



THE LONGER THE WAIT... KROGOLD: TRIPLE CELINIAN MYTH

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With the publication of *La Volonté du Roi Krogold* (*The Will of Krogold the King*), Gallimard has brought Céline's unpublished works to a close, putting an end to almost ninety years of uncertainty about the adventures of this legendary ruler. This will satisfy Céline aficionados first and foremost, while the uninitiated will find it a little-used gateway. If it is not easy to squeeze through, it nevertheless opens up new and unexpected reading perspectives.

Ecce Krogold! The famous Nordic king that Céline fans have been dreaming of since May 1936, when he made his appearance in *Mort à crédit* (*Death on Credit*), the second high point of a prolific body of work that is far more eclectic than the hasty reduction to the author's regrettable (and condemnable!) ideological blunders generally suggests. Far from being part of the contemporary realist fictions that continue to make Céline so successful, King Krogold is an original figure with a doubly mythical aura, firstly, because the story of which he is the central character draws on a number of legends, episodes and memories, including the Arthurian cycle, the biography of François Villon, the writings of Rabelais and that mythical medieval figure from Breton legend, *the Bard* with the gouged-out eyes, imprisoned for standing up to Christianization.

The mythical brilliance of Krogold the king, then, manifests itself in the improbability, long persistent, of seizing concretely and in a palpable, "haptic" way an epic which has become, over the decades, as legendary as the collection of a few scraps of narratives that, in spite of everything, have come down to us.

Krogold vs. Gwendor

A reminder: From the moment Céline left his Montmartre apartment for Copenhagen, for fear of paying the price for the political upheaval in France in the wake of Operation Neptune, he never ceased to deplore, with the vehemence often characteristic of his writings since *Mea culpa* (1936), the theft (or incineration, as the case may be) of what he himself, in a letter to his faithful secretary, Marie Canavaggia, described as "a legend from the operatic Middle Ages." We need only reread his two great post-war texts, *Féerie pour une autre fois* (*Enchantment for Another Time*) and *D'un Château l'autre* (*From one Castle to Another*), to be convinced.

The literary merit of *Krogold* seemed rather light, however: "I was disappointed to read it again. My romance hadn't stood the test of time," says the Ferdinand of *Mort à crédit*, and judging by the rejection

Céline received from his publisher Robert Denoël in 1933. Yet Denoël had not hesitated to publish *L'Église* (*The Church*), a five-act comedy of equally fragile merit, the first version of which had been rejected by Gallimard in 1927, just eleven months after the release of *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (*Journey to the End of the Night*). Literary choice or commercial calculation? In any case, important fragments of the legend were incorporated into the narrative of *Mort à crédit*, in whose pages King Krogold now runs like a weak, if stubborn, thread. It is as if Céline had sought to tacitly thumb his nose at his publisher.

Despite Ferdinand's repeated efforts to provide a detailed account, the legend's developing plot remains rather opaque. However, this has not prevented Celinian scholars, such as the American Erika Ostrovsky, from seeking to unravel the mystery behind it. In 1972, in her [contribution](#) to *Cahiers de L'Herne*, devoted to Céline, Ostrovsky noted that while the legend's known beginning, the deadly confrontation between King Krogold, "mighty and damned monarch of all the marches of Tierlande" and the felon Gwendor, "grand margrave of the Scythians, Prince of Christiania" (and very secret fiancé of Wanda, Krogold's only daughter) is "nothing out of the ordinary;" so much so that it "could almost pass for a pastiche of epic novels," but it is special in that, on a more abstract level, it puts into perspective the defeat of the poetic (of which Gwendor is the embodiment) in the face of the degradation of everyday life, embodied by Krogold; the latter presented by Ostrovsky as an "executioner."

Royal Magnanimity, Poetic Vagabondage

Although the idea of an antagonism between poetry and daily life is resistant to over-hasty expeditions, the development proposed by Ostrovsky half a century ago now requires nuance and even revision, particularly in the contortionist reading she gives King Krogold. This reassessment is all the more necessary given that, thanks to the recent publication by Gallimard of rediscovered pages, Céline enthusiasts and others can now look at a whole series of scenes and tableaux, differently elaborated. The common theme is the equipment of the legendary King Krogold (there is no need to go back over the incredible circumstances which, in the summer of 2021, saw the reappearance of the famous Céline manuscripts, stolen during the Liberation and thought to be lost forever, as well as the medico-judicial soap opera which has been making keyboards clack ever since).

First observation: the material of *Le Roi Krogold* gave birth to two distinct texts under Céline's pen, *La Volonté du Roi Krogold* (a manuscript found in 1939/40) and *La Légende du Roi René* (an earlier version based on a typescript dated 1933/34). The former is presented by the collection's editor, Véronique

[Robert-] Chovin, as a rewrite of the latter. The numerous thematic parallels that emerge from one plot to the next support this assertion.

Second observation: the elements on which these two versions are based take off from very different starting points. One is based on the defeat of Prince Gwendor's army by the victorious troops of King Krogold. Impaled by an enemy spear, Gwendor faces death from which, in a classic dialogue, he vainly seeks to obtain "one day... two days..." of reprieve. When the inhabitants of Christianie learn of the defeat of their protector Gwendor and the imminent arrival of King Krogold, they decide, in order to appease the latter's a priori devastating grudges, not to prostrate themselves before the victor and offer him the city's treasures, as might be expected, but instead to meet him by—dancing. This unusual stratagem had once saved the city from the advancing regiments of the Great Turk. Given the historical context of the writing, it is obviously tempting to read the advance of these armed troops as an allusion to the invasions (sometimes camouflaged as annexation) carried out by the Wehrmacht.

Alas! King Krogold is no connoisseur of dance. Indeed, he puts the harmless "dancers of the rigodon" to the sword. And yet, once he has entered the city, he heads straight for the cathedral and, while keeping his foot in the stirrup, throws his sword over a huge, panic-stricken crowd that has taken refuge under the nave's vaults, "right up to the altar step." This gesture of almost cinematic royal indulgence is greeted by jubilant singing, thanksgiving and even the appearance of an angel expressly sent down from heaven. Thus closes this first narrative, with its chivalric, popular and Christian overtones.

It is joined by another; this time centered on the wanderings of a trouvère, named Thibaut in *René* but Tébaut in *Krogold*. This vagabond poet with not-so-Catholic impulses seeks to join the victorious king (Krogold or René, respectively) in the North, to accompany him on his crusade. His itinerary takes him from Charente to Brittany, and in particular to Rennes, where—depending on the version of the legend—he is either about to be thrown into prison after narrowly escaping lynching by an excited mob (*Krogold*), or to stop off at the brothel where he casually abuses a prostitute (*René*). In both versions of the legend, however, he becomes the murderer of Prosecutor Morvan, president of the parliament of Brittany and father of Joad, Thibaut/Tébaut's traveling companion secretly in love with Wanda, the king's daughter. It is good to set up these triangles of conflict from the outset.

The Underpinnings of a Work

Make no mistake, however: *Krogold*, far from being an entertaining fabliau, is probably Céline's most

complicated text; *René* is a sort of first draft written in a French that is, if not academic, at least linguistically more accessible. In fact, these are pages not finalized by the author, with all that this implies of doubles, repetitions, unfinished business, which all very quickly causes a feeling of saturation, but also fatigue. At the same time, these pages are undoubtedly the most interesting and richest among the bundles of manuscripts found.

On the one hand, because together with the snippets of the legend inserted in *Guerre* (*War*) and *Londres* (*London*), (Gallimard, 2022), the other two recently exhumed unpublished works, they allow us to measure the important weight that throughout the 1930s, Céline gave to the possibility of giving birth to a medieval fantasy legend. That Krogold the King cannot be reduced to a unifying element of *Mort à crédit*, that he is much more than a mere vanishing point for Céline's post-war rantings, constantly raising the specter of spoliation, which we now know were not completely aberrant, The major merit of this collection, published by Gallimard under the full title of *La Volonté du Roi Krogold*, followed by *La Légende du Roi René*, is that it does indeed create a coherent whole, the hitherto unexploited underbelly of a work that has been widely commented on for almost ninety years.

One of the things we need to look at is how this legend relates to Céline's polemical writings. After all, the date chosen for the recovered manuscript is 1939/40. In the chronology of Céline's publications, this corresponds to the period between the publication of *L'École des cadavres* (*School for Corpses*), (November 1938) and the release of *Les Beaux Draps* (*The Fine Sheets*), (February 1941). But *Bagatelles pour un massacre* (*Trifles for a Massacre*), published in December 1937, already invokes the Middle Ages, presenting ballet librettos populated by legendary characters and deliberately drawing on medieval imaginary.

We should also take a closer look at the legend's many references to Christianity and its key concepts of blasphemy, sin, repentance, mercy and forgiveness, practices whose density is just as unusual here, as the invocation of a united Christianity is absent from the rest of the work—apart from *Mea culpa*.

"I am Celt"

On the other hand, it is undoubtedly in the linguistic contributions that the primary interest of the recovered pages lies. The few journalistic accounts published to date have made this clear. In the April 27 issue of *La Croix*, Fabienne Lemahieu writes of a "medieval Nordic tale with accents of Old French;" Alexis Brocas in the May issue of *Lire/Magazine littéraire* points to a "cousinly relationship between

Céline's language and that of the medieval Rabelais and Villon;" and David Fontaine in the May 10 issue of *Le Canard enchaîné* describes the Céline of *Krogold* as an "alchemist of style, [who] intends to resurrect medieval French."

A single passage illustrates these observations: "The Queen in her finest attire, followed by her ladies and pages, slowly approached and descended the long marble steps. 'Sir Knight, what would you have us give you?' 'Victory! Victory!' he shouted ever louder, raising his hand to his chest to show his pure heart. 'Victory? Victory? That it shall be [quickly]! But is not the King wounded? I had a sad dream... a fearful reverie yester night...' 'Nothing betides the King, my lady! Nothing betides the King! Apart from a mere wheal, a niggling scuff that his majesty little heeds.' 'You tell me so much, Sir Knight!'...'Excelras has won my wager!'"

While work on language is obviously one of the major constants in Céline's work, his interest in pre-classical turns of phrase in this excerpt is not only in keeping with his well-known abomination of so-called academic French, but also reflects a more assertive approach to a linguistic (and hence literary) genealogy that emphasizes the Celtic heritage of the French language. At the expense of the Greek and Latin legacies advocated by the codifiers of classical French. It would probably be instructive to reread André Thérive's *Libre histoire de la langue française* (Stock, 1954) to grasp the full ideological dimension behind this artistic approach.

"The intoxication of this existence must one day cease..."

Last but not least, Céline devotees will find it hard to pass up this collection which, in addition to the two versions of the legend, includes a rich appendix of all the passages in the work that can be associated, in one way or another, with the legend of Krogold the King: from *Mort à crédit* to *D'un Château l'autre*, via *Guerre, Londres* and *Féerie pour une autre fois*. A contextualizing essay by archivist and historian Alban Cerisier provides a more concrete account of the forces expressed in these two medievalist narratives. Although we are unaware of the legend's "incompleteness," "each scene offers, with the author's ironic finesse and great humor, a variation on man's relationship with his finitude."

The aforementioned mythical dimension of the Krogold legend is further enhanced by the fact that it has remained incomplete and fragmentary, and that its material has somehow resisted literary form. But is not this a guarantee of its "legitimacy?" After all, how many medieval legends have come down to us without gaps?

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Featured: *King William I*, folio 33 of *Liber legum antiquorum regum*, British Library, Cotton MS Claudius D. II, 14th century. [This article appears through the kind courtesy of [PHILITT](#).]
