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### THE POETRY OF DAY-TO-DAY LIFE

*poem* (noun): a composition in stanza, especially one that is characterized by a highly developed artistic form and by the use of heightened language and rhythm to express an intensely imaginative interpretation of the subject.

**S** OON AFTER JESSE AND CÉLINE meet on a train at the beginning of Richard Linklater's *Before Sunrise* (1995), Jesse tells her about an idea he has for a cable-TV program that would run for a year, 7 days a week, 24 hours a day. His idea is to enlist 365 documentary-makers around the world to film local people going about their daily lives. The program would be the sum of these documentaries, one shown each day for a year. Amused but sceptical, Céline suggests that the program would amount to a mere record of the "mundane boring things everyone has to do every day of their fucking life". Jesse disagrees. He thinks it would reveal "the poetry of day-to-day life".

The scene is important because it establishes from the outset Jesse's ambition to make art of the kind he goes on to make in his novels, art that explores aspects of day-to-day life we often take for granted. But it also serves an important meta-narrative purpose, as it prompts the realisation that *Before Sunrise* could itself be one of those documentaries. Shot in a fly-on-the-wall style, Linklater—or, better, the implied author of the *Before* trilogy (more on this presently)—himself explores aspects of

day-to-day life that we often take for granted. Immediately after Jesse convinces Céline to leave the train with him in Vienna and keep him company until the next morning when he flies back to the United States, they encounter two young actors who tell them that, since the museums are about to close, there is nothing for them to do. They therefore just wander around and talk, and, as a result of all that talking, a romance develops.

One thing we take for granted explored by the implied author of the *Before* trilogy is thus the genesis and growth of a romantic relationship. This feeds back into the narrative at the very beginning of *Before Sunset* (2004), as in the intervening nine years, Jesse becomes a novelist whose first novel is the story of *Before Sunrise*, and in *Before Midnight* (2013), we learn that his second novel is the story of *Before Sunset*. The implied author/character distinction is thus blurred within the trilogy, with Jesse seeming to represent the trilogy's implied author. This blurring also occurs elsewhere. For example, in *Before Sunset*, Jesse tells Céline that he has a recurring dream in which he wakes to find himself in bed with her. In *Waking Life* (2001), made between *Before Sunrise* and *Before Sunset*, Linklater included a dreamy scene of Jesse and Céline in bed together, a scene unlike any that figure in the trilogy.

These initial observations highlight two quite different aspects of day-to-day life we often take for granted explored by the *Before* trilogy's implied author. The first is the genesis and growth of a romantic relationship. The second is the creation and consumption of art, something that is explored within the narrative in part by having aspects of the narrative prompt meta-narrative thoughts about the implied author's intentions. The simultaneous exploration of these two aspects of day-to-day life in a work of art will come as no surprise to those familiar with contemporary philosophical accounts of what it is to be in a romantic relationship and what it is to be a consumer of art, as there are illuminating philosophical accounts of these relationships according to which each bears a striking similarity to the other. Let's therefore begin by considering these accounts on their own terms.

### **Being in a romantic relationship and being a consumer of art**

What is a romantic relationship? According to the account just alluded to, a romantic relationship is a form of friendship, where a friendship

is in turn a dynamic relationship in which the well-being of each of the friends is bound up with that of the other, and where what constitutes the well-being of each changes over time in response to the other's direction and interpretation (Baltzly and Kennett, 2016; Nehamas, 2016). To be friends is to be mutually disposed to acquire new desires in response to the desires of the other (this is the other's direction), and it is to be mutually disposed to come to interpret events in the world and in one's own life in response to the interpretations one is offered by the other (this is the other's interpretation). Though these are descriptive claims about what it is to be friends, to the extent that we have reasons to satisfy our desires, friendship so understood turns out to be a significant source of reasons for action.

In the ideal case of friendship—that is, in a friendship in which the disposition for direction and interpretation is maximally manifested—the possibility of acquiring new desires and novel interpretations is inexhaustible. There is always something new, or perhaps deeper, to enjoy and learn. Friends in the ideal case are thus made for each other by each other, and they continually make each other anew in ways that are open-ended. Conversely, friendships that are less than ideal are those in which the parties aren't suited to each other. They don't constantly find new things to enjoy or learn. At the limit, they are mere acquaintances. The distinctive feature of friendships that are romantic, according to this account, is that the well-being of each with which the well-being of the other is bound up includes aspects of the well-being of each sourced in their sexuality. Nothing is off the table when it comes to mutual direction and interpretation within a romance. This is why people's romantic relationships are so often central to who they are and their take on the world.

As already mentioned, one striking feature of this account of a romantic relationship as a kind of friendship is that it provides a model for what it is to engage with an artwork (Booth, 1988; Nehamas, 2007). Though this might initially seem surprising, it is less so once we remember that to regard something as an artwork is to think of it as created by an author who intends it to have certain effects on us, and that to consume an artwork is to set yourself the task of discovering what those intentions are. We do this by coming up with an interpretation—that is, an account of the author's intentions for which we find evidence in the artwork itself—and these interpretations are successful to

the extent that they encourage us to engage with the artwork again and come up with further hypotheses about the author's intentions. These further interpretations might be more nuanced versions of the original interpretation, or completely novel interpretations; the possibilities are again open-ended, limited only by what engaging with the artwork prompts within us.

Importantly, these interpretations need not be constrained by the actual author's intentions. Actual authors often produce artworks that invite interpretations that transcend the intentions they had when they created them, so in giving such interpretations, we imagine the artwork having been created by an author with the required intentions. This is why I earlier talked about the *implied author* of the *Before* trilogy. An actual author's ability to create artworks that transcend their intentions in this way, it is plausible to suppose, is one mark of a truly great author; plausible to suppose that the very best artworks are those for which the possibility of coming up with interpretations that prompt novel experiences that prompt further interpretations, all of which go beyond the actual author's intentions—these are the analogues of direction and interpretation in the case of romantic relationships—is literally inexhaustible. There is always something new to enjoy and learn by engaging with them. Conversely, artworks that are less good are those that exhaust the possibility of such transcendent engagement and interpretation. At the limit, they merely provide an opportunity to pass the time.

With these accounts of what it is to be in a romantic relationship and what it is to be a consumer of art in mind, let's return to the *Before* trilogy. As we will see, the trilogy encourages us to have thoughts about each by making us aware of ourselves as an instance of the latter.

### **Céline and Jesse's romance as a case study of mutual direction and interpretation**

The trajectory of Céline and Jesse's relationship is in many ways a case study of what it is to be in a romantic relationship, understood as a form of friendship in the way just described. One obvious question we find ourselves asking throughout the trilogy is thus how close their relationship is to the ideal.

Soon after they learn that the museums are closed in *Before Sunrise*, Céline and Jesse head off to a record store, and as they listen to a

romantic song huddled together in a listening booth, they steal secret glances at each other, glances that suggest a romance will blossom. From the record store, they stroll through the museum district, catch a tram to the Cemetery of the Nameless, and head to Prater Park. On the way, their conversation is wide-ranging, covering their first sexual feelings, the very idea of each person having a soul, and death. On the Ferris wheel, with the view of the Danube and the sunset, Céline initiates their first kiss.

Afterwards, they wander through the amusement park and talk about their relationships with their parents and their parents' relationships with each other. Jesse's parents argued often and eventually divorced, but not before Jesse learned that his father hadn't wanted him, something that made him think of "the world as this place where I really wasn't meant to be". By contrast, Céline felt and still feels secure in the knowledge that her parents love her, and she has a strong sense of commitment to use the freedom they afforded her to make the world a better place. Still together, her parents were part of the May 1968 student uprisings in France, "revolting against everything".

After eating a meal together in a square, Céline has her palm read.

PALM READER: You are an adventurer, a seeker. An adventurer in your mind. You are interested in the power of the woman, in a woman's deep strength, and creativity. You are becoming this woman. You need to resign yourself to the awkwardness of life.

She then turns her attention to Jesse and asks Céline whether he is a stranger to her. Céline confirms that he is, the palm reader looks perfunctorily at his palm and tells her, "You'll be alright. He is learning". Unhappy at being dismissed, Jesse scoffs at Céline's interest in the palm reader who he thinks is clearly a fake.

They visit an old church, and as they wander towards the Danube, Céline gently tells him that the thing she likes least about him so far is his "whining" reaction to not being the centre of attention when the palm reader read her palm: "You were like a little boy walking by an ice cream store, crying because his mother wouldn't buy him a milkshake or something". They walk past a street poet who offers to write a poem

for them using a word of their choice. Céline offers “milkshake”. She is impressed with the result and invites Jesse to agree. Though he thinks she’s been taken in again, and initially suggests that the poems are pre-written ready for the insertion of the provided word, he reconsiders and tells her that he loves it.

They go to a bar, listen to live music, and play pinball. While doing so, they each confess that they have recently been left by a partner with whom they thought they had a future. Céline’s breakup was especially traumatic. Her lover accused her of “blocking his artistic expression”, and that led her to have an obsession with him for which she sought help from a therapist. Jesse’s breakup happened in the weeks immediately prior to his being on the train, so the experience is still raw. They watch a street performance of a birth dance and then have a heart-to-heart conversation about whether they ever want to fall in love with someone again. They are both ambivalent, but Jesse more so. He worries that falling in love would prevent him from excelling at something, whereas Céline, though determined to be independent, can’t help but think that “if there’s any kind of magic in this world, it must be in the attempt of understanding someone, sharing something”.

They go to another bar and each pretends to be the other’s best friend who they ring and tell about the person they’ve just met on a train and with whom they have spent the day in Vienna. By this stage, it is clear that they have deep affection for each other. They sit on the steps of the Albertina Museum, overlooking the Vienna Opera House, and muse about how dreamlike their time together has been. They go to a restaurant and resolve that instead of pledging to be together forever, this will be their one and only night in each other’s company. They wind up in yet another bar where Jesse convinces the bartender to give him a bottle of red wine, on the promise of being paid after he returns to the USA, so that he can have a farewell drink with his female companion.

They walk to a park and lie together on the grass. Céline tells Jesse that she doesn’t want to have sex with him, as she doesn’t want to be remembered as part of “a great story”. They kiss, their kisses become more passionate, Céline rolls onto her back, Jesse rolls on top of her, and, as we discover later in *Before Sunset*, make love twice. The next morning, they walk through deserted streets back to the train station. There they admit that they desperately want to see each other again. They embrace and kiss, but they resolve not to exchange addresses. Instead, they will

meet on that same platform on 16 December, exactly six months from the day they first met, and then they go their separate ways.

To repeat, the evolution of Céline and Jesse's relationship is in many ways a case study of mutual direction and interpretation. Their commitment to having a romantic relationship at the end, the kind they had been ambivalent about having just a few hours earlier, is the result of the many smaller ways in which they have changed as they walked and talked about the nature of each other's relationships with their families, friends, and lovers; their ambitions; their thoughts about the passage of time, death, and religion; their attitudes towards sex, love, and marriage; and their coming to know about, accept, and even be moved by each other's flaws and vulnerabilities. But not only do they fall in love, we fall in love with them. We want them to meet again in six months, and we hope that if and when they do, they still feel the same way about each other.

### **Thinking about the trilogy as a case study of consuming art**

I suggested earlier that the implied author of the *Before* trilogy's aim is to reveal the poetry of day-to-day life. He manages to do that not just by telling Céline and Jesse's story, but by elevating it.

It is, for example, striking that the structure of the trilogy resembles that of a poem. There are three stanzas, and, as the titles suggest, these stanzas depict the stages of a loving relationship which are themselves likened to the three stages of a day. The first stanza, *Before Sunrise*, depicts the dawning of a loving relationship; the second, *Before Sunset*, depicts what it is like when people who had a past experience of love that didn't work out, and who have reconciled themselves to never loving again, are given another chance; and the third stanza, *Before Midnight*, depicts the pressures to which loving relationships become vulnerable as they evolve over time, and their fragility when they are subjected to those pressures.

As befits their subject matter, these depictions get more complex as the trilogy proceeds, but much like the stanzas of a poem, each depiction has the same internal structure, and hence, the same rhythm. A question is posed near the beginning of each film which gets answered towards the end, and at the very end of each film, a further question is posed that gets answered at the beginning of the next film. This rhythmic pattern of

questions and answers both drives the narrative and constitutes the connective tissue between the three films. That in turn adds to the drama, a drama dictated by the drama of a romance over time. When we think of the *Before* trilogy in this way, we think of the implied author as having self-consciously crafted it to be an example of what it is about. The trilogy reveals the poetry of a romance via its poetic form.

Consider *Before Sunrise*. When we first meet Jesse and Céline, they are strangers on a train who begin talking to each other after a middle-aged couple in their carriage have a heated argument that leads one to storm out and the other to follow. Céline and Jesse's initial conversation is easy and flirtatious. We therefore find ourselves wondering: *Will they fall in love?* After Jesse persuades Céline to leave the train with him in Vienna and continue their conversation while wandering around—if she doesn't, he tells her, her future-self will never forgive her not finding out what might have been—this question is answered within the film, and the answer is: Yes. But when they decide not to exchange addresses or telephone numbers at the end, and instead to go their separate ways, assuming they still feel the same way, the question we find ourselves asking is: *Will Jesse and Céline meet again in six months?*

*Before Sunset* begins by answering that question: No, Jesse and Céline did not meet again in six months. Though Jesse went to Vienna, Céline couldn't because her grandmother died and she had to attend the funeral. Jesse, who in the intervening nine years has turned his experience with Céline into a novel, is in Paris as part of a book tour. Towards the end of an interview and book-signing at the bookshop Shakespeare and Company, he sees Céline standing off to the side. We immediately ask ourselves: *Do they still feel the same way about each other?* This question is answered within the film. After spending an hour or so together, catching each other up on what happened that fateful day when they were supposed to meet, and what they have done with themselves since, we learn that they do still feel the same way about each other. Each is happy and successful in their work, Jesse as a novelist and Céline in environmental reform, and each is currently in a relationship. However, in neither case have they found a connection with someone of the kind they had with each other nine years ago. This poses a further and more complicated question. Though Jesse is in an unhappy marriage, he has a four-year-old son, Henry, to whom he is devoted. The more complicated question we are left with is therefore: *Will Jesse leave his wife for Céline?*



*Before Midnight* is set nine years later and begins with Jesse dropping Henry off at the Kalamata Airport in the Peloponnese after he has spent the summer at a writers' retreat with Jesse and Céline and their six-year-old twin girls, Ella and Nina. The answer to the question posed at the end of *Before Sunset* is therefore: Yes, Jesse did leave his wife. But the issue with Henry has remained unresolved. Henry must return home to his mother in Chicago, and the next day, Jesse and Céline will return with their girls to Paris. Feeling that his opportunity to spend time with Henry during his formative years is slipping away, on the drive back to the villa they've been staying at, Jesse asks Céline whether she would consider a move to Chicago. Céline tells him that he always feels sad when Henry goes back to his mother, suggesting that he will get over it as he always does. Besides that, Henry's mother hates Jesse, so if they moved to Chicago, she would only allow him to see him once a month anyway. Moreover, to make matters even more complicated, Céline has just decided to accept a new job in Paris working for the government as an environmental regulator, a job that will allow her to be much more effective in achieving the environmental reforms she cares so deeply about. When Jesse continues to push the idea, in Céline's view unreasonably, she screams that this is the kind of issue that people break up over. The question posed near the beginning of *Before Midnight* is therefore: *Will we witness Jesse and Céline break up?* This question is answered negatively within the film, but the answer also proves to be much more complicated than we initially thought it would be. For much of *Before Midnight*, we think that if Jesse and Céline were to break up, they would break up over Jesse's desire to spend more time with Henry. However, towards the end of the film, when they are in a hotel room their friends have given them for a night so that they can have romantic evening together, we discover that Céline has not been happy for some time. In her view, Jesse has crafted their marriage to enable his freedom at the expense of hers. When he is unresponsive to her complaints, she confronts him with her suspicion that he slept with a woman when he was on a book tour after the twins were born. Jesse fires back that he knows that she comforted her ex-boyfriend by fellating him when she attended his mother's funeral, but that he doesn't care because he accepts that she is a "complicated human being" and doesn't want to live "a boring life where two people...are institutionalized in a box that others created". The film ends with Céline storming off, telling Jesse she doesn't love him anymore, Jesse following her, and eventually

getting her to agree to return to the hotel room with him by reading a letter from her future-self telling her that she had the best sex she'd ever had in the Peloponnese. The question posed at the end of *Before Midnight* is therefore: *Will Jesse and Céline's marriage survive their mutual acknowledgement of their infidelity and Céline's perception that their relationship works to Jesse's advantage but not to hers?*

What we have here is thus the story of a mostly unremarkable romantic relationship elevated by being told in the form of lyric poetry. The implied author of the trilogy elevates Céline and Jesse's romance in other ways as well. For example, at the very beginning of *Before Sunrise*, as the initial title sequence appears on the screen, we hear Purcell's overture to *Dido and Aeneas*, an opera about Dido's love for Aeneas, and her despair when he abandons her. Those who reflect on this soundtrack choice immediately after watching *Before Sunrise* are led to expect that Jesse will decide not to meet Céline in six months and that Céline will be devastated. But when we learn what actually happened at the beginning of *Before Sunset*—that it was Céline who wasn't able to meet Jesse, and Jesse who was devastated—the choice of the *Dido and Aeneas* overture seems to be misleading. It isn't until we get to the end of *Before Midnight*, 18 years later, that we realise how appropriate it was. In Céline's eyes, Jesse has indeed abandoned her, but the abandonment is psychological rather than physical.

Other poetic features of the trilogy are anticipated in the title sequence to *Before Sunset* as well. The first image we see as we listen to *Dido and Aeneas* overture is a black screen; there is an edit and we see moving images of train tracks at the rear of the train shot from above; there is another edit and we see moving images from the rear of the train as it speeds through the countryside. There are more edits as the train crosses rivers and goes past rural villages; eventually, we see a passenger inside the train walking down the corridor and entering a carriage; and at that point, the title sequence comes to an end. The title sequence anticipates the fact that we are on a journey, and indeed journeys—to Vienna, around Vienna, and from Vienna to Paris and the USA; to, around, and from Paris; and to, around, and from the Peloponnese—figure literally in all three films. But a journey figures in the trilogy in a more metaphorical sense as well, as it depicts how Céline and Jesse's relationship evolves over an 18-year period, and it does so by allowing us to get inside their heads at three crucial moments in their journey together.



The literary use of a journey both literally and metaphorically to get inside the head of someone is familiar, and the *Before* trilogy draws our attention to parallels with a striking example. Céline and Jesse's initial meeting occurs on 16 June, Bloomsday, so-named after Leopold Bloom, the main character in James Joyce's novel *Ulysses*. Joyce's novel consists of three books, just as the *Before* trilogy consists of three films. *Ulysses* depicts one day in the life of Leopold Bloom, 16 June 1904, as he goes from place to place keeping various appointments around Dublin. *Before Sunrise* begins on 16 June, and it also takes place over the course of one day, and as we have already seen, the trilogy similarly depicts the stages of a romantic relationship as being like the stages of a single day from before sunrise to sunset to just before midnight. *Before Sunset* begins with Jesse attending a book-signing in Paris at Shakespeare and Company, and a bookshop by that name that existed in Paris in the 1920s was frequented by many literary figures, including James Joyce. *Ulysses* is written in a stream-of-consciousness style, revealing the multitude of thoughts and feelings that run through the mind of the narrator. The journeys in the *Before* trilogy similarly provide an opportunity to get inside the heads of Céline and Jesse through their revealing and free-flowing conversations with each other. *Ulysses* depicts both men and women as intensely sexual. The *Before* trilogy similarly depicts Céline and Jesse as intensely sexual. Indeed, when they first meet on the train to Vienna in *Before Sunrise*, Jesse asks Céline what she's reading. Rather than tell him, she holds up the book: a collection of stories by Georges Bataille, considered by many to be pornographic, that explore the idea that the self is a fusion of the spiritual and the sexual. At Céline's request, Jesse shows her what he is reading: Klaus Kinski's *All I Need is Love*, a sexually explicit account of the actor's lifelong obsession with girls and women. These books anticipate the infidelity each goes in for.

### **Being in love, creating art, and the perfect vs the real**

*Before Sunrise* concludes with a montage of the different places in Vienna Céline and Jesse had been, but without them being present. *Before Sunset* begins with a montage of the various places in Paris Céline and Jesse will be, again without them being present. These montages provide visual continuity between the two films, but they also help elevate Céline and Jesse's relationship by causing us to experience their absence. It is as if the universe demands that they be together in these spaces.

As we watch the montage in *Before Sunset*, we hear Julie Delpy sing her composition “An Ocean Apart”, a song about a woman separated from her lover who wonders whether he will still love her when they’re reunited. We therefore know from the beginning of *Before Sunset* that Céline and Jesse didn’t meet six months later, and we are also primed to think about the fact that Julie Delpy is a singer/songwriter, a meta-narrative blurring of the actor/character distinction that comes to have narrative significance later in the film.

After Céline and Jesse are reunited in *Before Sunset*, we learn that Céline worries that she will die without achieving everything she wants to achieve. She wants to “paint more, I want to play my guitar every day, I want to learn Chinese, I want to write more songs”. This exchange sets up the ending of *Before Sunset* when Céline sings a song she wrote for Jesse to Jesse, and then, to his great delight, dances alone while doing an alluring impression of Nina Simone talking to audience members at a concert. The fact that we hear Delpy sing her composition at the beginning of *Before Sunset*, that Céline’s statement tells us what she wants to achieve but is afraid she won’t, and that we hear her so winningly sing her song for Jesse to Jesse at the end establishes something important about Céline.

Though it is Jesse who is portrayed as having artistic ambitions in *Before Sunrise*, and whose being a novelist is crucial to the storylines of *Before Sunset* and *Before Midnight*, in *Before Sunset*, we learn that Céline has both the talent and creative impulse to be an artist herself, something that was anticipated in *Before Sunrise* when the palm reader told her: “You are interested in the power of the woman, in a woman’s deep strength, and creativity. You are becoming this woman”. This in turn suggests that Céline and Jesse’s relationship is more complicated than we have managed to convey so far, and that a further theme is also being explored within the trilogy, namely, the creation of art.

After the montage at the beginning of *Before Sunset*, we see Jesse in Paris being interviewed about his best-selling novel *This Time*, a novel based on the events of *Before Sunrise*. He explains the novel’s provenance this way.

JESSE: When I look at my life, I have to admit that I’ve never been around a bunch of guns or violence, a helicopter crash, political intrigue. But my life, from my point of view, has been full of drama. And one of the most exciting things that’s ever happened to me is actually connecting

with another person, and I thought if I could write a book that could capture that, make that connection valuable, that possibility... Anyway, that was the attempt.

Here, Jesse paraphrases Céline in *Before Sunrise* talking about why she still yearns to fall in love with someone: "...if there's any kind of magic in this world, it must be in the attempt of understanding someone, sharing something". Jesse found that connection with Céline, and his experience of that connection inspired his novel. Whereas Céline's former lover had left her because he thought she stifled his creativity, Céline appears to be Jesse's muse. She spurred his creativity, and at the end of *Before Sunset* when she performs the song she wrote about Jesse for Jesse, it seems that he could be her muse too.

Towards the end of the interview, Jesse sees Céline standing off to the side in the bookstore. Before she knows about the state of his marriage, he asks whether she has read *This Time*. She tells him that she read it twice, and that though she doesn't usually like that kind of thing, she thought that it was "very romantic".

CÉLINE: You know, reading something knowing that the character in the story is based on you...it's both flattering and disturbing at the same time.

JESSE: How is it disturbing?

CÉLINE: I don't know, just...being part of someone else's memory. Seeing myself through your eyes.

Céline later suggests that Jesse may have idealised that night in hindsight, and she offers the fact that they're portrayed as having made love as an example. Jesse is incredulous that she doesn't remember their having made love, and Céline later admits that she does remember, but says that she had tried to forget about it when they were unable to meet because thinking about their lost opportunity to be together made remembering it too painful. But what is really remarkable about this exchange is that neither of them bring up the fact that Céline had wanted not to make love that night because she didn't want to be part of a "great story". This suggests that part of what's so disturbing for Céline about his portrayal of her in his novel is the fact that she is literally part of a great story, and that this is something about which Jesse appears to be oblivious.

The fact that authors plunder their lives for material and the impact of this on those who they live with—the real-world implications of the fact one person is another’s muse—is one of the complicating factors about Céline and Jesse’s romance, and it is also something else we take for granted explored by the *Before* trilogy’s implied author. For example, though Jesse doesn’t talk explicitly about writing *This Time*, we know that it took him between three and four years, and that that means he began writing it before Henry was born. This provides crucial context for understanding the story he tells Céline about his marriage, a story that otherwise sounds like an all-too-familiar story of new parents and their non-existent sex life.

JESSE: I feel like I’m running a small nursery with somebody I used to date, you know. I mean, I’m like a monk, you know. I mean, I’ve had sex less than ten times in the last four years.

Céline placates with him the fact that a friend of hers counsels many young couples with the same experience, and her friend tells them that the heady passion they yearn for that they enjoyed pre-children is simply impossible for anyone to retain.

CÉLINE: I mean, God, otherwise we would end up with an aneurysm if we were in that constant state of excitement, right? We would end up doing nothing at all with our lives. Do you think you would have finished your book if you were fucking somebody every five minutes?

JESSE: I might have welcomed the challenge.

CÉLINE: But you know it’s not true, for your wife after the birth of your son...she has to give all her love to the little one!

Jesse admits she’s right, but there is dramatic irony in this conversation. Jesse’s wife has presumably known the story of his night with Céline since before Henry was born, and she has had to deal with the story’s being in the public arena since his novel was published. It would be difficult enough to be the spouse of someone whose past experience of

love lost is the defining experience of their life. But when your spouse is an artist who draws inspiration from that past experience for a novel that becomes a best-seller, it must border on the humiliating.

Nine years later, in *Before Midnight*, we learn at the writers' retreat that Jesse has written two more books since getting together with Céline: *That Time*, another semi-autobiographical novel based on the events of *Before Sunset*, and the longer, and we're told even better, *Temporary Cast Members of a Long Running But Little Seen Production of a Play Called Fleeting*. Early on in *Before Midnight*, we hear one person react to the "sexy" *That Time* in this way:

STEFANOS: When he misses the plane and they black out the windows and they have sex for days and days and days like there's no tomorrow. I mean wow, did you guys actually do that?

Jesse answers this question with a knowing shrug of his shoulders. At the farewell lunch, when Céline and Jesse are asked how they met, and one of the lunch party says that you have to read Jesse's books for the answer, Céline replies: "Yeah, especially if you want to know exactly what it's like to have sex with me, read away". Her tone makes it clear that this is not something she likes other people knowing about.

Later that night in the hotel, after they have begun arguing again about Jesse's desire to move to Chicago to be nearer Harry, Céline returns to the issue of his mining their relationship for material.

CÉLINE: And by the way, you may never, ever, use me or anything I say or do in one of your fucking books again! And that goes for the girls, too.

JESSE: Well, A) You shouldn't have hooked up with a writer. B) You weren't in the last book or the one I'm writing now. C) I'm going to write about whatever the fuck I want.

CÉLINE: As always, our life works for you.

JESSE: No, no, no. Don't give me this put-upon housewife bullshit. Okay this is not the 50's. I'm sorry to ruin your perfect little narrative of oppression with the truth but I am the one who's at home every day dealing with the bullshit because you're at work until 6:30.

CÉLINE: 6 o'clock.

JESSE: You take the girls to school, and I pick them up. That's fair, that's our deal. We live in Paris, France for Christ's sake.

A little later, when Céline tries again to explain the source of her unhappiness, we are reminded again that in *Before Sunset*, she had told Jesse she wants to "paint more, I want to play my guitar every day, I want to learn Chinese, I want to write more songs".

CÉLINE: When you get inspired, you keep on writing. I get inspired too sometimes, you know that?

JESSE: You wanna write? Write.

CÉLINE: No, but you remember...I used to sing and play guitar and write songs? I'd still like to do it, but I don't get to. There isn't time.

JESSE: Okay. Well, first off, my writing isn't a hobby. All right? Secondly, I wish you would find the time. You somehow find time to complain about eight hours a day. I mean, I love the way you sing. Okay? I fucked up my whole life because of the way you sing. All right? If you took one-eighth of the energy that you spend... on bitching, whining and worrying... If you put that energy into playing scales, you'd be like fucking Django Reinhardt.

This is a poignant moment that quickly turns very sour. Céline finally admits something it seems she has been loath to admit even to herself—how much she has missed engaging in her own creative pursuits since the twins were born—but in the heat of the moment, Jesse's response is to diminish her creative pursuits as a mere "hobby" and to admonish her for the amount of time she spends "bitching, whining and worrying" rather than pursuing them.

The emotional arc of Céline and Jesse's argument in the hotel room is to my mind hyper-realistic, veering as it does between moments of tender understanding and others of almost cruel accusation. Though Céline calms down after Jesse admonishes her, she soon fires back in a way clearly intended to hurt.



CÉLINE: You know something? The way you write in your book, people come up to me and think I make love to some wildcat Henry Miller type... HA! You like to have sex the exact same way every time.

JESSE: When you got it, you got it.

CÉLINE: Kissy, kissy. Titty, titty. PUSSY. (snoring)

JESSE: I'm a man of simple pleasures.

CÉLINE: Yeah, very simple, and I've been meaning to tell you that lately. You're no Henry Miller, on any level.

Note that "on any level": not in bed and not on the page either.

*Before Midnight* ends with Céline storming off after telling Jesse that she doesn't love him anymore, Jesse following her, and eventually finding her sitting at a table overlooking the harbor. This scene recalls the scene at the beginning of *Before Sunrise* when a middle-aged couple on the train have a heated argument that leads one of them to storm out of the carriage and the other to follow. Céline and Jesse have become that couple. In an attempt to win her over, Jesse pretends to have travelled from the future in a time machine to read a letter written to her by her future-self. The letter is long, but he skips to the part telling her that she had the best sex she'd ever had one night in the Peloponnese.

Though calmer, Céline is unmoved and asks him whether he heard what she had said.

JESSE: Yes, I heard you—that you don't love me anymore. I figured you didn't mean it but if you did, then fuck it... I tell you I love you unconditionally, I tell you that you're beautiful, I tell you that your ass looks great when you're 80. I'm trying to make you laugh. I put up with plenty of your shit, and if you think I'm just some dog who's going to keep coming back then, you're wrong. But if you want true love—this is it. This is real life. It's not perfect, but it's real. And if you can't see it, then you're blind, alright? I give up.

Céline's attitude softens.

CÉLINE: So what about this time machine?

JESSE: What do you mean?

CÉLINE: How does it work?

JESSE: Well... it's complicated.

CÉLINE: Am I going to have to get naked to operate it?

The camera pulls back and we leave them talking.

This final scene is an echo of the scene early on in *Before Sunrise* when Jesse persuades Céline to leave the train with him by telling her that her future-self would otherwise wonder what her life might have been like. It is an optimistic note on which to end the *Before* trilogy, as it suggests that their relationship will continue, albeit on a more candid basis. To quote the palm reader, Jesse will keep on learning, and Céline will keep on needing to resign herself to the awkwardness of life. In the real world, it seems, this might be as close to the ideal as a romantic relationship can get.

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