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## “INFINITY DEVOURS ME”. GEORGE SAND’S «LES SEPT CORDES DE LA LYRE»\*

**In her essay on George Sand**, published as part of her major book *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), Margaret Fuller so wrote of Sand’s *Les Sept Cordes de la lyre*:

But in *Les Sept Cordes de la lyre*, which I read first, I saw the knowledge of the passions and of social institutions, with the celestial choice which rose above them. I loved Helene, who could hear so well the terrene voices, yet keep her eye fixed on the stars. That would be my wish also,—to know all, and then choose. I even revered her, for I was not sure that I could have resisted the call of the “now”; could have left the spirit and gone to God; and at a more ambitious age I could not have refused the philosopher. But I hoped much from her steadfastness, and I thought I heard the last tones of a purified life. Gretchen, in the golden cloud, is raised above all past delusions, worthy to redeem and upbear the wise man who stumbled into the pit of error while searching for truth.<sup>1</sup>

\* G. Sand, *Œuvres complètes*, dir. B. Didier, 1840, *Les Sept Cordes de la lyre*, édition critique par L. Lascoux, et Gabriel, édition critique par L. Frappier-Mazur, Paris 2013, p. 167. I should like to thank Katarzyna Nadana-Sokołowska for the assistance she extended to me in writing this article, particularly in my use of the French-language literature.

<sup>1</sup> M. Fuller, ‘George Sand’, in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, Part II, New York 1845, p. 86. The book, groundbreaking for the American and European feminism as it was, postulated gender equality, seeing education and work for women as the necessary factor of change. Women could achieve independence by seeking fulfilment opportunities outside their families. Admiring and professing transcendentalism, she encouraged spiritual search, notably in combination with struggling for a better future. As Joan Von Mehren notes that once the *Revue des Deux Mondes* started publishing novels by G. Sand, Fuller would read them all, admiring the French author’s courage in shaping the figures of female artists and intellectuals who, despite social ostracism, never quit the path of self-development. In *Great Lawsuit*, Fuller makes Sand a prophetess of the impending change, believing that in the future women will think and write like Sand,

Based on an encouraging reading experience, this commendation is quite close to the evaluation expressed by Leconte de Lisle<sup>2</sup>. Yet, the play in question gained a rather modest publicity in France, with less than moderate opinions prevailing in the Polish territories. After the play came out in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*<sup>3</sup>, Józef Ignacy Kraszewski published his critical assessment in the literary weekly *Tygodnik Literacki* (29 July/19 August 1839, no. 18), reproaching its ‘mysticism’ and poor quality of its poetic language. Seeing it primarily as a failed philosophical piece, he stated “most unfortunately, what Mrs. Sand intended to depict, and what to prove, in her recent play, this I don’t know”.<sup>4</sup> Albeit the latter sentence has an ironical purport, it hits home as far as not comprehending Sand’s text is concerned. A few years later, in 1843, Edward Dembowski replied to Kraszewski’s objections. His (pretty short) essay entitled *Namiętność uważana pod względem umniczym* [*Passion As Considered in Terms of Knowledge and Skill*]<sup>5</sup> defended Sand’s work, seeing in it the artistry of the most brilliant and splendid woman. To his mind, the key to understand this fantastic poem was passion, identical with ecstasy and zeal, all these belonging not to the spiritual, rather than sensual, sphere: “let us bear in mind that passion, therefore, may only go with mental, emotional or sentimental, and spiritual elements—whilst lust may only go with sensuality. Let us avoid taking Passion

and there will be no point keeping them quiet (cf. J. Von Mehren, *Minerva ad the Muse: A Life of Margaret Fuller*, University of Massachusetts Press 1994).

- <sup>2</sup> René Bourgeois mentions Leconte de l’Isle’s enthusiastic review in the latter’s letter to Buloz of 4 October 1839—a four-line poem written in the form of an apostrophe to Helen as a ‘sister of spirits’ (*la soeur des esprits*)—as the only identified response at the time; cf. R. Bourgeois, ‘Introduction,’ in G. Sand, *Les Sept Cordes de la lyre*, Paris, 1973, p. 10. In her introduction to the play’s critical edition (*eadem*, *Présentation*, in G. Sand, *Oeuvres complètes*, sous la direction de B. Didier; 1840; *Les Sept Cordes de la lyre*. Édition critique par L. Lascoux; *Gabriel*. Édition critique par L. Frappier-Mazur, Paris 2013, pp. 9–44), L. Lascoux mentions two more responses—expressed in an ironical tone and also contained in letters, by Balzac and Marie d’Agoult—and points to a reference to Helen in the symphonic poem by Ferenc Liszt, *Héroïde funèbre*. Liszt, about whose opinion Sand cared very much, said nothing about the play upon its publication (*ibidem*, pp. 38–9).
- <sup>3</sup> *Revue des Deux Mondes*, 15 Apr./1 May 1839.
- <sup>4</sup> J.I. Kraszewski, ‘Literatura zagraniczna. *Les Sept Cordes de la lyre*’, *Tygodnik Literacki*, no. 18, 29 July 1839, p. 137. See M. Rudkowska, ‘Alegoria i namiętności. Kartka z dziejów krytyki literackiej w XIX wieku’, *Prace Filologiczne. Literaturaoznawstwo* 2016, no. 6 (9), pp. 145–55.
- <sup>5</sup> E. Dembowski, ‘Namiętność uważana pod względem umniczym’, *Przegląd Naukowy*, Yr 15, 1843, pp. 244–8.

for Lust! – A passion is the vehement, elated, and zestful Love of Human-kind, Love of the People, Love of Sciences, or spiritual (so-called platonic) love between the lovers; and lust is merely a rapid attraction to do debauchery, card-playing, inebriation, anger, and all sensualities, animalities”.<sup>6</sup>

The differentiation between passion, belonging to a higher order, and lust, expressing lower feelings, appears quite traditional, almost scholastic. While not departing from the classicist aesthetic rules or philosophical categories, it only somewhat approaches the philosophical purport of *Les Sept Cordes*, where passion or infatuation is a sensual and spiritual lust at the same time. Desire, which repeatedly appears in the play, is outside the notions proposed by Dembowski. Sand sets a transgression of this kind in opposition to intelligible (belonging to the realm of reason) and spiritual passions; while transgressed, they retain their characteristics and become associated with carnal affects.

Zygmunt Markiewicz, Polish twentieth-century literary historian, put forth his poignant and almost overly sarcastic opinion, describing the Sand play as “a shirrtail of *Faust*”, tinted with reminiscences of Mickiewicz’s *Dziady* (*Forefathers’ Eve*).<sup>7</sup>

Save for Dembowski, the aforementioned authors treated Sand somewhat condescendingly and didn’t endeavour to try and understand her artistic assumptions, confining their perception to the apparent or alleged borrowings from the great Romanticist authors. They may have assumed, let us presume, that philosophical issues only belonged to the male continuum and proved unavailable to women, including well-educated ones. Yet another explanation might be that they simply couldn’t understand the vision proposed by Sand. Their thinking got stuck in comparing Sand against

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 247.

<sup>7</sup> Z. Markiewicz, ‘Mickiewicz i George Sand: dzieje przyjaźni i jej odbicie w literaturze’, *Pamiętnik Literacki* 1961, no. 53/3, p. 56. To quote a remark: “Albertus looks after a brainsick girl named Helen, who recovers her wits owing to his endeavours. Regrettably, having found a magical seven-string lyre, she sinks back into insanity” (*ibidem*, p. 56). Then, he finds that Helena’s suffering is what rescues her. He summarises his evaluation of the play by referring to a probabilistic biographism: “echoes of Mickiewicz can be heard throughout the play. There are, besides, two facts to be highlighted: Helen’s madness, developed probably in association with the news received in Palma on the mental sickness of Celina, Mickiewicz’s wife; and, the (vaguely marked) motif of an illuminate philosopher who draws his knowledge from revelation and the heart” (*ibidem*, p. 57). Let me remark that, apart from its tendentious approach to the Sand play, the article offers valuable information on the acquaintance between Sand and Mickiewicz.

Goethe and, in their perception, the French writer didn't perform nearly as well.

Sand was working on her play in parallel with an essay on fantastic drama, focusing on *Faust*, Byron's *Manfred*, and *Dziady*<sup>8</sup>, and finally published in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* in 1839. François Buloz, the chief editor, consented for its publication in spite of serious reservations—he considered the play's content too radical, given the magazine's profile.<sup>9</sup> Like a number of Sand's works, *Essai sur le drame fantastique* [*Essay on Fantastic Drama*] was deemed controversial, not only because of its anti-Church strands. Placing an unknown poet on a par with Byron and Goethe obviously led to a sceptical astonishment. It can be presumed that Sand conceived this sketch as an introduction to, and excuse for, the play she was working on. As was the case with the essay on Goethe, apart from a few commendations, *Les Sept Cordes* did not win favour among critics. In Béatrice Didier's opinion, unacceptable for Buloz was also the form of Sand's play. It was customary for the French that a play would always be produced and performed, rather than written. The novel phenomenon of 'philosophical theatre and 'fantastic drama' aroused resistance in the literary milieu. Sand's choice of a hybrid form that combined philosophy with fantasticality or fabulousness and marvelousness made *Les Sept Cordes* a novel, a piece of theatre and verse, and an epic or epopee in one.<sup>10</sup> Albeit the French author directly referred to Goethe, she had her own idea as to how to form the play, which she made explicit in her essay as well. Her corrections to the brilliant poet's work seem inconspicuous but in fact they harbour a revolutionary potential. Sand's polemic with Goethe can be considered as her idealism clashing against his realism. Striking is Sand's courage and shrewdness in the formulation of her opinions regarding the German poet; it should be remarked, though, that her reading of *Faust* was thoroughly subjective and therefore it could raise certain objections (then as well as now) and

<sup>8</sup> G. Sand, *Essai sur le drame fantastique*, présenté et annoté par [ed. by] O. Bara, M. Fontana et M. Stistrup Jensen, in *George Sand critique*, sous la direction de [chief editor] Ch. Planté, Tusson 2006. Sand discusses therein *Faust, Part One*. A French translation of Part Two, by Gérard de Nerval, first came out at Gosselin in 1840 (Sand may have read the text before it was published).

<sup>9</sup> S. Kożuchowska, *Wstęp* [an introduction], in G. Sand, *Eseje*, trans. into Polish by eadem and M. Dramińska-Joczowa, Warszawa 1958, pp. 6–7.

<sup>10</sup> B. Didier, *George Sand: écrivain. «Un grand fleuve d'Amérique»*, Paris 1998, p. 202. This author points out that drama of this sort was not unprecedented in France, if the Enlightenment-age philosophical dialogue novel is to be taken into account (C.-P. Jolyot de Crébillon, Diderot, Sade). Thirsty of metaphysical plays, difficult to stage, Romanticism afforded these intermediate forms a new position.

the will to defend Goethe’s diagnose of humanness. Nonetheless, her noticing that the German poet’s great serenity conceals a cold, loveless confessor of reality, however precise his opinions and judgments were, is respectful. Yet, her judgment of Goethe proves neither unambiguous nor one-dimensional: “Goethe, let me repeat, was not only a great writer but also a beautiful character, a noble soul, and a righteous and disinterested heart”.<sup>11</sup> The moment Sand directly addresses the poet testifies to her emotional involvement: “I cannot feel hatred toward you because you lacked an ideal that could have elevated your powerful genius above the ordinary laws which Divine wisdom had established for human progress”.<sup>12</sup>

Sand moreover specifies in the essay why she has decided to offer her own version of the Faustian story. She starts her argument explaining the genre issues: anticipating a discussion with her possible adversaries, she admits that the proposed unprecedented form of her drama, defying classicist rules, introduced some disarray but enabled artistic freedom and a blend of metaphysics and reality. The form used by Goethe had become property of all artists, to her mind. She believed that accusing Byron of imitation was ungrounded, for the English poet turned the novel idea into a masterpiece. This method of expressing philosophical ideas had become common among all great poets; yet, the content or the composition was a matter of Byron’s or Mickiewicz’s creativity. In her mind, this referred—as we may guess—also herself as the author of *Les Sept Cordes*.

Inasmuch as the artistic realisation of *Faust* aroused her admiration, the drama’s pessimistic vision of reality inspired her fervent disagreement. Hence, a polemic with Goethe is central to the essay. Following Mme Staël, Sand found fascination with evil in his poetry. The idea that human nature could be perceived from the depths of hell triggered dismay in both French authors. In their view, Goethe offers no hope, presenting dark and naked aspects of humanity. Sand would reject such a vision, whereby man, a plaything of great forces, could arouse pity, at most. She stubbornly advocated free will, ability to act and improve oneself; in her view, the world would be nothing without human labour, and humans must “love, suffer, and seek truth as they are bound to continue the Divine work”.<sup>13</sup> Faust, for a change, is a powerless and zestless being, tired and bored, succumbing to the power of Mephisto. As Sand says of Goethe:

<sup>11</sup> G. Sand, ‘Essai sur le drame fantastique: Goethe, Byron, Mickiewicz’, retranslated from the Polish version, in George Sand, *Szkic o dramacie fantastycznym*, in *eadem*, *Eseje*, pp. 73–4.

<sup>12</sup> As above; pp. 74–5.

<sup>13</sup> As above; p. 61.

Faust has become in his hands a being with no clear physiognomy, and unsteady and agonised character, incomprehensible for himself; lacking the awareness of his own greatness and power; likewise, lacking the sense of his humiliation and weakness. He manifests no resistance to temptation; fall triggers no despair in him. Boredom is his only sickness; he is an elder brother of Werther, haughty and tormented by spleen. Before he made a pact with the devil, he grew bored by wisdom and reflection; just as he allied with a cold and bold comrade, he is getting bored with the eternal and unceasing mockery—one that prevents him from sincerely yielding to daydreaming or passions. Before he fell in love with Marguerite, he was bored with loneliness; now that he possesses her, he cannot love her anymore or at least neglects her and forgets about her, feeling an emptiness about all human affairs.<sup>14</sup>

Sand observes that Goethe's morality Goethe harmonises with his 'atheism': the latter mainly consists in 'diminishing God', as she puts it. She accuses him of moral relativism, which resolves nothing, and completely burdens nobody with guilt, since no-one is right. According to this concept, man appears to be "not thoroughly good, and devil, [not thoroughly] bad". The greatest of people might turn out to be rascals; the worst are capable of noble acts.

Thus, Goethe, a slave to plausibility—that is, a vulgar truth; a sworn enemy of romantic heroism as well as absolute perversity, could not resolve whether to make the human completely good and devil, completely bad. Chained to the present, he would present things as they were and not as they ought to be.<sup>15</sup>

Although our rational mind is inclined to the Goethean way of comprehending the reality, the purpose of Sand's pedagogy are not to be ignored. Disrespecting her idealism and seeing it as naïve misses the point: it is utopian indeed, but not naïve. Sand's belief in man and in that his/her works or deeds can make life better was an idea she remained faithful to till her very last days. The Goethean way of describing the things 'as it is' does not change the reality as it doesn't look forward. Presenting things as they should be is managing what is expected or due to come over.

### Helen

In rewriting *Faust*, Sand gives its new version, which from the feministic point-of-view proves more sensitive to the female question.<sup>16</sup> She definite-

<sup>14</sup> As above; p. 64.

<sup>15</sup> As above; p. 73.

<sup>16</sup> Bourgeois specifies three main topics *Les Sept Cordes* addresses, namely society, art, and cognition. The first of them is interrelated with Sand's ambivalent approach to social affairs and to the *art for art's sake* idea, as attested for the period 1835–1839. Her hesitations and pessimism are externalised by Helen,

ly rejects the fate of a maddened infanticide cast off by Faust. In contrast to Goethe’s play, Sand’s central protagonist is Helen (Hélène), who in Sand’s concept is to be an Anti-Marguerite; Albert (Albertus), a counterpart of Faust, is afforded a supporting role.<sup>17</sup> Helen clearly defines her position in the relations with the others, never intending to be a mother or a wife. She resists the seduction from Albert, a teacher, and his mother, for *she* herself is the master. The Helen–Albert relationship, where the latter is a guardian, teacher, and admirer of the former, is reminiscent of the Hegelian relation between the Master and the Slave, as finally it is him who is in need of her, though initially he considered himself a healer of her soul and was supposed to reinforce her organism through philosophical scholarship. Before he went insane owing to his love for Helen, he saw in her a numb, idle and sick soul that “cannot soar to the peaks of metaphysics”.<sup>18</sup>

The name of the drama’s female protagonist Sand is apparently not incidental, as her association with Helen of Troy, the character in *Faust (Part Two)* appears striking.<sup>19</sup> If in Sand’s play, Gretchen/Helen gets emancipat-

who is engulfed by varying moods. Sand ascribes a powerful role to art with a philosophical background—while opposing rationalism, as she sees Mephistophelean deposits in it. Bourgeois notices that ‘the devil is a logician’ in the Sand drama, for pure rationalism leads to scepticism. One can defend himself/herself against him through his/her wisdom of the heart, and by putting trust in intuition (cf. R. Bourgeois, *op. cit.*, pp. 27–8).

<sup>17</sup> At this point, by focusing on Helen—in a more literal than symbolic or allegorical reading (Soul aiming through Love at God; initiation into the mystery of Being, and so on), I significantly depart from the interpretations proposed by the three aforementioned modern French elaborations that offer an almost complete picture of the current state of research regarding this rarely discussed piece. The interpretations of Didier, Bourgeois and Lascoux concentrate on the philosophical and symbolic(al) meanings of the text, referring the reader back to their respective philosophical and literary sources, and do not focus much on the protagonists as humans with their passions, or on Helen as a woman entangled in interactions with them (and not just with the Lyre). These studies explain this fact by the title which highlights the symbolic object rather than certain selected characters, as otherwise customary in Sand. Helen is investigated mostly by Bourgeois and Didier—as a romantic(ist) heroine who is ‘mentally insane’ and mystical. Helen’s priority position has earlier been identified (as I mention in the introductory remarks herein) by M. Fuller and L. de Lisle.

<sup>18</sup> Retranslated from the Polish version: G. Sand, *Siedm strun lutni, ‘z francuskiego przez’* [= ‘[trans.] from the French by] W.O. [W. Olechowski], *Les Sept Cordes...*, p. 120.

<sup>19</sup> Goethe was writing *Faust* for most of his life. Part One came out in 1779; the poet subsequently worked for a number of years on his *Helen*, which was due

ed, becomes agential and acts as a completely independent person, this is different in *Faust*: in Goethe's view, the vision of human quests and stray-offs cannot possibly come to a resolution in the earthly life. Not until Gretchen incurs a punishment is her soul saved and subsequently made part of the Eternal Femininity, to which Helen of Troy belongs as well. Writing of Helen of Troy as shown in *Faust's* Part Two, J.M. van der Laar, refers to Hans Urs von Balthasar arguing that Faust's path leads through Gretchen and Helen into *Das Ewig-Weibliche*.<sup>20</sup> Many commentators of *Faust* add Sofia alias Helen to these two characters, who is known from the gnostic tradition. Sofia has been identified with a fallen deity, the Noble Virgin of Divine Wisdom that once created the angels.<sup>21</sup>

In Sand's play, Helen, daughter of a luthier named Meinbaker, arrives after his death at the house of Master Albert, a teacher of philosophy and all the other wisdom. She soon became the object of desire for his three students and for Albert himself, who took on the role of guardian and father. We therefore come across an archetypical family story: Helen's father and her (perceived) brothers are competing one against the other for her attention. Showing no interest in the men around her, the girl only desired to abandon herself to music and play the lute; whenever she approached the instrument, it would start playing a delightful celestial melody. She is the only

to be published in 1807 as a separate part but only came to light in 1827. The complete work, including Part Two, was eventually published in 1832. See F. Gundolf, *Goethe*, Berlin 1918; K.J. Obenauer, *Der faustische Mensch*, Jena 1922; K. May, *Faust II. Teil in der Sprachform gedeutet*, Berlin, 1936; Stuart Atkins, *Goethe's Faust. A Literary Analysis*, Cambridge, Mass., 1958; K. Mommsen, *Natur- und Fabelreich in Faust II*, Berlin 1968; D.F. Bub, 'Vision and Revelation in Goethe's Faust', *Modern Language Notes* LXXXVIII (1973), pp. 598–602; O. Dshinoria, 'Die Beschwörung der Helena in Goethes Faust', *Goethe (NFJGG)*, XXXII (1976), pp. 91–114; K.-H. Hahn, 'Faust und Helena oder die Aufhebung des Zwiespaltes zwischen Klassikern und Romantikern', *ibid.*, pp. 115–41; John R. Williams, 'Faust's Classical Education: Goethe's Allegorical Treatment of Faust and Helen of Troy', *Journal of European Studies* XIII, 1983, pp. 49–56; C.B. Springsteed, *The Helena Myth in Goethe's Faust and Its Symbolism*, Kessinger Publishing 1917, 2010.

<sup>20</sup> According to some scholars, *Faust's* gnostic references lead to the *Apocryphon of John*; see H.U. von Balthasar, *Prometheus: Studien zu Geschichte des deutschen Idealismus* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), Heidelberg 1947.

<sup>21</sup> J.M. van der Laan refers to the research of Hans Jonas, which identifies Faust as a descendant of Simon Magus and Helen as "the fallen Divine Wisdom [Sophia], owing to which humanity shall be reanimated", in J.M. van der Laan, *Seeking Meaning for Goethe's Faust*, London & New York 2007, p. 65; H. Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion. The Message of Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity*, Boston MA 1958, p. 111.

one among them who can hear the music of the spheres: the seven strings symbolise the seven planets responsible for the *harmonia mundi*. Playing music or listening to it, Helen was daydreaming; the more distant she was from the sublunary world, the more successfully did she attract men.

A disciple of Albert’s, she was aware that she wouldn’t have been capable of meeting the basic educational expectations: she would remark to herself, lamenting, that the very scent of rotting books made her nauseating, and she would confuse the object with the subject. She falls asleep trying to analyse the absolute. She had felt from the very beginning that she needed no teacher and no school whatsoever. This protagonist deviates from the traditional cultural pattern: she is neither Galatea or Elise from G.B. Shaw’s play, as she unmasks the Pygmalionian version of shaping a well-mannered and educated woman. In one of her conversations with Albertus, who is giving her a long lecture, it turns out that it is not a poor memory or narrow-mindedness that is responsible for her lack of interest in learning and getting educated: the point is her own insight into things metaphysical.

It was with a distance that Helen watched the endeavours of the boys in love with her. Even Hans, delicate and empathic as he was, the most poetical soul, did not delight her, though it would seem that he was spiritually most akin to her. Her biological father had bequeathed a lyre—the priceless magical object that allegedly brought her to a nervous breakdown. The instrument, furnished with seven strings (two each made of gold, silver, steel, and one of bronze) was made by her grandfather Adelsfreit, whose spirit was stuck inside her after his death<sup>22</sup>; the augury predicted that only

<sup>22</sup> Didier points to the numerous references related to the symbol of lyre. She asserts that the lyre is the actual protagonist, as attested by the play’s title—and Sand usually used the female characters’ name as titles of her works. As Didier notices, the lyre leads to the myth of Orpheus, and to the Lacedaemonian custom of tearing off the strings due to excessive excitement caused. While Didier cannot determine the type of the lyre in question, she states that the instrument, which experienced its renaissance at the time, was featured in François Gérard’s painting *Corinne au Cap Misène (Corinne at Cape Miseno)*, featuring Mme de Staël. This particular type of instrument, indeed *en vogue* at that time, was something intermediate between the guitar and the lyre—producing sounds like the former and looking like the latter. The lyre typically had six strings, the one portrayed by Sand, a magical and sacral object, is seven-stringed, and “it is the seventh string that saves [*sauve*] Albert” (cf. B. Didier, *op. cit.*, p. 205). It is worth noting that, being Apollo’s attribute, the lyre symbolised power over life and death. Together with the arc, it composed a harmony that, in Heraclitus’s view, ensued from a tension between the opposites annulling each other. Playing this instrument rendered one ecstatic, fostered visions and

a chaste and untainted person could release it. Not only the three students but also Albert and Adelsfreit struggled for her affection, the former tempting her with wisdom and the latter, with earthly love. But Helen rejected both of them: “one wants my love to serve as a model and a lesson for the dwellers of the Earth; the other wants me to love in order to satisfy the desires of my heart; for me to experience and enjoy happiness on Earth”.<sup>23</sup>

Following Mephistopheles’s suggestion, Master Albertus, in his attempted conquest of Helen, tears off the strings, one by one—starting with the two gold ones, celebrating infinity and faith; then come the two silver ones, revealing the secrets of the skyward world; then, the two steel ones, symbolising acts and creations of humans. The bronze spring that he finally detaches sets Adelsfreit’s spirit free, whereas Helen gets released from mundane bonds. Albert, yielding to the devil’s power, seems to have been defeated. Should the drama have thus concluded, it would have not diverted from Goethe’s fatalistic (as Sand believed it to be) vision from *Faust (Part One)*; the French author concludes it her own way: Albertus is eventually saved, and Helen’s spirit extends its care to him.

### The mystery of Helen

Helen is perceived by Master Albertus and his disciples as a deranged or insane person: a girl that runs into ecstasy, lapses into silence, otherwise behaving as if she saw or heard nobody at all. Her way of being resembles the nineteenth-century ‘female illness’ described by Jean-Martin Charcot.<sup>24</sup> Hysteria was apparently characterised by artificial or ‘theatrical’ behaviour. A Hysterical attack would manifest itself in spasms or outbursts, unnatural twists of the limbs, screaming, paresis, convulsions, along with aphasia or catatonia. It was observed that the same symptoms were characteristic of the behaviours of some female mystics experiencing meetings with Christ. Identifying the similarities in the inner experiences of female hysterics and mystics, Luce Irigaray coined the notion of *La Mystérique*,

spiritual elations. The ancient believed that Apollo’s playing enchanted not only the gods and humans but also stones.

<sup>23</sup> *Les Sept Cordes...*, p. 164.

<sup>24</sup> Since 1870, Charcot was in charge of hysteria patients for thirty years at the Salpêtrière hospital in Paris, introducing hypnosis as a method of cure. He considered hysteria as a hereditary affliction or a sort of trauma in the central nervous system, related to epilepsy; see E. Showalter, *Hystories. Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Media*, Columbia University Press 1997, p. 30; G. Didi-Huberman, *Invention of Hysteria*, trans. By A. Hartz, Massachusetts Institute of Technology 2003.

aptly describing the phenomenon<sup>25</sup>; this neologism enables to understand the behaviour of Helen. In her *Speculum of the Other Women*, Irigaray refers to Lacan’s psychoanalysis: his recognition of hysteria as a refusal towards the symbolic system, and of mysticism as a method of its transgression, is at the outset of her considerations. Following Lacan, she primarily points to mysticism, the stance of the mystic, as “the only place in the history of the West in which woman speaks and acts so publicly”.<sup>26</sup> Lacan developed the theory of Freud who approached hysteria as an organic sickness, a neurosis caused by post-traumatic repression, with symptoms such as disturbed sexuality and diverse fantasies.<sup>27</sup> The progress in psychological knowledge enabled specialists to subsequently part with the misogynistic ideas regarding female anatomy, notably, the myths of wandering uterus and demonic possession.<sup>28</sup>

Lacan’s argument that hysteria stands for the voice of the unconscious, and for an opposition to norms and language, has been taken up by the feminist critics Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous, who define hysteria as a female system of meanings outside the language.<sup>29</sup> Their findings complemented the feminist discussion on hysteria as a lack of language, with the resulting forms of repression as well as subversion, represented by the figure of rebelling and disobedient young girl who rejected all the paternal principles. Sand’s Helen incarnates the abovementioned forms of resistance and opposition towards all and any manifestations of symbolic violence.

At some point, Helen plunges into a world of her own creation, experiences some trances or deliria, and loses her consciousness for a while. Her mystery is, on the one hand, an act of most profound expression and free will (freedom/liberty), and on the other, an act of disturbance and excess in her relations with the others. Having regained her consciousness, she says to her admirers, “Leave me alone, men! I have nothing in common

<sup>25</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Women*, trans. G.C. Gill, Ithaca & New York 1985.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 191. Lacan stated that “In all its traditions—except the one I am about to refer to, where this issue makes one feel quite uneasy—mysticism is a search, construction, ascetic practice, assumption, however you want to put it, a headlong plunge into the *jouissance* of God”; J. Lacan, *On the Names of the Father*, trans. B. Fink, Cambridge & Malden, 2013, p. 78 (orig. publ. as *Des Noms-du-Père*, Paris, 2005).

<sup>27</sup> E. Showalter, *Hystories*, pp. 37–8.

<sup>28</sup> E. Trillat, *Histoire de l’hystérie*, Paris 1986, *passim*.

<sup>29</sup> E. Showalter, *Hystories*, pp. 56–7, 86.

with you. I do not belong to your world anymore".<sup>30</sup> Then, she pushes Wilhelm back: "don't you touch me, Wilhelm, I'm not a fiancée of yours, and shall never be [...]. I belong to a world where you cannot get into, unless through expiration or damnation".<sup>31</sup> Albert treats this behaviour as the subsequent instances of crisis: "the mind has gone mad [...], be obedient to me! I am your father".<sup>32</sup> Finally, Helen breaks up the relationship with her guardian; her rebellion against the father is also a rejection, according to the Lacanian 'meaningful system' terms. "I have no father. I am a daughter of the lute, and I know you not. You've been tormenting me long now, pointing to intellectual labours that prove contrary to my temperament. The big words and your big reasoning are not the things for me. The time to live has come; I am a free being, and I'm willing to live free", Helen says.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, Helen's behaviour may testify to the voice taken away and/or a refusal to participate in a language she is not comfortable with, while she can express herself most completely through music. It is this transgression of a symbolic system that gives her access to a mystical experience where the border between the body and the soul, immanence and transcendence, sensuality and intelligibility is blurred.

In her book *Gender in the Fiction of George Sand*, Françoise Massardier-Kenney points to a lack of female desire in certain novels of this author<sup>34</sup>, explaining this in terms of refusal to compliance with the patriarchal authority, lack of consent to male sexual pleasure which takes no account of the woman's needs. The scholar's analysis of the behaviour of Joanne, the main protagonist in a namesake peasant novel (*Joanne*, 1844)<sup>35</sup>, she aptly identifies her numerous social 'intrusivenesses'. Let us note that this young female peasant/shepherd from an infertile area in the Creuse River valley (Duchy of Creuse, formerly La Marche), an incarnation of Jeanne d'Arc, appears as an ideal, reflexive ne-plus-ultra, so there is no need that she strive for anything whatsoever. Joanne is almost incessantly self-complacent, a state that erases the borders between her and the nature around her:

Such a being she was, Joanne, the Gallican Isis, who seemed to be equally alien to all the superstitions of those who surrounded her, as if a daughter of She-Druids

<sup>30</sup> *Les Sept Cordes*, p. 95.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 74.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 99.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 100.

<sup>34</sup> F. Massardier Keney, *Gender in the Fiction of George Sand*, Amsterdam-Atlanta 2000, p. 54.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 70–83. [Polish ed.: *'Joanna' pana Jerzego Sand*, z francuskiego przełożył [translated from the French by] B.W. [B. Wisłowski], Leipzig 1845.

were she, if transferred into our age. [...] Amidst the unceasing delightment, she lived in this world a vegetal life, like a beautiful lilly, her breast open toward the zephyr of the night, the kiss of the day, and all the influences of the earth and the sky, though equally insensitive to human passions and not comprehending of the meaning of human speeches.<sup>36</sup>

Helen’s self-eroticism is somewhat different: she is determined by a strong desire for transcendence, along with a sense of deprivation, as expressed in the phrase “I desire infinity”. Deprivation is the constitutive force determining our lives, actions, and diverse fantasies.<sup>37</sup> Helen’s desire cannot find an appropriate object in the earthly environment, hence it remains undirected and unsatisfied. Her desire obviously cannot be satisfied in this world, for such satisfaction would mean its expiration.<sup>38</sup> Desiring infinity, Helen experiences exaltation and bliss inaccessible to others; her experience remains a secret for Albert and all the others.

In her *Speculum*, Irigaray, following Lacan, identifies mysticism as the space of female pleasure and delight—the *jouissance*—going beyond the phallic realm. This type of pleasure does not boil down to the sexual organs and to language, and thereby is unquantifiable and unlocalisable, occupying no specified place in the body whilst remaining sensual.<sup>39</sup> An ordinary pleasure, as Lacan repeatedly remarked, is never satisfactory, appears belying and disappointing. Such different female *jouissance* is unspeakable; if it could ever be articulated with use of *the meaningful*, it would appear unreliable, and so it has to remain inexpressible, like a mystic’s experience.<sup>40</sup> In spite of this, attempts of (re)presenting the *jouissance* in ques-

<sup>36</sup> G. Sand, *Joanne*, Paris 1881, pp. 190-1.

<sup>37</sup> In the platonic tradition, deprivation stands for ‘Eros’; in Lacan’s psychoanalysis, it is a feature of crossed-out subject of the meaningful.

<sup>38</sup> See lacanonline.com, <https://www.lacanonline.com/2015/07/what-does-lacan-say-about-jouissance/> [accessed: 2023-10-09].

<sup>39</sup> See L. Irigaray, *Speculum*, p.193; B. Fink, *Knowledge and Jouissance*, in *Reading Seminar XX: Lacan’s Major Work on Love, Knowledge, and Feminine Sexuality*, ed. by S. Barnard and B. Fink, Albany 2002; J. Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, ed. by J.-A. Miller, *On Feminine Sexuality. The Limits of Love and Knowledge*, trans. B. Fink, New York & London 1975, p. 74.

<sup>40</sup> J. Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: On Feminine Sexuality. The Limits of Love and Know* ed. by J.A. Miller, Book XX, pp. 76-7; B. Fink, *Knowledge*. The latter study differentiates between two types of *jouissance* in Lacan: mediocre (phallic), “which is susceptible to failure and [...] fundamentally misses our partner. [...] Because it reduces our partner, as Other, to what Lacan refers to as object a, that partial object that serves as the cause of desire: our partner’s voice or gaze that turns us on, or that body part we enjoy in our partner”.

tion have been made over centuries; it appears as a metaphor or metonymy in the symbolic order. Let us once again emphasise that whenever Helen comes closer to the lyre, she is experiencing elation, rapture. We can find depictions of female pleasure primarily in visual arts; suffice it to mention *Leda and the Swan* by Leonardo da Vinci or Tintoretto, the Spartan queen embraces the bird, but its neck is not the point. The point is different: the feather being almost-untouched, barely-nicked.<sup>41</sup> The *jouissance* experienced by Helen is not free of pain, suffering and tribulation. As a combination of the libido and death drive, it exceeds the pleasure principle and opens up for death. An example of this state is Guido Reni's painting *The Suicide of Cleopatra*, showing the queen putting the snake against her breast dies experiences pleasure, her face resembling that shown in Bernini's *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*.<sup>42</sup>

In the name of the unknown and infinite, Helen ignores her dream of immortality—first, by denying giving birth to children, the most typical way of extending the biological life, and then, by refusing to make love with the Spirit who, in Helen's chastity, intends to beget beauty and other ideas. She doesn't get blinded in her ecstasy, and instead, has the gift of extra-seeing, in which the secrets of sublunar nature and work of the humans are revealed for her: the world immersed in wars, blood, ruin, misfortune. Helen's sight embraces hell and heaven as she stands above the earth (on a tower). At this point, the poetic vision created by Sand appears close to testimonies and revelations of Christ's Passion. Although, unlike in Anne Catherine Emmerich's visions, there is no crucified Christ, the empathic power of these images is comparable.

This protagonist knows well what she is not willing to encounter or ex-

Whereas "The idea of an Other *jouissance* is closely related to the idea of God", to a mystical experience of God. "There is a kind of fantasy at work here: the fantasy that we could attain such perfect, total, indeed, we might even say spherical, satisfaction. That fantasy takes on various forms in Buddhism, Zen, Catholicism, Tantrism, and mysticism, and it goes by various names: Nirvana, Ecstasy, and so on", in Fink, *op. cit.*; quoted after *idem, Lacan to the Letter. Reading Écrits Closely*, Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2004, pp. 159, 157.

<sup>41</sup> In his interpretation of Sand's play, Bourgeois points to the biographical context, believing that the work's form and content was informed also by the initial period of Sand's love relationship with Chopin and her fascination with his music. The real-life relationship between the two is apparently reflected in the parallel relationship between Helen and the Spirit of the Lyre; cf. R. Bourgeois, 'Introduction', pp. 11–2.

<sup>42</sup> Works of art (re)presenting the female *jouissance* are numerous indeed.

perience but she does not know what is it that she wants, for he doesn't know it. Her unlimited and unspeakable pleasure occurs without love for the Father. Self-sufficient, it opens up to the inexpressible and apophatic dimensions of reality.

### Idealism

As a last point, I should like to resume Fuller's remark: she admires Helen for her rejection of the Spirit and the philosopher. We can understand this stance. Her friendship with Emerson yielded a deep philosophical reflection, opened new cognitive horizons, gave her support and made her more agential. Consequently, she had no reason to repel that extremely good friendship, whilst, on the other hand, she didn't feel strong enough to resist, be it in the sphere of fantasy, all the limitations or restrictions imposed by the patriarchal culture. This biographical interpolation is, however, a rough simplification: by assuming it, we would have to start considering—as Bourgeois does—whether *Les Sept Cordes* portrays, to an extent, her mentors Michel de Bourges, Fr. Félicité Robert de Lamennais, or Pierre Leroux.<sup>43</sup> It is more legitimate to go along the lines of artistic and philosophical interpretations of the drama.

Let us take a look, once again, at Helen's love affair with the Spirit. Adelsfreit is not a zeitgeist; with his earthly roots, his background is menial. We know that he stayed in heaven for some time, before he was knocked down into the lute. As a prisoner, he tried to seduce Helen; we also know that she is the only one who could free him from the state of fall. The more the Spirit desires Helen for his self-saving purposes, the more his behaviour becomes earthly, material, and sexual—male and patriarchal, in a word. At the first meeting under the sign of the gold string his words seemingly fell on the fertile ground. When he talks about infinity and divinity, Helen becomes enthusiastic and listens delightedly. Yet, she quickly discovers the mystification and recognises the nature of her subsequent admirer, who happens to be her grandfather, and says, “You are not a god, as you wish to pretend, you too are a son of mortals”.<sup>44</sup> During the second meeting, under the silver string, at which the laws of nature are revealed, Helen demands that the Spirit went on talking about infinity, but grows certain that he lacks adequate knowledge and will not guide her to the stars as he has no command of the language of infinity. Their dialogue shows how dramat-

<sup>43</sup> Cf. R. Bourgeois, *op. cit.*, pp. 14–6. According to this scholar, both in the work concerned and in its author's biography, a tension can be sensed between the need for a Master and the need for self-existence and freedom (*ibid.*, p. 16).

<sup>44</sup> *Les Sept Cordes...*, p. 105.

ically their paths have split, with Helen repeating, “I want infinity”, and him, “Let’s love each other”.

Given the girl’s resistance, the Spirit abandons his apparition and impatiently tries to persuade her that the most essential things are to be found here, on earth, and there’s no point ploughing through the curtains separating one from the ideal whilst life can be enjoyed to the full here and now; finally, he submits to the amorous struggle—to finally ascertain, surprisedly, that she doesn’t love him. He finds it the greatest astonishment, for who might resist heavenly powers. They are accompanied during those amatory meetings, like a shadow, by Albert, the Spirit’s opponent. Both play a perverse game with the girl: the Spirit falls in love like some impatient admirer, whereas Albert assumes the role of a platonic lover/father, which results in an effect of obscenity and ambiguity. Helen, hitherto unconquered, bids farewell to her would-be-lovers. None of them is capable of offering the love she expects; consequently, no new Trojan war is impending:

HELEN: I would like to love you, oh you misfortunate sage, you patient martyr of charity and virtue. I would like to love you, the spirit of the lute, oh imbibing melody, bright flame, the ideal of harmony, sublimity and fairness. [...] Oh God, thou whose existence has no beginning or end, and whose love has no limits: it is thou whom I can love, thou only. Shall thou take my soul immediately, or shall thou enjoin upon me to wither by decease as long as the earth’s existence—may I never lose the sense of infinity. Oh God mine, have mercy, for suffering I am, since I love thee; oh confer upon me thy life, since...<sup>45</sup>

The unfulfilled love affair with the lute’s spirit turns out to have been a test to which Helen was subjected by the celestial choirs—and she proved that her driving force was pure love for the extraterrestrial. The process of releasing herself from the worldly shackles goes across several levels—the sensual/carnal, intellectual, and spiritual. Her rejection of Hans’s and Wilhelm’s amatory endeavours is a gesture of deliverance from the limitations of a phallic economy which established woman’s happiness in a relationship with man as her ultimate purpose. Master Albertus and his teachings turned up as another obstacle; her rejection of knowledge, science, philosophy as unsatisfactory as irrelevant entities, which moreover proved, as it were, blind and deaf to her desire and striving, represents the limitations of European philosophy—in particular, Goethe’s realism. She perceives his philosophy, derived as it was from Voltaire, Leibniz and Spinoza, as manifesting itself in an idolatrous worship of divinised nature, and herself sees such nature as mute and insensitive, dreadful and unconscious, dis-

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 167.

turbing interpersonal relations and devastating “the sense of cordial bonds and of duty”. A sense of boredom and despair that gnaws Goethe’s characters comes as a consequence of this “deflection of knowledge”. Sand identifies the reason behind this state of affairs as the mind being liberated from all the restrictions and limitations, at the expense of loss of ideals.<sup>46</sup>

Quoting in her essay an excerpt from *Faust* describing a sky-high journey, she considers it a denial of the true desire for infinity. This flights wouldn’t end up in a transgression the earthly things, demonstrating the impossibility of freeing oneself from material attachments:<sup>47</sup>

A fiery chariot sweeps nearer  
On light wings! I feel ready, free  
To cut a new path through the ether  
And reach new spheres of pure activity.  
This greater life, this godlike bliss!  
[...]  
Choose to take that step, happy to go  
Where danger lies, where Nothingness may flow.<sup>48</sup>

Sand’s reply to lack of divine love and ideal in *Faust* is the subversive vision of her own skyward flight. Goethe and Sand both refer, each in his or her own way, to Platonian image-myths. In Plato’s *Symposium*, Diotima commends the love that is the main engine of human life: soaring through the degrees of knowledge, reaches the world of pure beauty and other ideas. Its path starts with love for beauty that is found in a single body, but this is only the beginning of the journey. Having abandoned the sensual

<sup>46</sup> *Essai sur le drame fantastique*, p. 69.

<sup>47</sup> Sand precedes the following quote from *Faust* with the remark: “His [i.e. Goethe’s] genius has encircled the world and bowed to the marvels of infinity; when he headed toward the earth, he felt his wings weakening and numbing. For in heavens, likewise on the earth, he only comprehended and felt matter, and it was not worthwhile to traverse such immense a space so as not to discover anything better. He would have consented to die, for him to find anything else out”; retranslated from the Polish, in Sand, *Szkic o dramacie*, in *eadem*, *Eseje*, p. 70.

<sup>48</sup> J.W Goethe, *Faust, Part One*, Scene I: Night, lines 702–6 & 718–19 trans. A.S. Kline (2003); another noteworthy translation, by David Luke (1987), goes as follows:

A fiery chariot on light wings descends  
And hovers by me! I will set forth here  
On a new journey to the heaven’s ends,  
To pure activity in a new sphere!  
sublime life, o godlike joy! [...]  
Time to step gladly over this great brink,  
And if it is the void, into the void to sink!

world, it moves through the consecutive degrees. Initially, it finds beauty in human works, and so it loves humanity; then, the last obstacles overcome, it arrives at the world of reason. At this point, the adventure of rational European philosophical thought comes to an end, one could remark. In *Phaedrus*, we come across a weird and incomprehensible moment: the soul, in the form of a winged horse-drawn chariot, traverses the whole heaven and eventually mounts upward to the top of heaven where it encounters pure ideas—entities essentially existent.<sup>49</sup> Beyond that, nothing is: a dark, empty and silent heaven, frightening but delightful. Not really rejecting the path leading from sensual beauty to idea(s), Sand basically suggests to go forward, beyond the world of intellect or even spirit, to where—as we may guess—an non-repressive de-sublimation of the libido occurs, in the form of *jouissance*. The seven strings break off, the music of the spheres fades out, the planets fall down from the skies, the stars have died out long ago—and Helen leaps into the void, infinite and unspeakable. One can only presume and speculate what might occur there; Meister Eckhart and Marguerite Porete of Hainaut have told us more about it.

At this point, Goethe is not to be neglected—on the contrary, the last word ought to be his. In *Faust, Part Two*, the peak of heaven is where *das Ewig-Weibliche*—‘the ever feminine’, or ‘eternal feminine’ begins (lines 12110–11). J.M. von der Laan argues in her study in *Faust* that, similarly to Helen of Troy, the ever-feminine is a form of all the forms (*Gestalt aller Gestalten*), and refers to Herder who spoke of God as ‘the being of beings’ and the purpose of all human enquiries.<sup>50</sup> Laan takes into account a feminist reading by Ellis Dye, who identifies a series of Eternity/Womanhood connotations: physicality, the concept of Eros, habitation and divinity, along with fertility, (self-)agency, origin/background, and destiny, and compares the idea in question to a vessel: the universal menstruum, maternal *Wunderschoß*—the ‘wonder bosom’ (8665).<sup>51</sup>

As noticed by Michael Neumann, Doctor Marianus in his praise song extols the Eternal Feminine thus: “Jungfrau, Mutter, Königin, / Gottin” (“Holy Virgin, Mother, Queen, / Goddess” [lines 12102–3]). The Eternal Feminine symbolises forgiving, grace, and love, while it also embodies the transcendental sphere of ultimate existence, divine wisdom and creative power that exceeds human capacity while never ceasing to attract as it reveals itself

<sup>49</sup> See Plato, *Phaedrus* [246 c, d], see *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. 9, trans. H.N. Fowler, Cambridge–London 1925.

<sup>50</sup> J.M. von der Laan, *Seeking Meaning for Goethe's Faust*, London 2007, p. 64.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 65; also, see E. Dye, ‘Figurations of the Feminine in Goethe's *Faust*’, in P. Bishop (ed.), *A Companion to Goethe's Faust*, NY 2001, pp. 107, 109.

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as divinity.<sup>52</sup> As long as *das Ewig-Weibliche* encompasses Gretchen, Helen and Mary, Mater Gloriosa, Galatea, Leda, Aurora, and Juno, the protagonist of *Les Sept Cordes de la Lyre* is among them as well.



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#### ABSTRACT

„Infinity devours me” – these words of Helen, the protagonist of George Sand’s *Seven Strings of the Lyre* are a topic of this article’s reflection. A first reading of this sentence draws towards Christian mystical love for the divine and this intuition is by all means correct, however, the author decided to analyse this expression in two ways: not only as a combination of two dimensions of the human universe, but she also sees these words as a gesture of breach with the romantic depiction of spiritual world. It is necessary to draw coordinates which, in this interpretation, will form a map of this revolt of Sand’s. On the one hand, a neologism proposed in *Speculum. De l’autre femme* by Luce Irigaray: *mysterique*, or a portmanteau of the mystic and the hysteric. Sand’s heroine is distinguished by the desire for death, the cause of which is a feminine, non-phallic experience of pleasure that disregards the pursuit of immortality. Death drive and *jouissance* are placed beyond Freudian pleasure principle and are, according to Jacques Lacan, the key to understanding the mystical experience. By using these determinants, the author attempts to show what is the desire for infinity, understood as a leap from the top of heaven, which can be interpreted as rejection of European metaphysics in favour of nonrepressive desublimation of libido.

#### KEYWORDS

George Sand, feminism, mysticism, sexuality



<sup>52</sup> J.M. von der Laan, *op. cit.*, p. 65–6; also, see M. Neumann, *Das Ewig-Weibliche in Goethes “Faust”*, Heidelberg 1985, p. 102.