

## Curing the Nation? Towards a Comparative Study of Medicine and Politics in Lu Xun and L.-F. Céline<sup>1</sup>

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On the outset, no pair in the business of literature could be farther away from each other than Lu Xun (1881-1936) and Louis-Ferdinand Céline (1894-1961). Written when China was on the rocky path towards becoming a republic, Lu Xun's literature is often sanctified as imbued with a patriotic spirit critical of Chinese society's inability to liberate itself from traditional Confucianism. The orthodox view about Lu Xun, the pseudonym of Zhou Shuren, being the "writer of the people" has generally been unchallenged up till recently, and was even readapted during the Cultural Revolution to give the Red Guard movement a new justification as they tore down any suspected traces of traditional ideology and counter-revolutionary revisionism, as Yu Hua once observed (139-40). It seems that Lu Xun's overtly politicized canonization also puts him in a rather fringe position within the genealogy of contemporary Chinese-language literature, as he gives off the impression of a politically engaged writer admired everywhere but lacking in artistic stardom, a peculiar status which distinguishes his legacy from some more "cultural" writers such as Eileen Chang whose post-mortem fame reaches out to a host of literary heiresses across the Chinese-speaking cultural sphere. The reception of Céline is located at the other extreme. Infamous for his life-long anti-Semitism and fascist politics, the writer of *Journey to the End of the Night* (hereafter referred to as *Journey*), born under the name Louis-Ferdinand Destouches, had to flee to Denmark after the fall of Nazi Germany and he was removed from public sight, at will or by force of his postwar disgrace. The authority he exerted in the literary field remained strong, however, after being subsequently rediscovered by the *Tel Quel* group around the 1970s, whose core members Philippe Sollers and Julia Kristeva both dedicated book-long studies to the publicly ashamed writer. In addition, Céline had almost the entire generation of Beat writers in America such as Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs as his loyalists, fascinated as they were by his visceral and explicit use of language and the virulent, almost terrorist, orality. Is it not a rather shady idea to consider them in the same light, as if the "saint of modern China" (Mao's phrase) could possibly have anything to do with the fascist "public enemy" (Henri Godard's expression)?

To insert their literary corpus back in the context of global history, the schism runs parallel to the differential development of modernization in each side of the geographical divide in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. According to this historical scheme, non-Western societies were preoccupied with the relevance of their cultural inheritance to the time of modernity,

an anxiety which the Western world had largely overcome in the previous century with respect to aristocracy and religion. The interpretations encrusted around Lu Xun and Céline testify to this cultural-historical dichotomy. Highly valorized for the literary modernism they represented or harbingered, the political commitments underpinning their artistic achievements continue to polarize readers decades after their death. As their respective fame grows either as the glorified nationalist writer written into textbooks, or as an ashamed ex-collaborator retrieved from obscurity only by some selected cultural elites years later, the unarticulated assumption about literary modernism is somehow preserved: Western high modernism is proto-elitist in that it embraces individualist innovation and formalist experiment at the expense of social responsibility, while non-Western writers are implicitly humanist preoccupied with socioeconomic modernity, and realism becomes their primary means to speak for the oppressed people. Eric Hobsbawm, who simply lumped Céline together with other artistic radicals but political reactionaries such as T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, called him a weaver of “nightmare even for cynics” (190), in strict opposition to his characterization of Lu Xun as adopting realism to discover and represent the reality of the people. Form/content is the watershed.

In this regard, to bring medical profession – a modern enterprise – of these writers to the forefront of our attention is not only to bring to light the relationship between the social position of the writer and his literary creation. It also helps to redefine the relation of literary works with the history of medical knowledge and modern politics. Michel Foucault devoted one of his major studies to the birth of modern medicine, in which he claims clinical science’s pseudo-objective gaze on the human body concerns the discursive construction of the totalizing concepts of nature, reality and the “Man,” a history which he associates with the rationalist episteme of the Enlightenment, when these concepts are philosophically assumed to be wholly comprehensible and representable as these discourses abstract them out of their essential vitality. Under this paradigm, the realist humanist tenets that inhere in medical science imply that politics is constituted by dissemination of discursive powers which leads to dehumanization. Our comparison concerns a curious case here. Lu Xun, who studied medicine in Japan, abandoned the prospect for a career in literature after seeing a slideshow of photos showing a group of Chinese people looking on nonchalantly at the spectacle of one of their compatriots accused of espionage being beheaded. This incident brought him to the conclusion that bodily strength, which medicine promotes, was inadequate to found a cultural people with enough ethical dignity and critical mentality required to resist injustice, causing his turn to literature as a means to “change their spirit” (“Preface to *Call of Arms*” iii). Céline would diverge from Lu Xun at this point yet again, as he never relinquished his status as physician. He would talk lovingly about it as his childhood dream somewhat dashed by the harsh reality that doctors then were treated with little respect. The curing profession even came into service for his public defense against post-war condemnations as he effectively denied his role as an ideologue in the Vichy government. For both of them, medicine is not vested with much power either in a generally social or specifically political sense. If modern medicine is, as many believe following Foucault, an instrument of power extending from Western rationality, the cases of Céline and Lu Xun should present a challenge rather than a confirmation. For example, how should the Foucauldian paradigm account for the fact that it is realism, usually associated with rationality and the Enlightenment, that was sought out in the literature of a writer who ultimately abandoned the realist-rationalist profession of medicine, while the other who is commonly associated with the avant-gardist rejection of

realism never severed his link to the medical institution? Against the conception that modernity develops with the professionalization of medicine policing and normalizing society through rationalization (which leads us from Foucault to Weber), it seems that the status of medical knowledge as distilled through Céline and Lu Xun offers an alternative view about the relationship between medicine, rationality and politics, in which medical discourse is politically bound to imaginaries of social transformation in which case justifying social order is not very relevant.

To limit the scope, our study focuses mainly on Lu Xun's short story "Medicine" collected in *Call to Arms* (written in 1919) and Céline's *Journey to the End of the Night* (first published in French in 1932). By making the association between medicine and political activities which constitute the symbolic matrix in both works, the study has three aims. The first is to question the opposition of East-West modernity, the belief that the East comes under the influence of Western "colonialist" rationality while the West increasingly shows signs of individual revolts against a thoroughly rationalized and alienating society. This argument is based on how the mind/body dualism presupposed by rationalist thinking as implicated in the philosophy of Western medicine is relativized in each work. This point is related to the question of realism. Realism, particularly the socialist variant of it, is commonly defined as the objective reproduction of the reality of ordinary people, a discourse constructed to "enlighten" readers about defined social problems. In our cases, little traces of realism are found; instead the texts are found to be consistently producing ambiguities in terms of the subject-object division, and the literary investigation of society is underscored by the mutually reinforcing interactions between the (maddened) mind and the (destitute) body. These textual features mark an important aspect of their politics, one which is not defined by coherent reproduction of reality but by a messianic promise inherent in modern medical and literary practices as much as political movements under which reality is shown as incomplete. Emphasizing this point against their shared similarities, the study also examines the degree of, and provides accounts for, the distinctions between both writers' political life, in the meantime tracing the political context of modernity as their shared interpretative background.

### **Mind/Body Dualism**

Initially, both primary texts present us a radical divergence in terms of their narrative structure and style. The presence of the narrator of *Journey* is extremely prominent and he often addresses the readers directly in retelling his misadventures. Bardamu comes from the trenches during the First World War which leaves him shell-shocked, after which he sets out to colonial Africa and America, before settling in the shambles of a medical practice among the disenfranchised population of France. On the other hand, both the narrator and the protagonist of "Medicine" are effaced from the text, a feature commonly branded as realist. Set in late Qing, the last dynasty of China, the story of "Medicine" begins with Hua Old Shuan visiting the execution site at midnight to acquire what he believes out of folkloric superstition would cure his son's tuberculosis: human blood, freshly jettied out of a beheaded convict. The victim on the death row is the revolutionary, Xia Yu, whose fate makes up the subplot of the story only indirectly narrated, hidden in the main plot which follows how the hope-inspiring "medicine" of the revolutionary's blood is transported to the Hua family to cure a child's disease which has no hope to improve. "Medicine" is, in summary, a gloomy picture of the underbelly of Chinese society under despotic oppression.

The novelistic portrayal of characters is generally considered as Lu Xun's exemplification of Chinese national character whose tenacious attachment to Confucian obscurantism made them impervious to the scientific ideas of Western Enlightenment. For instance, Wang Hui, who argues that Lu Xun "elevated the transformation of national character to a radically fundamental position," sees culturalist critique as central to Lu Xun's politics (126-27). According to this view, so entrenched are the Chinese people in their cultural backwardness that progressive political transformation must begin by reworking Chineseness, usually equated to importing Western ideas and culture. However, "Medicine" demonstrates that Lu Xun's dichotomization of cultures is at best a weak one; cultural belief is not wholly autonomous from the sociopolitical situation of the individual and is in no way essential to a culture. Lu Xun's iconoclastic critique of Confucian mores is inextricably connected to its "cannibalistic" kernel, a theme famously developed in "Diary of the Madman." In "Medicine", however, cannibalism relates less to stifling traditions imposed between the lines of moralistic classics, but is directly associated to the reality of the lowest strata of Chinese society, the massified city-dwelling lumpenproletariat like the Hua family and the semi-vagabond customers frequenting his rundown teahouse. Superstitious belief in the therapeutic power of human blood leads Old Shuan to a shady transaction with Kang the executioner, a minion of the corrupt imperial regime who has no qualms taking the revolutionary's life and shaming Old Shuan. Kang's brutal extortion of money from the poor Old Shuan with an obviously useless prescription fleshes out the relation of commanding and obeying in Chinese society, underscoring irrationality as a tool of control of the ruling class. This power structure is further nuanced as Kang complains how little advantage he procures out of the deal, because Red-Eye his superior is far more competent in the vampiric business of squeezing profits out of the convicts' family. Meanwhile, Old Shuan, who cares for nothing but the recovery of his only son's health, never questions the origin of the human blood. Despite multilayered domination and subservience in a highly stratified society, all these contradictory interests coincide at the last instant with the sacrifice of the revolutionary, either through putting him to death or consuming his blood without understanding his revolutionary ideas or questioning the legitimacy of his execution. Lu Xun's critical axe hacks on a multifaceted social reality where different levels are knotted together in reproducing social injustice against a lower and lower social class, by justifying oppression from the upper class and by extension making one's social position meaningful. Therefore, far from framing an essentialized "national character" of anti-scientific primitiveness descending from cultural history, Lu Xun perceives that traditional irrationalism is in fact an expression of individuals' need to adapt to China's dynastic hierarchy and survive in a man-eating-man social structure. It should be further pointed out that in Lu Xun's time tuberculosis was highly untreatable even by Western medicine, so by using this disease he could not have thought that Westernization can be an effective cure to the "diseased" Chinese mind.

Bigoted apathy, Lu Xun points out, may very well be the only "sane" option available to them. When the revolutionary tries to persuade the jailor Red-Eye to revolt, his egalitarianism is only met with derision. "He said the great Qing empire belongs to us. Just think: Is that kind of talk rational [*renhua*]?" (24) Coming to the conclusion that he is in fact insane (or inhuman, to be faithful to the original), everyone in the teahouse shows that their attitude is the only sanity and humanity in their knowledge. Intertextually, the revolutionary Xia Yu recalls the Madman, whose loneliness is constituted by a knowledge repressed by the

general ignorance of the others. His “rational” knowledge appears as insanity in a society ignorant of the true nature of its own suffering and collusion. The arbitrary “mad” diagnosis reached by social consensus reveals the people’s incapacity to reflect and the brutality of their censorship. The reassuring closure brought by the diagnosis inspires a conviviality which, like a disease, contracts Little Shuan who listens to the conversation on the side and is sent to “a paroxysm of coughing” (25) after the conclusion. Here, the mind which is too weak to reason is in a dialectical relation to the impoverished body, which is always *wanting*: struck by hunger, enfeebled by malnourishment, and incurably diseased. It is crushed by life’s necessities, the law of the material world of which the body itself is a part. The impoverished body, in fact, entombs the mind within a vicious cycle that reinforces unfreedom of the social subjects.

We are already parting ways from Cartesian rationality, whose core thinking is the separation of mind and body. In Lu Xun’s case, the disease-ridden body goes side by side with irrationality and thoughtlessness which are mental attributes. It seems that, already in “Medicine”, Lu Xun is critically reevaluating the turning point which directs him to literature: originally, his belief was that while health alone is incapable of liberating the Chinese people if they continue to think in slavish feudalist concepts, literature helps to bring forth spiritual improvement which should offer emancipatory hope. In “Medicine,” Lu Xun is at best disinclined to, if not wholly disillusioned by, the prospect of mental transformation. The revolutionary’s last words fall on deaf ears as he is surrounded by people whose enmeshment in life’s necessities prevents them from adopting a new pattern of thinking that could readjust them to the modern political situation. Lu Xun’s depiction of the teahouse conversation shows that the revolutionary’s positioning of himself as an authority that imparts truth to ordinary people, playing the role of literature conceived by a younger Lu Xun, changes nothing but reinforces existing prejudice. The disillusionment is very similar to the preoccupations of Céline, whose narrator-protagonist Bardamu has a stale career in his suburban clinic frequented by the cynical and dispossessed population in suburban Rancy, where the sky “is like Detroit, a smoky soup” (205). Among them are the Henrouilles, a family drawn close to Bardamu because the son and his wife want to procure him to commit their mother to the asylum so that they can get rid of a nuisance from the household. Grandma Henrouille, who displays signs of paranoia and delirium, refuses to take in any medical advice about her mental deterioration. The narrator describes her so:

Her dread [...] was the outside world, as though cold, horror, and death could come to her only from that direction and not from within. She evidently feared nothing from within, she seemed absolutely sure of her mind, as of something undeniable, acknowledged, and certified, once and for all. (220)

Absolute certainty in one’s sanity is already a symptom of madness. But rather than eagerness to establish her soundness of mind or lack thereof, Bardamu grows somewhat compassionate and rejects easy categories for her. “They called the old woman ‘mad’; that’s easy to say. [...] She may have her own reasons... [...] She wasn’t going to tell them to people like us, *people who were no longer inspired by life*” (220, emphasis added). Grandma Henrouille’s alleged madness is a result of a radical loss of hope from life which is deemed too deplorable to be worth living, a fact which owes much to the widespread impotence felt by the working-class population produced by Americanized industrial modernity. Medicine is hopeless to bring any positive change in this pit of despair to which these underdogs of society are assigned.

Madness is knotted with filth, fleas and other signs of abject poverty (221), which belongs to the materiality of the putrid body. Apart from his criticisms of modernity, Céline's work is "modernist" also in the sense that he "belongs to the same *vitalist* aesthetic tradition, to an anti-abstract vein" (Kaplan and Roussin 433), a feature critical to disembodied rational thinking, just as Lu Xun is associated with the vitalism of Nietzsche (cf. Wang 53-69; also Zhang). Céline's vitalism is in fact similar to Lu Xun's commitment to deconstruct the mind-body dichotomy, underscoring the immanent dependence of the mind upon the wretched and suffering body toiling through the empirical world.

More specifically, it is Bébert the child who Bardamu fails to cure in *Journey* that offers a mirror image to the plot of "Medicine." Bébert was one of the admittedly very few figures to whom Bardamu shows any affection, primarily because Bébert is a child. "If you've got to love something, you'll be taking less of a chance with children than with grownups, you'll at least have the excuse of hoping they won't turn out as crummy as the rest of us" (208-209). Evoking children's innocence much in the same way as Lu Xun's lifelong preoccupation with the same, Bébert is however first introduced to the readers through his aunt, who is looking for ways to stop his "filthy habits" of masturbation he learns from a "Gagat kid" (210). Bébert is in general depicted as an extremely curious child, preoccupied with what is going on in the world around him. Given how the world around him is, it means an interest in all sorts of depravities to which he has no immunity. "'Hey, doctor,' Bébert sings out. 'Is it true that they picked up a guy on the Place des Fête last night. Throat cut open with a razor. You were on duty, weren't you? Is it true?'" (209) "Evil" in the eye of adults is not recognized as such by the child, who, much like the Rousseauian "savage man," is as ignorant of vice as ungraced by virtue. Corruption, therefore, cannot be explained by an essentialist account of human or individual nature; the child's "evil," which he commits without knowing it, is the direct responsibility of his world made up by adults. For Lu Xun, this moral corruption of the child is thematized as inadvertent cannibalism, more vividly than Céline. In "Medicine" Little Shuan's cannibalism is an act committed in ignorance. Urged to gulp down the "black object," he never learns about the supposed therapeutic effect nor the true origin of the rice gruels [*mantou*]. But his eating of the buns is somehow linked to the adults' desire of him, a desire of "pouring something into him and at the same time extracting something" (22), as if the child is in the process of transforming into a vessel of the adults' cannibalistic values. Much in the same way as Lu Xun treats the subject elsewhere, cannibalism is a metaphor not only of oppression but of socialization into an anonymous, proto-bureaucratic despotism, the point at which the child loses his innocence "beyond good and evil."

Bébert's subsequent death reveals yet another pitfall of modern medicine and scientific rationality as unable to deliver the promise of restoring health and reinstating social equilibrium implied by bodily homeostasis. Running to the end of his means to save the little boy's life, Bardamu visits some colleagues in a municipal clinic called Joseph Bioduret Institute – a wordplay with *bio* and *durée*, to satirize how it fails its duty to prolong life – for their advice. But rather than offering more authoritative medical recommendations, the institute of a higher tier is in fact as dysfunctional as the suburban practicing physician at the lower end of the medical bureaucracy. Medical knowledge offers no enlightenment about the human body and the truth of health. It is contradictory, inconclusive and ineffective. The clueless professional holds no authority over the exegesis of the body.

Once acquainted with my difficulties, Parapine asked nothing better to help me and to orient my perilous therapy, but unfortunately, in twenty years, he had learned so many, so diverse, and so often contradictory things about typhoid that by that time he was just about unable to formulate any clear and definite opinion concerning that most commonplace ailment and its treatment.

“First of all, my dear colleague,” he said. “Do you believe in serums? Huh? Give me your honest opinion... And vaccines?... What do you really think?... Some of the best minds today have no use for vaccines at all... That of course is a bold way of thinking... Yes, indeed... but even so... in the last analysis... Don’t you think there’s a certain truth in that sort of negativism?...” (243)

In this case, medical authority is de-authorized by the proliferation of knowledge that grows out of the hands of individual practitioners. As medical science constitutes the body as object of positive knowledge, the contradictions that this empirical object provides for the positivist “medical gaze” (Foucault) undermine its logical unity, as revealed by discursive incoherence. Therefore for Céline, medicine is neither pursuing rationalization of the body nor an instrument of power; institutional disintegration of medicine bears witness to the absurdity of its democratic process to knowledge, which inevitably leads to a pathetic inability to decide amongst a plurality of conflicting opinions. He compares it to the superstition of religion that mystifies an already-lost power, like how Lu Xun links folkloric belief to a crumbling imperial regime. “Isn’t it the same with all religions? Hasn’t the priest stopped believing in God years ago, while the sacristan goes on believing...” (244) Cynicism, not belief in science and progress, rules in the modern world. Bébert’s death is as inevitable as Little Shuan’s.

The assumption that concepts of unhygiene in modern medicine are realistically founded on bacterial pathogenicity and thus distinguishable from the irrational and unscientific ideas of defilement in “primitive” cultures has been refuted by Mary Douglas. The anthropologist sees in both versions of pollution avoidance the same socio-cognitive inclination towards preserving a classificatory conceptual pattern that is culturally conditioned. Anomalies under this pattern are deemed defiling, untouchable and therefore avoided, a taint on the harmonious social fabric. For both Céline and Lu Xun, the fate of the underclass is closely linked to an inability to separate oneself from, if not also a pleasurable relish in, various abominations and improperly out-of-place matter, most importantly bodily excretions. As such, they are quite literally the scums of the earth. Bardamu’s neighborhood is a highly segregated one ridden with diseases too expensive to treat, and the people cannot help but confound the “higher” functions of the mind and “lower” ones of the body. Speaking of Bébert’s deteriorating health, his aunt could nonetheless express gaiety over the seasonal Brussels sprouts others give her as gifts, “‘It’s true,’ she was glad to admit, ‘they give me strength. And besides, they make me urinate’” (239). The nauseating social experience of suburban pariahs, however, is only one item in the Célinian list of social pathology, especially as it borders on the experience of mortality exposed by war, of which the narrator gives a highly expressionist account in a fractured syntax and graphical vocabulary.

I run into our captain... he’s leaning against a tree, in a very bad shape!... Dying!... He was holding his pants in both hands and vomiting... Bleeding all over and rolling his eyes... There was nobody with him. He was through... ‘Mama! Mama!’ he was sniveling, all the while dying and pissing blood... (34)

Relish in abominable scatology, reabsorbing and strengthened by what is excluded from high culture and conceptuality, underpins Céline's writings, as has already been analyzed by Kristeva (174-75). It should be reminded that Lu Xun's depiction of cannibalism in "Medicine" runs along the same line, because cannibalism is symptomatic of a subjective inability to feel repulsed and instead cannibalize on what the 'I' ought to expulse from itself, in order to become a "proper" subject (cf. Kristeva 11). On this point, it should also be noted that central to Lu Xun's critique of the dysfunctional Chinese society is the failure to instate individuality resistant to mass conformism. As explored by the ritualism in "The New-Year Sacrifice", the obsessive law of moral (and sexual) purity justifies social injustice perpetuated by public opinion against an "unclean" member. Yet the same theme also has echoes from "Medicine" in another way, where the magical belief of purging disease makes use of bodily reject, in this case the blood of the revolutionary, which is procured by colluding with despotic violence and is consumed at the risk of approaching barbarism. For both writers, impurities violently excluded from culture are reincorporated with an equally violent force into the lived experience of those subjects who are outcasts from the viewpoint of respectable society and political power.

### **Between Reality and Realism(s)**

As both writers' interests in the margins of society are politicized either by the writer himself (Céline) or his readers (Lu Xun), the status of "realism" in their works needs to be qualified, owing to the fact that now reality is not separate from the observer who incorporates it into the worldview of the social position he belongs to. As far as their interrogative probing of the limit of disembodied rationality goes, the Enlightenment concept of "reality" as a coherent and representable whole available for the "disinterested" objectivization by a writer-narrator becomes wholly questionable. The expressionist, proto-existentialist position is usually associated with Céline (see, for example, Raimond 10 and 481). Philippe Roussin, on the other hand, comes close to reinserting "realism" back into the understanding of Célinian *oeuvres* by arguing that the reality which interests Céline is a "defective totality" (259). Céline the writer is always preoccupied with an incomplete reality, and to write about it he adopts a tortured, amputated language seasoned with the three dots. The gruesome gores, reproducing the atrocities of the First World War, prevent the narrator from taking a dispassionate standpoint because reality is experienced as too traumatic, too "real." The disillusioned narrator detects in the war-torn urban landscape only "...Nothing. Streets, avenues, street lamps, and more lights in parallel lines, whole neighborhoods, and everything else *a black voracious void* [...]" (32; emphasis added). The real of the modern world, as revealed by the war, is an engulfing emptiness. This emptiness, as we shall see, is what Bardamu repeatedly runs into in his various voyages to war, America, French African colonies and back. It brims over the humanly acceptable limit only to return "back from the Other World" (*Journey* 204). The real world as revealed by this discourse is doubled, not between the "is" and the "should" as in revolutionary optimism, but between the "bad" and the "worse" of nihilism, a bellicose will-to-truth that flays embellishing deceptions off reality to expose its unpleasant core. The subject of nihilism runs free rein in his sinister emotions and ideological pathologies, a mental state fluttering between world domination and absolute worldlessness. Resonating with the novel's title, Bardamu writes of the war, "[t]hat night I had everything to myself. I was the owner of the moon, the village, and of an enormous fear" (30).

Underneath this defective realism is a paranoid subject who is both self-aggrandizing and tormented by paranoid fear, unable to “unmask” reality but completely possessed by it.

Lu Xun, on the other hand, is generally associated with a socialized strand of realism, so his conjunction with Céline in terms of representing reality should be surprising. The prologue of “Medicine” details Old Shuan leaving his home at midnight to the execution site – a journey to the end of the night – to meet his dealer. As opposed to the realist principle of giving complete information of the scene, the technique employed in “Medicine” is what Milena Doleželová-Velingerová calls “information manipulation,” withholding the disclosure of significant details to create tension. Old Shuan comes across a strange-seeming crowd, gathering for a purpose unknown to the readers till later, the description of which is also veiled in mystique and obscurity which suggests intrigue.

“Uh, an old chap.”

“Seems rather cheerful...”

Old Shuan started again and, opening his eyes, saw several men passing. One of them even turned back to look at him, and although he could not see him clearly, the man’s eyes shone with a lustful light, like a famished person’s at the sight of food. [...] Then he looked around and saw many strange people, in twos or threes, wandering about like lost souls. However, when he gazed steadily at them, he could not see anything else strange about them. (20)

The gathering of an undifferentiated mass of anonymous persons lusting for something unknown is ominous. Old Shuan grows persecutory-paranoid, not only because a grand sum of money is in his possession but because the benighted gathering, jealously desiring and even calling mutely for a violent execution, is a terrifying companion. But once he gets what he wants, he is immediately seized by a pompous surge of hopefulness unproportionate to his actual gain. “He was about to transplant this new life to his own home, and reap much happiness. The sun too has risen, lighting up the broad highway before him, which led straight home [...]” (21). Old Shuan is both pathetic and pitiful, because he is after all not so different from, if not even worse than, any member of the crowd who longs for Xia Yu’s sacrifice. Old Shuan’s psychical state is bipolar, paranoid and hyperbolic, and it affects how the exterior space of objective reality is experienced and represented as well (notice it is not clear whether the whispers Old Shuan overhears are not, in reality, hallucinated).

Far from being observant to the positivist principles of realism, Lu Xun’s deliberate use of broken language shows subversive tendencies towards the dominant form of politically committed realism. Not only is the mental state depicted in “Medicine” unable to maintain an intellectual barrier that defines the subject-object border, the language of the characters, with frequent interruptions of dashes and ellipses, leaves gaps and omissions in a style quite reminiscent of Céline. Most of the time, they are intended to replicate the texture of spoken language, where speech is sometimes crowded out by interferences, or to cover over a lack of meaningful content in idle talks, expressively capturing the essential meaninglessness of ordinary daily life. A more sociopolitical function is to tone down the speech with hesitation and deference by ceding authority to the socially superior addressee (see the conversation led by Kang in 23-25; cf. Parapine’s ellipsis-ridden speech when he speaks of his lack of means

about Bébert's illness in 243, quoted above). But the most significant function of ellipsis use is to silence Little Shuan in the place where he is supposed to speak.

"Son!... Don't you get up!... Your mother will see to the shop." (19)

"Do you feel better, son? – Still as hungry as ever?..." (24; translation modified)

The child is "cannibalized" in the sense that his speech is "eaten up" by other adults. Xia Yu's fate in the text is one of even more violent exclusion; his speeches are all reported through others. The revolutionary who provides political prescriptions is the object of discursive powers, from the jailors (political power) and the teahouse people (mass opinion) to his bereaved mother (filial duty) in the epilogue. His name, like his beheaded body, is not given in its completeness; it is only inferred from the family name provided by Kang and Widow Xia's appellation of his given name. Its textual counterpart is the erased inscription of the gilded words "古□亭□" (translating it as "Ancient Pavilion", the English translation did not replicate the erasure), which, if recovered, is the place of the execution of Qiu Jin the woman revolutionary in history (who is also the namesake of Xia Yu). The symmetry of the family of Hua and Xia, who never recognize each other, is the split form of another name of the Chinese race (*Huaxia minzu*). The mutilated syntax and vocabulary represent in a not so oblique way a defective and incomplete reality, broken up by power, violence and mutual non-understanding.

To further illustrate this linguistic point, we may highlight Céline's widely praised orality is in essence motivated by his *nationalism*: Céline himself acknowledges only Rabelais as his true literary predecessor, the medieval spokesperson of a vernacular and purely French culture which, argues Céline, has died out to the polluting influences of Latin classicism. Céline's stress is placed on an unmediated form of oral language set out to disrupt the silky-smooth fabric woven by neo-classical bourgeois hypocrisies. Although only hindsight permits readers to infer anti-Semitism from *Journey*, a vehemently anti-classical passage may shed some light on the Célinian hatred over a bastardized French culture and the decadent pseudo-aristocracy.

Proust, who was half ghost, immersed himself with extraordinary tenacity in the infinitely watery futility of the rites and procedures that entwine the members of high society, those denizens of the void, those phantoms of desire, those irresolute daisy-chainers still waiting for their Watteau, those listless seekers after implausible Cythereas. (61)

Céline's use of dirty language is for him a reversed process of *purification* by denouncing refined culture as alien to a more authentic pre-Romantic France rooted in vernacular language. On the other hand, while no May Fourth writers such as Lu Xun could dream of this explosive indecency of *argot* used in any literature, the writers in New Culture Movement (*Xinwenhua yundong*), who shared the patriotic ideals of "saving the nation with literature" (*Wenxue jiuguo*, also a title of Lu Xun's essay), similarly tried to liberate written language (*wenyan*) from its heavy baggage of classical Confucianism whose history the pre-republican China was desperately distancing from, to give rise to a more originary language that is genetically unpolluted. The return to oral tradition thus belongs to a popular ideology of language that would designate, in their view unproblematically, both the individual and the

*Volksgeist* of the people, a homogeneous mass as an emerging historical subject which in turn excludes the old ruling class and its sanctioned ideology. It is perfectly reasonable, therefore, to apply on the May Fourth writers this description for Céline, that he was in the process of radically “negotiat[ing] a relationship between the written and the oral” (Kaplan and Roussin 437). Lu Xun’s indebtedness towards oral language, albeit contained in the mouths of his socio-culturally inferior characters, follows largely the same vein, sharing Céline’s brokenness, inarticulacy and, sometimes, crudity, as heard from Kang’s dictions: “young rogue”, “scoundrel” and “rascal” (24), vividly bringing to life the language of lumpen townsfolks. In general, Lu Xun’s reluctance to give unreserved primacy to the oral breaks his fictions down into a pastiche of registers and styles, most clearly seen in the contraposition of classical and vernacular languages in “Diary of the Madman,” but also in the different tonalities of the narrator and characters in “Medicine.”

The symbolism of “Medicine” is also at variance with the belief underlying realism in an organized truth or ultimate meaning derivable from empirical reality. In the epilogue, the family of Hua and the Xia meet in the graveyard after their respective children’s death. Mother Hua tries to comfort the mourning Xia’s mother, who sees a crow standing on the branches. Out of superstition, Widow Xia immediately misinterpreted it as a sign. “‘I know,’ she continued. ‘They murdered you. But a day of reckoning will come, Heaven will see to it. Close your eyes in peace... If you are really here, and can hear me, make that crow fly on to your grave as a sign’” (27). But, as the story ends with the crow flying off, it does not answer Widow Xia’s plea; nor does the crow follow Mother Hua’s secret wish to remain still, perhaps because she could not believe a criminal can be wronged, i.e. the legal order is imperfect. In the end, reality conforms to no one’s intention or sense of justice. In contradistinction to the reassurance of how society represented by the teahouse comes to a consensual conclusion about the meaning of Xia’s final words, here reality cannot be reconstructed as a meaningful whole. “What could it mean?” asks Xia’s mother and the equally baffled reader. There is no ultimate justice, no final judgment to bring back meaning, either in life or after death, because the execution is illegitimate, and because the graveyard representing the nether world is organized to reproduce the inequalities and segregations that structure the living’s society. The crow cannot as many believe symbolize sublimity of an ultimately victorious revolution which will introduce ideal utopia to the real, not only because the somewhat ominous symbol is misfit but also because the story is impossible to be reintegrated into a holistic whole, as the bird darts into the indeterminacy of the “far horizon.”

Another symbol which attracts attention is the “flowers” on Xia’s grave. It is *artificially* arranged in two senses: first, the flowers have no roots, so their presence is the result of a human act, perhaps by Xia’s comrades whose existence is never indicated positively. Second, the flowers of the wreath, reveals the preface of the book, is put there by Lu Xun himself, a *deus ex machina* provided by the author outside the text which logically prohibits its existence. Its purpose is for Lu Xun to “obey [his] general’s orders” who were “against pessimism” at that time (vi). The act of putting the flowers is an authorial intervention, in defiance of the realist rule that the fictional world should be self-sufficient. While the writer intends the arbitrarily inserted symbol to comply with the general ideological trend of his time, this symbol is immediately misunderstood by Xia’s mother as a sign of Xia Yu’s avenging spirit (27). This act cannot even be subsumed under the brand of “critical realism,” because once inserted, the symbolic act of introducing an extraneous influence is too weak to be autonomous from

others' interpretations even though it is issued by the author. It is not at all consequential upon the sequence of events, no more than Xia Yu's revolution is. Not even his blood can fill a starving stomach long enough. (Readers are reminded of Bardamu's hopeless medical career in Rancy here.) Extra-textually, the same act is purported to be an encouragement for the fellow revolutionaries, but this "call to arms" concerns an ideological function in whose content the writer, despite his best wishes for the cause, holds no actual belief, a thought he wishes to conceal so as not to "infect [*chuanran*] with the loneliness which I found so bitter those young people who were still dreaming pleasant dreams" (vi; emphasis added). Since revolutionary engagement never accomplishes any goals (Xia Yu's sacrifice is meaningless) and is not even existentially resolute (Lu Xun's "loneliness" is incurable, even contagious), Lu Xun's psychical terrain approximates cynical realism, in which every political ideology, stripped of moralization, is exposed as an empty sham or wasted pathos, and what is left behind is simply the black bile of the "sickness unto death" (Kierkegaard).

### **Medicine, Literature, Politics**

Clearly, medicine affords one the power to represent reality as defective and in need of restorative intervention. With all these metaphors of infection, pollution, profane racial purity and revolution as ineffective placebo, a link can be traced between the roles of doctor and writer. Unlike Foucault's well-known thesis that modern medicine subtly reflects the power of moralization by an all-knowing panoptic society, Céline and Lu Xun subtly present us a view that medicine in early modernity carried a *messianic* promise, a (failed) promise of the political formation of the nation-state. Modern politics, bereft of transcendental dependence, must resort to immanent means to persuade or coerce its subjects into consensus. Authority as a natural legitimized form of dominance and obedience based on assigned positions has lost its relevance; modern conditions lay bare power as the ultimate organizing force of social relations precisely by denaturalizing it, abstracting it from its immediate holders so that it can be measured up against the modern invention of equality. That is why various forms of subjugation depicted in both works are tainted by violence and manipulation. They represent the immanentized power of the secular state as it arrogates itself to supremacy over the amorphous reality enveloping its subjects, and simultaneously becoming accountable for administering it. But the state simply cannot fill in the place left empty by the death of God, because the laws of nature and exigencies of life are strictly opposed to Divine Providence. Without it, these subjects can only explain the frustrations and disillusionments in everyday life by the impotence of the state composed solely of his fellow men. Pathology becomes politically meaningful by making bodily disequilibrium analogous to the malfunctioning state. Now there can be an etiology for various disarrangements in both the physical and political organism. A space is opened for political intervention, where treatment can be proposed and delivered. Through medicine, the actual state plagued by defects and failures resurrects itself by developing a symptomology out of it, as the disintegrations within the state-machine can now be vested with a symptomatic meaning within an organic and structural whole, albeit a porous one. Medicine, as a power-apparatus intervening in the wound between society (the people) and the state separated by modern institutions, retrieves the ideal of a unified Master-state buried underneath a dysfunctional society. The body is the perfect vector of this idea because it is immanent and directly manipulable, it has an inside and an outside, and it has a unity that cannot be divided without violence. It now represents the visible extension of an

undivided will, like the *patrie* incarnating a homogeneous people only contingently broken up by internal or external forces. *Medicine makes the people's body the embodiment of the state.*

The role of nationalism in literature can thus be rethought. It is not only the “patriotic” writer writing for his people who is part of the cult of nation; the cynic indicting the sorry state of social reality and calling for its transformation implicitly ascribes the divine attributes of omniscience and omnipotence to the state, not as it is at the hands of its current representatives but as a virtual power it should materialize. The thesis of “panoptic society,” while faithful to the aspirations of modern epistemology, in fact reproduces the same illusion of absolute mastery: the most eloquent critique of the Foucauldian paradigm comes from Marcel Gauchet and Gladys Swain, whose joint effort in *Madness and Democracy* sheds light on how the institution of asylum arises from modern society's refusal to come to terms with the fantasmatic nature of the omnipotent body politic that totalitarianism tries to translate into reality (cf. “Totalitarianism as an Illusion” 84-92). Céline's fascism bears witness to a similar appeal to the absolutist state: common people are wretched, the elites are self-congratulatory and imbecile, *but* all can be lifted to sublimity by a draconic intervention into history, through the “negativism” of “great minds” (Parapine's words, cited above) which in an apocalyptic explosion of greatness radically destroys the liberal, pluralistic *bon sens*:

Listen well, comrade, and don't fail to recognize and understand the tell-tale sign, which glares from all the murderous hypocrisies of our Society: ‘Compassion with the fate, the condition of the poor...’ I tell you, little man, life's fall guys, beaten, fleeced to the bone, sweated from time immemorial, [...]. Louis XIV, at least, and don't forget it, didn't give a hoot in hell about his beloved people. Louis XV ditto. He smeared his asshole with them. True, we didn't live well in those days, the poor have never lived well, but the kings didn't flay them with the obstinacy, the persistence you meet with in today's tyrants. (56)

That the authoritarian exercise of power exacerbates social inequalities is unabashedly confessed. Nevertheless, to make self-interest the general rule for human affairs – the core of *Realpolitik* thinking – props up a cult of power which is supposed to be more salutary than to the hypocritical philanthropic rhetoric such as one represented by the likes of Voltaire and Diderot “who first started giving people ideas” (*Journey* 57). The essentially proto-existentialist thesis that life is unbearable by nature is preserved. But into this natural law Céline reads the material reality of the poor, so that poverty is thought to have the same banal and ineradicable character as the futility of earthly existence itself. So instead of organizing society in a different way, the hope for the poor is to attack those living in complacency by inflicting them with the same abject fate, an assault by which the disenfranchised mass finds a new power at their disposal. The ideals of an equal society is perverted and then repudiated. Biological materialism comes to organize the appearances of reality, structuring their meanings to spite these ideals. Medicine, discredited and disillusioned with itself, enjoys a zombified new life in politics. The power of propaganda trumps over the ineffectuality of literature because propaganda writing is more genuine as to the ideological nature of every discursive practice. History seems to confirm that this passion for the “authentic” foregrounds fascism.

If the kernel of Céline's hostile cynicism is a kind of "political realism" in which nothing matters but power and seizure of power, Lu Xun's preoccupation lies instead in how to emancipate the people from complicity with the state. Céline's profane Frenchness is a reinvention of the national myth by reversing the conceptual hierarchy but leaving the concept of power intact. On the other hand, Lu Xun attempts to break apart the very conceptual order which binds political power to statecraft. The critique of Lu Xun is not primarily directed towards the elite class, but to the people who lend support to social structure regulated by the state. By incessantly showing that the people actually *enjoys* the aestheticized spectacle of decapitation in which they also unknowingly suffer (the Hua-Xia split), Lu Xun subtly makes the argument that "the people," in fact, cannot be represented as undivided – not even by the revolutionary who contends "the great Qing empire belongs to us" and acts in the name of the people. The aporia in "Medicine" is that, while Xia Yu's revolution can be legitimate only by appealing to the principle of universality founded on a unified people, ironically it is the general will which sanctions Xia Yu's execution – what use is universal equality in politics if the people do not recognize the same as regulative in their everyday life? Lu Xun reveals his skepticism towards popular sovereignty: simply giving power to the mass, who are pitted against each other by their dependence on bodily exigency, can produce proto-fascist subjects who aptly exploit the new opportunities in democratic conditions and turn into accomplices of an oppressive state. Lu Xun's respectful yet critical distance in relation to his massified and marginalized characters is thus an important aspect of his politics that distinguishes him from Céline.

It begs the question whether Lu Xun's critique of the people makes him a closeted elitist. It may however be noted that Lu Xun inscribes his critique in the inconsequentiality of revolution. As argued above, "Medicine" represents the author's efforts to negotiate with his disillusionment with medical and literary practices. Medicine promotes bodily health, but material life is irrelevant to founding a more ethical community. Literature purports to transform the "spirit" of the people, and yet what "Medicine" implicitly rejects (and, explicitly, in the Madman's unanswered call for society to abandon cannibalism by simply "changing one's ways") is the idealism common in May Fourth literature that mental transformation simply happens by a determination of the will. Revolutionary idealism is as mistaken as religious superstition in the belief in a Will that is disembodied and imperishable, either in the form of an avenging spirit or a vindictive historical Idea. Rejecting the messianic promise in both idealism and materialism costs the revolutionary all his claims of power to prescribe how to change the world, to save it from its broken actuality. While it preserves the modern idea that reality is produced and malleable by humans as social subjects and thus imperfect, reality is also disenchanted, essentially *imperfectible* by revolution, medicine or literature. We may pause to reflect on Xia's last words, read as an incitement to revolt: the revolutionary's formulation of power redistribution actually preserves the existence of the Qing empire. Universalization of political rights, far from empowering the people, keeps existing power structure intact by mere formal incorporation. The stake of democratization is thus raised, at least higher than the revolutionary discourse on the sovereignty of the people as a new mechanism of power that legitimizes the state. Lu Xun's most significant effort lies in making the problem of how to transform reality and intervene into history an insoluble one.

## Conclusion

My readings of Lu Xun and Céline bring me to conclude that modern medicine and literature define their own position with respect to reality by representing it in a necessarily incomplete mode. It calls for a reconsideration of the Foucauldian thesis: both discourses are linked to power, but not by virtue of an anthropomorphic epistemology but by virtue of a body politic in need of rehabilitating itself to an increasingly egalitarian society. Seen in this perspective, economic discrepancy between the East and the West is relatively less important as a determining historical factor. Rather, political and legal equality in the modern world, where the disenchanting reality is treated as slippery and subject to human management and intervention, is decisive in the appearance of a specific kind of power which makes populist use of “the people” that effaces all actual differences among individuals. In my examples, medicine is intimately related to it by appealing to the biological organism in humans, politicizing bodily and mental differences as requiring material external intervention by a curious conjuncture of a mob-ilized society and the Hobbesian state. Literature participates in the same process by seizing onto the sociocultural origin of spoken language within a hierarchized order turned upside down, overlapping with bio-racial concepts and discourses. If Céline and Lu Xun ultimately diverge in their politics, the present study seems to conclude that it is an individual difference not quite available for sociological explanations; it remains to be seen how the democratic invention of the polyphonic civil society (Bakhtin) as well as individual appropriation and even collapse of this social space can be illuminating. Also, the point on the uncertainties produced by formal equality of modern society has been raised, most notably in some of the analyses of totalitarianism by Hannah Arendt and Claude Lefort (the latter also relates it to the problem of body image); more researches are required to uncover in greater details the nature of the links between literature, medical discourse, and politics in its democratic, revolutionary and totalitarian modes.

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### Note:

<sup>1</sup> The paper uses *pinyin* for Chinese romanization except for character names, which are taken from the English translation cited. Unless otherwise specified, all translations are my own.

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