Like a concrete representation of Bardamu's own bad conscience, Robinson perceives and comments upon the watered-down solution to life adopted by the hero. With a characteristic mélange of crudeness and insight he condemns Bardamu's evolution towards compromise:

Alors il me regarda drôlement, comme s'il me découvrait soudain un aspect inouï de dégueulasse. "Toi quand j'y pense, t'as le bon bout. Tu vends tes bobards aux crevards et pour le reste, tu t'en fous... T'as l'air gentil mais t'es une belle vache tout dans le fond!"... (pp. 2294-295).

For his part, Bardamu perceives Robinson more and more as an obstacle to the realization of his hopes for security, tranquillity and comfort: "Il me

suffisait à présent de me maintenir dans un équilibre supportable, alimentaire et physique. Le reste ne m'importait vraiment plus du tout" (p. 418). Having excluded the option of revolt and refusal, the hero withdraws into a state of practical selfishness. Formerly a guide and source of insight into the way things really are, Robinson becomes for the hero an ominous and disagreeable threat:

A l'instant je le trouvais abominable de me déranger au moment juste où je commençais à me refaire un bon petit égoïsme... Parce que je peux bien le dire à présent, j'étais pas content du tout de le revoir. Ça me faisait aucun plaisir (p. 435).

If, in the confines of an examination of narrative point of view, I have felt obliged to linger over the hero's double attitude towards the world and over the ambiguity of his relationship with Robinson, it is because I am firmly convinced of the undesirability of completely separating formal devices from significant content. Rather, I am concerned with discovering the "bridges" linking technique to substance. It is interesting in this regard to note the definite parallelism which exists between the narrative couple observer/protagonist and the fictional pair Bardamu/Robinson. Both the protagonist and Robinson possess a twofold fictional status. The protagonist is at once the alter ego of the teller (his younger self) and a separate character with attitudes often in sharp contrast to those of the teller or observer. Similarly, Robinson functions both as Bardamu's alter ego -- embodying the hero's frustrated desire to revolt -- and as a realistic character with an independent fictional status: réserve, night-worker, lover of Madelon, murderer.



It might be objected that this analogy breaks down somewhat as the work progresses. For if in the course of the narrative the temporal and spatial distance separating the two narrative perspectives is gradually reduced -- the récit functioning precisely as the bridge which serves to reunite protagonist and observer<sup>8</sup> -- the two characters are apparently forever separated by a growing enmity and finally by death. Yet it can be argued that the unity of the narrative perspective and the fictional content is in fact reasserted in an almost organic manner. For the death of Robinson does not mark the disappearance (from the text) of the spirit of refusal and revolt. This spirit is in fact assumed by the teller of the tale (the observer) and expressed in his absolute judgments and implacable condemnations. Thus the separation and defeat that life and death have effected will be remedied by the decision of the protagonist to "tell all". Robinson has realized within the fiction the absolute experience of negation and death, the authentic "voyage au bout de la nuit" which Bardamu must recount if his own existence is not to be deemed a failure:

La grande défaite en tout, c'est d'oublier, et surtout ce qui vous a fait crever, et de crever sans comprendre jamais jusqu'à quel point les hommes sont vaches. Quand on sera au bord du trou faudra pas faire les malins nous autres, mais faudra raconter tout sans changer un mot, de ce qu'on a vu de plus vicieux chez les hommes et puis poser sa chique et puis descendre. Ça suffit comme boulot pour une vie tout entière (pp. 27-28).

The internal conflicts and fragmentation of the self will be overcome by the act of remembering and of recounting. The death of Robinson which terminates the récit will lead to the birth of the teller and the beginning of the discours.

<sup>8</sup> Much as in Proust's A la recherche du temps perdu. See also Michel Butor, Essais sur le roman, p. 77.

If life has crushed the hero's will to revolt, Art, which commences on the other side of life,<sup>9</sup> may serve to transcend the "déceptions et fatigues" (p. 7) of existence. When the story has ended the narration is about to begin.

#### Narrative Perspective: A Postscript

In his important work of narrative classification, The Rhetoric of Fiction, Wayne C. Booth cites Voyage as offering an example of what he terms the "seductive" point of view in fiction. According to Booth, the judgments and values professed by the narrator-observer are not clearly enough dissociated from -- nor for that matter are they explicitly associated with -- those of the author. As a result, the "innocent" reader risks being seduced by the nihilistic vision and the ferocious attacks on civilization which are contained in the narrator's comments. According to Booth, Céline, by not dissociating himself from his narrator, has produced "a book, which, if taken seriously by the reader, must corrupt him."<sup>10</sup>

Leaving aside for a moment the dubious art-as-morality premise upon which Booth bases his attack, it would seem possible to refute the critic on the technical grounds where he is usually strongest. Booth criticizes the failure of Céline to make the reader doubt the truthfulness of the narrator's general pronouncements on life. But in fact several factors in the novel work against an unhesitating acceptance of the observer's outlook and judgments. Firstly, to the extent that the observer is a continuation -- a later, evolved self -- of the protagonist, he implicitly possesses the penchant for error which characterizes the hero. One might well interpret the "absolute" style of the observer -- the frequent use of "jamais," "rien," "tout," etc. -- as

<sup>9</sup> See the epigraph which functions as a sort of preface to the novel and in which the author locates the origins of works of the imagination: "C'est de l'autre côté de la vie" (p. 7).

<sup>10</sup> The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago, 1961), p. 383.

the author's attempt to counteract this extreme fallibility by means of an inflated rhetoric. But it is perhaps equally justifiable to perceive this hyperbolic style as an implied devaluation of a narrator whose claims to omniscience are contradicted by the nature of the world he himself confronts, a world in which absolute certainty is never attainable. Finally, the utilization of a formal written code which often clashes with the dominant colloquial style of the narration may be taken as an oblique reference to a certain falseness and affectation<sup>11</sup> in the observer. In short, there is evidence which points to a certain distancing of the author with respect to the narrator.

All this is not meant to imply that the vision of reality presented in the novel is necessarily false or misleading. What seems clear is that the reader is not obliged to accept passively the declarations of the narrator; his sympathy with the suffering consciousness of the narrator-protagonist is never as total as Booth would have us believe.

At the heart of Booth's attack upon Voyage lies the critic's distaste for moral ambiguity and uncertainty. But in an age where the meaninglessness of existence has become a common fictional theme (Kafka, Sartre, Beckett), and where relativism and irony are basic intellectual weapons, Booth's moral criticisms seem anachronistic. Thus his declaration that "taken seriously, the book would make life itself meaningless..."<sup>12</sup> can itself hardly be taken seriously. Even less acceptable is Booth's affirmation that the world portrayed in the novel "contains no conceivable explanation of how anyone in that world could bring himself to write a book."<sup>13</sup> On the contrary, in a

<sup>11</sup> See for example the frequent use of the imperfect subjunctive throughout the novel.

<sup>12</sup> Booth, p. 384.

<sup>13</sup> Booth, p. 383.

world devoid of meaning, only the creative response can equal death as a remedy for the nothingness of being. In Voyage, both responses are present and, as we have seen, intimately related: the death of Robinson "generating" in a sense the appearance of Bardamu creator.

## CHAPTER II

## NARRATIVE STRUCTURES: EPISODE AND PLOT

In the picaresque novel, the chronological sequence is all there is: this happened and then that. The adventures, each an incident, which might be an independent tale, are connected by the figure of the hero. A more philosophic novel adds to chronology the structure of causation.<sup>14</sup>

In the preceding section dealing with narrative perspective I sought to outline the formal framework of the narration. I noted the dualism inherent in the narrative perspective chosen and observed the temporal and psychological polarization implied by the coexistence of a narrator-observer and a narrator-protagonist. A few stylistic consequences of this narrative dichotomy were indicated: the juxtaposition of two narrative voices -- one of which recollects and recounts while the other pronounces -- and of two temporal registers: the past of remembrance and the present of editorializing. The presence as well of a double stylistic register -- the colloquial oral and formal written codes -- within the text corroborates further the importance of the dualistic structure implied in the double narrative perspective. Going beyond strictly formal and stylistic considerations, I observed the radical schism between observer and protagonist and concluded

<sup>14</sup> R. Wellek and A. Warren, Theory of Literature (New York, 1956), p. 215.

that this split functions not only to stress a basic narrative motif -- the evolution of the hero -- but also to reflect a fundamental dichotomy located within the protagonist, an internal dialectic confirmed by the configuration of the hero's relationship with Robinson.

Leaving the problem of narrative perspective, I shall now examine in this section the "morphology" of the narration, its internal structure or skeleton. By "morphology" I understand the constituent elements of the narrative: actions, events, episodes; their functions, interrelationships, and the patterns that they form. Since I am concerned with the novel as a self-contained whole, my purpose is not to relate these particular elements to more or less universal narrative categories such as those developed by such critics as Propp<sup>15</sup> or Bremond.<sup>16</sup> Rather, I hope to demonstrate that specific laws and processes are at work regulating the narrative and conferring upon the work an organic unity rooted in the bedrock of its own narrative structure.

It may well be objected, however, that the plot-structure of the novel is clearly generically determined; that is, the choice of the picaresque conventions employed in Voyage would include the loose episodic plot, rapid variations in the fortunes of the hero, event piled upon event, haphazard encounters.<sup>17</sup> Its hero indeed resembles in many ways the typical pizaro: he is an innocent who becomes a semi-rogue "because the world he meets is roguish;"<sup>18</sup> he is capable of playing different rôles in order to survive, as evidenced aboard the Amiral Bragueton.

Nevertheless it would appear likely that generic determinism cannot

<sup>15</sup> Vladimir Propp, La Morphologie du conte (Paris, 1970).

<sup>16</sup> Claude Bremond, "La logique des possibles narratifs", in Communications 8 (1966), pp. 60-76.

<sup>17</sup> For an inventory of picaresque conventions see Stuart Miller, The Picaresque Novel (Cleveland, 1967).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

account adequately for either the form or the content of the novel. For if the conventions of the picaresque tend to imply "a total lack of structure in the world,"<sup>19</sup> several factors in Voyage clearly function as counterweights to this tendency towards chaos. We have ascertained for example that the apparently chance meetings with Robinson -- fortuitous encounters reflecting a typically picaresque convention -- perform in fact a unifying function: they mirror successive stages in the hero's quest to resolve an internal dichotomy. The very presence of this quest motif endows the work with a unity alien to the picaresque genre.

The existence of such unifying elements permits me to postulate the presence of a structural (formal) resistance to the tendency towards formlessness inherent in the picaresque vision.<sup>20</sup> Examples of this resistance to narrative anarchy abound in the text. One simple technique of preserving unity can be found in the numerous references to past adventures which are clearly similar to the present situation of the protagonist. The effect of such comparisons is to stress the unified nature of the hero's experiences. The streets of New York for example will remind Bardamu of the Parisian suburb where he was hospitalized during the war:

Tout me rappelait les environs de mon hôpital de Villejuif,  
même les petits enfants à gros genoux cagneux tout le long  
des trottoirs et aussi les orgues foraines (p. 204).

The numerous references to the war in later episodes function, in a rather superficial manner, to unify the narrative. The girl who has undergone an abortion bleeds in a manner reminiscent of the colonel shot down in Flanders: "Ça faisait 'glouglou' entre ses jambes comme dans le cou coupé du colonel à

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 131.

<sup>20</sup> I do not deny the reality of a picaresque vision in the novel. My point is that a well-knit narrative structure constitutes an attempt to impose a form upon this vision, thereby adding an additional dimension to the work.

la guerre" (p. 259). The trip to Africa aboard the Amiral Bragueton will seem to reveal to the hero the white man's "vraie nature, tout comme à la guerre" (p. 112). The forces of authority which will judge and condemn the hero for his inept handling of the Company's accounts will be armed with terrible laws, like "le Conseil de guerre..." (p. 173). And if Bardamu disapproves of l'abbé Protiste, his distaste results from an earlier experience:

Je ne le connaissais pas ce prêtre, j'ai failli l'éconduire.  
Je n'aimais pas les curés, j'avais mes raisons, surtout depuis  
qu'on m'avait fait le coup de l'embarquement à San Tapeta  
(p. 331).

Such examples confirm our suspicion that a tendency towards narrative unity is indeed present in the text. In addition, they lend plausibility to my hypothesis that a deep structural unity underlies the narration of the Voyage.

By examining the morphology (the construction of episodes) and the "syntax" (the global narrative sequence) of the narration, we shall observe that a few basic dynamic structures, or processes, regulate, unify and in a sense generate the narrative. For example, the novel's opening episode functions both morphologically -- the episode, it will be found, is a model upon which later episodes are based -- and syntactically -- the episode constitutes a sort of initiation into both the fictional universe and the narrative sequence. Let us examine the structure of this episode in some detail.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> By "episode" I mean a narrative fragment composed of a more or less autonomous and interrelated sequence of events and containing a discernible pattern or structure. Thus the major episodes of the novel appear to be:

- |                            |                            |                              |
|----------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. <u>Place Clichy</u>     | 5. Africa                  | 9. Garenne-Rancy             |
| 2. Flanders                | 6. <u>Infanta Combitta</u> | 10. Henrouille family        |
| 3. Paris                   | 7. New York                | 11. Toulouse                 |
| 4. <u>Amiral Bragueton</u> | 8. Detroit                 | 12. <u>Asile</u>             |
|                            |                            | 13. Madelon and the Carnival |

The following pages will deal with the homologous structure of these episodes as well as their capacity to function as either micro- or macro- sequences (their morphological and syntactical operations; respectively).



### La place Clichy

The situation of the hero at the beginning of this episode is unclear. The reader knows nothing of the events of his life previous to his conversation with Arthur Ganate. What does seem clear, however, is that the hero is not immediately in a crisis situation. On the contrary, he appears somewhat detached from the world, cut off from reality by his naïve egotism and intellectual posing. Student, poet, and pseudo-intellectual, the protagonist occupies a space which is neither completely within nor totally outside the world of direct experience. In a sense he is in a kind of limbo. The choice of a shaded café, protected from the glaring sun, in which to hold a conversation reflects a temptation to reject the world and isolate oneself from reality. This tendency to reject reality is made explicit in Bardamu's "prière vengeresse" (p. 12) and in his comparison of the world to a "galère" (p. 13) in which the many toil and suffer while the exploiting masters live in luxury.

With his lack of any concrete knowledge of the ways of the world, Bardamu can be viewed in this opening scene as a relative innocent enjoying the self-satisfied well-being of discoursing confidently about a reality with which he is not truly acquainted. Suddenly, however, a curious and fatal event takes place. Immediately after harshly condemning war, society, and life in general, the hero is tempted by the seductive appearances -- uniforms, music, etc., -- of a passing military regiment. Spontaneously, he decides to enlist. His stated reason for doing so -- "J'vais voir si c'est ainsi!" (p. 13) -- implies a decision to gain knowledge of the world immediately through concrete experience rather than through a dependence upon newspapers and

intellectually fashionable theories. Having abandoned a quasi-paradisial position of repose and equilibrium<sup>22</sup> the hero, in one abrupt act, crosses into a far less comfortable position directly in contact with the "real" world.

For a very short period all seems well: music, flowers, enthusiastic public approval greet the new recruit. Gradually however the situation deteriorates. The applause grows weaker, rain starts to fall and Bardamu begins to understand what has happened. He realizes that the seductive appearances of military life are a sham and fears that in truth "Nous n'étions donc plus rien qu'entre nous?" (p. 14). His first reaction is to turn back the clock and start again: "C'est tout à recommencer!" (p. 14). Then he realizes that he cannot escape, that he has been effectively trapped -- "On était faits, comme des rats" (p. 14) -- and that perhaps there will be little opportunity to escape the real world now that he is inside, since "une fois qu'on y est, on y est bien" (p. 15).

An examination of succeeding episodes reveals the presence of a process similar to that which occurs at Place Clichy. This process, or rather pattern of events, can be roughly schematized as follows:

- a) The passage, from a position of relative detachment to one of direct confrontation with the world;
- b) This passage into the world of experience is often followed by a short period of relative well-being;
- c) Then occurs the period of intense suffering and the feeling of being trapped which accompany the period of confrontation with the world;
- d) There follows various attempts to escape the real world;

<sup>22</sup> Clearly this is a false equilibrium just as the café is a false paradise; the inauthenticity of Bardamu's original position of innocence is, moreover, implied in the ironic attitude of the narrator towards the young students.

- e) The circle is completed by the attainment of a shelter whose power of protection is at best ephemeral, at worst illusory.

It should be noted that this schema does not take into account the spatio-temporal dimension of each episode, its dynamic interaction with what precedes and what follows. We shall soon see how this circular pattern is transformed -- when integrated into the spatial and temporal flow of the fiction -- into a cyclical process. Let us now examine the stages of this fundamental narrative pattern in more detail.

### The Entrance

Bardamu's passage into the world of concrete experience is regularly ambiguous. On one hand, he is seduced, like millions of others, by the emotional appeal of military splendour and patriotic rhetoric. The enthusiasm<sup>23</sup> provoked by such appearances is not the result of an individual choice; rather, Bardamu's spontaneous reaction bears witness to the overwhelming power of inherited cultural and religious traditions:

Un chrétien de vingt siècles, j'en savais quelque chose,  
ne se retient plus quand devant lui vient à passer un  
régiment. Ça lui fait jaillir trop d'idées (p. 139).

On the other hand, there definitely does exist an element of personal choice in the decision to enlist. The hero consciously desires to verify his theories in the real world; he is indeed driven by a personal need to understand the ways of the world: "J'avais comme envie malgré tout d'essayer de comprendre leur brutalité" (p. 14). The hero is therefore a victim of external forces but at the same time a willing victim: the destiny to which

<sup>23</sup> "Moi, je ne fis qu'un bond d'enthousiasme" (p. 13).

he is forced to submit results in part from a personal, existential choice.

This ambivalence which surrounds the entrance into the world of concrete experience recurs throughout the novel. Often the hero is pictured as the plaything of forces beyond his control. The trip to Africa results less from a positive project on the part of Bardamu than from pressures brought to bear upon him by "ceux qui me voulaient du bien" (p. 111). More acted upon than master of his acts, Bardamu lets himself be manipulated by the others:

On m'avait embarqué la-dessus... Ils y tenaient...  
à ce que j'é fasse fortune...

Va pour l'Afrique! que j'ai dit alors et je me  
suis laissé pousser vers les tropiques, où m'assurait-  
on, il suffisait de quelque tempérence et d'une bonne  
conduite pour se faire tout de suite une situation (p. 111).<sup>22</sup>

Similarly, the trip to Toulouse near the end of the novel results more from the offer of money from Protiste and the demonic temptation of a good time than from any personal choice or project:

Toujours une ou deux semaines de bonne existence!  
que je me disais. Le diable possède tous les trucs  
pour vous tenter! On en finira jamais de les connaître  
(p. 373).

But equally often the hero chooses to confront reality, mainly in order to satisfy a "désir d'en savoir toujours davantage" (p. 235). The taste for adventure and even for danger deeps returning:

Ainsi passèrent des jours et des jours, je reprenais un  
peu de santé, mais au fur et à mesure que je perdais mon  
délire et ma fièvre dans ce confort, le goût de l'aventure  
et des nouvelles imprudences me revint impérieux. A 37°  
tout devient banal (p. 189).

<sup>22</sup> Italics mine.

In a crucial episode, for example, the hero rejects the permanent shelter which Molly's love offers him. Consciously he elects to re-enter the painful cycle revealed by his direct encounters with reality:

Je retournai tout seul en moi-même, bien content d'être encore plus malheureux qu'autrefois parce que j'avais rapporté dans ma solitude une nouvelle façon de détresse, et quelque chose qui ressemblait à du vrai sentiment (p. 230).

In short, both internal and external factors motivate the hero's many passages into the world of suffering and unhappiness. To the extent that the external forces operating upon Bardamu impose a certain conformism and that the internal motivation on the contrary is individualizing, it is clearly possible to correlate this ambivalence with the dialectic "obedience/revolt" which I have already examined within the context of narrative perspective.

#### The Period of Grace

The entry into the world of experience is often followed by a short period of relative well-being. The trip aboard the Amiral Bragueton begins well: "Tant que nous restâmes dans les eaux d'Europe ça ne s'annonçait pas mal" (p. 111). Likewise, the visit to America begins with the tranquil period during which the hero counts the fleas on immigrants to America. Similarly the first moments in Toulouse -- or in any new milieu<sup>24</sup> -- are definitely the best:

C'est bon les villes inconnues! C'est le moment et l'endroit où on peut supposer que les gens qu'on rencontre sont tous gentils (p. 375).

<sup>24</sup>"En somme, c'est le petit délai où on est inconnu dans chaque endroit nouveau qu'est le plus agréable. Après, c'est la même vacherie qui recommence" (p. 340).

But "aucune indulgence ne dure en ce monde" (p. 188), and such moments of grace are always short-lived and constitute little more than the starting point for a gradual descent into suffering and unhappiness:

A mesure qu'on reste dans un endroit, les choses et les gens se débraillent, pourrissent et se mettent à puer tout exprès pour vous (p. 272).

### The Confrontation with the World

Little space need be devoted here to evaluating the nature of the reality encountered by the hero. This reality will be the subject of Part II of this study. Suffice it to say that the effect upon Bardamu of seeing things as they really are usually takes the form of a feeling of being trapped and rendered immobile: "En somme, on ne pouvait plus, nous, ni aller, ni revenir; fallait rester où on était" (p. 32). This sense of entrapment results from a realization of the essentially negative nature of being-in-the-world. Each entry into direct contact with the world is soon followed by a revelation which is both a source of suffering and another step in a gradual process of disillusionment. The following is a partial list of these negative discoveries:

1. Man's brutality and inhumanity (Flanders)
2. The reality of death (Flanders)
3. Man's hypocrisy (Paris in war-time)
4. Persecution and sadism (Amiral Bragueton)
5. Social exploitation (Africa)
6. Alienation (America)
7. The sordidness of poverty (Garenne-Rancy)
8. The betrayal of friendship (Robinson and Madelon)
9. The dangers of romantic love (Madelon)

## Escape

The normal reaction of the hero when he realizes the true nature of reality and his inability to change or reform the world is to seek ways of protecting himself. The desire to escape from reality comes to determine much of Bardamu's behaviour:

La meilleure des choses à faire, n'est-ce pas, quand on est dans ce monde, c'est d'en sortir? Fou ou pas, peur ou pas (p. 61).

The episodes of the novel are filled with various escape projects: desertion (in Flanders [pp. 44-49] and in the African forest [pp. 175-176]), feigned (or real) madness (pp. 60-61), cinema (pp. 200-201, 347, 349), theatre (pp. 98-100; p. 345), drunkenness (p. 264), eroticism (p. 352) and so on. Unfortunately, all these strategies to leave the world far behind share a similar weakness: they do not last. The film's images soon fade, sobriety succeeds inebriation, dreams are interrupted by the return of day. Reality returns, and whether desired or not the process must begin again: "C'était à recommencer entièrement" (p. 272).

The question arises: does Bardamu actively seek out the misfortunes which each re-entry into the world implies, or is he basically, like all the others, a more or less passive victim of external forces? As the following passage indicates, Bardamu's situation is complicated by his desire to know and understand. Not without a feeling of guilt, the hero comes to realize that in fact he is the willing victim of a reality which, paradoxically, is inescapable:

J'étais surtout coupable de désirer au fond que tout ça continue. Et que même je n'y voyais plus guère d'inconvénients à ce qu'on aille tous ensemble se vadrouiller de plus en plus loin dans la nuit.

D'abord, il n'y avait même plus besoin de désirer, ça marchait tout seul, et dare-dare encore! (p. 327).

To summarize, the presence of a recurring narrative sequence or "circle" structures the episodes of the novel. This sequence contains three primary elements: the entry into the real world; the confrontation with concrete reality; the attempts at escape from the world. It is my contention that this sequence, which is respected throughout the novel, constitutes a "morphological" pattern underlying and unifying the entire narrative.

### Narrative Syntax

It would be a gross simplification to conclude that by unearthing a recurring pattern of events I have arrived at a full delineation of the novel's narrative structure. One should not overlook, for example, the fact that each sequence is both complete in itself and yet strangely "open-ended". For the illusory nature of the escape element of the sequence implies the necessity of "starting again". The process becomes therefore infinitely repeatable, since each sequence carries within itself the necessity of reiteration. Thus, in addition to being superimposable one upon the other -- because they are identical, structurally -- the narrative sequences are "horizontally" articulated in a theoretically never-ending chain. This syntactical unity can be perceived in the inseparability of the hero's escape from the war from his entry into the African adventure:

En Afrique! que j'ai dit moi. Plus que ça sera loin,  
mieux ça vaudra! (p. 111).

Similarly, the hero's abandonment of the Company hut and flight into the jungle constitute the first step in his pilgrimage to America, much as his escape from Molly marks his entry into a new cycle in France.



This unity of the narrative syntax is underlined by yet another aspect of the interrelatedness of episodes. A global view of the narrative reveals an interesting structural phenomenon: the dual status of each episode as both an independent sequence and as one element in a larger sequence. Thus the opening episode at Place Clichy functions both as a complete sequence and as the entrance element into the larger War episode. The Flanders episode in turn contains the basic sequence<sup>25</sup> but also constitutes the confrontation element of the War episode. A similar pattern of organic interrelatedness is discernible in the African episode with its constituent sequences: the episode aboard the Amiral Bragueton (Entrance); the visits to Fort-Gono, Topo, and to the Company's hut (Confrontation); the illness, followed by the burning of the hut, the flight into the jungle, the meeting with the Spanish sargent, the stay in San Tapeta, and the trip aboard the Infanta Combitta (Escape). The same structural phenomenon operates in the American episode with its minor but complete constituent sequences (aboard the galère; as flea-counter; in New York; in Detroit; with Molly).

This specific episodic pattern is continued throughout the second half of the novel which is composed of the following macro-sequences:

(1) Garenne-Rancy, (2) the Henrouille adventure, (3) the visit to Toulouse, (4) the Asile. The structure of these episodes is, however, somewhat less coherent than that of earlier episodes. This relative looseness of form may be attributable to the protagonist's progressive integration into the amorphous flux of experience: "Maintenant il n'y avait plus qu'à y aller carrément, dans le tas" (p. 240). Bardamu becomes increasingly a participant

<sup>25</sup> The entrances before the enemy; the confrontations with death; the escape attempts (loss of consciousness, desertion, etc.).

in the daily struggles of existence and less of a marginal voyeur.  
Nevertheless, despite this apparent tendency towards formlessness, the principal elements of the basic narrative pattern can be isolated:

#### I. Garenne-Rancy

##### A. Entrance

1. Medical Studies (p. 237)
2. Installation (pp. 240-241)

##### B. Confrontation

1. Sordidness of poverty
  - a) Aborted woman (pp. 258-262)
  - b) Tortured daughter (p. 265)
  - c) Abandoned mother (pp. 269-271)
2. Disease and death (Bébert)

##### C. Escape

1. Renunciation (p. 261) and resignation (p. 299)
2. Provocation of scandal (pp. 271-272)
3. Cinema (p. 272)
4. Contemplative life (pp. 284-285) and stoicism (pp. 285-286)

#### II. The Henrouille Adventure

##### A. Entrance

1. Promise of money to Bardamu (p. 257)
2. Promise of money to Robinson (p. 304)

##### B. Confrontation

1. Plan to exile grand'mère Henrouille (pp. 253-254)
2. Plan to murder grand'mère Henrouille (pp. 303-305)

##### C. Escape

1. Into street (p. 257)
2. Into blindness (Robinson, p. 323)
3. Into theatre and pornography (pp. 345-355)

#### III. The visit to Toulouse

##### A. Entrance

1. Early period of grace (p. 375)
2. Pleasure with Madelon (pp. 378-379)

## B. Confrontation

1. Sentimental love (pp. 398-402)
2. Friendship betrayed (p. 399-402)
3. Murder of grand'mère Henrouille (p. 403)

## C. Escape

1. Into world of the rich (pp. 392-398)
2. Return to Paris (Asile, p. 403)

IV. The Asile

## A. Entrance

1. Obedient Assistant (p. 411)
2. Director (pp. 434-435)

## B. Confrontation

1. Absurdity of world (Baryton, pp. 426-427)
2. Angst (p. 419; p. 450)
3. Murderous jealousy (p. 484)

## C. Escape

1. Silence (Parapine, p. 416)
2. Violence (pp. 459-460)
3. Eroticism (pp. 463-464)
4. Carnival (pp. 467-478)

In résumé then, the narrative is composed of structurally similar episodes (sequences) recurring regularly throughout the novel. The nature of the sequence is such that its reiteration results from an internal necessity. Complete in itself, each sequence serves also as a necessary link in a theoretically<sup>26</sup> infinite narrative chain. The narrative structure presents therefore both a morphological and a syntactical unity. This latter is reinforced by the fact that each sequence can be seen to form an element of what might be termed "macro-sequences"; the War episode, the Henrouille episode, the Madelon episode. These macro-sequences in turn can

<sup>26</sup> Theoretical, because in fact the adventure does come to an end. But this ending is radically ambiguous, since Robinson's death constitutes both the dénouement of the story and the inception of the narration (of the protagonist as narrator). Thus in a sense the chain is finally infinite insofar as the end of the text as story obliges a return to the beginning of the text, now conceived as a project.

be grouped as simple elements constituting the two principal sections<sup>27</sup> of the work. Given the "organic" interrelationship of episodes as well as their similar configuration, there appears to be little doubt as to the profound structural unity of the novel's narrative universe.

### Plot-structure

In Part I of this study I have described both the formal framework (perspective) through which the narrative is presented and the patterns revealed in the narrative as such. I have sought to demonstrate that the narrative possesses a complex but definite formal unity which counteracts the tendency towards fragmentation and formlessness inherent in the utilization of elements of the picaresque genre. This unity is reinforced by the existence of an almost classical plot-structure. When the work is considered as a whole, it is indeed possible to extrapolate a plot-structure possessing an almost conventional unity. The first two stages of conventional plots -- exposition and initiating action<sup>28</sup> -- are clearly present in the Clichy episode: The conversation between the hero and Arthur Ganate introduces the "situation within which the conflict develops."<sup>29</sup> Their comments concerning the nature of humanity, the structure of society, and the place of the individual serve to "expose" the problems that will be developed in later episodes. Moreover, the Clichy episode presents the initiating act (the enlistment of Bardamu) which brings the opposing forces

<sup>27</sup> The first section presents a circular movement which commences and terminates at Place Clichy; the second section begins with the reformist-project of Bardamu and finishes with the hero's total detachment from the world. Both sections can be seen to contain the three major elements -- Entrance / Confrontation / Escape -- common to both micro- and macro-sequences.

<sup>28</sup> These definitions are taken from the article "Plot" in the Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetics, edited by Alex Preminger (Princeton, 1965), pp. 622-625.

<sup>29</sup> Poetics, pp. 624-625.

-- the hero and "reality" -- into contact and conflict. The war experience as well as the protagonist's adventures in Africa and America constitute the period of rising action leading to the crisis, or crucial point upon which all further action depends. At this stage, "the protagonist in the conflict takes, consciously or unconsciously, the action which determines the future course of the conflict irrevocably."<sup>30</sup> In Voyage, this crisis period takes place when the protagonist, almost in spite of himself, refuses the shelter of love, generosity and tranquillity offered to him by Molly in order to pursue "cette envie de m'enfuir de partout, à la recherche de je ne sais quoi..." (p. 229). The crisis is then followed by a long period of falling action corresponding to the protagonist's gradual submission to the way things are and his awareness of the inevitable triumph of nature over the individual's desire to change reality. The period of falling action concludes with the dénouement. In Voyage, the conclusion is marked by the death of Robinson and the apparent resignation and detachment of the protagonist from the world.<sup>31</sup> Here the definitive "escape" projects appear<sup>32</sup> to have been realized, death and silence: "qu'on n'en parle plus" (p. 493). However, the sequential process is clearly not terminated, since others must continue the cycle as long as the world and man coexist: "Mais à d'autres! ... C'est la jeunesse qu'on redemande comme ça sans avoir l'air..." (p. 489). The novel thus ends in an "open" manner -- between cycles, between night and day -- much as it began. This structural similarity between beginning and end may be interpreted as the last of numerous elements which

<sup>30</sup> Poetics, p. 625.

<sup>31</sup> "Mon trimbalage à moi, il était bien fini. A d'autres! ... Le monde était refermé! Au bout qu'on était arrivés nous autres!" (p. 489).

<sup>32</sup> I say "appear" because, as we have seen, the project to "tell all" -- the récit -- will intervene between the death of Robinson and the final silence of Bardamu.

create the profound unity of the work's narrative structure.

The novel, in short, possesses a closely-knit narrative structure which defies and counteracts the tendency towards division, looseness of form, and fragmentation inherent in a work possessing many characteristics of the picaresque genre. As we have seen in this chapter, this narrative cohesion is assured firstly by the presence of a basic sequence of actions which is repeated throughout the novel, secondly by the causal linking of these structurally similar sequences in a "horizontal" narrative chain, and thirdly by the fusion of basic sequences (episodes) resulting in the creation of larger but analogous narrative patterns. A further source of narrative unity can be located in the novel's paradoxical ending, an ending which marks, in a fundamental sense, the beginning of the narrative. Finally, if I have bothered to point out the presence of a unified plot structure in Voyage, it was in order simply to underline the powerful tendency towards unity -- that is, towards artistic wholeness -- which we have observed in the context of both narrative perspective and narrative morphology and syntax. This profound unity is situated, paradoxically, within a series of dualistic structures: the double narrative focus, the ambivalence of the protagonist, his double attitude both towards his fictional alter ego, Robinson, and towards life in general. What ultimately transcends these dualisms and confers a formal unity upon the text is the protagonist's transformation, after Robinson's death, into a narrator who has decided to "raconter tout" (p. 27), and thereby endow his own existence with a certain integrity. By "telling all" therefore, the text escapes from the structural fragmentation imposed by the picaresque form and refutes those who would interpret the work as totally negative and nihilistic in its message.

PART II

THEMATIC STRUCTURES

### Introduction

In the preceding section of this study we observed the presence of a dual narrative perspective. One of the functions of this double point of view was to emphasize and to delimit the protagonist's evolution, his gradual transformation from the youthful and naïve volunteer for military service (at Place Clichy) to the resigned and detached director of a mental asylum. This evolution, as we saw, results in part from the hero's conscious desire to understand the world, his project to arrive at a privileged familiarity with even the most negative aspects of existence. The protagonist, in short, undertakes a kind of quest, the ultimate goal of which, however, is never clearly formulated:

"... mon vice, cette envie de m'enfuir de partout, à la recherche de je ne sais quoi..." (p. 229).

But if the object of the quest proves to be vague and problematic, there is no doubt that the process of searching in itself constitutes a source of secondary revelations and discoveries about the world which radically alter the protagonist's outlook. This apprenticeship undergone by Bardamu normally assumes a regular pattern: from a state of illusion and ignorance (only relatively blissful) the hero makes a discovery which destroys the illusion and results in the attainment of authentic knowledge. The process may be schematized as follows:



- A. State of False Knowledge (Illusion, relative happiness);
- B. Discovery or Revelation (Disillusion, suffering);
- C. True Knowledge (Anguish, unhappiness).

The consequence for the protagonist of the repetition of this pattern of discovery is the gradual abandonment of the state of naïve innocence and its replacement by an outlook clouded by "notre savoir hargneux des choses de ce monde..." (p. 463).

The following chapters will be devoted to a detailed analysis of the content of these discoveries. This content constitutes the novel's thématique. In these chapters my principal, but not exclusive, concern is with the semantic level of the text, with the "meaning of words in a context".<sup>1</sup> I have sought to organize this content around a limited number of elements or categories: (a) human nature and human destiny; (b) the self and the others: the individual in society.

In a first chapter, however, I will attempt to define the mode of discovery, the manner in which the quest is effected. An apprenticeship consists of both a particular approach to the objects of knowing and the objects themselves. It is imperative therefore to understand the way in which the protagonist approaches reality. For the selection of one mode of knowing which is considered authentic over another reflects basic presuppositions about the nature of existence. It is these premises upon which the protagonist's project is based that I shall now examine.

<sup>1</sup> Eugene H. Falk, "Stylistic Forces in the Narrative", in Patterns of Literary Style, ed. Joseph Strelka (University Park and London, 1971), p. 43.

## CHAPTER I

## AUTHENTIC EXPERIENCE: THE BODY'S TRUTH

... ce que nous pouvons véritablement  
savoir ou croire savoir en tous domaines  
n'est autre chose que ce que nous pouvons  
ou observer ou faire nous-mêmes...

- Paul Valéry<sup>2</sup>

La force et la faiblesse de l'esprit sont  
mal nommées; elles ne sont en effet que  
la bonne ou la mauvaise disposition des  
organes.

- La Rochefoucauld<sup>3</sup>

Place Clichy

As I remarked in my analysis of narrative structure, the novel's initial episode -- the enlistment scene at Place Clichy -- functions as a kind of model<sup>4</sup> for succeeding episodes: structural elements of the episode tend to recur throughout the work. If we turn our attention to the work's principal themes it is again the Clichy episode which provides key information. It is this tableau in fact which suggests the importance of ascertaining the nature of the hero's approach to the world. For upon close inspection the episode is seen to be dealing principally with the transition from one mode of interaction with the world to another.

<sup>2</sup> Oeuvres, I (Paris, 1957), 1346.

<sup>3</sup> Maximes (Paris: Editions Garnier Frères, 1967), p. 16.

<sup>4</sup> Another critical view would see this episode as a generator of the episodes which follow it.

Specifically, this transition takes the protagonist from a relationship with the world that is mediated by abstractions to one that is more concrete and direct. The global implications of this transition are extremely significant, both for an understanding of the work's Weltanschauung and for an insight into the text's poetic or verbal structure.<sup>5</sup> Before attending to these general questions, I shall first examine this essential episode in some detail.

The novel opens with the lively discussion in a Montmartre café between two youthful carabins, the protagonist and his friend Arthur Ganate. While Bardamu is an avowed anarchist whose opinions are considered advanced, Arthur on the contrary is extremely conservative and traditionalist in his outlook.<sup>6</sup> The conversation takes place in the protective shade of a café, the traditional haven of the French intellectual and of bavards in general. An important aspect of the debate between the students is the facility with which their apparently diametrically opposed views can be reconciled:

"Enfin nous nous réconciliâmes avec Arthur pour finir,  
tout à fait. On était du même avis sur presque tout" (p. 13).

The discussion, which touches on several important topics, does not seem to be serious. The protagonist is more upset by the attitude of a waiter<sup>7</sup> than by the gravity of the problems being discussed. An aura of inauthenticity surrounds this conversation between would-be intellectuals, an inauthenticity which is implied -- as we saw in Part I of this study -- by the ironic attitude of the narrator-observer.

<sup>5</sup> To be examined in Part III of this study.

<sup>6</sup> "... j'en suis moi pour l'ordre établi" (p. 12).

<sup>7</sup> "Et puis j'étais ému aussi parce que le garçon m'avait un peu traité de sordide à cause du pourboire" (p. 13).

Arthur Ganate unconsciously poses the fundamental problem when he accuses Bardamu's poem -- "une manière de prière vengeresse et sociale" (p. 12) -- of not holding up before the facts of life: "Ton petit morceau ne tient pas devant la vie" (p. 12). Bardamu's response to this objection to his ideas is to enlist in order (partially) to verify his opinions. In one enthusiastic leap, his relationship to the world is radically transformed. From the position of a detached and somewhat diletantish intellectual he suddenly becomes an involved participant. His viewpoint ceases to be mediated by concepts and ideas, which are malleable and easily reconcilable: "... les idées ne font jamais peur. Avec elles, rien n'est perdu, tout s'arrange" (p. 332). Ideas are abandoned and replaced by direct observation and participation. The mode of interaction with reality becomes concrete: "Moi je ne fis qu'un bond d'enthousiasme. Je vais voir si c'est ainsi! que je crie à Arthur, et me voici parti m'engager, et au pas de course encore" (p. 13).

Thus in a single act of enthusiasm, which can be viewed (symbolically) as a type of rite de passage, the hero forsakes the traditional position of the student/intellectual. He leaves the shaded protection of the café and exposes himself to a scorching sun soon to be replaced by drenching rains. While this new vulnerability will bring with it suffering and anguish, it will also furnish the light needed if the hero is to "voir clair". The exposure to the natural rains (p. 14) will constitute the first of many moments of disillusionment as they wash off the veneer of false appearances (military splendour, civilian approval) and reveal to the protagonist the true situation, in its concrete ugliness and solitude: "La pluie est

tombée... Nous n'étions donc plus rien qu'entre nous? Les uns derrière les autres? La musique s'est arrêtée" (p. 14).

The radical difference between the pseudo-intellectual approach to the world represented by café conversations and the concrete approach of direct experience is confirmed at the outset of the war episode. The immediate, horrible nature of this experience is such that the detached and abstract discussions of Place Clichy are completely invalidated. Truly authentic discoveries about man and about reality are made within the context of the experience itself:

Comment aurais-je pu me douter moi de cette horreur en quittant la Place Clichy? Qui aurait pu prévoir avant d'entrer vraiment dans la guerre, tout ce que contenait la sale âme héroïque et fainéante des hommes? (p. 17).

This new knowledge is of a different nature from the fashionable opinions proffered within the sheltered café. This difference results in part from the fact that the protagonist's position (or viewpoint) has altered radically. The distance between himself and the object of knowing has been reduced: he is now positioned as it were both before and beside the object. He has become both observer of and participant in the process through which the object-in-itself is made manifest:

Je venais de découvrir d'un coup la guerre tout entière. J'étais dépucelé. Faut être à peu près seul devant elle comme je l'étais à ce moment-là pour bien la voir la vache, en face et de profil (p. 18).

Throughout the text, the narrator will refer to the privileged point of view afforded him by the transition to a level of concrete interaction with reality. The authenticity which characterizes his experiences seems due to the almost physical nature of his new relationship with the world. The essential aspect of the voyage to Africa, for example, is that the encounter with the tropics (and colonialism) will not be of a tourist nature.

In this latter instance, encounters with reality are mediated by the comforting signs of European civilization: railroads, tourist agencies, historic monuments, and so on. The protagonist's trip however will be quite different:

Nous voguions vers l'Afrique, la vraie, la grande; celle des insondables forêts, des miasmes délétères, des solitudes inviolées... Rien de commun avec cette Afrique décortiquée des agences et des monuments, des chemins de fer et des nougats. Ah non! Nous allions nous la voir dans son jus, la vraie Afrique!(p. 112).

Consistently the protagonist establishes with the world the most immediate relationship possible. The choice of a medical career is in part linked with the search for authentic knowledge, since medicine necessarily involves a concrete contact with others:

Avec la médecine, moi, pas très doué, tout de même je m'étais bien rapproché des hommes, des bêtes, de tout. Maintenant il n'y avait plus qu'à y aller carrément, dans le tas (p. 240).

The close physical relationship with the world afforded by medicine will offer to the observant protagonist privileged and irrefutable discoveries. His curiosity and desire to understand the world will be amply rewarded by an intimate acquaintanceship with his patients:

Je me laissais aller, mentir. Je les suivais. Ils me tenaient, pleurnichaient les clients malades, chaque jour, davantage, me conduisaient à leur merci. En même temps ils me montraient de laideurs en laideurs tout ce qu'ils dissimulaient dans la boutique de leur âme et ne le montraient à personne qu'à moi (p. 244).

By adopting this concrete and immediate interaction with the world, the protagonist implicitly calls in question other modes of obtaining knowledge. Compared to the concrete manner of knowing practised by the hero, other approaches can be characterized as abstractionist, mediated, and mystifying. Arthur Ganate, for example, expresses his opinions in the

form of pious abstractions: "nos pères", "la race française". But the protagonist, foreshadowing his future orientation, hastens to demystify these abstractions by describing the concrete reality which the concept disguises:

C'est pas vrai! La race, ce que t'appelles comme ça, c'est seulement ce grand ramassis de miteux dans mon genre, chassieux, puceux, transis, qui ont échoué ici poursuivis par la faim, la peste, les tumeurs et le froid, venus vaincus des quatre coins du monde. Ils ne pouvaient pas aller plus loin à cause de la mer. C'est ça la France et puis c'est ça les Français (pp. 11-12).

Another example of the utilisation of abstract concepts which deform reality can be found in the naïve outlook of the young American, Lola. For her, the war is a sort of epic romance in which she plays the rôle of Saviour -- "son petit air Jeanne d'Arc" (p. 52) -- of a suffering France:

Pour Lola, la France demeurait une espèce d'entité chevaleresque, aux contours peu définis dans l'espace et le temps, mais en ce moment, dangereusement blessée... (p. 53).

Her approach to the war-experience seems so inauthentic to the protagonist that he conceives a profound distrust for a mind which can be taken over by deforming, "romantic" images of reality. Lola's second-hand knowledge of the war, a knowledge mediated by the patriotic rhetoric which inundates Paris,<sup>8</sup> makes of her a dangerous but inviting temptation, offering to Bardamu an unreal but charming impression of the world:

Mais je me méfiais des impressions à présent. On m'avait possédé une fois à l'impression, on ne m'aurait plus au boniment. Personne.

Je croyais à son corps, je ne croyais pas à son esprit. Je la considérais comme une charmante embusquée, la Lola, à l'envers de la guerre, à l'envers de la vie.

<sup>8</sup> "La petite Lola ne connaissait du français que quelques phrases, mais elles étaient patriotiques: 'On les aura!...', 'Madelon, viens!...' C'était à pleurer" (p. 56).

Elle traversait mon angoisse avec la mentalité du  
Petit Journal: Pompon, Fanfare, ma Lorraine et gants  
 blancs... (p. 56).

While the history teacher Princhard shares none of the illusions of a Lola, his own approach to the war experience is also held by the narrator to be inauthentic. For although Princhard's knowledgeable analyses of the historical factors underlying the catastrophe may well be logical, coherent, and even correct, such an intellectual approach is totally unable to affect the course of events, to put an end to the slaughter. Analysis is consequently a waste of energy, and the intellectual, a pitiful misfit trapped in a world of irrefutable concrete realities. Thus upon the (probable) execution of Princhard, for desertion, the narrator observes:

Lui, Princhard, je ne le revis jamais. Il avait le vice des intellectuels, il était futile. Il savait trop de choses ce garçon-là et ces choses l'embrouillaient . . . . Je n'ai jamais rien fait pour avoir de ses nouvelles, pour savoir s'il était vraiment "disparu" ce Princhard, comme on l'a répété. Mais c'est mieux qu'il soit disparu (p. 71).

Princhard's failure to adjust to a world of direct experience calls into question the worth and utility of reason, logic, and analysis. His inability to cope with the modern world results from his attempt to defend himself from reality by attempting to analyse and explain it. More generally, the philosophic domain -- where reason and logic rule supreme -- may well prove to be simply an escapist retreat for the fearful. For philosophy, with its penchant for jargon and systematization separates rather than unites the self with the world. Its conclusions can only be artificial and in a sense second-hand: "Philosopher n'est qu'une autre façon d'avoir peur et ne porte guère qu'aux lâches simulacres" (p. 205).



To return for a moment to the Clichy episode, it seems clear that given the examples cited above, the significance of this transition scene goes far beyond its function as an introduction to the war experience. In a sense, the Clichy episode generates much of what will follow, since implicit in the actions of this mini-episode are premises and viewpoints which structure the work's thematic framework. Bardamu's spontaneous and unreasoned decision to "voir si c'est ainsi" (p. 13), contains an implicit rejection of normally accepted ways of apprehending the truth of the world: analysis, conceptualization, idealization, and so forth. The hero's "bond d'enthousiasme", which he will often regret -- so intolerable are the discoveries it leads to -- constitutes also a leap of revolt, the initial step in a long and painful road to liberation from illusion.

The Clichy episode, therefore, presents the first sign in the work of an attitude of systematic doubt and suspicion directed towards the traditional mediators of knowledge. The hero's transitional act implies a Cartesian-like tabula rasa with regard to knowledge. But in Voyage, doubt and suspicion are turned upon the Cogito itself. Reason's mystifying powers are rejected and replaced by the less exalting but considerably more trustworthy data of direct perception and observation: "Il y a, c'est exact, beaucoup de folie à s'occuper d'autre chose que de ce qu'on voit" (p. 170). For the post-Clichy hero -- who is in a way reborn into the world of concrete experience -- to see is to exist, and his credo, video ergo sum.

### Language and the Body

On what premises is based the protagonist's rejection of the intellectuals' approach to reality? What factors can explain or justify the selection of direct participation as a means of attaining understanding and knowledge? The answers to such questions should assist us in determining the fundamental "vision" of the work, the basic presuppositions about the nature of man and reality which inform the text.

As we have seen, the enlistment scene at Place Clichy implies a refusal of the space (café) and the activity (discussion and debate) of the intellectual, that traditional seeker of knowledge and truth. The protagonist chooses instead to gain understanding through concrete experience. It would appear that the underlying determinants of this transition are twofold: first, the inauthenticity of language, which serves to mask rather than to clarify man's relationship to the world; and second, the authenticity of the body, which serves as a valid source of revelations concerning the nature of reality.

### Language

Bardamu's sudden leap into a world of direct experience is motivated in part by a need to confirm or verify his opinions and his words: a poem is the object which Arthur Ganate accuses of not being true to life (p. 12). Thus the validity of language as an explicator of reality is implicitly questioned. Symbolic in its very nature, language is a structure of sounds and signs which tends to act as a refracting prism, thus deforming or distorting reality. Through language, the world is in a sense "de-realized".

Reality is conveyed by concepts, ideas and words; in short, by abstractions. As a result, knowledge of the thing-in-itself becomes difficult if not impossible.

The concrete reality of war, as the protagonist discovers, is suffering and death. Language can express the physical discovery, but beyond this reporting function, it has nothing to add but empty words: "De la prison on en sort vivant. Pas de la guerre. Tout le reste, c'est des mots" (p. 18).

But language's incapacity to aid in the discovery of fundamental truths does not make it an impotent and useless instrument. On the contrary, language's power to veil and to disguise reality, its power of mystification therefore, renders it a potentially dangerous weapon. For words -- in appearance simple movements of air -- can be manipulated and exploited to provoke and even to idealize the worst of horrors. Through language, falsehoods are transformed into virtues. This fact is clearly demonstrated in the Paris section of the war episode wherein "on mentait avec rage" (p. 56) in order to keep the slaughter going. Distrust and suspicion are consequently the only attitudes one can properly take with regard to language. To fail to assume such a stance invites disaster:

Avec les mots on ne se méfie jamais suffisamment, ils ont l'air de rien les mots, pas l'air de dangers bien sûr, plutôt de petits vents, de petits sons de bouche... On ne se méfie pas d'eux les mots et le malheur arrive (p. 476).

Pe Perhaps the most important lesson learned by the protagonist in the war experience is precisely a language lesson. In wartime the manipulation of words in order to deform and to idealize reality is ubiquitous and so

blatant<sup>9</sup> that reality seems to have been turned upside-down.<sup>10</sup> Trapped between two contradictory interpretations of the same situation -- the idealization and abstractions of patriotic rhetoric on one hand, and the horrible evidence of concrete experience on the other -- the young protagonist finds himself pushed to the brink of insanity: "Alors je suis tombé malade, fiévreux, rendu fou, qu'ils ont expliqué à l'hôpital, par la peur" (p. 61). As a vehicle for truth about the world, therefore, language is at best an unreliable tool. The protagonist opts rather for a mode of interaction with reality wherein language as a mediator is replaced by direct experience and observation. I shall now attempt to discover why the concrete mode is considered a more valid means of obtaining authentic knowledge of the world.

### The Body

The transition scene at Place Clichy brings the protagonist into a physically based relationship with reality: "J'avais voir..." (p. 13).<sup>11</sup> But what in fact assures a greater authenticity to this manner of knowing than to a more intellectual approach? It would seem that the answer in part resides in the nature of the body, the source of man's participation in the physical world.

Throughout the text an antithetical relationship is established between the body (le corps) and the mind (l'esprit). Regularly, the protagonist is forced to reject as false the products of the mind (language,

<sup>9</sup> "On mentait avec rage au delà de l'imaginaire, bien au delà du ridicule et de l'absurde, dans les journaux, sur les affiches, à pied, à cheval, en voiture. C'est à qui mentirait plus énormément que l'autre. Bientôt il n'y eut plus de vérité dans la ville" (p. 56).

<sup>10</sup> "Quand le moment du monde à l'envers est venu..." (p. 64).

<sup>11</sup> Italics mine.

sentimental love, science, psychology, etc.) and to accept as authentic evidence provided by the body. This situation is reflected in the ambivalent relationship of the hero with Lola: "Je croyais à son corps, je ne croyais pas à son esprit" (p. 56).

Indeed it is perhaps in the love relationship that this duality of mind and body is most clearly manifested in the novel. The mind of a Lola, for example, cannot be trusted since its tendency towards sentimentality deforms and mystifies relationships between the sexes. Lola presents a danger to the protagonist insofar as Bardamu's feelings threaten to drag him into her world of romantic idealizations, a world which the narrator places "à l'envers de la guerre, à l'envers de la vie" (p. 56). Another of Bardamu's acquaintances, the Polish dancer Tania, proves a victim of her overly sentimental relationship with a German Bank employee, a relationship which the narrator characterizes as an example of "un délire tout bouffi de mensonges" (p. 358). Probably the most violent attack upon sentimental love occurs in the context of the affair between Madelon and Robinson. Their relationship is implicitly criticized in their melodramatic dialogue near Toulouse:

- Ah! comme t'es bon mon Léon. T'es meilleur que j'imaginais encore... T'est tendre! T'es fidèle! et t'es tout!...
- C'est parce que je t'adore, ma mimime... (p. 400).

It is in the course of this dialogue d'amour that Robinson is obliged by his jealous mistress to denounce Bardamu and betray their long friendship (pp. 400-402). It is Robinson himself who finally escapes the powerful grip of sentimental love, but only through a powerful effort of denunciation not just of Madelon and of their love, but of life itself (Robinson's attack is

followed by his death at the hands of his outraged "beloved"):

Eh bien, c'est tout, qui me répugne et qui me dégoûte à présent! Pas seulement toi!... Tout!... L'amour surtout!... Le tien aussi bien que celui des autres... Les trucs aux sentiments que tu veux faire, veux-tu que je te dise à quoi ça ressemble moi? Ça ressemble à faire l'amour dans des chiottes! (p. 483).

In general Bardamu manages to avoid sentimental entanglements by resolutely placing the body's truths before those of the mind. In his relationship with Lola, for example, Bardamu is primarily interested in the erotic revelations furnished by the young American's body: "Son corps était pour moi une joie qui n'en finissait pas. Je n'en avais jamais assez de le parcourir ce corps américain" (p. 55). Upon his first meeting Madelon, Bardamu practises crudely, but with success, his "doctrine" of the primacy of the physical aspect of relationships between the sexes by immediately seducing the young girl in the crypt of Sainte-Eponime Church in Toulouse: "On était amis. Derrières d'abord! Nous venions d'économiser dix ans" (p. 379). Even Molly, with whom Bardamu experiences a profound and authentic sentimental relationship, is valued highly not just for the unquestionably fine qualities of her soul, but also for those of her body: "Il me souvient comme si c'était hier de ses gentillesse, de ses jambes longues et blondes et magnifiquement déliées et musclées, des jambes nobles" (p. 227). Bardamu's preference for the body over the mind is perhaps most evident in his rapturous attitude towards the nurse Sophie. Here the protagonist's worship of the body -- "De muscles en muscles, par groupes anatomiques je procédais..." (p. 462) -- leads him to accord to sensual pleasure the capacity to create a kind of Golden Age for which, unfortunately,

man is not yet ready: "L'ère de ces joies vivantes, des grandes harmonies indéniables, physiologiques, comparatives est encore à venir... Le corps, une divinité tripotée par mes mains honteuses..." (p. 462).

An important source of the body's superior authenticity can be found in its immunity to the mystifying powers of language: "L'esprit est content avec des phrases, le corps c'est pas pareil, il est plus difficile lui..." (p. 269). The body's evidence cannot easily be disguised and refined by the magical powers of language. Although the discoveries which the body permits will almost invariably prove to be disagreeable -- a probable reason in itself for the frequent exploitation of the distorting powers of words -- they can nevertheless be considered as authentic, albeit unappealing: "C'est quelque chose de toujours vrai un corps, c'est pour cela que c'est presque toujours triste et dégoûtant à regarder" (p. 269). Many examples of repugnant but authentic truths revealed by the body could be cited: the intimate knowledge of Death as incarnated by the mangled bodies of the colonel and messenger in Flanders (p. 21), and by the agony of Robinson, presented in clinical, anatomical terms (p. 487); the decayed nature of the colonial enterprise, foreshadowed by the deleterious effects of heat and alcohol upon the bodies of the colonists aboard l'Amiral Bragueton (p. 115); the sordidness of the lives of the poor of Garenne-Rancy, presented in images of the unhappy and bloody consequences of sexual activities: illegitimate children (pp. 270-271), abortion (pp. 258-259), miscarriage (pp. 297-298).

In addition to being relatively immune to language's deformation of reality, the body can be used to subvert and demystify language's powers.

By carrying out "observations méticuleuses" upon the physical mechanics of language production -- the act of speaking -- the protagonist is able to exorcize language's idealizing powers. In pointing out the physical basis of language generation, the crude origins of great and elevating thoughts, the protagonist succeeds in undermining the force and prestige of these idealizations:

Quand on s'arrête à la façon par exemple dont sont formés et proférés les mots, elles ne résistent guère nos phrases au désastre de leur décor baveux. C'est plus compliqué et plus pénible que la défécation notre effort mécanique de la conversation. Cette corolle de chair bouffie, la bouche, qui se convulse à siffler, aspire et se démène, pousse toutes espèces de sons visqueux... Voilà pourtant ce qu'on nous adjure de transposer en idéal. C'est difficile" (p. 332).

An analogous form of "exorcism" is practised in order to demystify the "sale prestige" that certain accoutrements -- military uniforms, religious vestments -- confer upon an individual. The process of demystification is similar: the illusions created by abstract symbols are destroyed by the invocation of a less than elevating physical reality. In this case, the protagonist undresses -- in his imagination -- the prestigious personage in question, thereby depriving the latter of his symbolic superiority:

C'est ainsi qu'il faut s'habituer à transposer dès le premier abord les hommes qui viennent vous rendre visite, on les comprend bien plus vite après ça, on discerne tout de suite dans n'importe quel personnage sa réalité d'énorme et d'avidie asticot... Son sale prestige se dissipe, s'évapore. Tout nu il ne reste plus devant vous enssomme qu'une pauvre bésace... qui s'évertue à bafouiller futilement dans un genre ou dans un autre (p. 332).

Thus the body is capable of effectively undermining the tendency towards abstraction and inauthenticity, a tendency inherent in language and other symbolic systems.



These powers of physical reality result from the existence, at the core of the organism, of the forces which underlie and determine both human nature and human destiny. For the body is the home and battle-ground for fundamental and antithetical forces in perpetual conflict: on one hand, the biological instincts for survival, unity, and security; on the other hand, the inevitable process of molecular fragmentation and decomposition, a process inseparable from life itself. The absolute bedrock of man's being is formed by this internal dialectic of the instincts of preservation and the constant betrayal of these instincts:

Ce corps à nous, travesti de molécules agitées et banales, tout le temps se révolte contre cette farce atroce de durer. Elles veulent aller se perdre nos molécules, au plus vite, parmi l'univers ces mignonnes!... Notre torture chérie est enfermée là, atomique, dans notre peau même, avec notre orgueil (p. 333);

L'ordure elle, ne cherche ni à durer, ni à croître. Ici, sur ce point, nous sommes bien plus malheureux que la merde, cet enragement à persévérer dans notre état constitue l'incroyable torture (pp. 332-333).

The importance accorded in Voyage to the body, and more generally to the physical and the concrete, results in short from a "biological" vision of reality. Both the human condition and human nature find their sources and determinants in the realm of the physical or biological. This is why the protagonist selects the road of concrete experience and why his discoveries are authentic. In the following chapter I will examine those discoveries which pertain both to human behaviour (or "nature") and to the human situation, to man's ontological status.

## CHAPTER II

## MAN'S DESTINY AND HUMAN NATURE

In the previous chapter we saw that the protagonist's concrete approach to knowledge finds its justification in the framework of what may be termed a "biological vision" of reality. Within this controlling vision the body, and by extension the physical and the concrete (in contrast to the mental, the spiritual, and the abstract) possess a privileged status: they constitute authentic forms of mediation between the subject (the self) and the object (the world). Through their intercession the hero may attain to a non-illusory knowledge of reality. Consequently, the existence of this biological vision confers upon the hero's adventures an added source of authenticity, investing them with an epistemological dimension.<sup>12</sup> In the present and the following chapters I shall examine some of the major discoveries resulting from the protagonist's concrete interaction with the world. As these discoveries deal with fundamental aspects of existence -- man's destiny and human nature -- I have called them metaphysical discoveries.

<sup>12</sup> It should be noted that this biological vision is not the starting point of the youthful protagonist but rather -- and even here, implicitly -- of the narrator-observer, who arrives at this vision through empirical experience. The vision is reflected back upon the experiences, which are thereby validated and deemed authentic. (The dual narrative perspective referred to in this note is analysed extensively in Part I of this study, which deals with narrative structures.)

### Human Destiny

Perhaps the principal revelation of the body is that of its own ephemerality, of its constant tendency towards fragmentation, disintegration and corruption. Man's fate is contained in his cells, in the biological facts of life. We shall see later in this chapter how these facts determine man's behaviour and underlie his "nature". My immediate aim however is to examine the manner in which the hero's concrete experiences impress upon him an awareness of man's metaphysical situation. How, by knowing the world physically, is the protagonist led to metaphysical knowledge?

The initial and most traumatic source of the hero's awareness of the true nature of human destiny is the War experience. Whereas the Clichy episode presented actions which modify the protagonist's manner of apprehending reality, the succeeding episode -- the Flanders tableau -- introduces the hero to a fundamental datum of being; the presence and constant threat of the absolute negation of existence: Death. While the transition at Place Clichy transformed entirely the hero's approach to the world, the consciousness gained in Flanders of the concrete reality of Death will radically modify Bardamu's interpretation of his experiences.

The War episode provides revelations of an absolute nature in terms of a physical interaction between an observing subject and a concrete space: the battlefields of Flanders. This space is presented initially in terms of its aimlessness and emptiness:

Moi d'abord la campagne, faut que je le dise tout de suite, j'ai jamais pu la sentir, je l'ai toujours trouvée triste, avec ses bourbiers qui n'en finissent pas, ses maisons où les gens n'y sont jamais et ses chemins qui ne vont nulle part (pp. 16-17);

... et puis on plongeait d'un coup dans la sale aventure, dans les ténèbres de ces pays à personne (p. 29).

As the "sale aventure" progresses, however, the emptiness and seeming purposelessness of this space are transformed by a présence which gradually envelops the protagonist. The space becomes dominated by "des volontés homicides énormes et sans nombre" (p. 26). As the bullets whiz around him the hero experiences a constricting physical environment "où tout s'est rétréci au meurtre" (p. 43). The presence of Death is perceived as a concrete entity which dominates the countryside and which because of its progressive expansion becomes visible even to those not wishing to see it: "Bientôt on serait en plein orage et ce qu'on cherchait à ne pas voir serait alors en plein devant soi et on ne pourrait plus voir qu'elle: sa propre mort" (p. 36). As Death's presence invades the fields of Flanders, the protagonist finds that his ability to move in this contracting space has become severely impaired since each "mètre d'ombre devant nous était une promesse nouvelle d'en finir et de crever..." (p. 30). Soon Bardamu discovers that the ubiquitous presence of Death threatens to immobilize him completely. The crushing pressure of a space filled with Death fixes the protagonist and prevents him from progressing: "En somme, on ne pouvait plus, nous, ni aller, ni revenir; fallait rester où on était" (p. 32).

The protagonist's awareness of Death is extended from a personal to a universal level upon his return to Paris from the front. While walking near Saint-Cloud with Lola, Bardamu comes across a deserted fairground. Here he discovers a shooting-gallery called the "Stand des Nations". The gallery's targets represent a cross-section of society: the City-Hall, the police, a

military regiment, a marriage and so on. The sight of human targets provokes a strong reaction in the hero, so strong that in a sense he will never recover:

Je me sentais tout bizarre. C'est même à partir de ce moment-là, je crois, que ma tête est devenue si difficile à tranquilliser avec ses idées dedans (p. 60).

The shock caused by the "Stand des Nations" leads to the recognition that all in fact are targets. This new awareness of the global nature of the danger produces a state of delirium in the hero. While dining out a few hours after coming across the "Stand des Nations", Bardamu begins to hallucinate, and warns his acquaintances and fellow-diners that they too are potential victims:

Tous ces gens assis en rangs autour de nous me donnaient l'impression d'attendre eux aussi que des balles les assaillent de partout pendant qu'ils bouffaient. "Allez-vous-en tous! que je les ai prévenus. Foutez le camp! on va tirer! Vous tuer! Nous tuer tous!" (p. 61).

While the civilians take this outbreak as a sure sign of madness, and the military as one of cowardice, it appears that on the contrary the hallucinations are reflecting an authentic vision of man's fundamental situation, that of being an "assassiné en sursis" (p. 54). We are all, like the soldiers of Flanders, living under the constant menace of death; like them we are under sentence, "condamnés à mort différés..." (p. 38).

Bardamu's outlook on and interpretation of life are radically altered by the metaphysical discoveries resulting from direct experience: "J'étais dans la vérité jusqu'au trognon, et même que ma propre mort me suivait pour ainsi dire pas à pas" (p. 54). Whereas at Place Clichy life was a remote

pretext for clever witticisms and facile opinions, in Flanders the protagonist experiences life as a prison within which man serves an inevitable and all-inclusive sentence: "Jamais je n'avais senti plus implacable la sentence des hommes et des choses" (p. 17).

This condition of imprisonment is rendered even more intolerable by the hero's gradual awareness that the sentence is inescapable and that the affliction of Death cannot be cured. This impotence of the individual before Death is clearly illustrated in the Bébert episode. Here the protagonist, who has now become a medical doctor, calls upon science -- the new God of the modern age -- to assist him in saving the innocent child. Science's failure to effect a cure suggests, symbolically, the transcendent powers of Death, and implies that the ultimate and victorious reality is the Emptiness lying behind or beyond life's activity:

Je n'avais pas de veine avec lui Bébert, mort ou vif.  
Il me semblait qu'il n'y avait rien pour lui sur la  
terre... C'est peut-être pour tout le monde la même  
chose d'ailleurs, dès qu'on insiste un peu, c'est le  
vide (p. 286).

Given the ineluctable nature of man's destiny and his inability to alter his fate -- "... toujours emportés par notre même invincible destin" (p. 197) -- the daily activities of mankind are invested with an absurd dimension. For if nothingness and emptiness describe man's ultimate destiny, then the normal dynamism of existence loses all significance. Thus the concrete immobility imposed upon the protagonist on the battlefields of Flanders figures the fundamental nature of human existence. Man is metaphysically emptied of all significance. Consequently, his daily activities are in truth "nothings" and "nothing" is all that can be

communicated between men: "On est là, vide. On en baverait. On est content. On a rien à causer, parce qu'au fond il ne vous arrive plus rien..." (p. 294).

Death's certain triumph mocks man's ordinary struggles, ambitions, and projects. His activities are perceived as futile and ridiculous. Man's existence in a world ruled by Death makes of him a Sisyphus figure, forced, like the legendary king of Corinth, to struggle vainly against an implacable destiny:

Ce qui est pire c'est qu'on se demande comment le lendemain on trouvera assez de forces pour continuer à faire ce qu'on a fait le veille et depuis déjà tellement trop longtemps, où on trouvera la force pour ces démarches imbéciles, ces mille projets qui n'aboutissent à rien, ces tentatives pour sortir de l'accablante nécessité, tentatives qui toujours avortent, et toutes pour aller se convaincre une fois de plus que le destin est insurmontable, qu'il faut retomber au bas de la muraille, chaque soir, sous l'angoisse de ce lendemain, toujours plus précaire, plus sordide (p. 199).

Viewed in such a perspective, life becomes a source of anguish and despair.<sup>13</sup> For man's sentence is not simply to die, but also to live, to treat the world as if it contained purpose and meaning. Life must be approached as if it were not a mask disguising a cosmic nothingness: "Dans ce métier d'être tué, faut pas être difficile, faut faire comme si la vie continuait, c'est ça le plus dur, ce mensonge" (p. 37). Bardamu's quest will permit him not only to obtain an authentic knowledge of reality<sup>14</sup> and of its essential nothingness, but also to discover the fundamental irony inherent in the human situation: that of having both to submit to reality and to pretend that the world is tolerable and even pleasurable:

<sup>13</sup> "La vie, c'est plus compliqué, celle des formes humaines surtout. Atroce aventure. Il n'en est pas de plus désespérée" (p. 462).

<sup>14</sup> "C'est cela l'exil, l'étranger, cette inexorable observation de l'existence telle qu'elle est vraiment..." (p. 214).

Tout ... vient s'ajouter à votre immonde détresse pour vous forcer, débile, à discerner les choses, les gens et l'avenir tels qu'ils sont, c'est-à-dire des squelettes, rien que des riens, qu'il faudra cependant aimer, chérir, défendre, animer comme s'ils existaient (p. 214).

Man is, in short, obliged to play at existence, to "act" as if reality were other than it is, as if Death were not a global, all-pervasive determining force. In the face of his mortal destiny, man must lie, he must delude himself about the true nature of being: "La vérité, c'est une agonie qui n'en finit pas. La vérité de ce monde c'est la mort. Il faut choisir, mourir ou mentir" (pp. 199-200). It is the manner of coping with this metaphysical predicament, the ways in which man lives his lie, that I shall now examine.

### Man's Nature

To raise the subject of human nature, is to approach the thorny problems of determinism and free-will, of conditioning and liberty. Without making of the novel a philosophical treatise -- which it certainly is not -- it is clear that such questions are at least implicitly raised in various passages of the text.

As early as the Clichy episode the question of free-will versus conditioned behaviour is posed. Indeed we have already alluded to a certain ambiguity which pervades the enlistment scene and which is closely related to the problems we are examining. One aspect of this ambiguity may be summarized as follows: does not the protagonist's "leap" into a world of authentic experience reflect an application of the will, an exercise in choosing one's destiny? Is this action not, therefore, a sign of individual



freedom? Certain objections can be formulated, however, which argue against such an assumption. To begin with, the very spontaneity of the action and the lack of any period of reflexion preceding it would seem to weaken somewhat the argument of a "willed choosing". This objection appears to be strengthened by the fact that the hero seems, in Place Clichy, to re-act more than to act. His reaction is to external circumstances over which he asserts no control,<sup>15</sup> and more specifically, to concrete stimuli: the passing of a military regiment with its seductive rhetoric (music, uniforms, public enthusiasm, etc.). In part, therefore, Bardamu's enlistment appears little more than a conditioned reflex, a reaction determined, in this instance, by a specific cultural heritage:

Un chrétien de vingt siècles, j'en savais quelque chose,  
ne se retient plus quand devant lui vient à passer un régiment.  
Ça lui fait jaillir trop d'idées (p. 139).

Consequently, it would seem doubtful whether in fact Bardamu was choosing his destiny at Place Clichy. Indeed the protagonist's succeeding adventures will present him with revelations of powerful determinants<sup>16</sup> which control man's behaviour and form his nature. Such revelations would tend to invalidate a possible existential interpretation of the hero's actions. For in a universe ruled by "l'accablante nécessité" (p. 199), man is not capable of choosing, of forging his own destiny. Thus in later episodes the protagonist will only appear to be making free choices: "Comme si j'avais su où j'allais, j'ai eu l'air de choisir encore et j'ai changé

<sup>15</sup> "Justement la guerre approchait de nous deux sans qu'on s'en soye rendu compte..." (p. 12).

<sup>16</sup> I am alluding here to both the empirical (objective) discovery of Death and to the "biological" vision which locates man's emotional difficulties in the body's inevitable tendency towards decay: "Puisque nous sommes que des enclos de tripes tièdes et mal pourries nous aurons toujours du mal avec le sentiment" (p. 332).

de route..." (p. 192). Bardamu will become painfully aware that truth is not obtained through choice but rather through submission and observation. Indeed, it is the protagonist's authentic approach to the controlling forces of existence which will permit him to see through the illusion of free choice and existential self-creation. For to encounter reality authentically is to be trapped<sup>17</sup> in a situation where all choice is futile because all the dice have already been thrown:

Mais moi, je ne pouvais plus choisir, mon jeu était fait!  
J'étais dans la vérité jusqu'au trognon... (p. 54);

Question de temps et d'attente seulement. Les jeux étaient faits (p. 97).

As the above quotations suggest, man is forced by "la force des choses" to assume an attitude of docile passivity towards the world. He is always more acted upon than acting. This passive stance is referred to very early in the text, when the two students speak of their forefathers:

Haineux et dociles, violés, volés, étripés et couillons  
pour toujours, ils nous valaient bien! Tu peux le dire!  
Nous ne changeons pas! (p. 12).

In general men accept their situation completely, without bothering to seek explanations or examine causes:

C'est triste des gens qui se couchent, on voit bien qu'ils  
se foutent que les choses aillent comme elles veulent, on  
voit bien qu'ils ne cherchent pas à comprendre eux, le  
pourquoi qu'on est là (p. 199).

Along with this refusal or inability to seek to understand what is happening to them,<sup>18</sup> men take refuge in an attitude of defeatism and resignation.

<sup>17</sup> Immediately after his enlistment, Bardamu senses that he has been caught in a trap: "On était faits, comme des rats" (p. 14).

<sup>18</sup> "Eux ne cherchaient guère à comprendre ce qui se passaient autour de nous dans la vie..." (p. 87).

We have seen earlier that to a certain extent the protagonist goes beyond this passive rôle and replaces acceptance by an active desire to understand the true nature of the world.<sup>19</sup> In this respect at least he distinguishes himself from the mass of ordinary individuals who "ne veulent rien comprendre à rien" (p. 22). Much of the ambiguity of the episode at Place Clichy stems from the hero's active desire to understand and to interrogate reality. His aggressiveness contrasts with the conventional passivity of the others (Arthur Ganate, the galèriens of l'Infanta Combitta, for example) and gives to his enlistment the appearance of an act of self-creation. But even if Bardamu does abandon -- at least temporarily<sup>20</sup> -- the attitude of resignation and passivity of his fellows, his project may well be interpreted as simply another of the possible rôles which man may play as he reacts to his state of metaphysical emptiness. Bardamu's quest may be seen as simply another reaction, another rôle.

Man is not only reduced -- by the all-powerful and homicidal nature of things -- to playing various rôles; his condition also imposes upon him the particular rôle(s) that he must "live". The individual is never conscious of having chosen his particular manner of reacting to reality. Here again his personal nature is a consequence of external determinants, of more or less obscure forces over which the individual exerts no control whatsoever:

C'est la nature qui est plus forte que vous voilà tout.  
Elle nous essaye dans un genre et on ne peut plus en sortir  
de ce genre-là. Moi j'étais parti dans une direction  
d'inquiétude. On prend doucement son rôle et son destin  
au sérieux sans s'en rendre bien compte et puis quand on se  
retourne il est bien trop tard pour en changer. On est

<sup>19</sup> "J'avais comme envie malgré tout d'essayer de comprendre leur brutalité..." (p. 15).

<sup>20</sup> As he grows older and his attempts to triumph over the nature of things prove to be futile, Bardamu appears to evolve towards a state of resigned detachment: "Résignons-nous! Laissons la nature tranquille, la garce!" (p. 299).

devenu tout inquiet et c'est entendu comme ça pour toujours  
(p. 229).

Thus "la nature" arbitrarily assigns rôles to some which are absolutely refused to others.<sup>21</sup> Bardamu, for example, is absolutely incapable of killing, not because he does not wish to -- although he well may not -- and not because he has not been trained to kill (he has), but because the rôle of "killer" has not been allotted to him:

Je me sentais si incapable de tuer quelqu'un, qu'il valait décidément mieux que j'y renonce et que j'en finisse tout de suite. Non que l'expérience m'eût manqué, on avait même tout fait pour me donner le goût, mais le don me faisait défaut (p. 91).

On the other hand rôles are not of an exclusive nature. That is, the same individual may play different, even contradictory rôles at different times. Man's behaviour may well be inconsistent: courage and cowardice may be manifested by the same individual. Each rôle awaits, in a sense, the determining circumstances which will precipitate its appearance:

Lâche ou courageux, cela ne veut pas dire grand-chose.  
Lapin-ici, héros-là-bas, c'est le même homme... (p. 83);

... l'angoissante futilité de ces êtres tantôt poules effrayées, tantôt moutons fats et consentants (p. 82).

In the face of such flexibility of rôle-playing, can one speak realistically of a basic human nature? Yes, but only if we view this human nature as a generalized need to play rôles, to believe in false appearances, to refuse to see things as they are. Man seems born to be an actor -- "Il ne comprend que...le théâtre" (p. 83). Let us now look more closely at the types of rôles men play, and attempt to understand why these forms of behaviour are common.

<sup>21</sup> "On est militaire ou on ne l'est pas" (p. 25).

### Escapism, Violence, and Egotism

It seems clear at this stage of my analysis that in Voyage man's behaviour is determined by both physical and metaphysical elements.<sup>22</sup> As the work's biological vision implies, the body and, more specifically, the instincts constitute fundamental determinants of behaviour. We have seen that a situation prevails wherein two irreconcilable forces are in conflict: the inherent physical tendency towards decomposition against which react the instincts of self-preservation. These latter push men to deny, or to repress, any awareness of the on-going process of bodily dissolution. The second global source of man's behaviour is located in the empirical revelation of the external presence of Death. Death is an objective element of experience, an essential aspect of being-in-the-world.<sup>23</sup>

Man copes with his predicament by refusing to face up to it. He follows his self-preservation instincts and represses indigestible truths.<sup>24</sup> Escapism characterizes and motivates his behaviour. Distractions, which serve to postpone an intolerable encounter with one's destiny, are feverishly pursued and constitute a basic occupation and source of vitality for mankind: "Nous sommes, par nature, si futiles, que seules les distractions peuvent nous empêcher vraiment de mourir" (pp. 203-204). Thus such varied cultural phenomena as the study of History, the cinema, and the enjoyment of the arts are in truth more or less sophisticated escape techniques, means employed "pour vous amuser, vous distraire, vous faire sortir de votre Destinée" (p. 347).

<sup>22</sup> Clearly the influence of social class is also significant: This element will be discussed in the following chapter, with particular attention given to the attitudes of les petits.

<sup>23</sup> "On se cherche bien encore des trucs et des excuses pour rester là avec les copains, mais la mort est là aussi elle, puante, à côté de vous, tout le temps à présent et moins mystérieuse qu'une belote" (p. 448).

<sup>24</sup> "La vérité c'est pas mangeable" (p. 358). "Lâche qu'il était... de nature, espérant toujours qu'on allait le sauver de la vérité..." (p. 324).

As the above example suggests, some of the most civilized activities of the mind serve, in fact, escapist projects. As we saw in the previous chapter, the mind can be easily fooled. Man's intellect permits him to construct elaborate barriers between himself and reality. We have already observed the inauthenticity of the mind's activities in, for example, the futile intellectual vices of a Princhard, as well as in the romantic idealizations of a Lola.

It should, however, be pointed out that not all man's mental activity must necessarily result in inauthentic behaviour. Man perverts his intelligence by making it fulfill self-justifying escapist functions, rather than having it serve as a means by which the individual can come to grips with his situation. The possibility of a more realistic use of the intellect is hinted at in the episode dealing with the patients who are emotional casualties of the war. In their attempts to break out of the prison that is war they fail to envisage their problem in a practical and concrete manner. Having succumbed to the false image of reality created by patriotic rhetoric, they fail to look at the situation directly and to ask the right question:

Princhard, il s'appelait, ce professeur. Que pouvait-il avoir décidé lui, pour sauver ses carotides, ses poumons et ses nerfs optiques? Voici la question essentielle, celle qu'il aurait fallu nous poser entre nous pour demeurer strictement humains et pratiques. Mais nous étions loin de là, titubants dans un idéal d'absurdités... (pp. 64-65).

Such a realistic and concrete utilization of the mind's powers will rarely if ever occur since the non-escapist type of relationship thus established with the world would presumably be too painful to endure. As a result, man consistently refuses to interrogate reality, to use his mind to penetrate

the veils of illusion and inauthenticity:

Lapin ici, héros là-bas, c'est le même homme, il ne pense pas plus ici que là-bas... Même sa propre mort il la spécule mal et de travers (p. 83).

Most men resemble Lieutenant Grappa, for whom reflecting upon his wasted life in the African jungle or upon his inhuman methods of treating the indigenous peoples might well prove traumatic:

Devant moi, il tenait à demeurer distant de ces choses. ... il n'aimait pas non plus qu'on le force à penser. Ça l'agaçait. Ce qui le rendait irritable dans ses fonctions judiciaires, c'était les questions qu'on lui posait (p. 154).

Mankind is similar to the employees of the Compagnie Pordurière who are satisfied with ready-made formulas rather than real thought: "Mes petits collègues n'échangeaient point d'idées entre eux. Rien que des formules, fixées, cuites et recuites comme des croûtons de pensées" (p. 133).

Along with the widespread tendency towards fatalism and resignation, this degradation of the powers of human intelligence in order to escape from the truth makes up the passive element of human nature. At the opposite behavioural pole, however, one discovers a recurring pattern of aggressiveness and violence both in organized forms (war, colonialism, industrialism) and in the amorphous context of everyday living.

Evidence of man's brutal nature appears throughout the hero's adventures. Bardamu encounters violence and hostility in Flanders, aboard the Amiral Bragueton, in the colonies (the treatment of the natives), in America (within the factories) and in the slums of Paris. This tendency towards aggressiveness seems entrenched in man's nature. War, for example, is viewed as proceeding from the depths of man's being: "A présent, j'étais

pris dans cette fuite en masse, vers le meurtre en commun, vers le feu... Ça venait des profondeurs et c'était arrivé" (p. 17). War indeed is claimed to constitute one of the "véritables réalisations de nos profonds tempéraments" (p. 407). How can this violent pattern of behaviour be explained? What forces can make of ordinary men a "horde de fous vicieux devenus incapables soudain d'autre chose, autant qu'ils étaient, que de tuer et d'être étripés sans savoir pourquoi?" (p. 37).

One possible answer to the above questions takes us back to the biological vision which, as I have suggested, informs and structures the novel's thématique. This vision would interpret the penchant for violence and aggressive behaviour as the expression of a need for catharsis, of a need to purge the self of an intolerable internal conflict between life and death forces. Through violence, man proclaims his hostility both towards the world -- where Death awaits him -- and towards himself, since his own body harbours the source of his anguish. The violence of man can be interpreted therefore as a dual death-wish (or instinct) directed at both the others and the self:

D'ailleurs dans la vie courante, réfléchissons que cent individus au moins dans le cours d'une seule journée bien ordinaire désirent votre pauvre mort... (p. 116);

C'est tuer et se tuer qu'ils voulaient, pas d'un seul coup bien sûr, mais petit à petit comme Robinson avec tout ce qu'ils trouvaient, des vieux chagrins, des nouvelles misères, des haines encore sans nom quand ça n'est pas la guerre toute crue et que ça se passe alors plus vite encore que d'habitude (p. 268).

To the extent that violence and brutality function as a temporary release from tension and repressed inner conflict they are often experienced by man as pleasurable activities and as such are associated with the sexual



experience.<sup>25</sup> This juxtaposition of violence and sex is first presented in the war episode when the hero returns to Paris and observes the sexual excitement which the war has aroused:

... eux à l'arrière, ils devenaient, à mesure que la guerre avançait, de plus en plus vicieux. Tout de suite j'ai compris ça en rentrant à Paris et aussi que leurs femmes avaient le feu au derrière, et les vieux des gueules grandes comme ça, et les mains partout, aux culs et aux poches (p. 50).

The close relationship between violence and sexuality is visible again in the attitudes of women who seek to idealize the soldiers and their exploits: "Les femmes surtout demandaient du spectacle et elles étaient impitoyables les garces.... La guerre, sans conteste, porte aux ovaires, elles en exigeaient des héros..." (p. 90). A similar contiguity of sex and violence is presented aboard the Amiral Braguéton where one of the female passengers feverishly hopes to see the protagonist destroyed by the colonial officers: "Scène de haut carnage, dont ses ovaires fripés pressentaient un réveil. Ça valait un viol par gorille" (p. 117). A final and incredibly sordid linking of sex and brutality is witnessed by the protagonist in Rancy; here a ritualistic child-beating is the seemingly necessary preliminary to sexual activity (pp. 265-266).

The pleasure man takes in violence is perhaps understandable in the light of the novel's biological vision; nevertheless, the narrator refuses to defend such an attitude. On the contrary, man's moral position is pictured as somewhat lower than the beasts who at least do not reflect with pleasure upon their viciousness nor give themselves over enthusiastically

<sup>25</sup> "On passe son temps à tuer ou à adorer en ce monde et cela tout ensemble" (p. 72).

to the violent unleashing of their instincts:

... plus enragés que les chiens, adorant leur rage (ce que les chiens ne font pas) cent mille fois plus enragés que mille chiens et tellement plus vicieux! Nous étions jolis! (p. 17);

Les chevaux ont bien de la chance eux, car s'ils subissent aussi la guerre comme nous, on ne leur demande pas d'y souscrire, d'avoir l'air d'y croire. Malheureux mais libres chevaux! L'enthousiasme hélas! c'est rien que pour nous, ce putain! (p. 40).

The final and perhaps most fundamental behaviour-pattern which makes up human nature may be described as a universal egoism. Man's behaviour, springing as it does from the preservation instincts, is in a way naturally self-centred. His internal conflicts produce a turning-in upon the self (to protect the ego from a hostile universe), a permanent and instinctual preoccupation with the moi:

Il n'y a pas de vanité intelligente. C'est un instinct.  
Il n'y a pas d'homme non plus qui ne soit pas avant tout vaniteux (p. 122).

Unable to transcend his instincts, man cannot go beyond himself. His existence takes necessarily the form of a sterile narcissism: "Ils continuent à s'admirer et c'est tout" (p. 11).

Although the protagonist will attempt to transcend the self in his search for a "punition pour l'égoïsme universel" (p. 373) which afflicts mankind, he is unable to carry out his project and thereby escape a seemingly unavoidable self-centredness:

J'avais beau essayer de me perdre pour ne plus me retrouver devant ma vie, je la retrouvais partout simplement. Je revenais sur moi-même (p. 489).

In the course of his experiences as a doctor the protagonist discovers

that any attempt to subordinate the self and to act out of disinterestedness constitutes a kind of crime which brings prompt punishment and suffering:

"La misère poursuit implacablement et minutieusement l'altruisme et les plus gentilles initiatives sont impitoyablement châtiées" (p. 315). The suspicion and hostility of the others towards the would-be altruist reflects the "natural" character of egocentric behaviour. To be generous in a world where the ego is eternally menaced is to engage in behaviour that the others are not able to understand. And can they be blamed for not feeling well-disposed towards their fellow-man?

Est-ce que la vie est gentille avec eux? Pitié de qui et de quoi qu'ils auraient donc eux? Pour quoi faire? Des autres? A-t-on jamais vu personne descendre en enfer pour remplacer un autre? Jamais. On l'y voit l'y faire descendre. C'est tout (p. 304).

Since the self constitutes the centre of man's preoccupations, values which traditionally involve the subordination of the self to the other are held to be little more than impossible dreams. Interpersonal communication, for example, consists more of exchanged monologues than authentic dialogues or discussion:

Autant pas se faire des illusions, les gens n'ont rien à se dire, ils ne se parlent que de leurs peines à eux chacun, c'est entendu. Chacun pour soi, la terre pour tous (p. 289).

Even love, traditionally considered the ideal example of the subordination of the self, is perceived as a basically selfish relationship in which each member seeks to project his unhappiness onto the other: "Ils essayent de s'en débarrasser de leur peine, sur l'autre, au moment de l'amour..." (p. 289). This fundamental selfishness of love is incarnated in the person of Madelon, whose jealousy and possessiveness lead to the novel's final and fatal denouement.

## Résumé

Man's metaphysical condition "empties" him and renders his existence absurd and meaningless. Death's presence invalidates man's ambitions, projects, and dreams. Faced with the indigestible facts of his mortality and consequent nothingness, man's behaviour has only one object: escape. The principal means by which escape is effected are:

- a) a passive attitude of acceptance and resignation;
- b) a refusal to reflect upon the situation in any way;
- c) irrational attempts to resolve the situation through aggressiveness and violence;
- d) a protective turning-in upon the self.

Men thus spend their lives ignoring the true nature of their existence. They live in a world of rôle-playing in which appearances must be reassuring even if they are false. Man must present a mask of rationality, a mask which he often mistakes for his "real" person. All his energy is expended in maintaining an illusion about himself, in pandering to a threatened ego, in refusing to see things as they are:

La grande fatigue de l'existence n'est peut-être en somme que cet énorme mal qu'on se donne pour demeurer vingt ans, quarante ans, davantage, raisonnable, pour ne pas être simplement, profondément soi-même, c'est-à-dire immonde, atroce, absurde. Cauchemar d'avoir à présenter toujours comme un petit idéal universel, surhomme du matin au soir, le sous-homme claudicant qu'on nous a donné (p. 407).

Only very rarely does the mask fall, and the true, hidden nature of man make a sustained appearance. Such a moment occurs aboard the Amiral Bragueton. The change of climate is hard on the bodies of the Europeans and they are unable to repress their real nature. For a short while they abandon their masks of reasonableness. Their biological confession may

stand as a summary of my analysis of the physical and metaphysical aspects of Being as presented in the novel:

Dans cette stabilité désespérante de chaleur, tout le contenu humain du navire s'est coagulé dans une massive ivrognerie. ... c'est depuis ce moment que nous vîmes à fleur de peau venir s'étaler l'angoissante nature des blancs, provoquée, libérée, bien débraillée enfin, leur vraie nature, tout comme à la guerre. ... Dans le froid d'Europe, sous les grisailles pudiques du Nord, on ne fait, hors les carnages, que soupçonner la grouillante cruauté de nos frères, mais leur pourriture envahit la surface dès que les émoustille la fièvre ignoble des tropiques. C'est alors qu'on se déboutonne éperdument et que la saloperie triomphe et nous recouvre entiers. C'est l'aveu biologique (pp. 112-113).

## CHAPTER III

## THE INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETY

The point in question is the organic, indissoluble connection between man as a private individual and man as a social being, as a member of a community.

- Georg Lukács<sup>26</sup>

In the two preceding chapters we have observed the general approach to obtaining authentic knowledge of the world adopted by the protagonist and also the universal metaphysical truths which his concrete interaction with reality permits him to discover. We have also remarked the hero's awareness of man's cosmic nothingness, of "tout le ridicule de notre puérile et tragique nature" (p. 427), and described the principal behavioural patterns of man as he seeks to react against his ontological predicament. In the present chapter I abandon these cosmic considerations and attempt to describe the interrelationship of the individual and the collectivity.

According to Lukács, "every action, thought and emotion of human beings is inseparably bound up with the life and struggle of the community ... whether the humans themselves are conscious of this, unconscious of it or even trying to escape from it..."<sup>27</sup> If such is indeed the case, one may expect to find that the situation of the individual within society is

<sup>26</sup> Studies in European Realism (New York, 1964), p. 8.

<sup>27</sup> Studies in European Realism, p. 9.

somewhat analogous to his position within the cosmos. One may also expect to discover that the individual's reactions to his social condition resemble those elicited by his metaphysical dilemma. In order to ascertain whether or not such parallels do exist I will examine society from both a static and dynamic viewpoint: society as structure and process. I will seek to uncover the organizing principles around which society is constructed and the means employed to create and uphold this organization. Finally I will look at the various activities of individuals within the collectivity and attempt to discern significant behavioural patterns.

### The Structure of Society

Je n'avais pas encore appris qu'il existe  
deux humanités très différentes, celle des  
riches et celle des pauvres (p. 81).

The basic elements of the social structure are suggested in the image of the galley-ship<sup>28</sup> utilized by the protagonist in his discussion with Arthur Ganate at Place Clichy. The image is that of a two-level structure, reflecting society's fundamental division into two distinct camps: the captains and the rowers, the masters and the slaves, the exploiters and the exploited, the powerful and the weak, the few and the many. The protagonist's concrete experience of society will substantiate this "literary" image of a basic social dichotomy.

What are the sources of this division? How do the few gain power and authority over the many? There is no evidence in the text that authority

<sup>28</sup> "... mais enfin on est tous assis sur une grande galère, on rame tous à tour de bras, tu peux pas venir me dire le contraire! ... On est en bas dans les cales à souffler de la gueule, puants, suintants des rouspignolles, et puis voilà! En haut sur le pont, au frais, il y a les maîtres et qui s'en font pas, avec des belles femmes roses et gonflées de parfums sur les genoux" (p. 13).

derives from some moral or intellectual superiority held by those in power. Authority appears rather to result from the possession of certain objects, the ownership of which is arbitrarily denied to the many.

In the war episode, the criterion which confers the power of life and death over others is that of rank. Here the simple fact of possessing "quatre galons" (p. 30), binoculars and maps makes of the owner a "Roi de la mort" (p. 38), endowed with divine powers of decision concerning the destiny of those "qui n'avaient pas de carte" (p. 30). The senile General Céladon des Entrayes has attained, by the process of advancement through the ranks, to the status of an Inca god who demands human sacrifices from the masses beneath him: "... notre général Céladon des Entrayes ... devenu par l'effet des avancements une sorte de dieu précis, lui aussi, une sorte de petit soleil atrocement exigeant" (pp. 39-40).

In civilian society as well, the two-tiered structure remains a dominant reality. Here, however, the principal source of power is not rank, but wealth, not stripes but money. Bardamu's revengeful social prayer -- "Un Dieu qui compte les minutes et les sous, un Dieu désespéré, sensuel et grognon comme un cochon" (p. 12) -- suggests early in the text the decisive rôle that materialistic values play in the structuring of society. Later, in the Flanders episode, the protagonist will become acutely aware of the rôle of money as the essential mediator and final arbiter of relationships within society. Obligated to pay a supposedly friendly family for a much-needed drink, the young soldier discovers the priority accorded to monetary considerations by men in their dealings with one another: "Pas



d'amour à perdre dans ce monde, tant qu'il y aura cent sous" (p. 43).

As the vengeful prayer implies, Mammon is the religious idol of modern times.<sup>29</sup> In the course of his visit to America the protagonist notices the reverence for money exhibited by the progressive Americans. Here banks have replaced cathedrals as temples of religion, and monetary transactions possess the aura and form of religious rites:

Quand les fidèles entrent dans leur Banque, faut pas croire qu'ils peuvent se servir comme ça selon leur caprice. Pas du tout. Ils parlent à Dollar en lui murmurant des choses à travers un petit grillage, ils se confessent quoi. Pas beaucoup de bruit, des lampes bien douces, un tout minuscule guichet entre de hautes arches, c'est tout. Ils ne l'avalent pas l'Hostie. Ils se la mettent sur le coeur (p. 192).

A solid bank-account confers upon its possessor a quasi-divine status. Just as advancement in rank had made of Entrayes an imperious divinity, so money allows men to climb the social ladder, to become themselves gods. Such is the destiny of the rich Argentinians whom the young protagonist observes in Paris during the war:

Me réchauffant donc à l'office avec mes compagnons domestiques, je ne comprenais pas qu'au-dessus de ma tête dansaient les dieux argentins, ils auraient pu être allemands, français, chinois, cela n'avait guère d'importance, mais des dieux, des riches, voilà ce qu'il fallait comprendre (p. 81).

Money, therefore, constitutes a fundamental aspect of social organization in that its presence confers prestige and authority. It should be noted here that money performs another closely related function, that of providing benefits and privileges not afforded to those who dwell in the wrong camp. Lola, for example, glows with a happiness due to the advantages

<sup>29</sup> "... le Dollar, un vrai Saint-Esprit, plus précieux que du sang" (p. 192).

provided for the rich alone, for those on the "right" side of life:

"Lola, après tout, ne faisait que divaguer de bonheur et d'optimisme, comme tous les gens qui sont du bon côté de la vie, celui des privilèges, de la santé, de la sécurité et qui en ont encore pour longtemps à vivre" (p. 54).

The structure of society is basically dualistic. There are two distinct camps, the one possessing rank and/or wealth, the other deprived of these elements. This dualism is modified slightly however by the frequent textual allusions to a vertical pyramid-like configuration. Many of the quotations already utilized in this chapter express this verticality: Entrayes is a "petit soleil", the Argentinians dance "au-dessus" the head of the protagonist, the captains in the galley-ship image are found "en-haut sur le pont".

The colonial society presents the same general vertical configuration. Above all the resident members of the colony stands the Governor whose glance, when lowered, petrifies all below him:

Dans cette colonie de la Brambola-Bragamance, au-dessus de tout le monde, triomphait le Gouverneur. Ses militaires et ses fonctionnaires osaient à peine respirer quand il daignait abaisser ses regards jusqu'à leurs personnes (p. 125).

God-like in his elevation and invincibility, the Governor withstands "comme un charme" (p. 126) the disease and despair which ravage the members of the colony more lowly situated in the pyramid. The Director of the Compagnie Pordurière occupies a similar, if less Olympian, position of vertical supremacy which reflects his powerful status within the colonial social structure. From his elevated position -- "là-haut sur la falaise rouge" (p. 133) -- the Director literally looks down upon the port, the

natives and his white employees: "De sa maison nous dominions le port fluvial qui miroitait en bas..." (p. 129).

In addition to presenting the conventional image of a hierarchical social structure, the recurring allusions to a vertical social space serve to designate another characteristic of those possessing power and authority: their separation or distance from the crude realities of existence, from the physical reality which, in a sense, constitutes the basis of their authority.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, those who have climbed the social pyramid and find themselves on the good side of life are there precisely to avoid these realities and to forget their existence: "Etre riche, c'est une autre ivresse, c'est oublier. C'est même pour ça qu'on devient riche, pour oublier" (pp. 329-330).

One can cite many examples which reflect a separation from concrete reality proportional to the elevation attained in the social hierarchy: Lola's romantic patriotism, des Entrayes' taste for roses and aristocratic comfort, the Argentinians' life of music and dance. But perhaps the clearest and most sustained presentation of this distance separating the authorities from concrete reality is to be found in the colonial social structure. The most powerful colonists are precisely those who remain at the farthest remove possible from the colonial experience. Thus the Minister in charge of the colonies remains in Paris as do the shareholders, "les plus grands bandits que personne" (p. 133). These latter are only too content to spy upon the colony from far away, "d'encore plus haut, de la rue Moncey à

<sup>30</sup> The god-like powers of a General des Entrayes are a direct consequence of the fact of war; but to be a general means also to be separated from the war itself: "... on lui trouvait un village calme, bien à l'abri..." (p. 25). Similarly, the Governor and the Director receive their authority from the commercial exploitation of the colony, a process which they observe comfortably from afar.

Paris" (p. 133), and to profit from the sufferings of those who toil for them in the disease-ridden jungles of Africa. On the other hand, those members of the colonial hierarchy who find themselves closest to the physical reality of the enterprise are the lowest on the social ladder. This is the situation of the auxiliary agent Tandernot whose concrete knowledge of the jungle (he supervises the construction of roads in the forest) seems to condemn him to an inferior social status: "Il n'avait pas du tout d'argent. Sa place était aussi inférieure que possible dans la hiérarchie coloniale. Sa fonction consistait à diriger la construction de routes en pleines forêts" (p. 134).

On the whole, the exploiters refuse to confront the absurd and uncomfortable reality of the colonial enterprise. They refuse, for example, to utilize the roads leading into the jungle of Tandernot.<sup>31</sup> A typical reaction is that of Lieutenant Grappa who, while he never hesitates to deal out the most cruel punishments to the "uncivilized" natives, nevertheless avoids all direct contact with the operations of a society he ruthlessly defends. His rank allows him to keep his distance from the forest and he spends most of his time in attempting to forget where he is and in dreaming of being elsewhere:

Il n'avait pas non plus très envie d'en savoir davantage sur leur compte à ces territoires. Les arbres, la forêt, après tout, on sait ce que c'est, on les voit très bien de loin. ... Rien ne justifiait une expédition administrative douloureuse et sans écho. Quand il avait cessé de rendre sa loi, Grappa se tournait plutôt vers la mer et contemplait cet horizon d'où certain jour il était apparu et par où certain jour il s'en irait, si tout se passait bien..." (p. 156).

<sup>31</sup> "... aucun blanc ne passait jamais sur les nouvelles routes que créait Tandernot..." (p. 134).

The vertical configuration of the social structure reflects both a relationship of authority (between superiors and inferiors) and a pattern of separation from concrete reality. To be rich, therefore, is to be both powerful and comfortable. This twofold aspect is illustrated in the adventure aboard the luxurious canal-boat (péniche), anchored near Toulouse. Although the invitation which the luxury barge's owner (a rich artist) extends to Bardamu and Robinson appears to suspend the normal exploitative relationship between the rich and the poor, the behaviour of the two groups reveals their fundamental difference and opposition. The well-to-do are unable to repress the biting accent and superior tone which they habitually employ when addressing their inferiors:

Et même quand ils prennent des tons canailles pour chanter des chansons de pauvres en manière de distraction, ils le gardent cet accent distingué qui vous met en méfiance et en dégoût, un accent qui a comme un petit fouet dedans, toujours, comme il en faut un, toujours, pour parler aux domestiques (p. 393).

The poor, for their part, indulge a seemingly irresistible need to lie about their social status; they play false rôles, boast, and generally attempt to raise themselves to the level of their wealthy hosts. As inauthentic as such efforts may be -- they are thus another testimony to the irremediable split between the two camps -- the poor appear to possess few weapons other than falsehoods with which to combat their inferiority: "On s'en sort des humiliations quotidiennes en essayant comme Robinson de se mettre à l'unisson des gens riches, par les mensonges, ces monnaies du pauvre" (p. 396).

This recourse to lies and inauthenticity is not of course restricted to the poor alone. We observed in the previous chapter, and shall see again

later in the present chapter, that mankind is continuously seeking escape from the truth: "On n'y tient pas à sa vérité" (p. 396). Indeed, Bardamu and Robinson are not the only passengers aboard the péniche who are playing rôles and living lies. The wealthy too seek to avoid reality by living in comfortable dream-worlds. Their separation from reality is suggested by the very position of the barge, anchored off-shore like an island, in calm, sleep-inducing waters. The song which the wealthy passengers sing reflects perfectly the desire of the rich not to see the world as it is, but rather to sojourn in a false but agreeable dream-world: "Ferme tes jolis yeux, car les heures sont brèves.../ Au pays merveilleux, au doux pays du rê-ê-ve" (p. 392).

#### The Maintenance of the Social Structure

Je vous le dis, petits bonshommes, couillons de la vie, battus, rançonnés, transpirant de toujours, je vous préviens, quand les grands de ce monde se mettent à vous aimer, c'est qu'ils vont vous tourner en saucissons de bataille... (p. 69).

In order to ensure the continuity of what for them is an excellent system, the authorities (the "establishment") exert great efforts to maintain the non-privileged in their enslaved condition. Two fundamental techniques are utilized to guarantee the adhesion of members of the collectivity to the system: bribery and force. The protagonist, for example, is seduced (bribed) into enlisting by rhetoric and impressive appearances: uniforms, music, gallant airs, public enthusiasm, and so on. Later, however, when Bardamu considers deserting the system, the threat of force, brandished by

the hated Pinçon, tends to dissuade him. Having imposed itself upon the individual through seductive appearances, the system retains his loyalty through force and repression. It is this battle of repression waged against wavering individuals which constitutes the principal means of maintaining social order. Consequently, the real war, that with the most far-ranging implications, takes place not between nations, but between the mutually hostile camps which form society:

Ceux qui avaient encore un peu de coeur l'ont perdu. C'est à partir de ces mois-là qu'on a commencé à fusiller des troupiers pour leur remonter le moral, par escouades, et que le gendarme s'est mis à être cité à l'ordre du jour pour la manière dont il faisait sa petite guerre à lui, la profonde, la vraie de vraie (pp. 32-33).

A similar utilization of both force and bribery is carried out by the colonial "establishment". Force is historically the primary method of social control; in recent centuries however more subtle means of persuasion have been developed. The colonial system practises the authoritarian approach upon the "primitive" natives; the more "civilized" white employees are motivated by promises of wealth and social respectability. This latter technique of social integration might well be termed the "democratic" method since its purpose is to engage the voluntary collaboration of an "advanced" society's members in the process of their own enslavement: "Les indigènes eux, ne fonctionnent guère en somme qu'à coups de trique, ils gardent cette dignité, tandis que les blancs, perfectionnés par l'instruction publique, ils marchent tout seuls" (p. 139). No need to use the whip upon the whites who work docilely and energetically to maintain the status quo. By providing the illusion of participation, the "establishment" employs a most effective

means to further its privileged position and to continue its exploitation:

Qu'on ne vienne plus nous vanter l'Egypte et les Tyrans tartares! Ce n'étaient ces antiques amateurs que petits margoullins prétentieux dans l'art suprême de faire rendre à la bête verticale son plus bel effort au boulot. Ils ne savaient pas, ces primitifs, l'appeler "Monsieur" l'esclave, et le faire voter de temps à autre, ni lui payer le journal, ni surtout l'emmener à la guerre, pour lui faire passer ses passions" (p. 139).

The bribes of fortune and success transform the colonial employees into willing slaves. Urged on by the "espoir de devenir puissants et riches dont les blancs sont gavés" (p. 139) these individuals tend to identify their existence with that of the Company. Martyrs for money, they embody the desired end-product of modern techniques of social integration:

Une hâte belliqueuse semblait leur posséder de procéder sans cesse au déchargement et rechargement des cargos les uns après les autres. "Ça coûte si cher un cargo sur rade!" qu'ils répétaient sincèrement navrés, comme si c'était de leur argent qu'il se fût agi (p. 132);

Ils étaient venus en Afrique tropicale, ces petits ébauchés, lui offrir leurs viandes, aux patrons, leur sang, leurs vies, leur jeunesse, martyrs pour vingt-deux francs par jour (moins les retenues), contents, quand même contents, jusqu'au dernier globule rouge guetté par le dix-millionième moustique (pp. 132-133).

Totally unaware of being exploited, robot-like in their reactions, incapable of original thought or of questioning the workings of the dehumanizing enterprise upon which they have embarked, these employees are the portraits of the perfectly conventional and therefore legitimate sons, the totally assimilated products of the social system:

Des employés en or, en somme, bien choisis, d'une inconscience enthousiaste à faire rêver. Des fils comme ma mère eût adoré en posséder un, fervents de leurs patrons ... un dont on puisse être fier devant tout le monde, un fils tout à fait légitime (p. 132).



Perhaps the ultimate stage in the system's integration and destruction of the individual occurs within the context of modern industrial production methods. Factory life, as the scene at the Ford factory in Detroit demonstrates, results in the absolute repression of individual thought and initiative. Even more so than in the colonies, the individual is reduced to an automaton. This point is made clear to the protagonist by the medical examiner at the Ford factory:

Ça ne vous servira à rien ici vos études, mon garçon!  
 Vous n'êtes pas venu ici pour penser, mais pour faire  
 les gestes qu'on vous commandera d'exécuter ... Nous  
 n'avons pas besoin d'imaginatifs dans notre usine. C'est  
 de chimpanzés dont nous avons besoin..." (p. 224).

In the factory the individual is transformed into a machine, but a machine that one considers less important than the production machinery. In this downgrading of the individual, in this reduction of man to an impotent sub-machine, lies the final solution to the problem of inducing social conformity and of assuring thereby to the privileged members of society their continued well-being:

Et j'ai vu en effet les grands bâtiments trapus et vitrés,  
 des sortes de cages à mouches sans fin, dans lesquelles on  
 discernait des hommes à remuer, mais remuer à peine, comme  
 s'ils ne se débattaient plus que faiblement contre je ne  
 sais quoi d'impossible" (p. 223);

On existait plus que par une sorte d'hésitation entre l'hébétude  
 et le délire. Rien n'importait que la continuité fracassante  
 des mille et mille instruments qui commandaient les hommes  
 (p. 226);

On en devenait machine soi-même... (p. 225).

It would appear evident from what precedes that inducing or imposing social conformity constitutes one of the principal goals of the social

system. Obedience becomes the cardinal social virtue that the exploited members of the collectivity are trained to practise from their very earliest days: "... l'ignoble envie d'obéir qu'on leur a donnée en naissant..." (p. 372). Most events of a collective nature serve to instil some lesson of obedience and conformity. The underlying function of the fair (la fête) is less to give real pleasure than to serve the interests and objectives of the system. The fair exploits for commercial benefits the human need for amusement and distraction: "Il n'y a jamais de fête véritable que pour le commerce..." (p. 309). Moreover, the fair helps initiate the young child to the monetary facts of social life. Pleasure is limited here by the basic social law which decrees that "tout se paye" (p. 309). The innocent, unknowing children of non-privileged families painfully discovers this frustrating reality:

Ils croient que c'est par gentillesse que les grandes personnes derrière les comptoirs enluminés incitent les clients à s'offrir les merveilles qu'ils amassent et dominent et défendent avec des vociférants sourires. Ils ne connaissent pas la loi les enfants. C'est à coups de gifles que les parents la leur apprennent la loi et les défendent contre les plaisirs (p. 309).

The powerful thus strengthen their privileged positions on top of the social pyramid by manipulating and indoctrinating the mass of individuals. From the standpoint of the system, these ordinary individuals are simply objects, "mots qui souffrent" (p. 12). Their personal desires are regularly ignored or subordinated to the will of the authorities, of the privileged élite. This process of reification permits the authorities to remain indifferent to the plight and suffering of their underlings. During the war experience, for example, individuals are obliged to sacrifice themselves

despite their overwhelming desire to survive. Indifferent to personal wishes, the authorities are scornful and demanding: "... les Aztèques et leur mépris du corps d'autrui, c'est le même que devait avoir pour mes humbles tripes notre général Céladon des Entrayes..." (p. 39). Demonstrating the same indifference to the wishes of the individual, the mayor of Noircœur-sur-la-Lys underlines (in his refusal to assist Bardamu and Robinson) the fact that personal desires are as nothing if the will of the system opposes them:

De certain, il n'y avait à opposer décidément, à tous ces puissants, que notre petit désir, à nous deux, de ne pas mourir et de ne pas brûler. C'était peu, surtout que ces choses-là ne peuvent pas se déclarer pendant la guerre (p. 48).

A parallel indifference to the interests and well-being of ordinary individuals is manifested by the Director of the "Compagnie Pordurière" who crudely emphasizes the supreme importance of the organization: "On s'en fout qu'il soye malade!... La Compagnie d'abord!" (p. 130).

This indifference of the boss can be viewed as a logical, almost natural phenomenon. By definition an exploiter (in the Célinian universe at any rate), the patron must act in a manner which ensures the maintenance of the status quo, of his domination over the others. Even the kindly psychologist Baryton must carry out the duties of a boss. Thus, when hiring the protagonist, he offers Bardamu "un tout petit salaire, mais avec un contrat et des clauses longues comme ça, toutes à son avantage évidemment. Un patron en somme" (p. 404). And if by some rare chance the boss were to feel some guilt with regard to his exploitative function, a process of rationalization and self-justification takes over. The boss contemplates some moral or physical defect in his "slave" and thereby convinces himself

both of his personal superiority and of the essential good sense and rightness of the system. By means of such specious reasoning the most benevolent patron can justify with a clear conscience the miserable fate of the masses:

Il n'était point mauvais que Baryton me considérât dans mon ensemble avec quelque mépris. Un patron se trouve toujours un peu rassuré par l'ignominie de son personnel. L'esclave doit être coûte que coûte un peu et même beaucoup méprisable. Un ensemble de petites tares chroniques morales et physiques justifie le sort qui l'accable. La terre tourne mieux ainsi puisque chacun se trouve dessus à sa place méritée (p. 418).

The Individual and the System: Conflict and Compromise

Le vol du pauvre devient une malicieuse reprise individuelle, me comprenez-vous? (p. 68).

From the standpoint of those in power -- the real "bandits", as Princhard calls them<sup>32</sup> -- the system functions perfectly. The more or less voluntary efforts of the indoctrinated and manipulated many maintain the radical division of society into the powerful and the weak. Unconsciously the ordinary people assist the wealthy in their most unscrupulous schemings, often in the usually vain hope of themselves ascending the social hierarchy.<sup>33</sup> From the standpoint of the exploited individual, however, the situation is much less agreeable. This is the case especially when the individual happens to reflect, as does the protagonist, upon his position within the social

<sup>32</sup> "Certes, nous avons l'habitude d'admirer tous les jours d'immenses bandits, dont le monde entier vénère avec nous l'opulence et dont l'existence se démontre cependant dès qu'on l'examine d'un peu près comme un long crime chaque jour renouvelé, mais ces gens-là jouissent de gloire, d'honneurs et de puissance, leurs forfaits sont consacrés par les lois..." (p. 68).

<sup>33</sup> "Les riches n'ont pas besoin de tuer eux-mêmes pour bouffer. Ils les font travailler les gens comme ils disent. Ils ne font pas le mal eux-mêmes, les riches. Ils payent. On fait tout pour leur plaire et tout le monde est bien content" (p. 328).

structure, and to seek to understand the process which causes him to suffer.

The protagonist's concrete and open-eyed interaction with social forces reveals to him the false bases upon which the structure functions. Society operates mainly by disguising the true nature of reality and by persuading its members that the disguise is the reality. It masks, for example, the horrible slaughter of war behind splendid uniforms and an exalted rhetoric. It substitutes the bribes of fortune and security for the disease and pain which form the concrete reality of the colonial enterprise.

This widespread utilization of false appearances and masks by the system as well as the use of brute force in order to elicit the correct rôle-playing from individuals suggest a parallel between social activity and theatre. The extraordinary bravery of the colonel upon the Flanders battlefield strikes the terrified protagonist as an example of social theatricality:

Et je repensais encore au colonel... avec sa cuirasse, son casque et ses moustaches, on l'aurait montré se promenant comme je l'avais vu moi, sous les balles et les obus, dans un music-hall, c'était un spectacle à remplir l'Alhambra d'alors, il aurait éclipsé Fragson, dans l'époque dont je vous parle une formidable vedette, cependant (p. 23).

Lola, who in many ways typifies society's theatrical essence,<sup>34</sup> first meets the protagonist in the suitably symbolic setting of the Opéra-Comique (p. 51). The ambitious social-climbing Musyne ascends to the privileged universe of the Argentinian "gods" after her successful tour with the "Théâtre aux Armées" (pp. 79-80). A recital given to honour the armed forces, Fatherland

<sup>34</sup> Lola plays at nursing, at being a "Jeanne d'Arc" (p. 52), desirous of saving some vague mythical ideal which she calls France: "Pour Lola, la France demeurerait une espèce d'entité chevaleresque, aux contours peu définis dans l'espace et le temps..." (p. 53).

and Victory is held in that traditional setting for masks and false appearances, the Comédie-Française (p. 100).

An important consequence of the theatrical nature of the system lies in the imposition upon individuals of the need in turn to play rôles and keep up appearances. This obligation is perhaps most apparent in the hospital of Bestombes for emotionally disturbed military personnel. Here the patients are made to realize that in order to survive they must repress their real desires and fears,<sup>35</sup> and wear the masks of convinced patriots:

Comme le Théâtre était partout il fallait jouer... (p. 90);

Nous vivions un grand roman de geste, dans la peau de personnages fantastiques, au fond desquels, dérisoires, nous tremblions de tout le contenu de nos viandes et de nos âmes. On en aurait bavé si on nous avait surpris au vrai (p. 99).

Society is essentially theatre. Unlike what occurs in good theatre, however, the system disguises reality, not in order to better reveal it in some powerful manner, but rather in order to repress or forget it. The refusal of society to see war for the bloody slaughterhouse it is results in an epidemic of deceit as language is perverted so that the truth may remain hidden:

Le délire de mentir... s'attrape comme la gale (p. 56);

On mentait avec rage... dans les journaux, sur les affiches, à pied, à cheval, en voiture. Tout le monde s'y était mis. C'est à qui mentirait plus énormément que l'autre. Bientôt, il n'y eut plus de vérité dans la ville (p. 56).

The protagonist's desire to see and not to forget<sup>36</sup> allows him to

<sup>35</sup> Repress, but not necessarily deny these feelings, since in a world where only external appearances count, "tout est permis en dedans" (p. 50).

<sup>36</sup> "La grande défaite, en tout, c'est d'oublier..." (p. 27).

see through the system, to demystify false appearances. He can, in the colonial episode for example, penetrate the masks of progress and civilization and denounce their falseness: "... au fond elles ne menaient nulle part les routes de l'Administration à Tandernot, alors elles disparaissaient sous la végétation fort rapidement, en vérité d'un mois à l'autre, pour tout dire" (p. 134). Similarly, Bardamu's insight allows him to perceive and denounce, in the attempts to train natives for the militia, the ridiculously theatrical nature of the techniques employed to integrate individuals into the social corpus:

Dès sept heures, chaque matin, les miliciens d'Alcide se rendaient à l'exercice. ... j'étais aux premières loges pour assister à cette fantasia (p. 149);

Tels les miliciens d'Alcide, tous ces êtres semblaient tenir avant tout à s'agiter frénétiquement dans le fictif... (p. 152).

Bardamu's experience and awareness of the basic falseness of society convince him of the irreconcilable nature of the goals pursued by the system and those desired by the individual. Intent upon affirming his individuality<sup>37</sup> in the face of enormous pressures to conform and to be assimilated, Bardamu adopts an outlook upon the world directly contrary to the official line preached by the system. This global opposition of outlook forces (or permits) the protagonist to conceive as insane, behaviour which society considers acceptable and even desirable. Thus the world is, in a sense, turned upside-down before his very eyes. War, which is justifiable from society's standpoint, constitutes for the fully conscious individual

<sup>37</sup> "Seraient-ils neuf cent quatre-vingt-quinze millions et moi tout seul, c'est eux qui ont tort ... et c'est moi qui ai raison, parce que je suis le seul à savoir ce que je veux..." (p. 66).

a type of madness. For him, the combattants are quite simply crazy:

"... deux millions de fous héroïques et déchaînés..." (p. 17); "une horde de fous vicieux..." (p. 37). But since madness is a malleable concept defined by the majority<sup>38</sup> -- that is, by the dominant elements of society and the obedient masses -- the rebel who attempts to refuse the war<sup>39</sup> finds himself in a hospital for the mentally deranged. In this upside-down view of things, to oppose society's will is to be considered insane. In the war episode madness, in the view of the system, is not wanting to be killed:

"Etait-il [Princhard] fou vraiment? Quand le moment du monde à l'envers est venu et que c'est être fou que de demander pourquoi on vous assassine, il devient évident qu'on passe pour fou à peu de frais" (p. 64).

In this upside-down world cowardice, as Bardamu's adventure aboard the Amiral Bragueton illustrates, may prove a necessary virtue. The optimism and honesty of the hero's mother, on the other hand, may well be signs of collaboration with the forces of injustice and exploitation. Illness may constitute a disguised blessing since it permits one to take refuge in the Hospital. The distance separating this institution from the homicidal intentions and projects of society transforms the hospital's traditional image of a place to be avoided to that of an attractive shelter, a kind of "Paradis Terrestre" (p. 141).

Consistent with the perception of a world turned inside-out are the examples of authentic virtue and goodness demonstrated by individuals who are habitually neglected or scorned by respectable society. The nondescript, humble Alcide immures himself in the monotony of life in the jungle for the

<sup>38</sup> "... c'est la majorité qui décrète de ce qui est fou et ce qui ne l'est pas" (p. 62).

<sup>39</sup> "Je la [la guerre] refuse tout net, avec tous les hommes qu'elle contient, je ne veux rien avoir à faire avec eux, avec elle" (p. 66).



sake of an almost unknown relative. Although unrecognized by society, Alcide's generous self-sacrifice manifests "assez de tendresse pour refaire un monde entier et cela ne se voyait pas" (p. 160). The conventionally scandalous figure of the prostitute attains in the person of Molly to an angelic stature. The utterly unselfish nature of this social reprobate can be contrasted with the egotism and false sentimentality of the rich, and therefore highly respectable Lola. In the eyes of the protagonist, the night-workers of Detroit provide another striking reversal of conventional values. Although placed at the very bottom of the social pyramid, the night-workers nevertheless possess infinitely more dignity and serenity than their day-time counterparts: "Ils semblaient moins inquiets que nous autres, gens de la journée. Peut-être parce qu'ils étaient parvenus, eux, tout en bas des gens et des choses" (p. 232).

In order to protect his individual integrity the conscious individual rejects this upside-down world of conventional behaviour and attempts to rebel. The carrying out of such a project proves however to be much more difficult than formulating it. A principal source of the difficulty in realizing an authentic revolt lies in the total dependency of the individual upon the system for his survival. For although society exploits and oppresses most of its members, it serves also as their only source of security and subsistence. The military convoy brings sustenance to the soldiers without ceasing to function as an instrument of the system which condemns them to be slaughtered. The Compagnie Pordurière offers its employees both disease and fortune, suffering and the possibility of privilege and security.

This ambivalent relationship holding between the individual and society tends to modify any rebellious project that a recalcitrant member of the collectivity might consider. For the poor may scarcely be expected to rid themselves of their unique, albeit tyrannical, source of livelihood. The boss may indeed place his hirelings in a servile position; nevertheless, he does provide a minimum vital security simply because he is "celui qui vous sauve de crever de faim" (p. 238). Therefore, in their absurd logic, the poor cling to their enslaved condition. To be deprived of their master and benefactor is unthinkable, and consequently "ils ont énormément peur de le perdre, les lâches" (p. 238).

The temptation to revolt is also modified by the realization that individual opposition invariably brings down upon the solitary rebel the wrath and vengeance of an offended social system. As Princhard points out, the anti-social act implies a criticism of the social structure and is perceived consequently as a direct attack upon the hierarchy. Thus severe punishments are inflicted for even minor acts of rebellion, as the system seeks to defend itself by setting an example for other would-be recalcitrants:

Aussi la répression des menus larcins s'exerce-t-elle, remarquez-le, sous tous les climats, avec une rigueur extrême, comme moyen de défense sociale non seulement, mais encore et surtout comme une recommandation sévère à tous les malheureux d'avoir à se tenir à leur place et dans leur caste, peinarde, joyeusement résignés à crever tout au long des siècles et indéfiniment de misère et de faim... (p. 68).

The protagonist knows from his war experience that the authorities take a sadistic pleasure in severely punishing, for their anti-social misdemeanours, those who labour below them on the social pyramid:

Si on avait dit au commandant Pinçon qu'il n'était qu'un sale assassin lâche, on lui aurait fait un plaisir énorme, celui de nous faire fusiller, séance tenante, par le capitaine de gendarmerie, qui ne le quittait jamais d'une semelle et qui, lui, ne pensait précisément qu'à cela (p. 27).

Direct confrontation with society tends to be futile since the individual dissident will inevitably be punished and the status quo restored. To be poor and to question the rules of the game is simply to invite failure and pain at the hands of the Law: "La loi, c'est le grand "Luna Park" de la douleur. Quand le miteux se laisse saisir par elle, on l'entend encore crier des siècles après" (p. 173). As a result, the protagonist finds himself divided between on the one hand a natural temptation to rebel openly against an unjust and indifferent social system<sup>40</sup> and on the other hand a deep-seated fear of the authorities. The individual realizes the necessity, for survival's sake, of avoiding a direct conflict with the forces of law and stability: "Où qu'on se trouve, dès qu'on attire sur soi l'attention des autorités, le mieux est de disparaître en vitesse. Pas d'explications" (p. 194).

The threat of severe reprisals directed by the authorities against all dissenters considerably modifies the individual's urge to revolt. Bardamu, for example, adopts a compromise position between the extremes of total integration into the system and direct confrontation and rebellion. Unable to express openly his revolt, the protagonist represses and redirects his rejection of the system. Thus the vomiting spell he undergoes in Flanders (p. 29), or again his visceral reaction against the colonial system<sup>41</sup>

<sup>40</sup> "Foutez-vous donc des affaires de la Compagnie Porcûrière comme elle se fout des vôtres..." (p. 166).

<sup>41</sup> "... j'avais tellement mal au ventre de tout ça et de tout! J'aurais vomi la terre entière" (p. 173).

reflect an organic refusal of an intolerable enslavement. But his revolt seldom goes beyond these profound but relatively harmless manifestations of frustration. Although he desires desperately to get away from the war -- "... j'avais envie de m'en aller, énormément, absolument..." (p. 15) -- the protagonist fails to carry out his desertion project. His subversive desire that the entire system be destroyed<sup>42</sup> is not backed up by any directly treasonable activities on his part. Even the apparent climax of his rebellion -- the burning and desertion of the hut of the Compagnie Pordurière (p. 175) -- seems more symbolic than revolutionary, less an act of total defiance than the finishing touch administered to an already rotten and crumbling edifice. Bardamu, in short, limits the nature of his rebellion, clearly fully aware of the fatal consequences that attend upon a direct confrontation and conflict with the authorities. The protagonist, like most individuals trapped within the structures of society, compromises.<sup>43</sup>

Patterns of Compromise: Escape within the System

La meilleure des choses à faire, n'est-ce pas, quand on est dans ce monde, c'est d'en sortir? (p. 61).

The early sections of the novel (the War, Africa, America) present a description of the structure and operations of the social system as well as the protagonist's growing awareness of the nature of the individual's relationship with society. Bardamu comes to understand the need to appear to play the social game. In the second half of the novel, with the hero's

<sup>42</sup> "Puisqu'ils ne veulent rien comprendre à rien, c'est ça qui serait avantageux et pratique qu'ils soient tous tués très vite" (p. 22).

<sup>43</sup> I allude to this attitude of compromise in Part I of this study which deals with narrative structures; see above, pp. 28-30.

return to Paris, the focus of attention moves away from the recurring confrontations between a structured hierarchy and a questioning individual. The emphasis is now placed upon the amorphous mass of exploited and oppressed individuals and the principal aspects of their sordid daily existence. Although they are unable to attack successfully the system which utilizes and enslaves them, and upon which they depend in order to survive, the masses must and do seek to forget their misery, to reduce their suffering and to escape from their condition of poverty: "Contre l'abomination d'être pauvre il faut, avouons-le, c'est un devoir, tout essayer, se saouler avec n'importe quoi" (p. 211). To conclude this chapter on the individual and society I shall examine a few of the projects undertaken by members of the non-privileged section of society in order to alleviate and combat their condition.

A widespread reaction to this condition, particularly on the part of the petites gens, is to accept unquestioningly the miserable fate that is theirs: "Jamais, ou presque, ils ne demandent le pourquoi les petits, de tout ce qu'ils supportent" (p. 151). The protagonist's mother incarnates particularly well this common tendency of the little people towards fatalism. Not only does she accept her miserable lot in life, she views her misfortunes as a consequence of some personal moral failure which she is very content to expiate by submitting to a life of suffering:

Elle croyait au fond que les petites gens de sa sorte étaient faits pour souffrir de tout, que c'était leur rôle sur la terre, et que si les choses allaient récemment aussi mal, ça devait tenir à ce qu'ils avaient commis bien des fautes accumulées, les petites gens... Ils avaient dû faire des sottises, sans s'en rendre compte, bien sûr, mais tout de même ils étaient coupables et c'était déjà

bien gentil qu'on leur donne ainsi en souffrant l'occasion d'expier leurs indignités... C'était une "intouchable" ma mère.

Cet optimisme résigné et tragique lui servait de foi et formait le fond de sa nature (pp. 95-96).

Since money constitutes the principal basis and criterion of social division and stratification, many of the efforts made by the poor to liberate themselves are directed towards accumulating wealth. This path is chosen, for example, by the Henrouille couple who have spent (and wasted) forty years striving anxiously to economize sufficiently to raise themselves to the level of home-owner. In the process, however, saving ceases to be a means and becomes instead an end in itself, the couple's raison d'être. Their bills take up the entire diningroom while the family -- the human element -- is relegated to the tiny kitchen. Far from being liberated from material cares the Henrouille couple ironically becomes enslaved by their very struggle to free themselves, servants to the objects they have literally spent their lives seeking to possess.

For Robinson also the most promising means of escaping poverty and oppression lies in obtaining money. According to him, to become rich is tantamount to reversing the nature and course of one's existence: "Ah! Si j'avais du pognon!... Tout le monde me trouverait bien gentil" (p. 294). Robinson is prepared indeed to break any and all social conventions to realize this desire, and when an opportunity finally presents itself he is convinced that the money he makes, for aiding in a murder, will enable him to be liberated from his miserable state:

Dix mille!... Me voilà tiré d'affaire tout simplement, ajouta-t-il, ce sont ces dix mille francs-là qui m'ont toujours manqué à moi!... Il me laissait me rendre compte de tout ce qu'il allait pouvoir effectuer, entreprendre, avec ces dix mille francs... Un monde nouveau" (p. 310).

A similar sort of reverence before material benefits characterizes the patients of Bardamu who are stricken with tuberculosis. Their primary concern lies less with being cured than with the possibility of being eligible, because of their illness, for a government pension: "... la guérison ne venait que bien après la pension dans leurs espérances" (p. 329). Since it allows them to entertain dreams of escape from poverty, the minuscule pension is perceived by the sick as possessing divine powers: "... une pension de l'Etat, même infime, ça c'est divin, purement et simplement" (p. 330).

Another group of projects involves an approach to escaping reality quite different from the projects just mentioned. They are composed mainly of imaginative fantasies which tend to exaggerate, idealize, or otherwise transform social realities in order to render them more palatable. Individuals may for example imagine a more tolerable interpretation of a situation; they then project the results of this wishful thinking upon an unacceptable reality hoping that this latter will immediately disappear.

Playing rôles which dramatize one's position in the midst of banal and sordid circumstances constitutes a primary technique of this imaginative escapism. The young unwed mother, for instance, becomes reconciled to her situation by extracting from her abandonment material which allows her to play the rôle of a glorious martyr. She capitalizes upon her unusual situation to satisfy some deep need "d'héroïsme et de singularité" (p. 270). By coming to terms as it were theatrically with her unhappiness, she is able to find consolation and refuge in a self-glorifying dream-world: "... elle s'accommoda du grand malheur qui la frappait, avec délices, et les ravages du sort furent en somme dramatiquement bienvenus" (p. 270).

The mother of the girl who undergoes an abortion practises a similar method of flight into exaggeration and rôle-playing. She seizes with great relish the opportunity of assuming the glorious rôle of "defender of the family honour". Rather than confronting the distasteful facts and perhaps considering the real dangers to her daughter, the mother seeks to uphold the appearances of respectability. By becoming histrionic, she effectively avoids the shame and scandal of reality: "Mais la mère, elle, le tenait, le rôle capital, entre la fille et moi. Le théâtre pouvait crouler, elle s'en foutait elle, s'y trouvait bien et bonne et belle" (p. 259). Almost any situation can serve as a spring-board for man's indefatigable escapist fantasies. In the love experience, for example, the individual can pretend that he is finally happy and free of his personal anguish. Instead of accepting its limitations and contingencies, one attempts to transform the relationship into a transcendent means of self-liberation. Love becomes an illusory means of ridding oneself of unhappiness, a vain and selfish attempt to escape from one's suffering: "... mais tout le monde sait bien n'est-ce pas que c'est pas vrai du tout et qu'on l'a [sa peine] bel et bien gardée entièrement pour soi" (p. 289).

The general need on the part of the exploited members of society to flee from their social condition and to seek a less unpleasant world results in the institutionalization of certain forms of diversion. The theatre and the cinema are among the principal products of the desire of the public to escape reality and of the tendency of the system to profit from its members. The cinema provides a particularly suitable and attractive escapist-institution:

Ils sortent de la nuit tout autour les gens avec les yeux  
tout écarquillés déjà pour venir à se les remplir d'images (p. 345);  
... le cinéma, ce nouveau petit salarié de nos rêves (p. 347).



Similarly, the fête, as I have mentioned earlier, furnishes distractions to the public. Its technique is to convince the visitors that they have entered into a new world, full of gaiety and free of squalor: "Paradis! qu'on leur dit" (p. 307). But much like other "escapes" the fair is based on artifice and appearances, and constitutes little more than an attractive and seductive illusion:

C'est la musique à la mécanique qui tombe des chevaux de bois, des automobiles qui n'en sont pas, des montagnes pas russes du tout et du tréteau du lutteur qui n'a pas de biceps et qui ne vient pas de Marseille, de la femme qui n'a pas de barbe, du magicien qui est cocu, de l'orgue qui n'est pas en or, derrière le tir dont les oeufs sont vides. C'est la fête à tromper les gens du bout de la semaine (p. 307).

Spurious and ephemeral, therefore, the projects of liberation and escape conclude inevitably with the return of the masses to their oppressive and intolerable social situation. This unpalatable reality in turn necessitates a repetition of the same or similar flights of fantasy. The system resembles "une prison qui n'a pas besoin de portes" (p. 364), from which successful escape appears impossible. The exploited members of society move in futile and vicious circles, performing empty gestures and inventing endless, sterile projects:

... on se sentait chez eux comme dans un bateau, une espèce de bateau qui irait d'une crainte à l'autre. Des passagers renfermés et qui passaient longtemps à faire des projets plus tristes encore que la vie... (pp. 322-323).

For the poor, a constantly frustrated need to escape forms the core of their social existence. Every Sunday in Garenne-Rancy escape into violence succeeds abortive attempts to escape through drunkenness, fairs, theatre, cinema, and so forth. Forced by an implacable social system to abandon all idea of

authentic revolt the people find only an ephemeral and disappointing shelter in rôle-playing, dreams, and drunkenness. Since both acceptance and true escape are inconceivable, the oppressed are condemned to oscillate futilely between these two impossibilities.

### Conclusion

In the vision of society presented in the novel, a fundamental dualism is evident. Society is divided into two distinct groups of individuals: those with rank or wealth, and those without. The former possess power, security and comfort; the latter do not. Money, an object of religious veneration, mediates all social relationships. People are judged and sentenced according to their financial position. A global pattern of reification is thereby created, by which men are objectified in each other's eyes. This reifying process is manifest not only in the scornful attitude of the authorities towards their inferiors but also in the distrust and indifference which hold between individuals in the same camp.<sup>44</sup>

The privileged camp ensures the continuity of this dual social structure by obtaining from the masses either their forced or voluntary integration into society. The poor collaborate, either willingly or under duress, in their own enslavement and in the maintenance of a privileged, exploitative "establishment". The few individuals who consciously perceive both the iniquities and the false representation of reality upon which the structure is based are tempted to revolt and to refuse the system. Their acts of rebellion are severely punished by angry authorities who feel threatened. Most non-privileged individuals, however, remain unconscious of the underlying causes of their misery.<sup>45</sup> They spend their lives seeking escape routes which will lead them away from their true condition, but such projects are uniformly unsuccessful: "Tout se passe en efforts pour éloigner

<sup>44</sup> "... l'indifférence absolue de vos semblables..." (p. 82).

<sup>45</sup> The little individual never asks why: "Tout ce qui n'est pas gagner de l'argent le dépasse... Il ne comprend que l'argent et le théâtre" (p. 83).

la vérité de ces lieux qui revient pleurer sans cesse sur tout le monde..." (p. 95). The lives of the privileged are escapist also, in that they are directed towards separating the self from a reality which is better forgotten. What differentiates the rich from the poor in this regard is of course the fact that the former possess the means which permit them to effect more successful escapes into tranquil dream-worlds.

To conclude this analysis of thematic structures, I would do well to point out certain patterns which recur in the preceding three chapters. Whether on the physical, metaphysical, or social level of experience the individual discovers himself placed in a situation of extreme tension. This tension may originate in the facts of physical dissolution, of metaphysical emptiness or of social oppression. At all levels severe conflicts take place as the self reacts to an intolerable situation.

The forms of reaction practised by the individual in a social context are analogous to the more universal patterns of behaviour which, I have maintained, constitute a kind of human nature. Thus man's basic egocentricity and selfishness -- defense reactions to his metaphysical dilemma -- are transformed on a social level into the materialism (possessiveness) and scornful indifference for others which, as we have seen, characterize man's social activities. The global human tendency towards violence and aggressiveness -- instinctual reactions to unpalatable truths -- reappears both in the brutal techniques employed by the élite to impose social conformity and in the violent week-end expressions of frustration by the poor. Humanity's escapist nature, determined by a hopeless cosmic Destiny, is

mirrored in the projects of the weak and the powerful, as both turn away from social realities.

At all levels, the reactions of individuals to the condition of existence imposed upon them prove in the end futile. The individual's desires are thwarted and opposed by forces much greater than himself. And whether he adopts a final mask of obstinate refusal (Robinson), of silence (Parapine), or of detachment and repressed bitterness (the protagonist), the individual must ultimately surrender to an implacably hostile universe.

PART III

STRUCTURES OF IMAGERY AND SYMBOLISM

## INTRODUCTION

Formal criticism begins with an examination of the imagery of a poem, with a view to bringing out its distinctive pattern. The recurring or most frequently repeated images form the tonality, so to speak, and the modulating, episodic and isolated images relate themselves to this in a hierarchic structure which is the critical analogy to the proportions of the poem itself.

- Northrop Frye<sup>1</sup>

In the two preceding sections of this study, I sought to describe certain important narrative and thematic patterns or structures in Voyage au bout de la nuit. In the first part, I discerned a double narrative perspective through which the fiction is filtered and observed how the utilization of the first-person retrospective point of view created certain ironic and ambiguous patterns. This narrative dualism was then shown to be active in the structuration of the novel's action: the narration presents a linear plot structure within which a recurring, "open-ended", and cyclical pattern of action was discernible. This cyclical pattern of attraction (entry into contact with reality) and repulsion (escape from this contact) defined the relationship of the protagonist to the world. Bardamu's dualistic attitude towards reality (concretely projected into the anecdote by means of the alter ego Robinson) corresponded in turn to the double point of view. Thus, a series of structural correspondences linked, in an "organic"

<sup>1</sup> Anatomy of Criticism (New York, 1967), p. 85.

manner, the narrative and the fiction.

In the second part of this analysis, I examined the approach to the world adopted by the protagonist, the content of the reality he experiences, and the manner in which this content is organized. A concrete or biological perception of reality was held to constitute the fundamental informing vision of the work. The physical world contains the essential determinants of man's individual and collective existence. Death -- the sign of both the power and the absurdity of the physical -- transcends the individual and social levels of being-in-the-world and constitutes the basis of the novel's metaphysics.

The third and final part of this study will deal with the novel's imagery, the poetic material which underlies both the narrative and the themes of the work.<sup>2</sup> Imagery may be viewed as the principal component of the novel's symbolism. Normally, symbolism involves the uniting of "an image (the analogy) and an idea or conception (the subject) which that image suggests or evokes."<sup>3</sup> Not all imagery, however, can be linked directly to an idea or to a concept. While ultimately significant, the relationship between an image and a theme may be extremely indirect. Consequently, I shall not limit this section to thematic imagery illustrative of a specific idea. I shall rather seek to determine the different functions of images in the novel and thereby arrive at some knowledge of how imagery structures the text.<sup>4</sup>

The imagery in the novel seems to perform three principal functions:

<sup>2</sup> See Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, pp. 85-86.

<sup>3</sup> The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetics, p. 833.

<sup>4</sup> "Structure," presumably, reflects or embodies such functional differentiation.



(1) the creation of a certain atmosphere or tonality in the work (literal or descriptive imagery); (2) the expression of an idea or theme (the "formal" function of imagery, as Frye terms it<sup>5</sup>); and finally (3) the global organization or generation of the text (productive imagery). While images may function simultaneously in each of these three modes -- and the laws of artistic economy require such polyfunctionalism -- one can isolate certain image systems which function primarily in one of these manners. Thus a group of what I term "sensual" images confers upon the anecdote a concrete or physical tonality. A second series, the "figurative" images, illustrates certain themes by means of analogy (man as beast, life as illness, etc.). A third series of images functions principally as what I have called producers or "generators" of the text. These images or symbols (Voyage; Nuit), by their global, archetypal nature, by their disposition en exergue in the text, and by the frequency of their repetition, possess a distinctive status in the work. By their presence, all other elements find their place, function, and significance.

Although the three distinct functions of imagery described here participate actively in the definition of the structural properties of the text, it is perhaps this last productive function which ultimately confers upon the novel its deep or poetic unity and coherence.

<sup>5</sup> Anatomy of Criticism, p. 124.

## CHAPTER I

## SENSUAL IMAGERY

As we saw in preceding chapters<sup>6</sup> it is through an unmediated interaction with physical reality that the protagonist seeks to arrive at an authentic knowledge of truth and reality. This approach finds its textual correlation in the abundance of what can be termed "sensual" imagery; that is, imagery which refers to the senses (especially those of sight, hearing, smell, and touch) and their specific activities. On the whole, this imagery is literal or descriptive in its manner of functioning; that is, it does not explicitly refer to something beyond itself.<sup>7</sup> As such, its principal function is the creation of a particular atmosphere or tone (in this case a concrete, physical, and sensual tone). This is not to deny that sensual imagery may function thematically (as illustration of a concept) or productively (as a principle of the text's organization). We are dealing here with imagery which is polyfunctional, but which appears to contribute most to one aspect or level of the novel's signification: the creation of a physical substratum in which the thematic, the symbolic and the structural dimensions of the text are rooted.

<sup>6</sup> Part II, Chapters I, II, and III.

<sup>7</sup> It is not therefore "symbolic" in the normal literary sense of the word.

### Sight imagery

In my analysis of the novel's principal themes I noted the importance of visual perception to the protagonist in his search for knowledge.

Bardamu's entrance into the process of direct experience is motivated by the need to "voir si c'est ainsi" (p. 13). The hero's ultimate goal is to recount less what he has done, thought or felt, than what he has seen:

"Quand on sera au bord du trou faudra pas faire les malins nous autres, mais faudra pas oublier non plus, faudra raconter tout sans changer un mot, de ce qu'on a vu de plus vicieux chez les hommes..." (p. 27).

Having refused, at Place Clichy, the temptation of abstract intellectualizing, the protagonist confers upon the results of direct observation a privileged status: "Il y a, c'est exact, beaucoup de folie à s'occuper d'autre chose que de ce qu'on voit" (p. 170). His position as spectator-participant in the Flanders episode (and in the adventures which follow) affords Bardamu an intimate, internal knowledge of the true nature of war and of the world: "Je venais de découvrir d'un coup la guerre tout entière. J'étais dépucelé. Faut être à peu près seul devant elle comme je l'étais à ce moment-là pour bien la voir la vache, en face et de profil" (p. 18). The quest for visual knowledge of the world turns Bardamu into a kind of voyeur, as when he observes the bedroom rituals of American couples from his hotel room window:

Dans certaines d'entre elles [les chambres], je pouvais apercevoir ce qui se passait (p. 198);

C'est triste des gens qui se couchent, on voit bien qu'ils se foutent que les choses aillent comme elles veulent, on voit bien qu'ils ne cherchent pas à comprendre eux, le pourquoi

qu'on est là (p. 199).<sup>8</sup>

This voyeurism continues with Bardamu's return to Garenne-Rancy: the window of his kitchen allows him a privileged observation (and listening) post, from which he can observe the ugliness of the neighbourhood and the sordid lives of its inhabitants: "... comme je demeurais au premier, j'avais de cet endroit un beau panorama d'arrière-cour" (p. 264).

Despite the apparent superiority of what is seen to what is only talked about, with the resulting emphasis on direct experience as opposed to intellectualizing, a certain ambiguity with regard to the validity of visual perception pervades the text. Since appearances can easily be manipulated to provoke a desired reaction, any reliance on the visible alone is fraught with difficulties. The protagonist is not unaware of the danger of being misled by false appearances, as he himself was seduced into the army by the pleasing spectacle of a military parade, flashy uniforms, and enthusiastically approving crowds (pp. 13-14). Having once been a victim of his impressionability, the hero determines not to allow himself to be taken in again by false appearances: "Mais je me méfiais des impressions à présent. On m'avait possédé une fois à l'impression. On ne m'aurait plus au boniment" (p. 56). Invested with a certain insight, therefore, the protagonist attempts to see through appearances which would mislead most individuals. Thus, while most would see in Alcide a simple soldier with an "air bien ordinaire" (p. 160), Bardamu goes beyond the superficial<sup>9</sup> and sees

<sup>8</sup> Another example of sexual voyeurism -- accompanied by a lesson on the unreliability of friends -- takes place during the stay in Toulouse as the hero spies upon Madelon and Robinson: "Moi dans l'herbe à côté, j'essayais de voir ce qui allait se passer. Il lui prenait les bouts des seins entre les lèvres..." (p. 401).

<sup>9</sup> "Je me mis à le regarder de bien plus près Alcide..." (p. 158).

the true qualities of a man who "évoluait dans le sublime à son aise et pour ainsi dire familièrement, il tutoyait les anges, ce garçon, et il n'avait l'air de rien" (p. 159). The protagonist's special vision, therefore, permits him (and the reader of the text) to transcend the official view of reality. In Africa, for example, the ordinary tourist will know only the "Afrique décortiquée des agences et des monuments, des chemins de fer et des nougats" (p. 112). Rejecting the reassuring varnish of false appearances Bardamu's insight takes him to the concrete and vital core of African reality: "Ah non! Nous allons nous la voir dans son jus, la vraie Afrique!" (p. 112).

The possession of a certain insight and the resulting capacity to enter into an authentic, concrete relationship with the world does not, unfortunately, deliver the protagonist from the realm of ambiguity. For if this insight confers upon the individual a potential for liberation from illusion,<sup>10</sup> it also reveals a reality so repugnant<sup>11</sup> that Bardamu is regularly tempted not to see, to keep his eyes firmly closed to the truths around him: "Venu jusque-là, le courage me manquait une fois de plus pour aller vraiment au fond des choses. Maintenant qu'il s'agissait d'ouvrir les yeux dans la nuit j'aimais presque autant les garder fermés" (p. 310).

This temptation to compromise, to refuse to follow his quest for truth "jusqu'au bout!," places the protagonist in a severe dilemma which he never truly resolves. This danger of compromise is alluded to in the episode in which the hero and his friends are invited aboard a luxurious barge

<sup>10</sup> As Robinson tells the protagonist: "Il n'y a qu'une liberté, que je te dis moi, rien qu'une: C'est de voir clair d'abord..." (p. 383).

<sup>11</sup> "Je ne vois partout que de noires et vieilles misères qui fermentent dans les corps..." (p. 372).

anchored near Toulouse. Here the refusal to see and the seductions of a state of forgetfulness<sup>12</sup> have been transformed into a lifestyle. Aboard the vessel reigns a state of dreamy-eyed tranquillity, of immobility and self-delusion designed to protect the inhabitants of the boat from all contact with sordid reality. This manner of coping with existence by consciously refusing to see it is epitomized in the lyrics of the popular song which the artist-couple and their friends are singing when the protagonist first perceives their refuge:

Ferme tes jolis yeux, car les heures sont brèves...  
 Au pays merveilleux, au doux pays du rê-ê-ve,  
 .....  
 Ferme tes jolis yeux, car la vie n'est qu'un songe...  
 L'amour n'est qu'un menson-on-ge...  
 Ferme tes jolis yeuuuuuuux! (p. 392).

The faculty of visual perception, therefore, plays an important rôle in the novel. The deprivation of sight -- as in the blindness of Robinson -- is a traumatic, absolute event.<sup>13</sup> But if to see is to know, it is also to be misled, and a special kind of lucidity ("voir clair") is required in order to pass beyond the veils of false (manipulated) appearances. Ironically, the consequence of possessing such insight is an ambiguous, almost contradictory attitude towards reality: "J'en avais trop vu moi des choses pas claires pour être content. J'en savais de trop et j'en savais pas assez" (p. 199). Thus the protagonist's double attitude towards reality -- manifested

<sup>12</sup> In terms of the protagonist's original project, the passengers of the péniche have committed the greatest of errors: "La grande défaite, en tout, c'est d'oublier..." (p. 27). The fact that the owner of the barge is an artist brings the danger of compromise even closer to home.

<sup>13</sup> "Il pleurait. Il était arrivé au bout lui aussi. On ne pouvait plus rien lui dire. Il y a un moment où on est tout seul quand on est arrivé au bout de tout ce qui peut vous arriver. C'est le bout du monde" (p. 323).

also in the structure of the narrative (Part I) -- is indicated and in a sense paralleled by the system of visual imagery.

### Sounds and odours

The implications of visual imagery in the novel are numerous. They extend from the affirmation of the concreteness of the text to an evocation of fundamental contradictions and ambiguities linked to the human condition. As an element in a system of sensual imagery, however, visual perception functions principally to underline the essential importance of the physical. Two other modes of sensual perception, hearing and smell, supplement and reinforce this orientation towards the concrete. Sounds and odours, by means of their ubiquity in the text, sustain or contradict the evidence of the eyes, often victims either of an externally manipulated reality, or of an internal need to be deceived by, for example, the diverting appearances of reality offered by the images of the cinema. Because of their weak, underdeveloped nature in man, the frequent presence of references to the aural and olfactory faculties suggests an intimate association of the protagonist with the outside, concrete world.

### Sounds

In the course of a series of concrete interactions with the world, Bardamu often assumes the rôle of an eavesdropper. Many of the most shocking revelations are overheard.<sup>14</sup> Such is notably the case in Garenne-Rancy, where Bardamu is the aural witness to scenes of incredible cruelty

<sup>14</sup>"Je ne pouvais rien faire. Je restais à écouter seulement comme toujours, partout" (p. 266).

and misery: "J'ai eu bien du temps à moi pour la regarder la mienne d'arrière-cour et surtout pour l'entendre. Là viennent chuter, craquer, rebondir les cris, les appels des vingt maisons en pourtour..." (p. 264).

At the beginning of his visit to Toulouse, Bardamu overhears the discussion among the staff of a pastry shop. The cruelty, mindlessness, and absurdity of human communication are perceived by the protagonist through this apparently banal conversation:

Des raclures d'arguments à l'assaut de rien du tout.  
J'avais fini par m'asseoir pour qu'elles m'etourdissent  
mieux encore avec le bruit incessant des mots... Un  
énorme babillage s'étend gris et monotone au-dessus de  
la vie comme un mirage énormément décourageant (p. 376).

Also during his visit to Toulouse, the protagonist will overhear the dialogue d'amour<sup>15</sup> exchanged between Robinson and Madelon as well as Robinson's betrayal of their friendship, carried out with the encouragement of a jealous and possessive Madelon.

While the preceding examples refer mainly to the situation of the hero with regard to sounds, other passages indicate that in themselves sounds can be highly significant vehicles of truths about life. Music is an important example of such a vehicle. Like language, music is made up of an organized system of sounds; music, however, avoids the dangers of language -- dangers resulting from language's manipulability, as evidenced in war propaganda. Music is invested with a mysterious capacity to communicate ineffable, transcendent truths. Thus while the lyrics of the song performed nightly at the Tarapout theatre are extremely banal, the musical form confers a new dimension of significance upon a conventionally sentimental

<sup>15</sup> "C'était tendre ce qu'ils se racontaient. Je les entendais" (p. 399).



love-song:

D'un coup, comme je n'y pensais plus, leur chanson est devenue plus forte que la vie et même qu'elle a fait tourner le destin en plein du côté du malheur (p. 355);

Ça commençait d'un petit ton gentil leur chanson, ça n'avait l'air de rien, comme toutes ces choses pour danser, et puis voilà que ça vous faisait pencher le coeur à force de vous faire triste comme si on allait perdre à l'entendre l'envie de vivre, tellement que c'était vrai que tout n'arrive à rien... (p. 357).

Unconscious of the profound metaphysical power latent in the sounds they are producing, the youthful singers at the Tarapout appear to attend only to the superficial sense of the song:

Elles chantaient la déroute d'exister et de vivre et elles ne comprenaient pas. Elles prenaient ça encore pour de l'amour, rien que pour de l'amour, on leur avait pas appris le reste à ces petites (p. 356).

Sounds are also present in the novel in less highly organized forms than speech or music. The "petits bruits secs" of machine-guns (p. 17) and the resounding echoes of horses' hooves in Flanders (p. 29) serve both to endow the episode with concreteness and to underline the physical presence of Death. The importance of money as a mediator in human relationships is indicated by the jingle of coins whether in the purse of Lola (p. 220), the pockets of the priest at San Tapeta (p. 180), or in the hands of individuals at the fair (p. 470).

Sounds therefore, like visual perceptions, link the concrete nature of the hero's experiences with the meaning of these experiences. The "sifflets"<sup>16</sup> which M. Henrouille auscults emanating from his own body are irrefutable signs of death's approach. Man's fundamental alienation from

<sup>16</sup> "Et il les écoutait en effet, au lieu de dormir, des sifflets, des tambours, des ronrons... C'était un nouveau supplice. Il s'en occupait toute la journée et toute la nuit. Il avait tous les bruits en lui" (p. 251).

himself and from others is concretized in terms of internal noises which prevent us from understanding or sympathizing with the plight of our neighbours: "Dans le bruit d'eux-mêmes, ils n'entendent rien. Ils s'en foutent" (p. 209). Thus, in the case of sounds also, a sensual image pattern serves to link the physical and the metaphysical, the concrete and the abstract, an atmosphere and a thématique.

### Odours

The polyfunctionalism of sensual imagery in the novel is manifested also in images referring to odours, to man's olfactory faculties. Here again the images assist in the construction of a physical text while simultaneously designating realities which go beyond the descriptive and the anecdotal.

On the descriptive level, odours regularly fill the concrete space which the hero traverses on his long journey. The wounded horses in Flanders give off horrible stench, "odeurs qui suintaient des blessures" (p. 25). In Garenne-Rancy the air seems to disappear from a space overwhelmed by foul odours: "L'été aussi tout sentait fort. Il n'y avait plus d'air dans la cour, rien que des odeurs" (p. 267). The laboratories of the Institut Bioduret Joseph are similarly dominated by a fetid odour, in this case that of decaying animal specimens: "Lorsque l'odeur en devenait véritablement intenable, on en sacrifiait un autre de lapin, mais pas avant..." (p. 277).

The thematic importance of the system of olfactory images which recurs throughout the text lies in its organic relationship to the universal process of gradual decay and degradation. As the physical manifestation of this process, odours point towards the irrevocable dissolution of all things:

"C'est par les odeurs que finissent les êtres, les pays et les choses. Toutes les aventures s'en vont par le nez" (p. 180). With regard to man, this tendency towards decay constitutes a part of his essential nature. Little more than "de la pourriture en suspens" (p. 416), man is irrevocably carried along "la route de la pourriture" (p. 72). He is condemned to give value to a self that is in a constant state of putrefaction: "Décidément nous n'adorons rien de plus divin que notre odeur" (p. 333). "Pourris de naissance" (p. 370), human beings cannot separate these biological facts<sup>17</sup> from the ultimate meaning of their existence.

By reason of its inherent ties with the general notions of collapse and destruction, the imagery of foul smells rejoins the large thematic movements of the novel. The setting aflame of the hut of the Compagnie Pordurière results in an odour which designates more than just the corruption of the specific enterprise or even of the colonial system in general. The association of olfactory imagery with the fundamental life processes of decay, dissolution and death permits the stench of the burning hut to function as an exemplar, a sign of all failures of the individual to adapt harmoniously to social institutions:

Après une heure d'incendie, il ne restait presque rien de mon édicule. Quelques flammèches sous la pluie et... les bouffées de cette odeur fidèle à toutes les détresses, odeur détachée de toutes les déroutes de ce monde, l'odeur de la poudre fumante (p. 176).

Both the temporal and spatial dimensions of existence are radically affected by the presence (and the implications) of decay. As process, the

<sup>17</sup> "Puisque nous sommes que des enclos de tripes tièdes et mal pourries..." (p. 332).

decay implied by offensive odours forms an essential aspect of the work's temporality. Thus each episode of the novel will demonstrate a constant pattern in time: from an initial state of equilibrium, the situation will deteriorate and decay will set in, with its accompanying odours: "A mesure qu'on reste dans un endroit, les choses et les gens se débraillent, pourrissent et se mettent à puer tout exprès pour vous" (p. 272). This process of ageing and degradation affects time not only in its on-going movement; the past, as well as the present, is affected by the process of decay: memories too have their youth, ripeness, and decrepitude:

Les souvenirs eux-mêmes ont leur jeunesse... Ils tournent dès qu'on les laisse moisir en dégoûtants fantômes tout suintants d'égoïsme, de vanités et de mensonges... Ils pourrissent comme des pommes... (p. 326).

Sounds and odours present the concrete core of the hero's experience. The climax of Bardamu's initiation into the reality of war -- the death of the colonel and the messenger -- is marked by the conjunction of these sensual elements: the deafening noise of the shell exploding: "Mais alors un de ces bruits comme on ne croirait jamais qu'il en existe" (p. 20); and the accompanying stench: "... l'odeur pointue de la poudre et du soufre mou restait comme pour tuer les punaises et les puces de la terre entière" (p. 21). At the Ford factory in Detroit, the daily existence of the workers is dominated by the deafening roar and oily smell of the machines. The sensations are so penetrating and imperious that they transform the workers, imposing upon them a new identity: "Quand à six heures tout s'arrête on emporte le bruit dans sa tête, j'en avais encore moi pour la nuit entière de bruit et d'odeur à l'huile aussi comme si on m'avait mis un nez nouveau,

un cerveau nouveau pour toujours" (p. 226). Under the influence of the machine -- of modern technology and the resulting sense of alienation -- men themselves are mechanized, rendered indistinguishable from the machines they serve: "... ce n'étaient que des échos et des odeurs de machines comme moi, des viandes vibrées à l'infini, mes compagnons" (p. 226).

### Conclusion

The images I have been examining refer explicitly to the objects of sense perception as well as to the faculties of perception themselves. Some critics have sought to determine the primary meaning of Voyage in terms of the sensual imagery, and in particular those images referring to the tactile: viscosity, liquidity, solidity and so on.<sup>18</sup> My purpose in pointing out the existence of sensual imagery in the text is perhaps more modest. It is my view that such imagery, by its double functionality, occupies an important position in the structuration of the text. In itself, this imagery confers upon the text a physical dimension which parallels, formally or stylistically, a fundamental aspect of the work's content: the biological vision of reality. In addition to the creation of a specific tone, or texture, which implicitly augments the global unity and coherence of the text, the sensual imagery is explicitly associated with certain important themes: social alienation, death, etc. Integral components of the work's formal structure as well as of its thématique, sensual imagery constitutes an organic bedrock upon which the novel's symbolic structure is firmly based.

<sup>18</sup> See for example Jean-Pierre Richard, La Nausée de Céline (Montpellier, 1973); and Michel Beaujour, "Temps et substances dans 'Voyage au bout de la Nuit'", L'Herne, No. 5 (1965), pp. 173-182.

## CHAPTER II

## IMAGE AS THEME: FIGURATIVE IMAGERY

The primary function of what I have termed "sensual" imagery was found to be descriptive. The imagery contributes to the creation of a concrete texture; the anecdote is invested with a physical realism. We discovered nevertheless that, between this tonal imagery and other levels of the text, certain parallels and correspondences could be established. The intelligibility of such associations depended to some extent upon my earlier analysis of these other levels: the narrative and the thematic.

In the present chapter I will examine images whose associative function is much more prominent. These are images which by their figurative nature mean more than they say;<sup>19</sup> that is, their very presence in the text involves the work's conceptual framework (its thématique). By examining the principal image-systems which are of a primarily thematic nature, I shall seek to determine their rôle in the over-all structuration of the text.

It should be borne in mind that my purpose here is not to inventory nor even to analyze the different types of figures in the novel. I am concerned primarily with the ordering of imagesy in accordance with their principal mode of functioning in the text. A description of the "Célinian" image or metaphor is not my object. I hope rather to discover if and how this imagery contributes to the production of a coherent work of art, a unified

<sup>19</sup> The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetics, p. 365.

and polysemous structure of words. To this end I shall, in the present chapter,<sup>20</sup> look at imagery which is basically expressive: imagery, that is, which tends to illustrate certain thematic elements: the body, the individual in society, human nature, Death.

### The Body as Image

In the course of his interaction with others, Bardamu practises a kind of physiognomy: his attention is concentrated upon a particular part of the other's body in the apparent belief that the external aspects of, for example, the head or face are capable of revealing profound truths not only about the other, but also about life. The observation of Robinson's countenance, for instance, allows the protagonist to discover his friend's authentic identity as well as his primary function<sup>21</sup> in the work:

Mais je lui trouvai, en l'observant, par la suite, une figure décidément aventureuse, une figure à angles très tracés et même une de ces têtes de révolte qui entrent trop à vif dans l'existence au lieu de rouler dessus, avec un gros nez rond par exemple et des joues pleines en péniches, qui vont clapoter contre le destin avec un bruit de babillage. Celui-ci c'était un malheureux (p. 163).

The face and head are thus endowed with a singularly privileged status as sources of truth. The head of course contains the sense organs and faculties of perception discussed in the previous chapter: sight, hearing, smell. The face -- constantly incontact with the physical realities of life -- is logically and figuratively the best of all possible mirrors of the effects of the outer world upon the individual.

<sup>20</sup> In the following chapter I will again look at figurative images. There, however, the imagery will be of such global significance that its function seems radically different from that of "thematic" imagery.

<sup>21</sup> Robinson, as I remarked in the chapters dealing with narrative structures, manifests in his actions an unequivocal refusal of his personal situation in particular and of the world in general.

In an early stage, when life has not yet worked its will upon the individual, the face embodies a state of naïve yet touching innocence and joy. The smile of the child Bébert, for example, reflects the early hopes of men for happiness in this world: "Sur sa face livide dansotait cet infini petit sourire d'affection pure que je n'ai jamais pu oublier. Une gaîté pour l'univers (p. 242). After a period of interaction with the outer world, however, the face soon loses its smile and begins to take on the look of a twisted battleground: "L'existence, ça vous tord et ça vous écrase la face"(p. 216). It is the poor who seem to suffer most from this physiological havoc. Unable to turn away successfully from the sordidness of existence, the poor undergo a facial desecration resulting from their overly close contact with brutality and suffering: "La misère est géante, elle se sert pour essuyer les ordures du monde de votre figure comme d'une toile à laver. Il en reste" (p. 216). The physical transformations operated by the corrosive aspects of being-in-the-world are not, however, limited to those who are deprived of material comfort.<sup>22</sup> All men must undergo, consciously or not, a process of disillusionment, a process which is reflected in faces transformed by the fact that their original "sourire" was an enormous mistake. Life undeceives us all and our new face expresses the error upon which we have based our existence:

Le monde n'est pas ce qu'on croyait! Voilà tout! Alors, on a changé de gueule! Et comment! Puisqu'on s'était trompé! Tout de la vache qu'on devient en moins de deux! Voilà ce qui nous reste sur la figure après vingt ans passés! Une erreur! Notre figure n'est qu'une erreur (p. 242).

<sup>22</sup> The wealthy Lola experiences, but to a lesser extent, a facial destruction similar to that of the poor: "A elle aussi ça lui avait écrasé la face mais moins, bien moins". (p. 216).



Man's condition, therefore, is written on his face. Sculpted by the implacable forces of time and experience, our countenances reflect faithfully the negative nature of our existence, a negativity which we can only learn to accept: "On demeure comme hésitant un instant devant, et puis on finit par l'accepter tel qu'il est devenu le visage avec cette disharmonie croissante, ignoble, de toute la figure" (p. 77). Thus by the utilization of what might be termed a reductive synecdoche, the facial appearance is offered in lieu of the complex of emotions, thoughts, and perceptions which make up an attitude towards or a reaction against life. Through this formal technique the sum of one's knowledge and essence of one's soul can be concretely expressed in a complicated, but visible, and thereby observable, facial expression:

Comme on devient de plus en plus laid... en vieillissant, on ne peut même plus la dissimuler sa peine, sa faillite, on finit par en avoir plein la figure de cette sale grimace qui met des vingt ans, des trente ans et davantage à vous remonter enfin du ventre sur la face. C'est à cela que ça sert, à ça seulement, un homme, une grimace, qu'il met toute une vie à se confectionner, et encore qu'il arrive même pas toujours à la terminer tellement qu'elle est lourde et compliquée la grimace qu'il faudrait faire pour exprimer toute sa vraie âme sans rien en perdre (p. 289).

The text contains other examples of this reductive synecdoche, although not in the sustained manner of the facial imagery.<sup>23</sup> The hands of Lieutenant Grappa, for example, express the brutality and ignorance of the instruments of an exploitative and inhuman colonial system: "... les mains brèves, pourpres, terribles. Des mains à ne jamais rien comprendre" (p. 152). The authentic nobleness of Molly is revealed not so much by her behaviour as by

<sup>23</sup> While such imagery may be taken to imply a literal belief in physiognomy on the part of the narrator (and the author), the utilization of the face as a sign of something else (something more complex and more abstract) does enable the imagery to function figuratively and thematically within the text.

"ses jambes longues et blondes et magnifiquement déliées et musclées, des jambes nobles. La véritable aristocratie humaine, on a beau dire, ce sont les jambes qui la confèrent" (pp. 227-228). The references to Lola's heart as "tendre, faible et enthousiaste" (p. 51), the several allusions to humans as "viandes,"<sup>24</sup> such examples are representative of a figurative reduction of man to a physical core or essence.

The preceding image-system both rejoins the sensual imagery, insofar as its referent is the body, and partakes of the thematizing function of imagery. It serves to express or embody social and psychological abstractions as well as to reinforce implicitly the biological vision informing the text, a vision which privileges the body and its evidence as sources of authentic knowledge about the world.

#### "La Fête" and "Les Bêtes"

The imagery of the body which I have been examining relates, through metonymy, the concrete image and the abstract theme: a part of the body contains and conveys a complex series of concepts, emotions, and attitudes. Through this figurative use of imagery, therefore, two important functions are carried out: (1) the work's ideational content is concretized and given a physical mode of expression; and (2) the fundamental biological vision informing the text is implicitly affirmed and strengthened by the utilization of the body as the precise vehicle through which the content is expressed. We have already seen, in the section dealing with thematic structures, the

<sup>24</sup> "Toutes ces viandes saignaient énormément ensemble" (p. 21); "... nous les viandes destinées aux sacrifices" (p. 97); "... des viandes vibrées à l'infini, mes compagnons" (p. 226).

essential rôle played by the body in the text. The images which I shall now examine -- those related to the fête and to animals -- function in a similar manner. While the body imagery clearly corresponds to the theme of the "physical" in the novel, the two image systems which I shall now examine are related to other aspects of the novel's thématique: the social theme (la fête) and the vision of human nature and the human condition (animal imagery).

### La Fête

The image of the fair and the fair-grounds appears regularly in the novel. Its principal function is to clarify and present certain essential aspects of society by means of inherent analogies between it and the social system. At once a part of the social machine and a reliable image of the principal aspects of this machine, the fair -- like the "face" -- enters into a metonymic relationship with its subject. That is, an isolated, well-defined element of society tends to represent the whole social complex. This is the case, for example, with the "Stand des Nations" (pp. 59-60), which presents a faithful and traumatizing image of the terrible situation in which the individual finds himself. Like the targets in the shooting-gallery, the individual is (because he has been conditioned to accept passively his fate) a mechanized, impotent victim of a society at war.<sup>25</sup>

In general, it is the commercial exploitation upon which any fair is based which permits it to stand as a figure of the whole society. Money, in both instances, is the element mediating human interaction. Consequently,

<sup>25</sup> See also the explicit allusions to war as a kind of fair: "... même à la guerre c'est la foire..." (p. 46); "... cette foire pourrie à laquelle on ne pouvait vraiment plus rien ajouter de plus sordide..." (p. 54).

the fair can operate as an initiating system for the young: here they learn that nothing is free and that their desires are forever to be limited by monetary considerations (p. 309).

The fact that the fair serves as an escape for the downtrodden from real society does not effectively isolate this figurative image from its subject. Rather, the fête is both separate from and an integral part of the social mechanism. The escape provided by the fête is intrinsically futile, given the fair's artificial nature: "C'est la fête à tromper les gens du bout de la semaine" (p. 307). Like society itself, the fair divides men into the exploiters and the exploited, the rich and the poor, the few and the many. Thus while apparently presenting an amusing alternative to the real society, the carnival offers only a homologous structure, a kind of society en abyme whose textual function is to illustrate the various elements of the social theme.

### Les Bêtes

The imagery of the carnival functions figuratively by reflecting, like a mirror and in a condensed form, the principal mechanisms and structures of society. Animal imagery tends to embody thematic content in a different manner. In this case the image signifies metaphorically rather than through metonymy. That is to say that the imagery brings into contiguity, explicitly or implicitly, two different elements (the animal and the human), and suggests points of similarity or dissimilarity between them. These points of comparison or contrast designate in turn aspects of the work's thématique.

The presence of much of the animal imagery in the novel can be viewed

as a poetic or figurative equivalent of the explicit critique of human nature and the human condition described in Part II of this study. The efficacy of this imagery results in part from the conventional placement of the animal world below the human on the hierarchical chain of being. Thus, the fact that comparisons are made which tend to unite the two levels constitutes in itself an implicit attack upon man. This identification of the human with the animal world occurs frequently in the novel:

- (1) The African natives are described as "sortes de fourmis verticales" (p. 129);
- (2) The lack of awareness on the part of the customers at the fair makes of them little more than "bêtes à bénéfices" (p. 309);
- (3) The taciturn, uncommunicative nature of the Americans of New York causes them to resemble "des grosses bêtes bien dociles..." (p. 199);
- (4) Only man's posture seems to differentiate him from the beast: he is simply "la bête verticale" (p. 139).

Animal imagery is in fact utilized as part of a denunciatory rhetoric aimed at undermining the officially accepted views of man. The hostile aggressiveness of men towards each other is viewed as a self-destructive aspect of human nature, an aspect which lowers man to the level of the beast:

Ainsi, les rares énergies qui échappaient au paludisme, à la soif, au soleil, se consumaient en haines si mordantes, si insistantes, que beaucoup de colons finissaient, par en crever sur place, empoisonnés d'eux-mêmes, comme des scorpions (p. 125).

Similarly, man's passive nature and his conformity to the inhuman demands of the social system are embodied (and implicitly denounced) in terms of animal imagery: the Africans are seen as "fourmis verticales", the civilians

in Paris are "tantôt poules effrayées, tantôt moutons fats et consentants" (p. 82).

The attack upon man by means of the assimilation of the human to the animal is strengthened by the presentation of comparisons wherein the animal is held to occupy a rank in the moral order superior to the human. Here the natural instincts of animals are compared favourably to the perverted activities of man, whose consciousness, conscience, and moral sense render his brutality and cruelty inexcusable. Thus the friendly mixing of allied and enemy horses contrasts with the hostile relationship which holds between their human masters: "Et leurs chevaux libérés, étriers fous et clinquants, galopaient à vide et dévalaient vers nous... C'est nos chevaux qu'ils venaient rejoindre, amis tout de suite. Bien de la chance! C'est pas nous qu'on aurait pu en faire autant!" (p. 34). Because they lack the human capacity for abstraction and idealization horses, unlike men, are free of the ideas and enthusiasms which can lead to the carnage and horrors of war:

Les chevaux ont bien de la chance eux, car s'ils subissent aussi la guerre, comme nous, on ne leur demande pas d'y souscrire, d'avoir l'air d'y croire. Malheureux mais libres chevaux! L'enthousiasme hélas! c'est rien que pour nous, ce putain! (p. 40).

It is man's complacency before his own vileness, his ability to take a perverse pleasure in hate and suffering which places him on a moral level inferior to that of a dog. The soldiers in Flanders, for example, have only one purpose and pleasure: "... détruire, plus enragés que les chiens, adorant leur rage (ce que les chiens ne font pas), cent, mille fois plus enragés que mille chiens et tellement plus vicieux! Nous étions jolis!" (p. 17).

In addition to this attack upon aspects of human behaviour, animal imagery is utilized to reflect the degraded nature of man's global metaphysical condition. The predominance in the world of material values and the resulting absence of the spiritual dimension of existence is illustrated by the porcine image contained in the "prière sociale et vengeresse", an image which expresses a contemporary and satiric vision of the Deity:

Un Dieu qui compte les minutes et les sous, un Dieu désespéré,  
sensuel et grognon comme un cochon. Un cochon avec des ailes  
en or qui retombe partout, le ventre en l'air, prêt aux  
caresses, c'est lui, c'est notre maître (p. 12).

The pig image will reappear later in the text as an example, or rather as a victim, of man's senseless cruelty. I have pointed out earlier in this study that the sadism and brutality in man takes its source from the physical and metaphysical "sentence" which all men must serve. The torture of a defenseless pig constitutes one example of the violent outbursts of a human nature condemned to eternal internal conflict:

Et puis, on n'arrêtait pas de lui faire des misères.  
Les gens lui tortillaient les oreilles histoire de  
l'entendre crier. Il se tordait et se retournait les  
pattes le cochon à force de vouloir s'enfuir à tirer  
sur sa corde, d'autres l'asticotaient et il hurlait  
encore plus fort à cause de la douleur. Et on riait  
davantage (pp. 286-287).

Similarly, the vision of existence as a painful and poisonous prelude to Death -- a vision which informs the metaphysics of the novel -- finds its expression in imagery which reduces man to the level of the lowest beast: "La terre est morte.... On est rien que des vers dessus nous autres, des vers sur son dégueulasse de gros cadavre, à lui bouffer tout le temps les

tripes et rien que ses poisons..." (p. 370). The image of the trapped rat<sup>26</sup> will be utilized to express the position of man in the universe, while that of the maggot will serve to suggest the inevitable destiny of man, his mortal essence, revealed only when all false appearances have been stripped away:

Ainsi s'en vont les hommes qui décidément ont bien du mal à faire tout ce qu'on exige d'eux: le papillon pendant la jeunesse et l'asticot pour en finir (p. 145);

C'est ainsi qu'il faut s'habituer à transposer dès le premier abord les hommes... on discerne tout de suite dans n'importe quel personnage sa réalité d'énorme et d'avide asticot (p. 332).

The principal function of animal imagery is expressive. The image simply illustrates the concept or idea: death, entrapment, cruelty, degradation, etc. The secondary functions of thematic imagery -- the creation of a physical texture and the organization or generation of meaning -- are in this case of minor importance. Animal imagery expresses a vision of man and of reality. Grounded in a conventional hierarchical system of values this imagery, while apparently the most radical or destructive, is structurally the most traditional, the most "unifunctional" and strictly thematic of any image-system in the text.

### La Maladie

I have suggested that imagery in the novel functions descriptively (the creation of tone), expressively (the presentation of themes), and

<sup>26</sup> "On était faits, comme des rats" (p. 14); "... rats enfumés déjà, nous tentions, en folie, de sortir du bateau de feu..." (p. 65); "J'ai été fait, qu'il concluait lui, fait comme un rat..." (p. 382).



as organizing symbols (the production of meaning and coherence). Animal imagery, insofar as its descriptive and organizational importance is minimal,<sup>27</sup> may be taken as the most representative example of expressive or thematic imagery in the text. It is this great predominance of the expressive function which determined the placing of animal (and fête) imagery at the mid-point of my analysis, equidistant from image systems whose principal mode of functioning is either descriptive or symbolic.

The imagery of illness, which I shall now examine, contains certain structural complexities which relate it to the organizing or productive images which will be described in the following chapter. Moreover, the images associated with illness (fever, vomiting, delirium, etc.) are inherently descriptive insofar as they carry a biological or physical connotation which permits them to function in the creation of a concrete tonality or texture. Given that the primary function of illness imagery remains thematic, it is clear that this cluster operates within the text at more levels than was the case with the system of animal imagery.

Like other thematic images, those of illness convey the general concepts of suffering, decay, and death, elements which define man's situation in the world and determine his behaviour and nature: "Malade! Moi aussi, je suis malade! Qu'est-ce que ça veut dire malade? On est tous malades! Vous aussi vous serez malade et dans pas longtemps par-dessus le marché!" (pp. 129-130). Expressive of the global malfunctioning of the human psyche, illness forms a latent pole of the human temperament whose manifest

<sup>27</sup> Only in the African episode do animal images function in a purely descriptive manner.

content -- brutality, aggressiveness, cruelty -- is concentrated and polarized in the collective hostility that is War: "... je ne peux pas m'empêcher de mettre en doute qu'il en reste d'autres véritables réalisations de nos profonds tempéraments que la guerre et la maladie, ces deux infinis du cauchemar" (p. 407).

In general, images of illness function thematically in a metaphoric manner: the comparison of certain aspects of human activity to a disease or sickness invests that activity with a negative value. Images of illness, therefore, partake of a rhetoric of denunciation by means of which a radical critique of humanity is carried out. The following are but a few of the objects of this attack through imagery:

- (1) Man's incurable and contagious tendency towards self-deception: "Le délire de mentir et de croire s'attrape comme la gale" (p. 56);
- (2) Man's solitude and alienation and his apparent incapacity to overcome this state of being: "Il faudrait savoir pourquoi on s'entête à ne pas guérir de la solitude" (p. 370);
- (3) The latent, but always present cruelty of our fellows: "Dans le froid d'Europe, sous les grisailles pudiques du nord, on ne fait, hors les carnages, que soupçonner la grouillante cruauté de nos frères, mais leur pourriture envahit la surface dès que les écoustille la fièvre ignoble des tropiques" (p. 113);
- (4) Man's futile struggle to flee the ravages of time and death: "Faut se dépêcher, faut pas la rater sa mort. La maladie, la misère qui vous disperse les heures, les années, l'insomnie qui vous barbouille en gris, des journées, des semaines entières et le cancer qui nous monte déjà peut-être, méticuleux et saignant du rectum" (p. 374).

Imagery associated with illness would appear therefore to express a single value: the negative nature of being-in-the-world. But as is often the case in Voyage, the same element may contain contradictory connotations.<sup>28</sup> Thus, while the soldiers at Flanders are condemned for their mental illness -- "une horde de fous vicieux" (p. 37) -- the protagonist discovers that such an illness, real or feigned, offers a practical and positive means of escape from the horrors of war: "Alors je suis tombé malade, fiévreux, rendu fou, qu'ils ont expliqué à l'hôpital, par la peur. C'était possible. La meilleure des choses à faire, n'est-ce pas, quand on est dans ce monde, c'est d'en sortir? Fou ou pas, peur ou pas" (p. 61).

The sickness of the world, therefore, can best be counteracted by escaping into illness and thereby reaching a state which permits the patient to avoid confronting reality. The Hospital, insofar as it protects from the real sickness which is existence itself, presents an image of repose and tranquillity:

... décidément je ne trouvais qu'un seul endroit définitivement désirable: l'Hôpital (p. 141);

Tout lugubre qu'était l'hôpital, c'était cependant l'endroit de la colonie, le seul où l'on pouvait se sentir un peu oublié, à l'abri des hommes du dehors, des chefs (p. 144);

Un genre "Paradis Terrestre" (p. 141).

To the extent that he wishes to avoid reality, the protagonist actively seeks out fevers and illness, so that he may find shelter in the hospital:

Mon départ pour la forêt, je ne l'envisageais plus qu'avec désespoir et révolte et me promettais déjà de contracter au plus tôt, toutes les fièvres qui passeraient à ma portée ... Des trucs j'en connaissais déjà et des fameux, pour être malade... (pp. 144-145).

<sup>28</sup> See for example the imagery of light and darkness analysed in the following chapter.

This positive value attributed to images of illness results in part from the respite sickness provides from the boredom and anguish which accompany the clear and healthy consciousness. Thus, Bardamu refuses to take quinine for his illness in the African jungle: "Je préférerais rester stupéfié là, tremblotant, baveux dans les 40°, que d'être forcé lucide, d'imaginer ce qui m'attendait à Fort Gono. J'en arrivais à ne plus prendre de quinine pour bien laisser la fièvre me cacher la vie" (p. 173).

Similarly the protagonist -- who has taken refuge in a hospital for the mentally disturbed, which he directs -- finds himself seeking out physical illness in order to escape anguish: "... pour que je puisse la retrouver un peu cette indifférence et neutraliser mon inquiétude à moi et retrouver la sotte et divine tranquillité" (p. 419).

The imagery associated with illness presents, therefore, a basic ambivalence which permits it to function, not just as an expression of the novel's themes, but also as a source of the work's underlying organization or structure. Thematically, illness is offered as the figurative equivalent of existence: "Comme la vie n'est qu'un délire tout bouffi de mensonges..." (p. 358). War, for example, represents simply a heightened state of the ordinary illness of the world: "... le délire ordinaire du monde s'était accru depuis quelques mois..." (p. 87). Moreover, the state of illness is seen as a sine qua non of life's dynamism, the refusal of the stasis which accompanies lucidity:

Ainsi passèrent des jours et des jours, je reprenais un peu de santé, mais au fur et à mesure que je perdais mon délire et ma fièvre dans ce confort, le goût de l'aventure et des nouvelles imprudences me revint impérieux. A 37° tout devient banal (p. 189);

Et où aller dehors, je vous le demande, dès qu'on n'a plus en soi la somme suffisante de délire? (p. 199).

In this context, illness (delirium) can be seen to represent the underlying source of the protagonist's activity, of his quest for knowledge. This is made clear in Molly's description of the hero's desire to know as a kind of sickness: "Vous en êtes comme malade de votre désir d'en savoir toujours davantage" (p. 235).

The double and contradictory value placed upon illness imagery reinforces certain structural dualities I have noted in earlier sections. Just as the protagonist is simultaneously fascinated and repelled by the reality he discovers, the sickness which is figuratively indentified with life is invested with a twofold and antithetical value: illness is a state which is both horrible and seductive, intolerable yet necessary.

Thus, while functioning mainly in a thematic manner to illustrate essential concepts, the images of illness lead us towards the question of the structuring rôle of imagery in the novel. Illustrative of a formal dualism which we have already seen to be present in both the narrative and thematic structures of the text, the paradox contained in the illness imagery obliges us to examine in more detail the organizing function of imagery in the text. Such will be the object of the following chapter.

## CHAPTER III

## GENERATIVE AND SYMBOLIC IMAGERY: THE JOURNEY AND THE NIGHT

Remarquons donc que l'établissement du texte moderne se reconnaît notamment à ce qu'il métamorphose les traditionnelles procédures expressives en moyens de production: agencements générateurs ou organisateurs...

- Jean Ricardou<sup>29</sup>

At the beginning of this section I postulated a threefold functioning of imagery in the novel. Images appear to function in the following ways:

- (a) as naturalistic or descriptive elements of the text (literal function);
- (b) as vehicles of abstract concepts or themes (figurative function);
- (c) as clusters or systems which through recurrence and symbolic associations help to organize the novel into a unified and coherent whole (symbolic or generative function).

All the imagery which I am examining may well partake in some measure of all three of the above modes. Nevertheless, by distinguishing the dominant function of each image cluster I have felt justified in affirming the presence of a specific structure of imagery in the text. Thus far I have looked at imagery which operates primarily in either the descriptive or thematic mode. In the present chapter I will discuss two image systems which function

<sup>29</sup> "La Bataille de la phrase", Critique, No. 274 (1970), pp. 226-227.

primarily as organizing or productive elements: the imagery related to Journey and to Night.

The privileged status accorded to these two images results from a number of factors which I will present briefly and then go on to discuss in detail: Firstly, we shall see that these images occupy a vital place in the pre-anecdotal fragments of the text, a positioning which permits the images to share in the generative activity of these fragments. Secondly, I will demonstrate how the profound associative and symbolic power of these images permits them to assimilate large numbers of related images and endows them therefore with the status of kernel or core image (archetype). Moreover, it will be shown that these images also function in a dynamic manner on the descriptive and thematic levels. As creators of a concrete text and vehicles of a specific content, their rôle is extremely important. The images of the Journey and the Night are, so to speak, globally operational: that is, they function in so varied and all-encompassing a manner that their absence from the text would deprive it of the bases of both its formal and significant structures. Let us now look at the specific components of these global operations.

#### The Generative Function: Title and Epigraph

The capacity of these images to organize the text results in part from their prominent position within the pre-anecdotal fragments of the novel: the title and the epigraph. The title of the novel, by placing the two images in the initial and final positions, is emblematic of the all-inclusive rôle and functioning of the imagery. Similarly, the epigraph

(the "Chanson des Gardes Suisses") places the Journey and the Night images into prominence:

Notre vie est un voyage  
 Dans l'hiver et dans la Nuit  
 Nous cherchons notre passage  
 Dans le Ciel où rien ne luit (p. 5).

Traditionally these fragments would be seen as illustrations, as adornments which express the work's substance. But following a contemporary critical outlook, it is also quite possible to regard these fragments as kernels (generative elements) from which the text will receive the principles of its development. From this point of view, the title and epigraph are held to function as producers or generators of the text which follows: "Mais supposons qu'au lieu de survenir après coup selon une posture illustrative, le fragment serve de précis programme thématique. Alors le principe de l'épigraphe est transformé en rôle générateur de fiction."<sup>30</sup> The title and epigraph may therefore present essential elements which will be developed throughout the text. The epigraph of our text, for example, endows the Journey with a special status by equating the image with the totality of existence: "Notre vie est un voyage". Similarly Night, and its seasonal equivalent Winter, are identified with the medium in which existence takes place: Night is the space in which our lives develop, the place in which we are obliged to find "notre passage". The epigraph therefore presents the first and perhaps fundamental dualism which structures the text -- that of a subjective (the life of the hero seen as journey and as search) and an objective (the presence of the world seen as night, as winter, as the "Ciel où rien ne luit") reality.

<sup>30</sup> Jean Ricardou, "La Bataille de la phrase", pp. 229-230.



Given the extreme generality of application which the title and epigraph confer upon the images of Night and Journey, it is clear that this imagery is endowed from the beginning with a special status. To the extent that these fragments constitute in themselves a "texte du départ dont chaque terme, systématiquement, se trouve repris et travaillé par la fiction subséquente",<sup>31</sup> the imagery they contain can be viewed in turn as essential organizing elements of the text which follows.

### Symbol and Archetype

I am postulating a special status for the imagery of the Journey and the Night. These two image systems appear to constitute the core of underlying deep structural elements from which the text may be said to be secreted or generated.<sup>32</sup> We have just observed that the positioning of these images within the pre-fictional fragments (the title and the epigraph) confers upon them a potential for such a productive function. It seems clear, however, that this potential could not be realized unless the images were to possess a sufficient symbolic (connotative and associative) charge to allow them to support this polysemous and complexly structured text. In short, these images must be universal enough in their symbolic force to account for and contain the numerous images, structures and meanings which the text may reveal. They must therefore possess the capacity to unify and universalize complex, varied and particular experiences, a capacity sometimes associated

<sup>31</sup> Ricardou, op. cit., p. 230.

<sup>32</sup> In more conventional terms, these images may be viewed as the principal organizing and unifying elements of the text.

with the class of symbols known as archetypes.<sup>33</sup>

The image of the Journey would appear to possess the universal symbolic power required to play a primary structural rôle in the elaboration of the text. The presentation of the image in the fragments themselves suggests this universality. The title, Voyage au bout de la nuit, by excluding a restricting definite article indicates the general and generalizable nature of the image. The epigraph, for its part, explicitly proposes the broadest interpretation possible of the journey imagery: the journey is equivalent to life itself ("Notre vie est un voyage"). Consequently, all the complexities, vicissitudes, pleasure, and so on which existence offers can (theoretically) in some way be linked to this basic image.

This universal connotative power conferred upon the image by the fragments is confirmed by traditional interpretations of the image.<sup>34</sup> Some of the conventional associations attributed to the journey image seem particularly relevant to the text we are studying. Thus the journey is usually linked with the quest motif, with the search for a purer, transcendent state: "Le symbolisme du voyage, particulièrement riche, se résume toutefois dans la quête de la vérité, de la paix, de l'immortalité, dans la recherche et la découverte d'un centre spirituel."<sup>35</sup> A closely related aspect of the journey symbol involves a series of obstacles or trials which the hero must confront and overcome in order to succeed in his quest, in order to be initiated into the world of understanding and truth.<sup>36</sup> On a more individual

<sup>33</sup> "Archetypes are associative clusters and differ from signs in being complex variables. Within the complex is often a large number of specific learned associations which are communicable..." (N. Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, p. 102).

<sup>34</sup> Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, Dictionnaire des Symboles (Paris, 1969), pp. 813-814.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 813.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 814.

and psychological level, the journey may also express a deep dissatisfaction with the self and a need to transform one's inner being: "Le voyage exprime un désir profond de changement intérieur, un besoin d'expériences nouvelles, plus encore que de déplacement local."<sup>37</sup>

We have seen in preceding chapters that such attributes of the journey image are indeed present in the novel. Bardamu's early adventures consist of a series of journeys undertaken in the hope of attaining to a knowledge and understanding of the world. Moreover, these adventures are presented as conflicts or tests which permit the hero to pass from a state of naïve illusion to one of lucid awareness which permits only a "savoir hargneux des choses" (p. 463), and allows the initiate to see things as they really are.

But if the journey image in the novel clearly presents the general structure of the initiating quest of the hero of Romance,<sup>38</sup> the treatment of this archetypal process is ironic and modern. Both the hero and the object of his quest remain problematical. The hero seems unable to define the ultimate goal of his quest -- "à la recherche de je ne sais quoi" (p. 229). Consequently, he refuses a possible source of salvation, the "fair damsel" Molly (a prostitute!), in the name of a vague goal lying somewhere at the end of the night:

... comme si je voulais tout garder pour je ne sais quoi de magnifique, de sublime, pour plus tard, mais pas pour Molly... Comme si la vie allait emporter, me cacher ce que je voulais savoir d'elle, de la vie au fond du noir... (p. 231).

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 814.

<sup>38</sup> See N. Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, pp. 187-190.

Despite this ironical and perhaps even parodical treatment of the quest motif, there is no doubt that as a structuring principle the journey archetype plays a fundamental rôle in the text. It offers a formal framework for the entire narrative, a framework from which the actions, themes, and images of the work develop organically, and by means of which the novel attains a greater measure of unity and coherence.

The image of the Night appears capable also of bearing the symbolic weight necessary for it to function as an organizing principle of the text. The (theoretically) productive fragments again support this all-inclusive status. The presence of the definite article in the title ("la nuit") indicates in this case a tendency towards generalization. In addition, the epigraph, as we saw earlier, invests Night with the capacity to represent the complex external world through which the journey is effected. This generalization of the image is confirmed by traditional interpretations of the symbol: "Elle est riche de toutes les virtualités de l'existence".<sup>39</sup> The most immediate associations with the imagery of Night are notions we have already observed to be essential to the novel's thematic significance: Death, emptiness, nothingness, evil, anguish, and so on. Moreover the image, like many symbols, may associate contrasting functions: "Comme tout symbole, la nuit elle-même présente un double aspect, celui des ténèbres où fermente le devenir et celui de la préparation du jour, où jaillira la lumière de la vie."<sup>40</sup> Thus, Night imagery, following the structural principle of binary opposition, calls into existence imagery of light (day). Consequently, the

<sup>39</sup> Dictionnaire des Symboles, p. 545.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 545.

imagery goes beyond a simple representation and unification of the characteristics of the external world. Night imagery implicitly involves the cyclical nature of existence and thereby integrates the formal narrative (whose cyclical pattern we observed in Part I) into the human (sleeping and waking, conscious and unconscious), the solar (night and day), and the seasonal cycles. As such, the Night imagery parallels that of the Journey as a structuring principle working to generate, organize, and unify the formal and significant levels of the text.

#### Associative Clusters

Le sens (ou la fonction) d'un élément de l'oeuvre, c'est sa possibilité d'entrer en corrélation avec d'autres éléments de cette oeuvre et avec l'oeuvre entière.

- Tzvetan Todorov<sup>41</sup>

The combination of the generative potential of the pre-anecdotal fragments and the capacity of the images of the Journey and the Night to operate as universal symbols endows this imagery with the possibility of functioning as fundamental structuring elements of the narrative, as organizers and producers of the text. From this point of view<sup>42</sup> the work appears to be in a sense determined by the simple presence and positioning of these images.

<sup>41</sup> "Les catégories du récit littéraire", Communications 8 (1966), p. 125.

<sup>42</sup> Clearly I am following here a critical position that invests the constituent elements of the text -- in this case its imagery -- with a great deal of autonomy and dynamism. I have adopted this position to the extent that the text seems to authorize me to do so. While eschewing the pitfalls of the "intentional fallacy", I would not go so far as to deny the rôle played by authorial choice and by a controlling vision of reality. The stylistic particularities of the écriture célinienne, for example, strike me as the

As a final step in my demonstration of the special status conferred by the text upon these images, I will turn my attention to their actual operation, as image systems, within the novel. These core images lie each at the centre of a cluster of closely related images which taken together form a kind of constellation. The repetition and recurrence of the core images throughout the text transform them into structural elements, linking different passages of the text and ultimately unifying these passages through their direct or indirect association with a single core image. To the extent that the elements of these constellations in turn enter into an associative relationship with diverse elements of the text, a second stage of expansion takes place. I will terminate this study by an examination of some of these primary and secondary associations, whose principal effect is to underline and strengthen the organic unity and coherence of the text.

### The Journey Cluster

I am emphasizing in this chapter the importance of Journey and Night imagery, whose principal function appears to be the organization and production of the text as a coherent whole. Like the other images I have been analyzing in this section, however, the core images (and their related clusters) function both literally as creators of a concrete text and figuratively as vehicles of the novel's themes. Thus, in this discussion of the operations of the kernel image constellations within the text, one may well expect to discover a threefold mode of functioning.

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products of a conscious artistic choice. What I am examining in the present instance are precisely those elements of style and structure which result not from choice but rather from the autonomous power of words.

An example of this triple operation upon the text may be found in the Journey image itself. We have already seen that the image is theoretically capable of conveying any number of themes insofar as it has been metaphorically assimilated to the global notion of existence: "Notre vie est un voyage". In addition, I have noted that the Journey possesses a symbolic universality which allows it to function as a fundamental structuring element of the narrative: the narrative as quest and as initiation. It is consequently not surprising to discover that the image operates also at the literal or anecdotal level. Indeed, on this literal level the journey image appears to constitute an important component of the protagonist's concrete experience. Bardamu's existence is in fact characterized by a series of physical displacements:

- (a) Place Clichy to Flanders; return to Paris;
- (b) Paris to Africa (on the Amiral Bragueton);  
Fort-Gono to Topo; to the Hut and on to San Tapeta;
- (c) Africa to America (on the Infanta Combitta);  
New York to Detroit;
- (d) the return to Paris.

In the second half of the novel the journeys become fewer and rarely take the hero outside Paris, except of course for the trip to Toulouse.

Nevertheless, several short trips do take Bardamu from one part of Paris to another:

- (a) the various visits to patients;
- (b) the journey to the Left Bank in order to seek  
medical advice at the Institut Bioduret Joseph;
- (c) the visits to the fair, and to the Tarapout theatre;

- (d) the taking up of residence in the Asile at Vigny-sur-Seine, and the final fatal journey to the Fair at Batignolles.

I have discussed in earlier sections the narrative and thematic importance of these journeys. My purpose in listing them here was simply to underline the importance of the descriptive function of the journey image, its essential rôle in the elaboration of the anecdote. Let us now look at some of the principal elements of the image cluster linked to the journey image. It will be recalled that these secondary images serve in a sense as intermediaries between the core image and the context in which they are found. Insofar as these secondary images depend upon the pre-existence of the kernel archetype in order to signify fully, they (and by extension their contexts) are in a very real sense the products of the generative operations of the kernel image.

#### Vessels, Roadways, and Movement

The system or cluster of imagery which develops from, or is generated by, the image of the Journey may be divided into two main categories:

- (a) images which define the objects by means of which the journey is effected: the vessels which transport the protagonist and the roadways upon which he travels;
- (b) images which describe the characteristics or modalities of the journeying: images of movement and by extension (rather, by the structural principle of binary opposition) images of immobility.

These two categories reflect the objective and the subjective elements of the Journey, the means by which and the way in which the journeys are carried out. The subjective element (images of movement) may be related to the inner, psychological world of the voyageur, while the objective element



reflects the external world which he encounters.

### Vessels

By their status as structured objects, the various vessels appearing in the text are associated with events or phenomena of a certain complexity such as the war, a "bateau de feu" (p. 65).<sup>43</sup> Because of their limited size and isolated position, vessels can clarify the amorphous chaos of existence and reveal the precise contours of the event: "Sur le bateau ça se discerne mieux cette presse, alors c'est plus gênant..." (p. 116). Vessels may therefore exist either as concrete containers of reality or as figurative representations of this reality.

The novel presents three main types of vessel: le navire, le bateau and la galère. These three species correspond to the three functions I have postulated for imagery: literal (descriptive), figurative (thematic), and symbolic (generative). The image of the navire, for example, functions principally as a descriptive element and appears to be relatively devoid of thematic or symbolic significance. Its primary rôle is to concretize the anecdote, to operate inside the frontiers of the story (fiction): "Notre navire avait nom: l'Amiral Bragueton" (p. 112); "Il était difficile d'être aussi peu que moi sur le navire tout en y demeurant" (p. 116); "Dans cette stabilité désespérante de chaleur tout le contenu humain du navire s'est coagulé dans une massive ivrognerie" (p. 112); "Quand la mer emporte ses derniers navires... Quand Monmouth se met à penser pour la

<sup>43</sup> Incidentally here we have an excellent example of an organizational functioning of the imagery, since the fire image itself belongs, as we shall see, to the image cluster related to Night. This juxtaposition functions both to underline the importance of the specific context and to create a certain textual unity by linking this and similar contexts to one another as well as to the productive sources of the work.

première fois" (pp. 426-427). The navire is a simple container of reality, a concretizing element of the anecdote. Essentially a literal image, the navire attains to a symbolic potential only when juxtaposed with a vessel image such as le bateau which can function figuratively: "... on apercevait les gros quais d'ombre des fortifs qui s'avancent hauts dans la nuit pour attendre des bateaux de si loin, des si nobles navires, qu'on en verra jamais des bateaux comme ça. C'est sûr. On les espère" (p. 343). The theme of the impossibility of an authentic escape from reality which the images convey here is carried mainly by the "bateaux" which do function actively on the thematic level.

While the navire is essentially a literal image, the galère in contrast functions almost entirely in a symbolic, productive manner. The symbolic charge associated with this image results in part from its anachronistic status: the galère belongs, in the modern world, to the universe of imagination and of myth. Its invocation in a modern context, therefore, is almost necessarily symbolic. Thus, with its hierarchical structure and its division into the captains and the rowers (the powerful and the weak), the galère symbolizes the structure of social reality, the division of the world into two classes: the rich and the poor, the exploiters and the exploited. Moreover, the presentation of the image at the beginning of the narrative invests the symbol with a productive capacity, in that the succeeding events will constitute simply a development and confirmation of this core image of society:

... mais enfin on est tous assis sur une grande galère...  
On est en bas dans les cales à souffler de la gueule, puants,  
suintants des rouspignolles, et puis voilà! En haut sur le pont,  
au frais, il y a les maîtres et qui s'en font pas, avec des

belles femmes roses et gonflées de parfums sur les genoux (p. 13).

The image of the galère reappears as the vessel which transports the delirious protagonist to America. Here the image reaffirms its position as an organizing element of the text in that it continues to function as a kind of social allegory. The image presents a vision of society in miniature, a society characterized by the passive, conformist nature of the many who allow themselves to be victimized in return for a minimum of comfort and the illusion of participation:

Sur l'Infanta Combitta on bouffait pas mal, on les triquait un peu les copains, mais pas trop, et en somme ça pouvait aller. C'était du boulot moyen. Et puis sublime avantage, on les renvoyait jamais de la galère et même que le Roi leur avait promis... une espèce de petite retraite. Cette perspective les rendait heureux, ça leur donnait de quoi rêver et le dimanche pour se sentir libres, au surplus, ils jouaient à voter (p. 185).

The bateau image appears to occupy the mid-point, in terms of its functioning, between the descriptive navire and the symbolic galère. While indeed the images of bateaux may at times appear only to denote a concrete referent<sup>44</sup> and thus lack any significant figurative dynamism, for the most part the image functions (metaphorically) to express themes. Thus the emptiness and gradual decay which characterizes the lives of the majority are embodied in a boat metaphor: "C'est en douce qu'ils voyagent sur la vie d'un jour à l'autre sans se faire remarquer, dans l'hôtel comme dans un bateau qui serait pourri un peu et puis plein de trous et qu'on le saurait" (p. 351). A similar figurative presentation of the image, wherein

<sup>44</sup> "Des files de nègres, sur la rive, trimaient à la chicotte, en train de décharger, cale après cale, les bateaux jamais vides..." (p. 129); "Il nous apportait toujours de la glace lui, volée évidemment par-ci, par-là, sur les bateaux à quai" (p. 136).

the Henrouille's house is compared to a vessel, conveys the themes of the futility of human projects and the fear-motivated struggle for material security which characterize the pavillon of the Henrouille family:

"... on se sentait chez eux comme dans un bateau, une espèce de bateau qui irait d'une crainte à l'autre. Des passagers renfermés et qui passaient longtemps à faire des projets plus tristes encore que la vie et des économies aussi et puis à se méfier de la lumière et aussi de la nuit" (pp. 322-323). Significantly we find in the preceding example yet another juxtaposition of elements of the two core image clusters:<sup>45</sup> "bateau/passagers" and "nuit/lumière". This contiguous relationship serves to underline the deep unity of the novel's symbolic structure. Moreover, the preceding example demonstrates the structuring potential of these images which help compose one of the two core constellations. For clearly the thematic function of the bateau image can be extended to an organizing function insofar as the various and disparate themes that the image conveys are united precisely by their association with a member of one of the two fundamental image systems.

#### Roadway Imagery

Images which designate the various "ways" (les voies) upon which the journey takes place constitute a second cluster directly related to the core symbol of the journey. Whereas vessel imagery presented the phenomena of the external world in, so to speak, their verticality (their existence as objects or constructs), the roadway imagery underlines the horizontal

<sup>45</sup> See the comparison previously noted (p.167) of War to a "bateau de feu".

dimension of the journey, its unfolding within the limits and influence of space and time. Significantly, this cluster like that of vessel imagery contains three primary images, corresponding to the three levels of functioning I have already posited: the descriptive (la rue), the symbolic (la route) and a middle term (le chemin) which, while essentially thematic in its operations, partakes fully of the other two functions.

### La rue

In accordance with its normal semantic status, la rue functions usually as a concrete element of the anecdote. The streets of Paris, New York, and Fort-Gono constitute a part of the physical décor within which the anecdote develops. However, so strong is the associative potential conferred upon this every-day image-through its kinship with the journey constellation that its normal descriptive function slides regularly into the realm of the figurative. Consequently, an innocuous action, such as changing directions in downtown New York, is invested, by means of the associative power of the imagery, with symbolic resonances that transform the action into the representation of a global psychological and even metaphysical state. The following is an example of such a symbolic transformation: "Comme si j'avais su où j'allais, j'ai eu l'air de choisir encore et j'ai changé de route, j'ai pris sur ma droite une autre rue, mieux éclairée, "Broadway" qu'elle s'appelait" (p. 192).<sup>46</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Again we find the juxtaposition of elements ("rue/éclairée") of the two core constellations in the same context.

While apparently operative on the descriptive level only, this imagery, by association, suggests for example the fundamental déroute of the protagonist. Imprisoned in his condition, unable to make an authentic choice ("Comme si j'avais su où j'allais, j'ai eu l'air de choisir encore..."), yet obliged to give himself the illusion of change ("j'ai changé de route"), the protagonist searches out diversions (which may be interpreted in a Pascalian sense) on Broadway street, the focus of theatrical activity in the city. It should be noted that the presence of the normally more abstract and figurative term "route" supports this symbolic reading of the passage and, by juxtaposition, assists the image of the street to operate beyond its customary descriptive level.

As the novel progresses this symbolic potential carried by la rue is actualized in a more explicit fashion. In connection, for example, with his refusal to accept the death of the child Bébert, Bardamu clearly confers upon the image a symbolic and even allegorical dimension: "Le cimetière, un autre encore, à côté, et puis le boulevard de la Révolte. Il monte avec toutes ses lampes droit et large en plein dans la nuit. Y a qu'à suivre, à gauche. C'était ma rue" (p. 287).<sup>47</sup> A figurative dimension to the image may also be conferred by associating the street with some conventional source of symbolic meaning, such as the Bible. In this way, the street is transformed into the space which all men must occupy "au jugement dernier qui se passera dans la rue..." (p. 350). By means therefore of its association with textual and conventional symbols, the rue may come to represent the

<sup>47</sup> We see again the juxtaposition of elements of both the Journey and the Night constellations.

the space within which all existence is contained, and upon which all must voyage. The rue is thereby identified with the cosmos and invested with an anagogic or infinite status:

C'est pas la peine de se débattre, attendre ça suffit, puisque tout doit finir par y passer dans la rue. Elle seule compte au fond. Rien à dire. Elle nous attend. Faudra qu'on y descende dans la rue, qu'on se décide, pas un, pas deux, pas trois d'entre nous, mais tous. On est là devant à faire des manières et des chichis, mais ça viendra (p. 350).

This example of the sliding of an essentially descriptive image into the realm of the apocalyptic (the infinite and eternal)<sup>48</sup> demonstrates clearly both the polysemous nature of the text and the actualization of the symbolic potential of an image resulting principally from its association with a generative archetype or symbol, in this case that of the Journey.

### La Route

Less rooted in a semantic concreteness than imagery of the street, la route normally functions in an abstract, symbolic manner. When, for example, Bardamu expresses his regret at not having encountered Molly earlier in life, the route image figures the global orientation of an individual destiny: "Ah! si je l'avais rencontrée plus tôt, Molly, quand il était encore temps de prendre une route au lieu d'une autre!" (p. 229). The clearly symbolic function of this image is indicated by the insistence with which it is presented as a figure not just of a single destiny, but of the universal fate of man, of his condemnation to decay and dissolution,

<sup>48</sup> For a description of the anagogical mode, see N. Frye, The Anatomy of Criticism, pp. 119-128.

the irrevocable consequences of his journey in Time:

Accepter le temps, ce tableau de nous. On peut dire alors...  
qu'on ne s'était pas trompé de chemin, qu'on avait bien  
suivi la vraie route, sans s'être concerté, l'immanquable  
route... la route de la pourriture. Et voilà tout (p. 77).

Two structural aspects of the above example may be mentioned in passing.

First, the passage brings the theme of decay ("pourriture"), and the related themes of dissolution and death, into a coherent and organic relationship with the fundamental structuring elements of the text (the core images). Second, the passage confers upon the image of "le chemin" -- which I will examine next -- an implicit symbolic charge, by reason of its contiguous relationship to the clearly symbolic image of the "route".

This fatal progression along the route of time seems inalterable; perhaps only suicide, or the impossible wisdom which would allow one to "s'arrêter pile sur la route du temps" (p. 284) can remedy man's condition. Failing this, one can, like Parapine, follow "la route du silence" (p. 416); in any case, the Journey must and will go on, and the narrator is obliged to "continuer sa route tout seul, dans la nuit" (p. 371).<sup>49</sup>

### Le Chemin

Like the bateau of the vessel imagery, the image of le chemin appears to mark a mid-point between the concrete and symbolic functioning of images of the "way". The "chemins qui vont nulle part" (p. 17) and the "chemins inconnus à la lisière des hameaux évacués" (p. 27) are primarily instances of the concrete operation of the image. Nevertheless, a certain figurative

<sup>49</sup> Italics mine. Again we see the juxtaposition of the novel's two principal image systems.



weight is clearly present even here since the aimlessness of the roads and their unfamiliarity may be seen to designate the futility of war and the sense of being lost in a world of brutality and death. As a simple figure of speech, the use of le chemin is conventional and even banal: "... l'idée fit son chemin..." (p. 113); "Je le [l'hôpital] retrouvais partout sur mon chemin" (p. 132). Despite the cliché status, this figurative utilization of the image does serve to relate the abstract (l'idée) to the concrete and helps to unify the work by associating an important thematic image cluster (l'Hôpital/la Maladie) with the core image system.<sup>50</sup>

The image of le chemin may also function in a purely symbolic manner, thus affirming its relationship with the Journey archetype. I have already noted an example of this global symbolization in connection with route imagery (p. 77). The image of the chemin may, for example, suggest the metaphysical emptiness of existence: "Il suffit désormais de bouffer un peu, de se faire un peu de chaleur et de dormir le plus qu'on peut sur le chemin de rien du tout" (p. 448). Finally, the image may be directly assimilated into the quest motif and thereby function in a totally symbolic (archetypal) manner: "Enfin, ça doit être votre chemin à vous... Par là, tout seul... C'est le voyageur solitaire qui va le plus loin..." (p. 235).

### Movement

To recapitulate this discussion of journey imagery, I have suggested that this symbol provides a dynamic framework from which many, if not all,

<sup>50</sup> In a similar fashion, the theme of escape is assimilated into the basic image system through its association with road imagery: "Chacun possède ses raisons pour s'évader de sa misère intime et chacun de nous pour y parvenir emprunte aux circonstances quelque ingénieux chemin" (p. 416).

of the work's significant structures are derived, or generated. The journey imagery and its associated images form a system or network which branches out from this basic framework and recurs in varying contexts throughout the work. These contexts are thereby related to one another and the coherence and unity of the work are thus reinforced.

The dynamic element conferred upon the text by this imagery of the Journey is linked to the development of the story in time and space. The imagery of vessels and roadways, for example, suggests that a direct, linear progressions characterizes the journey of the protagonist. The title ("Voyage au bout...") and the epigraph ("Nous cherchons notre passage...") seem to support the notion of a rectilinear quest: the protagonist would thus be moving gradually but directly towards his final goal, the "bout de la nuit". This concept of a linear journey conflicts, however, with both the pattern of circular repetition noted in Part I of this study and the double attitude of the protagonist towards his quest<sup>51</sup> which I have remarked upon frequently in the course of this analysis. By examining the precise nature of movement in the text, I hope to resolve this apparent conflict and more clearly define the function and the dynamics of the Journey symbol in the novel.

A close perusal of imagery directly related to the nature of motion in the text indicates that progress in the Journey is neither direct nor continuous but rather oblique and periodic. Movement alternates with immobility. From this viewpoint, life is held to consist of a series of

<sup>51</sup> "Somme toute, j'étais intrigué et empoisonné en même temps" (p. 310).

futile projects to move ahead, "projets qui toujours avortent" (p. 199). Since these efforts result only in "avortons de bonheur" (p. 377), the forward impulse is checked and a period of immobility sets in, to be followed in turn by equally futile efforts to "se recommencer un bonheur" (p. 373).

This cyclical structure of action is paralleled on the descriptive level of the text by a pattern of discontinuous movements between similar objects. Motion in the novel is never prolonged; one moves, furtively, from one object to another of the same kind. Thus Bardamu advances through the war only by moving stealthily "d'arbre en arbre" (p. 43), or "d'une grange inconnue à l'autre" (p. 39). Progress, therefore, is limited by the objects and dangers of the external world. To move in this world becomes an arduous and uncomfortable task. The birds of the African jungle illustrate, in a descriptive context, this difficulty in moving: "... ces grosses pintades bleues, empêtrées dans leur plumage comme pour une noce et si maladroites quand elles sautaient en toussant d'une branche à l'autre, qu'on aurait dit qu'un accident venait de leur arriver" (p. 177). Likewise, the Amiral Bragueton moves in a jerky, spasmodic manner: "L'Amiral n'avancait guère, il se traînait plutôt, en ronronnant, d'un roulis vers l'autre" (p. 115). This same difficulty in advancing is experienced by the protagonist as he takes to the jungle after setting ablaze the Company's hut -- "Nous n'avançons qu'à grande peine..." (p. 177) -- and makes his way painfully to a Spanish colony: "Nous venions de passer à force d'aller d'un sentier à l'autre comme ça, tant bien que mal, dans la colonie du Rio del Rio..." (p. 178). This imagery of an uncomfortable movement from one object to another of the same kind may perform a more explicitly thematic (figurative)

function as when it indicates the constant tendency of men to move through life by playing similar rôles, by escaping reality: "Les êtres vont d'une comédie vers une autre" (p. 259). This escapism may take the form of the search for a state of forgetfulness through sex and other forms of submission "aux besoins naturels" (p. 340). Life remains at any rate a repetition of similar movements between similar objects: "Le même pinard, le même cinéma, les mêmes ragots sportifs... La même horde bouseuse, tâtubante d'un bobard à l'autre, hâblarde toujours, trafiqueuse, malveillante, agressive entre deux paniques" (p. 340).

In addition to its discontinuous and repetitive nature, motion in the novel is rarely straightforward: movement is generally diagonal, and progress is effected in a zigzag manner.<sup>52</sup> One advances in this world by moving from side to side, like the people of Paris who move hesitatingly "d'un trottoir à l'autre avant d'aller verser dans le noir" (p. 261). Through its association with other elements of the network of journey imagery, this oblique motion takes on a figurative value and comes to embody a global aspect of human activity and to symbolize the human situation:

C'était comme une plaie triste la rue qui n'en finissait plus, avec nous au fond, nous autres, d'un bord à l'autre, d'une peine à l'autre, vers le bout qu'on ne voit jamais, le bout de toutes les rues du monde (p. 192).

This oblique movement figures the typical manner in which man reacts in a world that he perceives as hostile and menacing. Unable to advance directly towards the heart of an intolerable reality, man progresses only by moving from side to side upon the "plaie triste" of existence:

<sup>52</sup> "A force de déambuler d'un bord de l'ombre à l'autre, on finissait par s'y reconnaître..." (p. 29); "... j'ai déambulé plutôt de droite à gauche tout le long de la route..." (p. 488).

Mais puisque le malade lui, change bien de côté dans son lit, dans la vie, on a bien le droit aussi nous, de se chambarder d'un flanc sur l'autre, c'est tout ce qu'on peut faire et tout ce qu'on a trouvé comme défense contre son Destin (p. 340).<sup>53</sup>

Thus a particular kind of motion is presented as a symbol of the manner in which men are obliged to confront their metaphysical situation. Through its association with the core archetype, this zigzag movement is offered as a figure of the rhythm of the world, a world in which all things move in this oblique manner, "d'un bord à l'autre du destin" (p. 309).

To summarize, the movement imagery furnishes insight into the mechanism of the hero's quest, into the precise manner in which the Journey (of life) is carried out. This voyage is shown to be basically of an oblique or indirect nature. Rather than overcoming obstacles directly, the traveller attempts to cope with external reality by moving diagonally from object to object in limited, sporadic bursts of activity. This oblique, almost furtive, approach to reality coincides with certain ambiguities in action and attitude previously revealed in my analysis of narrative and thematic patterns. Thus, the network of Journey imagery finds its status as a unifying and productive structural element corroborated and reinforced.

<sup>53</sup> Here and in the preceding quotations the italics are mine.

### Night Imagery

I have posited a twofold generative and symbolic base from which the form and content of the work are ultimately derivable. The first element of this base, the journey imagery, operates as we have just seen as a structuring principle of the work's narrative: the imagery functions literally (as a physical, concrete element of the anecdote), thematically (the quest motif) and as an archetypal symbol underlying and generating the dynamic progression of the text. The second element of the text's symbolic base is composed of imagery associated with la Nuit. This kernel image, along with the network of images directly linked to it, concentrates in itself (in its symbolic potential) the amorphous external world in which the Journey takes place. If the journey imagery can be said to inform the subjective and dynamic dimensions of the text, images of Night are linked to its objective and static aspects. Clearly such a dichotomy is valid only to a certain extent;<sup>54</sup> nevertheless, since I am here examining globally operative deep structures, these perhaps overly clear-cut distinctions do serve a useful purpose.

### La Nuit

The image of night is among the most frequently utilized in the text. This ubiquity in itself suggests the importance of the image as a unifying element. Its appearance in various contexts and its operativeness on various levels (literal, thematic, symbolical) serve to unite and bring a certain

<sup>54</sup> The night is of course dynamic insofar as it participates in the solar cycle, while the journey contains moments of stasis when the protagonist is immobilized, whether by fear, anguish, alienation, well-being or despair.

coherence to a text which may appear at first disjointed and disorganized. The most literal appearance of the image may, through conventional and/or textual association, carry a thematic or symbolic resonance. Conversely, an example of the image functioning in a primarily abstract or symbolic manner may not prevent it from being integrated into the concrete development of the anecdote.

It would be tediously repetitive to inventory and classify the numerous appearances of the image of Night in the novel. Consequently, I shall simply summarize some of the more representative operations of the image. On the descriptive level, for example, much of the early action of the novel, during which the protagonist is undergoing his initiation into the world, takes place at night. This is notably the case in the Flanders episode, where the space of the war adventure is regularly described in terms of the night image: "Par là, où il montrait, il n'y avait rien que la nuit, comme partout d'ailleurs, une nuit énorme qui bouffait la route à deux pas de nous..." (p. 26). The preceding is a good example of the polyfunctional nature of the image: while principally descriptive in its operation, the image contains, through its war context, a thematic association with Death, and by its contiguous relationship to the Journey network (la route), an organizing or structuring function. Other examples of the mainly descriptive presence of the image include the protagonist's first encounter with Robinson -- "Il devait être sur les deux heures après minuit..." (p. 43) -- his voyeuristic insights into the sexual habits of American couples (p. 199), and his encounter with a singularly noble species of mankind: the night-workers of Detroit (pp. 232-233).

The rôle of the night image as a vehicle of the work's principal themes is essential. Conventional symbolism links the darkness image to many of the work's dominant themes:

- (a) Death: "Ici à l'hôpital, tout comme dans la nuit des Flandres la mort nous tracassait..." (p. 87);
- (b) Death, Solitude, Emptiness: "J'ai fini par m'endormir sur la question, dans ma nuit à moi, ce cercueil, tellement j'étais fatigué de marcher et de ne trouver rien" (p. 288);
- (c) The Poverty and Distrustfulness of the "petites gens": "Les gens étaient si pauvres et si méfiants dans mon quartier qu'il fallait qu'il fasse nuit pour qu'ils se décident à me faire venir... J'en ai parcouru ainsi des nuits et des nuits à chercher des dix francs à travers les courettes sans lune" (p. 241).

The primary rôle of this image, however, appears to be organizational or productive. The capacity of the image to identify itself with existence as a whole confers upon it a universal value which in turn permits it to underlie and unify the varied manifestations of reality. Night represents the hostile and mysterious reality through which the entire world moves: "Ainsi tourne le monde à travers la nuit énormément menaçante et silencieuse" (p. 321). It is this status as a universal symbol of existence which permits the night image to enter into a significant contiguous relationship with the journey archetype. Night becomes thereby an integral element of the Quest, the objective element which confers upon the quest its true significance and depth: "On s'enfonce, on s'épouvante d'abord dans la nuit, mais on veut comprendre quand même et alors on ne quitte plus la profondeur" (p. 374). To confront the night, to pass through it (by whatever manner of movement) and to reach its very end amounts to an assuming of one's ultimate condition, to a victory over the enormous fear of knowing reality and truth, a fear



which prevents most men from undertaking to confront the night:

A force d'être poussé comme ça dans la nuit, on doit finir tout de même par aboutir quelque part... C'est la consolation. "Courage, Ferdinand, que je me répétais à moi-même, pour me soutenir, à force d'être foutu à la porte de partout, tu finiras sûrement par le trouver le truc qui leur fait si peur à eux tous... et qui doit être au bout de la nuit. C'est pour ça qu'ils n'y vont pas eux au bout de la nuit!" (p. 219).

This fear of the hostile night infects the protagonist himself and produces in Bardamu an ambiguous attitude towards his own quest. On one hand, he is tempted to go along with the others and refuse to confront the night; on the other hand, the influence of Robinson makes him conscious of the value and of the necessity of familiarizing himself with "la nuit":

Décidément d'avoir suivi dans la nuit Robinson jusque-là où nous en étions, j'avais quand même appris des choses (p. 305);  
Maintenant qu'il s'agissait d'ouvrir les yeux dans la nuit j'aimais presque autant les garder fermés. Mais Robinson semblait tenir à ce que je les ouvrisse, à ce que je me rende compte (p. 310).

### Associated Clusters

Thus far I have pointed out that the capacity of night imagery to function as an organizing productive principle within the text is confirmed by its status as a universal all-encompassing symbol as well as by its recurring interaction with the core journey imagery.<sup>55</sup> This generative potential, of which the text in all its structural complexity would be the realized product, is reinforced by the presence of a group of related images which form a network that branches out from the core image and links

<sup>55</sup> The repeated juxtaposition of elements of the two core image clusters indicates the actualization within the text of the generative capacity of the novel's title and pre-anecdotal fragments, where the two core images are juxtaposed in what might be termed an emblematic manner.

different elements of the text both to the central image and, indirectly, to one another. The existence of these associated image clusters tends to strengthen the organizing or structuring function of night imagery. I shall now examine briefly a few of these related clusters.

### Noir

Black is the colour which appears most frequently in the text. The colour often appears to function simply as a literal or descriptive element, as when the narrator describes the African night as: "l'énorme vélum noir qui nous étouffait" (p. 177). The war experience also provides examples of the apparently uniquely descriptive function of blackness imagery; thus Bardamu and his military comrades seek out respite from the menace of being shot, by frantically pursuing "le sommeil dans le noir" (p. 36). These descriptive operations do not, however, rule out the potential for symbolic meaning that the colour may possess either by conventional association<sup>56</sup> or by its recurring presence within a specific context. Thus the stifling darkness of the African forests echoes the hostile and menacing reality which Africa in particular and nature in general reveals to the protagonist; similarly, the enormity of the blackness observed in Flanders suggests the theme of the omnipresence of Death which characterizes this episode.

It is doubtless this figurative value of blackness that determines the primary rôle of the image in the text. While much of this figurative activity is identical to that observed in the night image, the specific

<sup>56</sup> See J. Chevalier et Alain Gheerbrant, Dictionnaire des Symboles: "Il évoque, avant tout, le chaos, le néant... le mal, l'angoisse, la tristesse, l'inconscience et la Mort" (p. 538).

thematic connotation of blackness seems to be that of malevolence. Thus the curé Protiste, by reason of his involvement in the Henrouille affair, finds himself caught up in the anguish which afflicts the criminals:

"Maintenant qu'il nous avait rejoints dans notre angoisse il ne savait plus trop comment faire le curé pour avancer à la suite de nous quatre dans le

noir" (p. 334).<sup>57</sup> Robinson, whose actions in the novel are resolutely negative and determined by his refusal of basic conventional values, is regularly associated with blackness:

Robinson se mit à nous raconter une fois de plus que les acides lui brûlaient l'estomac et les poumons, l'étouffaient et le faisaient cracher tout noir (p. 291);

Il se recroquevillait tellement dans le noir pour tousser sur lui-même que je ne le voyais presque plus... (p. 302).

Robinson's attempt to assassinate la mère Henrouille is followed by a period of retributive blindness, of concrete and total blackness which operates as a physical sign of the emptiness of his moral conscience: "Il les allongeait alors ses bras comme ça dans son noir tant qu'il pouvait, comme pour toucher le bout. Il voulait pas y croire. Du noir tout à lui" (p. 323).

These specific examples of the linking of the blackness image to acts of evil and to states of moral anguish and turpitude could be added to without difficulty.<sup>58</sup> Such examples take on an added dimension of significance when the image is explicitly associated with the physical essence of man (his body) and with the basic tendencies of human nature towards cruelty and stupidity: "Je ne vois partout que de noires et vieilles niaiseries qui fermentent dans les corps plus ou moins récents..." (p. 372). Here again

<sup>57</sup> The italics in this and the following quotations are mine.

<sup>58</sup> See, for example, the eyes of the dangerous and desperate Madelon, which are "trop noirs" (p. 378); and the state of depression which often overwhelms the hero and which he describes as "noir et lourd" (p. 240).

we see the capacity of an apparently innocuous descriptive element to function as an active part of an organizing and unifying system of imagery.

### L'ombre

As in the case of blackness imagery, the descriptive function here is subordinated to the thematic (figurative). Moreover, the dual composition of shade -- its implicit reference to the coexistence of light and darkness -- invests the image with a certain complexity which corresponds to other ambivalent elements of the text. The example of Robinson is again useful. His first appearance in the work is indicated by a "changement dans la disposition de l'ombre" (p. 43), and he is later described by the narrator as "ce ténébreux" (p. 167). I have noted in an earlier chapter (Part I, Chapter I) the ambivalent status which Robinson occupies in the text: he is both a concrete personnage and a kind of phantom, the incarnation of an attitude (refusal) towards the world. His close association with l'ombre both echoes this double rôle and emphasizes his symbolic function as alter ego, as the projection of the protagonist's repressed desire to go to the end of his refusal to accept things as they are. It might be pointed out that the capacity of this image to function "psychologically" as a symbol of the unconscious, is evoked explicitly in the text: "Tout ce qui est intéressant se passe dans l'ombre décidément. On ne sait rien de la véritable histoire des hommes" (p. 64).

### La Lumière

The presence in the text of a series of images clustered around the central image of light confirms, paradoxically perhaps, the structuring function of night imagery. For by its very presence in the text, light imagery suggests the integration of images of darkness into the universal rhythms, the great cyclical processes. Much as periods of immobility were essential to the pattern of the Journey -- pointing towards the episodic and cyclical nature of the quest -- so the existence of images of light confer upon night imagery a cosmic dimension which greatly augments the signifying potential of this imagery. Night can be viewed not simply as a symbol which connotes the nature of objective reality, but also as a dynamic principle informing the work in its status not just as a static structure but also a dynamic process.

This integration of night imagery into a cyclical structure is underlined by the affirmation within the text of the fundamental inseparability of the apparently antithetical elements of light and darkness. Such an affirmation occurs in connection with the blatant coexistence in war-time Paris of the contradictory states of normality and frenzied delirium:

A l'ombre des journaux délirants d'appels aux sacrifices ultimes et patriotiques, la vie, strictement mesurée, farcie de prévoyance, continuait et bien plus astucieuse même que jamais. Tels sont l'envers et l'endroit, comme la lumière et l'ombre, de la même médaille (p. 73).<sup>59</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Italics mine.

This intimate interaction of darkness and light is encountered frequently throughout the text.<sup>60</sup> Life itself, conceived as both a fixed and a dynamic structure, is envisaged in terms of this duality as "un bout de lumière qui finit dans la nuit" (p. 335).

An important characteristic of the relationship between light and night imagery is their capacity to exchange rôles. While conventional symbolic interpretations would confer a positive value upon light and a negative value upon darkness, this is only partially the case in the novel. An evident ambiguity present in light imagery, for example, is suggested in the opening scene of the novel, wherein the protagonist and his friend take cover from the sunlight in the protective shade of the café. The war episode in turn will expand upon this initial evocation of ambiguity. In Flanders, night and light imagery seem to oscillate wildly in their respective significations. At first, the imagery appears to function conventionally; night images are associated with danger, evil and death: "Chaque mètre d'ombre devant nous était une promesse d'en finir et de crever..." (p. 30). But light imagery also is endowed with a negative connotation since its presence in Flanders either renders the soldiers more vulnerable (because more visible) or else signals the immediate threat of annihilation: "Je me disais toujours que la première lumière qu'on verrait ce serait celle du coup de fusil de la fin" (p. 29). Likewise the night, because of its capacity to hide, and therefore to protect, takes on a positive connotation as a possible shelter from the dangers and madness

<sup>60</sup> An obvious example is the town of Noireur-sur-la-Lys, which the hero observes to be "toute allumée et répandue au beau milieu de la nuit" (p. 43).

of War:

La nuit, dont on avait eu si peur dans les premiers temps, en devenait par comparaison assez douce. Nous finissions par l'attendre, la désirer la nuit. On nous tirait dessus moins facilement la nuit que le jour. Et il n'y avait plus que cette différence qui comptait (p. 36).

These and other examples of the ambiguity which characterizes light (and night) imagery reflect in part a questioning of conventional values, a contestation which permeates the text. Thus, the setting ablaze of the Company's hut -- a negative, anti-social act by conventional standards -- is ironically justified by the hero's appropriation of a conventional proverb: "Le feu purifie tout" (p. 175). The ambiguous value of light imagery, inherent in the very nature of fire, permits the narrator to illustrate the paradoxical fact that war may have positive consequences for some: "La guerre avait brûlé les uns, réchauffé les autres, comme le feu torture ou conforte, selon qu'on est placé dedans ou devant" (p. 216).

This ambiguous value inherent in light imagery and conferred in turn upon images of the night is structurally significant in that it echoes and parallels the dual nature of reality as revealed in the work: reality (the outer world) is both a source of suffering and a source of knowledge. The protagonist perceives this reality to be simultaneously repugnant and fascinating; thus the hesitant, ambivalent pattern of his quest, and of the Journey as a whole. Night, as a source of both pain and knowledge, is thus integrated into the fundamental dynamics of the work. The core image of la nuit is thereby endowed with a unifying, productive status. Thus the two kernel image systems are fused in a single process which, in the text,

constitutes the generative framework from which the details of the work in all their apparent difference and specificity are ultimately derivable.

### Conclusion

In this section I have sought to indicate the various operations of imagery in the text. We have seen that imagery can be classified into three categories (sensual, figurative, and productive) derived from their primary function: descriptive, thematic, or organizational. Sensual imagery operates primarily to confer upon the text a concrete or physical tonality: Thematic imagery conveys, in a figurative manner, the principal notions which inform the work's vision of the world. Productive imagery, by means of its universality,<sup>61</sup> appears to function as fundamental structuring kernels which both endow the work with a unifying base and produce (by symbolic association) the text in its infinite variety and potential to signify. Imagery in the novel, therefore, operates both expressively (to illustrate a vision of the world) and generatively (to inform this vision). It is precisely this dual functioning of the imagery which permits it to underlie and unify the text in its double status as form and meaning, as signifier and signified. The novel's imagery, therefore, realizes the poetic fusion of form and content, of narrative and theme, in an on-going, infinite process of signifying.

<sup>61</sup> A universality resulting both from its conventional symbolic value and from the importance and frequency of its presence in the text.



## CONCLUSION

This study has attempted, by examining certain structural properties of the text, to arrive at an adequate account of the formal unity of Céline's first and probably greatest novel. In order to describe the principal elements of the novel's significant form, I approached the text from three distinct but interrelated vantage points:

- (a) the narrative (point of view, structure of episodes);
- (b) the thematic (vision of reality, the metaphysical and the social levels of experience);
- (c) the symbolic (the function of imagery in the organization of a unified text).

It was felt that, by describing the specific pattern of each of these three aspects of the text and then noting their structural similarities, one could demonstrate the existence of an organic unity which went far deeper than the mechanical unity resulting from the presence of a picaresque narrative framework.

In the first section of this analysis ("Narrative Structures"), the binary structure of the narrative was pointed out: the narration is assured by a double voice (or je), that of the protagonist and that of the narrator-observer. This latter, whose angle of vision is basically retrospective, possesses a quasi-omniscient status which is revealed in his penchant for aphorisms and absolute pronouncements. An ironic relationship holds between this apparently all-knowing je and his younger and naïve self,

the protagonist. Although the temporal and psychological distance separating the two "I's" is progressively reduced in the course of the narrative, the double structure incarnated by the two narrative voices constitutes one of the fundamental formal elements operating in the text, a framework which modifies profoundly the nature of the novel's content.

This double narrative focus, through which are refracted the multiple events, objects, and characters which appear in the text, institutes a dichotomous structure which various elements of the anecdote will echo and corroborate. Thus the double attitude of Bardamu both towards existence and towards his friend Robinson are fictional parallels of the double narrative point of view. Bardamu's relationship with the world is fundamentally ambivalent. "Intrigué et empoisonné en même temps" (p. 310), the protagonist oscillates between refusal and compromise, between a desire to understand the world and the need to avoid the suffering which understanding inevitably produces. Bardamu's internal ambivalence is in turn concretized and projected into the anecdote in terms of his relationship with Robinson. The latter, whose attitude towards the world is consistently one of refusal, is alternately sought out and avoided by the protagonist. For Bardamu, Robinson is a source both of knowledge and of unhappiness. Robinson's suicidal denunciation of Madelon and of existence in general constitutes the culmination of his "voyage au bout de la nuit". His death functions within the text in two ways: first, it effectively closes the story by operating as a climactic act of revolt; second, Robinson's death opens the narrative by obliging the protagonist to examine and to seek to justify his

existence (pp. 489-490). Robinson's death leads to a transformation of the protagonist into narrator (observer), and the anecdote into discours. By "telling all" (p. 27) Bardamu will reverse his apparent evolution towards detachment and resignation and, by refusing to forget "ce qui vous a fait crever" (p. 27), will seek both a justification to his own life and a cure for the universal egoism which afflicts mankind.

In the second chapter of Part I, I attempted to provide some insight into the structure of interaction which determines the relationship between the individual and reality. It was observed that the narrative action could be characterized in terms of a recurring circular pattern: Entrance → Confrontation → Escape → Entrance, etc. This iterative circular structure was designated as "open-ended" since the ephemeral nature of all escape projects (save Death) signified an inevitable re-entry into contact with the world. Thus the structure of action (circular) can also be viewed as a process (cyclical), since each episode contains the need for its (structural) reiteration. This relationship of necessity which links episodes in a theoretically infinite syntactical chain constitutes an important aspect of the text's formal unity.

In addition to describing a few of the more important formal properties of the narrative, the first section of this study pointed towards the importance of defining the nature of the reality which the self confronts throughout the work. The second part ("Thematic Structures") attempted to elucidate the principal characteristics of this reality. In Voyage, reality is essentially physical. Physiological and biological revelations provide

the fundamental truths concerning existence. The body, for example, harbours two conflicting truths which both define the human condition and determine in large measure human behaviour. This irrefutable evidence of the body consists of the instinct for self-preservation and the simultaneous denial of this instinct, a denial implicit in the body's inevitable tendency towards decay and death.

The biological vision of reality which informs the text leads to a dismissal of the abstract (of philosophizing, of ideas, of intellectuals like Princhard), and to a marked preference for the concrete. Bardamu's quest for understanding will, therefore, be a physical quest; authentic knowledge can be gained only by entering into direct contact with the world. However, this unmediated relationship with reality proves consistently to be a source of suffering. Truth is intolerable. Consequently the protagonist oscillates between his desire to know more and the need to preserve oneself by avoiding painful truths. This dual attitude of the protagonist -- the result of his interaction with the world -- echoes the double narrative structure described in Part I.

Man's metaphysical fate is determined by the physical facts of life revealed through the body. He is condemned to decay and death. Fundamentally, man is a slave of Nature, an impotent victim of his organic being. This master-slave affiliation, which defines man's relationship with the cosmos, defines also the nature of social interaction. Society consists of two distinct groups, the rich and the poor, the exploiters and the exploited. At both the universal and the social levels of experience the individual is obliged, in order to survive, to repress both his lucidity and his revolt.

His principal activity is to devise various escape projects which permit him to avoid seeing things as they really are. The cinema, the fair, violence, obtaining wealth, drunkenness, rôle-playing, illness, madness -- all these are basically strategies conceived in order to avoid confronting intolerable truths. Condemned to inauthenticity -- "Il faut choisir, mourir ou mentir" (p. 200) -- man can truly escape only by death (Robinson) or, as an epigraph to the novel suggests, by passing to "l'autre côté de la vie" (p. 7), to the side of dream, imagination, and Art. This latter choice, as we have seen, appears to be that adopted by the protagonist, who, influenced by Robinson's absolute refusal of the world, will seek, by recounting all he has seen, to "me remplir la tête avec une seule idée, mais alors une superbe pensée tout à fait plus forte que la mort..." (p. 489).

The third and final section of this study dealt with the rôle of imagery in the organization of the text. Insofar as imagery realizes a synthesis of the concrete and the abstract, of the signifier and the signified, of the form and the content, it constitutes an excellent source of insight into the novel as a significant form. Thus an examination of various image clusters present in the novel revealed the importance of this poetic material in the creation of a coherent and ultimately unified text.

It was found that imagery in the work functions in three distinct manners. The novel's sensual imagery performs a concretizing function and creates a predominantly physical tone or atmosphere within which the narrative unfolds. This concrete dimension of the text corresponds to the biological vision of reality which informs the work's "content", and underlines clearly, if

implicitly, the value of the unmediated contact with reality which characterizes the protagonist's quest for knowledge and understanding.

A second group of images performs a primarily thematic function. By reason of their figurative nature, these images point beyond themselves towards the significant ideas which constitute the novel's thématique. Images of illness, as well as animal and carnival imagery, are among the elements which convey poetically various aspects of the work's message.

A third group of images possesses a symbolic potential such that it can function as a kind of structural support for the text as a whole. This group contains two core images and their respective clusters: imagery of the Journey and imagery of the Night. The journey image, in addition to underlying the quest and initiation structures of the narrative, serves to confer upon the text its spatial and temporal dynamism. The night image encompasses the diverse aspects of reality encountered by the individual. Night imagery also refers (implicitly) to the cyclical nature of reality and thereby contains the principle of iteration, which, as we observed earlier, characterizes the dynamics of being-in-the-world. The extremely broad nature of these core images (or symbols, or archetypes) of the Journey and the Night confers upon them an organizing potential which operates to unify the text in its diversity and multiplicity. The text may indeed be considered as the product of these kernel images whose function is essentially generative.

A principal object of this study of Voyage au bout de la nuit has been to demonstrate the existence of a certain unity within diversity, of analogous structural patterns operating at different "levels" of a text

considered as a functioning mechanism. Thus the dual structure of the narrative point of view is closely related not just to the character of Bardamu or to the rôle of Robinson, but also to the nature of reality (physical, metaphysical and social) and to the symbolic dualism of journey and night.

This analysis makes no claim to be exhaustive either as an inquiry into the novel's structural unity or as a description of the text's narrative, thematic and symbolic components. Indeed each section of this study could well be expanded upon. To be sure, a number of problems have been raised to which only tentative answers can be given. Nevertheless, I feel strongly that the general findings of this study clearly indicate some of the directions which further investigations should follow. Certainly, for example, some of the implications arising from the analysis of narrative structures -- the rôle of Robinson, the nature of action, the ambiguous je -- deserve to be pursued. Similarly, the section dealing with imagery could well be both amplified upon and complemented by a rigorous rhetorical analysis of figurative language in the novel. Another important element which is only casually alluded to here is the function of Céline's style as it is related to the significant structures described in this study. Can, for example, the use of tenses be related to the problems of narrative perspective? Does the two-tiered stylistic register of the novel -- langue parlée et langue écrite -- constitute an integral part of the vision which informs the work? Or can the narrator's predilection for absolute terms -- "une fois pour toutes", "c'est tout" etc. -- be assimilated in some manner

to the structural properties of the text? These and a host of other problems remain unsolved and demand further examination. Hopefully this study has helped to lay the groundwork for such investigations and will thereby contribute to some extent in furthering interest in and research upon Céline, and particularly upon Voyage, his most important, complex, and "méchant" (p. 9) fictional text.



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