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On the trail of George Sand's Wanda: feminism, Polishness and esoterics

There are two French novels written in the 1840s, whose protagonist (one of the protagonists) bears the name of Wanda, a legendary Polish princess. Both dealing with the topics of initiation and esoteric societies. The first is *La Comtesse de Rudolstadt*, written by George Sand around 1843, the second – written four years later in Wierzchownia – Balzac's *Initié* (the second part of his *L'Envers de l'histoire contemporaine*). I want to focus on the first of these two. Connections of both Balzac and George Sand to Poland are known and well-studied, which makes the Polish trail not ungrounded. I read both of these novels when researching French reception of the Cracovian legend. Both – at least at the first glance – have little to do with the invariant of the legend known in Poland in terms of their plot. However, they still – which is my thesis – refer to it in a sense, even if this relationship is already distorted and both Polish Wandas are contemporary figures. Wanda from Balzac's novel, baroness de Mergi – Polish after her mother – inherited the *plica polonica* after her ancestors, an affliction which is, in a metaphoric sense, the state of „suffering from Polishness”. George Sand's Wanda – countess of Rudolstadt and Consuelo's mother-in-law is not Polish (the fact that her ancestor Jan Žizka took part in the battle of Grunwald is only anecdotal here, rather the more important fact that in both of these novels the line of inheritance is the matriarchal line), but, as it turns out, she has traits which link her to the Cracovian princess.

Admittedly all categories mentioned in the title have already been studied in relation to *La Comtesse de Rudolstadt*, but never in this combination. Let's begin with the final, most obvious one – the esoteric. *Consuelo* and *La Comtesse de Rudolstadt* are both ranked among so-called „mystical novels”. The evolution within both of these novels has been aptly described by Regina Bochenek-Franczakowa as transition from the scheme of musical journey towards initiatory journey. An important part of the novel, which takes place first at the Prussian court in Berlin, in Spandau fortress, and finally in a castle in Bohemia (only briefly in Poland), with history of persecution of the Hussites as background, is formed by the topic of the protagonist's initiation to the society of the Invisibles, which uses forms and initiatory structures known from Freemasonry, Rosicrucianism, Order of St. John and different varieties of Illuminism, popular in the 18th and 19th century. Another influential aspect of the novel are ideas and ways of organising community life promoted by Pierre Leroux, particularly dear to the author. The novel also includes direct references to ideas of Jacob Boehme and Swedenborg.

How do, however, Polish and feminist motifs connect to this main esoteric current? I will try to show that they are united – as in a lens – exactly in the figure of Wanda, who officiates as priestess or master of the Invisibles. The feminist, or rather emancipatory aspect of George Sand's artistic activities is well known, however it is usually emphasised, with regard to her addresses from 1848, that we are dealing with „moderate” and „realistic” feminism. In *La Comtesse de Rudolstadt* it can be clearly seen on the example of the protagonist, but also in the figure of Wanda, who stands for ideas already expressed in *Indiana*: a woman's right to a relationship out of love and criticism of marriage as a form of enslavement. Wanda is therefore a figure of both metaphysical, religious pursuit, and also of emancipatory social movements, women's aspiration to self-determination. A study of the relationships between different forms of religiosity and feminism, of the place of religious ideas in women's emancipation has already been undertaken in analysis of George Sand's „mystical” novels.

As I have already mentioned, Polish motifs in her work have already been studied as well. I omit here the topic of her relationship with Frederic Chopin, I will only remind that already in 1838 she published an important comparative essay about fantastic drama, which cites *Faust*, *Manfred* and the 3rd part of *Forefathers' Eve*, and early 1840s, when George Sand was writing *Consuelo* and *La Comtesse de Rudolstadt*, are also a time of her very intense collaboration with Adam Mickiewicz, related to publication of articles about his lectures at Collège de France in „Revue Independent”. The writer's memoirs and correspondence show that she closely observed the Polish poet and intended to use these observations as literary material – she was supposedly working on a „Polish” novel. In a way, *La Comtesse de Rudolstadt* is such a „Polish” novel. A fascination with Mickiewicz would be, according to scholars, expressed in this novel first of all in the creation of Wanda's son, Albert de Rudolstadt. That he is modelled on the Polish national bard, can be seen in characteristics such as enthusiasm, improvisatory and prophetic talent, disposition to ecstasy, a peculiar kind of religiosity. It can be seen that analysis of Polish motifs mostly concerned the figure (rather than writing) of Mickiewicz, due to personal acquaintance between both writers. An analysis of Polish tropes in French literature of that time shows that, apart from the „Polish cause” (Polish independence movement) itself and figures of the brave Polish man and beautiful Polish woman, characteristics associated with Polishness were particular penchant for music, linked to the sphere of transcendence and leading to ecstasy, developed imagination (according to Stendhal, it distinguished Polish women from „cold” French ones) and tendency to religious and patriotic exaltation. In general, feminist motifs were not linked with Polish ones in studies, although both were studied in relation to broadly understood religiosity. I won't concentrate on

the influence of Mickiewicz in the novel, although I do think that ideas propagated by the poet-professor in Collège de France are worth comparing with those found in *La Comtesse de Rudolstadt* (for example the concept of the eternal human).

As I already mentioned, the centre of my reflections will be occupied by the figure of Wanda as a creation which links feminism, Polishness and esoterics. This kind of reading requires activating certain contexts. Let's begin with the name. The name Wanda itself is probably too little to speak about Polish motifs, although it should be remembered that it was introduced by Wincenty Kadłubek (medieval Polish chronicler) precisely as name of the legendary Cracovian princess and is closely connected to the legend. When Alfred de Vigny asked duchess Kossakowska about some poetic Polish names, the duchess (Polish after her mother) mentioned Wanda as the first and Wanda was to become the heroine of Vigny's epic poem.

The legend of Wanda was well-known in France since the 16th century, although in a version slightly different to the one considered canonic here. Over time, the French version diverged further away from the original. According to François Rosset, the legend has a few elements which were particularly hard to accept by the French public. These elements are: first, full political power in a woman's hands, second – her rejection of marriage, third – her death by suicide. In the 19th century romances telling the story of Wanda were particularly popular in France: the anonymous, reissued several times, novel *Venda, reine de Pologne ou l'histoire galante et curieuse de ce qui s'est passé de plus mémorable en ce temps-là* from 1705, and historical romance *Vanda ou la superstition* by Helena Ponińska from 1834. These two literary versions of the legend will form the context for *La Comtesse de Rudolstadt* in my analysis. What I mean is not a study of influences, rather a movement of contextualisation, which can reveal unobvious meanings.

Who is George Sand's Wanda and what allows linking her to the legendary Wanda? Apart from the name itself, it is her position, one usually occupied by men, an exposed post which gives her power, and also the problem of marriage and freedom in choosing a partner. Both earlier novels which depict the story of the princess include plot twists, which will also be used by George Sand in case of her non-legendary Wanda. It is, first of all, the motif of feigned death and Wanda's return from beyond the grave. *Venda, reine de Pologne...* begins with the scene of Wanda's leap into the Vistula, which is shown as an offering to the gods, but is in fact meant to save her from unwanted marriage to Sisifroy. It turns out, however, that the queen is saved – fished out of the water by one of the priests, she finds refuge in a temple, where a twist of fate also leads Przemysław, a man whom she loves. Przemysław, convinced of her death, like

Shakespeare's Romeo, wants to commit suicide out of despair, and when hearing her voice, he believes that he has heard a ghost. However, the lovers find each other in the end and their story has a happy ending, contrary to the „canonic” version of the legend. Wanda de Rudolstadt also seemingly dies – in a lethargic state, she is pronounced dead and buried. Her lover, Marcus, steals her from the coffin, which gives a beginning to her new life. She too, when supporting her son from hiding, is considered a ghost, a revenant who guards Albert from beyond. Albert sometimes sees his mother in ecstasies, and in states of inspiration he considers himself to be Jan Žižka, and identifies Wanda his mother with another Wanda, Žižka's persecuted sister. These tropes allow investigating other similarities. Wanda from the 18th-century novel flees possessive love of her brothers, George Sand's Wanda runs away from an unloved husband. The legendary Wanda in *Venda, reine de Pologne* and in Ponińska's retelling worships Slavic gods, both novels depict scenes of offerings and prophecy, altogether – initiatory scenes with religious aspects, in which a young woman is the entrant. Scenes of a girl's initiation and prophecy are also described by George Sand (Wanda-Sybill). In all three texts Wanda is also socially committed to fighting against tyranny and supporting the poor and wronged. (Further common motifs are that of a masked lover hiding his identity, music, internment, *hortus conclusus*, faithful dog, companion bird etc.).

Princess Wanda is sometimes regarded as the „first Polish feminist”. Such a depiction concentrates, of course, on showing her – since medieval chronicles and renaissance poems – as an autonomous ruler who fights both for her country's sovereignty and her own independence, which by itself would emphasise her agency in deciding about her own fate and that of the whole community. In case of a legendary heroine, depicted according to the medieval model of a perfect queen, such a perspective seems relatively justified. Relatively, because, as we know, there are many literary versions of the story and not all of them emphasise Wanda's autonomy, not even all treat her as a positive figure. In the mentioned French novels prior to *Consuelo* the potential emancipatory dimension of the legend is fully effaced. In *Venda, reine de Pologne...* Wanda's political power is not valuable in itself, but rather is another, other than her beauty, element which makes her an object of desire. The queen from 18th-century novel is, according to the rules of *histoire galante et curieuse*, a kind of woman desired by all men. If in Polish chronicles she still remains a fighter and an autonomous ruler, here she is turned into an emotional protagonist, fully dependent on men who surround her: her father (the king), her brothers with their incestuous love for her, the commander of her troops, several suitors. Her beauty and attractivity are her curse, she constantly has to run away from male characters who harass her with their interest in her. She perceives love as oppression, but her only chance at

rescue is to one of her admirers. A happy ending is only possible through marriage, which lifts Przemysław to the throne. Ponińska's novel, in turn, has a tragic ending, but her presentation of the protagonist doesn't stand out from that in a typical romance. The fates of Wanda and Rüdiger are tied together with love at first sight, but cruel fate, a dying mother's oath, Slavic gods and intrigues of a jealous voivod lead to suicide of both lovers. It's worth noting that in none of the French versions does foreign origin of Wanda's lover have any particular meaning. Ponińska also introduces a motif very important in the versions by Krasiński or Norwid, that of a clash between Paganism and Christianity, and suggests that Wanda pays the highest price for being faithful to her gods (the title suggests that she's the victim of a superstition). The novel even includes an Italian missionary's unsuccessful attempt to convert Wanda to Christianity. In this context it's worth noting that religion of the Invisibles in Sand's novel is eclectic, based on republican values, but is also opposed to oppressive Catholic practices pushed on Albert by his father.

In 19th-century Polish versions of the story (Łubieńska, Krasiński, Słowacki, to some extent even Norwid), it can be said in a generalising way that Wanda's problem is not so much that of defending her autonomy, but rather her desire to marry a lover who is the leader of a hostile country. George Sand changes both the male perspective of Polish romantic writers and Wanda's passivity from the French versions. By using motifs known from earlier versions of Wanda's story, she extracts feminist, emancipatory aspects from the legend, aspects which were absent in other retellings of the story from her time. She argues against the objectifying or – according to Julia Kristeva – fetishising image of femininity which was characteristic for earlier French versions and is anyway not uncommon in romantic novels.

While Wanda de Rudolstadt is not a queen, but only a countess, she performs the role of a spiritual leader of the Invisibles. It was already said that religion – which, in its modern form, generally supports patriarchy – in archaic, matriarchal forms could have strengthened women's social status. The legend itself is nowadays sometimes read in the context of Slavic beliefs, with Wanda interpreted as a chthonic or aquatic deity. In the anonymous French novel Wanda offers herself to the god of Vistula and is saved by a priest, who instructs her on what she should do. The male priest (so a figure doubly – through his role and gender – superior to the protagonist) encourages Wanda to support Przemysław as a hero. In Ponińska's novel male priests as leaders in rituals are dominant, but Wanda herself – as offered to Ziewonia – is during the final battle perceived by Rüdiger's troops as her priestess, which makes them unwilling to fight. In George Sand's novel Wanda without any doubt performs priestly functions, he instructs Consuelo herself, has a high status in the temple and is called the Sybill. She is a woman who

performs sacred tasks and also fights for other women's freedom. It is the first important turnaround compared to earlier versions.

This turnaround, that of entering a culturally masculine role, or a role strongly attributed to men, was shown in a literal way. George Sand's Wanda appears during the conversation with Consuelo in disguise of an old man – she is wearing a bearded mask, calls herself the girl's spiritual father, which makes the girl convinced that she is speaking to a man, a master to whom she should confess her deepest secrets. For a long time the narrator doesn't reveal the true identity of the mysterious man to whom the girl had talked. In fact, crossdressing appears in several of George Sand's novels, but in this case the topic of gender transgression is problematised. And it isn't only about equal rights, although also about them: the social authority of a priest (of what religion – this is in fact irrelevant here) and a master of a secret society is unquestionable. Removing the mask and revealing to Consuelo that the master is a woman doesn't lower the standing of these functions, because what decides is wisdom and level of initiation, not gender.

When revealing her identity, Wanda says of herself: „cet être accablé et souffrant, dont la voix éteinte n'a plus de sexe, est une femme brisée par la douleur, les maladies et les inquiétudes, plus que par l'âge”. On the one hand she says that gender doesn't matter (which brings to mind Carrambé, a transgender deity created by the writer in her childhood, which however appeared to her in the female form), on the other – her femininity becomes, in a way, a central spot of this encounter. Wanda reveals herself as a woman and exposes the commonality of her and Consuelo's fates – having been harmed herself by incomplete love, she wants to save the girl from the same fate. By teaching her independence, she enters – as she says herself – the role of no longer a father, but that of a mother, whom Consuelo never had. The writer shows a community of women, based on similar experiences. The legend of Wanda is tied to the discourse of sacrifice – protagonists of both earlier novels (particularly in case of Ponińska) emphasise that personal happiness doesn't matter as much as that of the whole community. Each of them subjects to an external instance – in Ponińska's novel vows made by the mother are binding for the daughter. George Sand's Wanda is married off against her feelings to save the family, which she perceived in the category of sacrifice. She manages to escape this fate, but doesn't find full happiness with her loved one either.

However, what matters most is that in the instruction she gives to Consuelo, the countess defends women's independence. Marriage imposed on Wanda for different reasons is a fixed point in all variants of the legend. In *Venda, reine de Pologne...* and Ponińska's version Wanda doesn't resist marriage as such, but rather escapes unwanted suitors. Also in Sand's novel what

matters is the freedom to choose a partner, Wanda's message is a manifesto for women's independence. Wanda de Rudolstadt doesn't really reject marriage as such, but rather an institution enforced by social restriction, to which she fell victim herself. Offering oneself to a man against one's own desires is slavery to her:

„De quel droit? Dieu te les a-t-il suggérés pour rien? t'a-t-il autorisée à abjurer ton sexe, à prononcer dans le mariage le vœu de virginité, ou celui plus affreux et plus dégradant encore du servage? „La passivité de l'esclavage a quelque chose qui ressemble à ta froideur et à l'abrutissement de la prostitution. Est-il dans les desseins de Dieu qu'un être tel que toi soit dégradé à ce point?“

Wanda has a similarly negative view of imposed vows of virginity, as an inhuman and asocial practice (and in fact, in Ponińska's novel the vows of Wanda's mother – an oath to preserve her daughter's virginity in exchange for the throne – is what leads to tragedy). Wanda de Rudolstadt not only enlightens Consuelo on her rights and feelings, she also has the power to give her divorce from Albert. She is on a higher level of initiation and understanding of human nature, which allows her to speak these truths about freedom and equality. A man cannot speak to Consuelo about the woman's condition, because „Un homme n'eût pu vous dire quels sont dans l'amour les droits sacrés et les véritables devoirs de la femme. Ils ont fait leurs lois et leurs idées sans nous consulter (...)“. In order for these words to have any power, they must be said not by a distant old man in a priest's robe, but as a close and suffering woman, experienced by her suffering.

The story of princess Wanda in all versions is cut short in her youth, closed either by her tragic death, or – rarely, as in *Venda, reine de Pologne...* - a marriage which saves her. George Sand's and Balzac's Wandas live longer, they aren't young anymore, are physically and mentally wasted, touched by a mysterious illness. They seem exhausted – both in the literal and a metaphorical sense, because the canon of the legend of Wanda is already exhausted too and fictional protagonists move further and further away from their legendary prototype. Perhaps it's also a sign of a deconstruction of the legend, which decomposes into incohesive pieces, unrecognisable in isolation, and leads – in a dialectic way – towards not historical, but modern problems. Balzac uses the metaphor of Wanda's illness as means of an ironic polemic with the image of Polishness, George Sand shifts the emphasis from the symbolic to the existential and makes Wanda into a heroine fighting for women's agency.