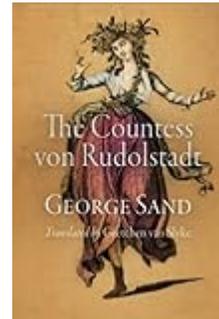




George Sand. *The Countess Von Rudolstadt.* Translated by Gretchen van Slyke. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. xviii + 441 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-4073-3.



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The Occult History of Humanity

Gretchen van Slyke has produced a new, welcome translation of George Sand's *The Countess von Rudolstadt*, the stand-alone sequel to *Consuelo*, both of which were serialized between February 1842 and February 1844 in *La Revue Indépendante*, which Sand founded with Pierre Leroux, the radical French philosopher. The novel is a gothic vehicle for Sand to put forth revolutionary arguments about society, family, and marriage and to fan the flame of primitive Christian republicanism, a subterranean smoldering fire that, in Sand's view, has fueled the struggle against despotism and dogmatism for nearly two thousand years. This struggle unites Christ's disciples with an extraordinary cast of religious and political dissidents all the way to 1789 and beyond to create a single and, for Sand, immortal, life force of freedom. The eighteenth-century story is designed to illuminate the darkness of the post-revolutionary restoration in the nineteenth. As Sand stated in a 1842 letter, novels were a means "to inspire doubt about the lie that is believed, to raise a hue and cry about a truth that is forgotten" (p. xv). Sand offers nothing less than a contribution to what

she referred to as an "occult history" of humanity, one which combined the stylistic effects of the Gothic novel with the political argument for revolutionary liberation. This "occult history" provides a fascinating perspective on historical consciousness in the nineteenth century but is better understood after a summary of the plot.

Set in the middle of the eighteenth century, *The Countess von Rudolstadt* follows the trials and misadventures of Consuelo, an impoverished Spanish singer whose beautiful voice and hard training lead to a successful career in the opera houses of Berlin and Vienna, but whose noble, religiously inclined heart leads her to resist the despotism of her lovers and patrons, including historical figures such as Frederick the Great. Repeatedly, she plots her escapes to recover the free, wandering life of a genuine artist. "In our lingo of itinerant artists," Consuelo explains, "we often talk about *roaming through Bohemia*, which means launching into a perilous life of poverty, toil, and often shame, the life of the Zingari, whom the French also call Bohemians. As for me, I wasn't heading for that symbolic Bohemia ... but toward the troubled,

chivalrous land of the Czechs, the homeland of Hus and Zizka, the Bohemian Forest, and finally the Castle of the Giants where I was generously welcomed by the Rudolstadt family” (p. 51). Sand uses Bohemia, with its ancient, obscure histories, as the counterpoint to the authoritarian kingdoms of the age of enlightened despotism, Prussia foremost among them. Count Albert, the son of the Rudolstadt family, provides the impoverished Consuelo with the “only serious education” she ever receives, introducing her to the anti-imperial, republican struggle of his fifteenth-century Taborite ancestor, Jan ÁřiÁřka. A seer, a “superman,” but also a “poor wretch,” Albert falls in love with Consuelo, who consents to marry him on his deathbed, although she loves him only as a “brother” (pp. 51, 251). Without knowing that Albert has suffered another attack of catalepsy, in which the victim appears to be dead but is not, she fulfills her contract to sing in Berlin, where she is drawn into the court intrigues against Frederick the Great. These, in turn, lead to her imprisonment in the stony fortress of Spandau and her rescue by Albert’s loyal disciples, the mysterious fictional “Invisibles,” precursors to the historical freemasonic “Illuminati.”

Spirited back to Bohemia, Consuelo falls in love with one of her rescuers, an esteemed Invisible, the masked Liverani, which is the *nom de guerre* that the revived but unrecognized Albert has taken in order to rekindle her love. At the same time, the “Invisibles” have identified Consuelo as a new recruit who, through the mentorship of her “Confessor,” who turns out to be Wanda Prachalitz, Albert’s mother, comes to understand the hidden history of humanity’s sufferings; her own responsibility to serve as an agent for the “Invisibles,” especially among women, whom Sand regards as among despotism’s most visible victims; and finally, the truthfulness of her love and sexual desire for Liverani, who happily turns out to be Albert. In the end, although we know, thanks to Sand’s interventions as a narrator, that the French Revolution is coming, the flame of resistance is flickering: the “Invisibles” have been dispersed by despots, Albert is once again mad, and Consuelo roams with her family among the Bohemian peasants. 1760 is thus Sand’s subdued, pessimistic portrait of political possibility in 1840.

The following homologies structure *The Countess of Rudolstadt*: Prussia stands in negative relation to Bohemia, the fact of empire to the hidden, underground nation, just as reason is opposed to the occult and the eighteenth-century Age of Reason is opposed to subversive historical memory. The novel opens with Consuelo’s arrival in Berlin society after Albert’s death. Frederick

the Great, whose life Consuelo saved in an earlier, somewhat convoluted incident, begins to fall in love with the new opera star, an attraction that animates the Hohenzollern court and allows Sand to satirize the enlightenment of the royal despot. Voltaire’s presence in the king’s retinue does little to further the cause of reason. Frederick, lampooned behind his back as the “grand lama” (whereas his father, the miserly Frederick William I, is remembered as “Big Willy”), is portrayed as an arbitrary ruler whose crusade against sorcerers, seers, and fortune-tellers cannot hide his own mercurial actions. No sooner had Frederick the Great ascended to the throne “than he promptly established the same system” his father had (p. 1). The king who, as a boy, had witnessed his father order the execution of his companion, the young Major Katte, now threatens Consuelo with the very walking stick Voltaire had given him as a gift—a telling gesture. He imprisons Consuelo when she threatens to leave, just as his brother and sisters are captive to his whims. At the opera, Berlin’s audiences show “regularity, obedience, and what was called reason,” but they have no real enthusiasm (p. 3). Everywhere Consuelo hears the echoes of Prussia’s “terrifying military regime,” “the recruiters’ ferocity ... the screams of a soldier who I saw being thrashed one morning,” all of which uphold “great Frederick’s strength and glory” (p. 69). Even Frederick the Great unwittingly testifies to his arbitrary authority, insisting that the doctors refrain from bleeding an ailing Consuelo: “I don’t like to see innocent blood spilled nonchalantly off the battlefield” (p. 9).

Behind the scenes, the “grumpy goddess of reason” has many contestants (p. 17). Ghosts and necromancers slide through the passages of the castle. Princess Amalia’s inner sanctum resembled “a sorcerer’s workshop,” filled as it was with “globes, compasses, astrolabes, astrological charts,” and skulls (p. 30). Sand relates this occultism, which Amalia and her aristocratic companions understand only incompletely, with a secret history of subversion that the state, in the name of reason, but in the service of empire, wants to stamp out. Amalia can go only so far. “It’s fine with me if they overthrow kings,” she explains to Consuelo, “fine too if they set up republics like those in Sparta, Athens, or old Venice. I can accept that. But I don’t like your bloodthirsty, filthy Taborites” and “their mania for Christian equality” “any better than the Waldensians of blazing memory, the odious Anabaptists of Munster” (p. 54). However, out of place in the “century of reason,” fanaticism is exactly what Sand unveils in her secret history. Under the tutelage of Albert, the visionary who claimed to be a reincarnated ÁřiÁřka,

Consuelo has come to appreciate the “patriotic independence and evangelical equality” of Jan Hus, Zizka, and the Bohemians (p. 53). She learns more during her imprisonment, where she is befriended by “an angel in exile,” the disabled son of her jailers—jailers who “mathematically combined the greatest number of dinners possible with the fewest ingredients imaginable,” while composing “the most daunting bills stuffed with the most fabulous details” (p. 141). Gangly Gottlieb, who, to the chagrin of his parents, apprentices as a shoemaker rather than preparing for the parsonage, tells Consuela wild stories from among his tradesmen, who are adherents of the millenarian Jacob Boehme. The benevolent fraternity of Sand’s shoemakers resembles the millers in Carlo Ginzburg’s *The Cheese and the Worms* (1976).

The circle of subversives widens after Consuelo returns to Bohemia. Even though the Podiebrads had been forced to Germanize their family name to Rudolstadt, they resist the oblivion of empire by remembering the Taborites in front of altars erected out of their bones. In particular, it is music, which Consuelo compares to the cold expression of “words and sentences,” that preserves the memories of revolt. Albert himself never played “a single phrase of modern music,” just “old Bohemian tunes, hymns, and battle songs,” precisely Consuelo’s and Albert’s repertoire when they wander among the peasants at the end of the novel (pp. 229, 159). Music, enthusiasm, and sorcery better preserve the past and the knowledge of revolt than words, historians, or philosophers; Consuelo “understood Gottlieb’s frenzied speeches better than the writings of Voltaire” (p. 246). Indeed, with her emphasis on the scrupulously documented historical struggle of Bohemia, Sand suggests that humankind will be liberated not by the universal prose of the rationalist Enlightenment but by the commemorative verse of the authentic nation.

Finally, Consuelo encounters the subterranean world of the “Invisibles.” Sand sets an extraordinary scene. The collective grave of history’s persecuted, rebellious victims showcases Sand’s astonishing gothic effects. Underground, Consuelo is witness to “the catacombs of feudalism” and “of military or religious despotism”: “Here have perished, here have suffered, here have wept, roared, and blasphemed twenty generations of men” (p. 344). Consuelo makes her way, but steps on a “pebble-like bump every now and then,” “a broken rib, the neck of a thighbone, the remains of a skull” (p. 346). There are also “a few nearly complete skeletons ... one was perfectly preserved, standing with a chain fastened around his middle ... At his feet knelt a skeleton whose head, detached from

the vertebrae, was lying on the ground, but whose stiff arms still embraced the martyr’s knees” (p. 346). When Consuelo faints, the “Invisibles” comfort her in her embarrassment: “Your noble heart broke with indignation and pity at the palpable evidence of humanity’s crimes and afflictions. Had you got here on your feet and unassisted, we would have less respect for you than we do carrying you, moribund and sorely distressed” (p. 350). Thereupon, the “Invisibles” enroll Consuelo in the work of their secret society, one of the many “underground laboratories where a great revolution, whose crater will be Germany and France, is being prepared” (p. 278). Anticipating the French Revolution in this way, Sand, as van Slyke observes, accepts this historical account of Augustin Barruel, whose *Histoire du Jacobinisme* (1797-98) blamed the revolution on the freemasons, although she replaces “Barruel’s shudders of horror with bounding enthusiasm” (p. viii).

That Sand has Consuelo work “mainly on women” in her mission for the “Invisibles” is an important gesture (p. 279). Sand considered the faithfulness and obedience of women the most visible form of humanity’s enslavement. In the novel, Sand often addressed women directly—as “lectrices”—and elsewhere recognized them as “the daughters of heresy, you are all heretics.... Like the voice of the Protestant Church of every century, your voice is stifled by the decree of the official Church of society” (pp. xiv-xv). Forced to choose between her love for Liverani and her vows to Albert—a choice that is later made moot, since the two are the same person—Consuelo comes to adhere to the faith of the “Invisibles,” who maintain that marriage is only true when both men and women follow their desires; “did God instill them in you for nothing?” asks her confessor: “Did he authorize you to forswear your sex, to pronounce in marriage the vow of virginity of the still more hideous and degrading vow of servitude?” (p. 285). This conception of marriage offers the most immediate opportunity for liberation in this world: “Then the faithful wife will no longer be the lonely flower hiding herself away to preserve her honor’s fragile treasure, the often forsaken victim pining away alone with her tears, unable to revive in her beloved’s heart the flame that she has kept pure in her own. Then the brother will no longer be forced to avenge his sister and kill the man she loves ... in order to give her back a semblance of false honor; then the mother will no longer tremble for her daughter, and the daughter will no longer be ashamed of her mother; then, above all, the husband will no longer be suspicious or despotic, and the wife will renounce the victim’s bitterness or the slave’s rancor” (p.

367). However, Sand's militant idealism is qualified by the novel's denouement, in which Albert's returned madness is accompanied by Consuelo's loss of her voice and the end of her career. Her Bohemian years end on a domestic note.

By the end of the novel, the insurrectionists of the prerevolutionary years have been scattered or imprisoned. It is no longer the case that the "Invisibles" are "everywhere, in all four corners of the earth," as Gottlieb had confidently explained (p. 175). To some extent this condition matches Sand's mood in post-revolutionary France. She was terrified by the violence of 1789, prompting the narrator to exclaim: "Jean-Jacques Rousseau would have repudiated his works, had the Mountain, with the guillotine looming over it, appeared to him in a dream. Al-

bert von Rudolstadt would all of a sudden have reverted to the cataleptic madman of Schreckenstein, had these bloody glories, followed by Napoleon Bonaparte's despotism, the restoration of the Old Regime, and then the reign of the most vile material interests" been revealed to him (pp. 359-360). Indeed, anticipating these disappointing revelations in post-revolutionary history, the "Invisibles" themselves insist that "the battle is being fought on new ground ... our war is wholly intellectual;" "we appeal to the mind and spirit" (p. 273). Despair and disappointment at the end of the novel register the "mal de siècle" that Sand, the one-time lover of the young Alfred de Musset, both felt and resisted in this extraordinary "occult history," which van Slyke has graciously reintroduced to contemporary readers.

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