

H-France Review Vol. 10 (February 2010), No. 31

George Sand [Aurore Dupin], *The Countess of Rudolstadt*, translated by Gretchen van Slyke. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. xviii + 444 pp. Notes and ill. \$49.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8122-4073-3.

Review by James Smith Allen, Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

While writing *The Countess von Rudolstadt* (1843), George Sand remarked to Pierre Leroux, “Je suis dans la Franc-maçonnerie jusqu’aux oreilles, je ne sors pas du ‘Kadosh,’ du ‘Rose-Croix,’ et du ‘Sublime Ecosais.’ Il va en résulter un roman du plus mystérieux.”[1] Sand owed much of what she knew about these secret societies to Leroux, so it was appropriate that she acknowledged her debt to him. But she owed much more to an unstated source, the arch-conservative Jesuit abbot, Augustin de Barruel, whose multivolume *Mémoires pour servir à l’histoire du jacobinisme* (1797-99) defined many other observers’ views of eighteenth-century secret societies and their special role in the Revolution of 1789.[2] Barruel’s tomes rested on Sand’s bookshelves as she composed her work, informing her account of revolutionary change in a major contribution to the French Romantic literary tradition of historical fiction as well as to the novel of initiation and its gothic variations. Despite a traditional view of the conspiratorial origins of the Revolution, *The Countess von Rudolstadt* actually provides a more nuanced perspective on the social and intellectual context of modernity’s political watershed in France, and elsewhere, after 1789.

Sand’s novel is the sequel to an earlier work, *Consuelo* (1842), whose principal characters re-appear, though the new volume has its own integrity and is perfectly understandable without reference to the first. The Countess von Rudolstadt in both books is none other than a Spanish gypsy soprano from Venice, where she was discovered and trained by the famous choral composer from Naples, Nicola Porpora. When *The Countess von Rudolstadt* begins, the widowed protagonist is in the employ of King Frederick II the Great, singing brilliantly in his concert hall at Sans Souci until, one night, she catches sight of her late husband in the audience. Unnerved by the apparition, but also by the amorous-cum-political intrigue in Frederick’s court, Consuelo attempts to escape back to Venice only to be caught and thrown into Spandau prison (in the novel the suspicious Frederick is portrayed as more despotic than enlightened). “A soul of unassailable loyalty” (p. 31), Consuelo escapes from her cell with the help of a society, better known as the Invisibles, the “secret architects of a new society” (p. 284), whose revolutionary agents are everywhere in eighteenth-century Europe. Consuelo’s beauty, talent, and family connections make her a prime recruit for the conspirators’ quest to establish liberty, equality, and fraternity — “the whole secret of [their] mysteries” (p. 277) — as they understood this slogan before the Revolution.

The rest of the novel depicts the peripatetic Countess’s many difficult trials, from her escape from Spandau to Riesenburg castle in the Bohemian forest, leading to her flawless initiation into the mixed company of conspiratorial Invisibles. At the heart of Consuelo’s preparation for membership, however, is the reunion with her husband, the Count, who, it seems, had not died as she had thought. He had inherited his mother’s catalepsy for prolonged periods; the mother, too, had not died and re-appears in the novel to help her son recruit Consuelo to the Invisibles’ cause. The pre-condition for Consuelo’s initiation is the renunciation of her reluctant marriage with the Count, the embrace of true love in all its

manifestations (including, for much of the novel, her husband disguised as another man), and the quest to reform marriage, family life, and society that will provide greater freedom for women. Passing these tests, Consuelo is initiated with much fanfare and leaves Riesenburg with her re-generated husband to prepare for the revolution, which will make possible this new world. She is last seen in the novel selflessly working with her family to engage Bohemian peasants in this new vision of humanity, one very similar to that framed by Leroux, Sand's intellectual mentor during the composition of her most ambitious novel.

The historical significance of this literary text is not easily exaggerated. It extends far beyond the author's private enthusiasms and artistic achievement, however considerable. Sand was among France's greatest nineteenth-century writers, from Staël and Chateaubriand to Zola and Proust. *The Countess of Rudolstadt* marks a major shift in the French novel from the sentimental idealism evident among women novelists like Sophie Cottin, Madame de Genlis, and Marie-Jeanne Riccoboni until the advent of cold-blooded realism advanced by men like Stendhal, Balzac, and Flaubert. Sand's work effectively bridges the gap between these two traditions in French fiction.[3] On the one hand, it is remarkably cerebral in its reflection; its moralizing declamations are long and passionate. On the other hand, the novel's narrative is remarkably accurate and precise; the words and actions of its historical figures are set in their proper context. Sand did indeed research her characters and their situations, much as any good historian or memoirist.

Sand's novel points up the changing landscape in French politics, social relations, and intellectual life with implications for the on-going redefinition of gender after the Revolution of 1789. A close reading of this text suggests just how much upheaval there was on the eve of 1848. Such a discerning "document" is rare in its perceptions of French modernity. Because of the central role played by the Invisibles -- "the cause of everything good or bad that happens in the world" (p. 176) -- encompasses a wide array of secret societies in Europe from the Illuminati of Bavaria to the elite women in adoptive Freemasonry, *The Countess of Rudolstadt* details the new place for civil society from the eighteenth century onward.[4] The Habermasian public sphere remained largely illicit right through the Revolution. What had been crackpots, con artists, and cynical literati in the Old Regime rapidly gave way to still less innocent organizers of resistance to authority, which could only briefly be suppressed or co-opted during the Empire. Napoleon's fall meant that groups like the Charbonnerie, workers' cooperatives, and utopian socialists still had to keep a low profile until their aspirations could be realized in another explosion. Sand's work captures well the spirit of this seething political ferment in revolutionary France.

As John Roberts argued in 1972, the myth of secret societies developed a life of its own, and not just in the nineteenth century.[5] The source of 1789, it was widely believed, lay in the widespread conspiracies of organizations led by the likes of Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin and the comte de Cagliostro (a.k.a. Giuseppe Balsamo), who promoted a more secular, egalitarian, libertarian model of social relations in their associations. So the argument goes, traditional institutions essential to social order such as the absolutist monarchy, the privileged aristocracy, and the Roman Catholic Church found themselves challenged, leading to the dissolution of longstanding authority and to the overt violence of revolution. That this theory ignores the longer-term structural problems of the Old Regime did not deter Sand from embracing it, but with a difference. Her novel spins the conspiracy into a positive development, one in keeping with the modern quest for individual liberty, religious tolerance, and gender equality. It is no accident that the leaders of the Invisibles trace their conspiratorial pedigree back to the Hussites, well before the Protestant Reformation struck the first major blow, as Sand saw it, on behalf of "patriotic independence and evangelical equality" (p. 53).

The novel captures well the intellectual climate of post-revolutionary France. Besides developments in prose fiction, *The Countess of Rudolstadt* exemplifies the creative spirit of Romanticism to embrace new notions of time, space, self, and the cosmos. The medieval past is no longer benighted, but a brilliant and

courageous precursor to modernity. The exoticism of Europe's eastern reaches, where Consuelo practices her inspired musical art, prevails over the brutal order of Frederick's "enlightened" Berlin. Clearly the post-revolutionary bourgeois self takes center stage in its quest for certainty in a rapidly changing society.[6] God is found in nearly everything, animate or otherwise, in a pantheistic celebration of humanity, at least as Leroux's socialist ruminations on community defined it. So, far from rejecting the philosophical idealism of the literary romance -- a genre of special interest to women authors and readers in the early nineteenth century-- Sand weaves it into her larger vision of human possibility in "the image of the universal soul we call God" (p. 320).

For these reasons, and more, Gretchen van Slyke's lucid and precise translation of Sand's novel is welcome and not just for general readers too unfamiliar with French to tackle such a long work. Scholars of the 1840s will find the scholarly apparatus -- a well-informed introduction and detailed notes -- useful for a better understanding of Sand's work and its historical significance. The novel's gothic features -- worthy of Victor Hugo's *Notre Dame de Paris* (1831) -- cast a creative light on the history of French civil society, gender relations, and intellectual life less than five years before another major revolution. And like 1789, the Freemasons are everywhere, but they are not the only source of literary inspiration or historical change.

NOTES

[1] George Sand, letter to Pierre Leroux, June 8, 1843, in Sand, *Correspondance*, ed. Georges Lubin (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 6:161.

[2] For a modern edition, see Abbé Augustin de Barruel. *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire du jacobinisme* (Vouillé: Diffusion de la Pensée Française, 1973), 2 vols. Cf. J. M. Roberts, *The Mythology of the Secret Societies* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972), pp. 188-97.

[3] On the sentimental and realistic novelistic traditions in Sand's work, see Margaret Cohen, *The Sentimental Education of the Novel* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 119-62.

[4] For more on the history of civil society in modern France, see Pierre Rosanvallon, *The Demands of Liberty: Civil Society in France Since the Revolution*, translated by Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007).

[5] See Roberts, *The Mythology of the Secret Societies*, pp. 1-16.

[6] Cf. Jan Goldstein, *The Post-Revolutionary Self: Politics and Psyche in France, 1750-1850* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), based in large part on the philosophical influence of Victor Cousin. I believe that Sand's version was more widespread. See James Smith Allen, "Review Essay," *H-France Forum*, Volume 1, Issue 1 (Winter 2006): 2.

James Smith Allen
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
jsallen@siu.edu

Copyright © 2010 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical

Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of *H-France*. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172