Wallenrodian Conspiracy Revisited Twice and Not Quite: Marcin Wolski's *Wallenrod* and Szczepan Twardoch's *Wieczny Grunwald*

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The story of Adam Mickiewicz's *Konrad Wallenrod* (1828)—a Lithuanian boy grows up to become Grand Master of the Teutonic Order, which, after he finds out his true identity, he betrays in an act of national fervor before committing suicide—might at first not appear to be much more than an unremarkable, typically *romantic* story that could have come straight from a Walter Scott novel. However, due to Mickiewicz's choice to tell the story as a narrative poem and in a highly achronological fashion, and supported by the historical context—it was published in 1828 Saint Petersburg for a Polish audience under a Russian yoke—it became both highly regarded and highly influential.

Adam Mickiewicz was a trendsetter in Polish literature in more than one respect. He was certainly one by 1832 when, in the prologue of *Dziady III* (*Forefathers Eve III*), he revisited his earlier work *Konrad Wallenrod* with the famous scene in which his protagonist, Gustaw, declares his resurrection as Konrad on his prison walls. This is commonly regarded as a reference to Konrad-Wallenrod-the-character's patriotic altruism, which now takes the place of Gustaw's romantic individualism. While these two characters share the same name and might be alike, they are far from being one and the same and differ in many other respects. The former is merely an adaptation of the latter, an intertextual reference, albeit a highly relevant one. This change emphasizes the widespread 'notoriety' that the protagonist of *Konrad Wallenrod* had already gained in the four

years since its publication. Mickiewicz would have been sure that his readers understood the point that Gustaw was making in shuffling off his nomenclative coil and exchanging it for a different one: they would have known it was *not just any name.*

Authors writing adaptations of their own work or referencing it is, of course, nothing new, nor is it at all that remarkable when other authors do likewise. It either becomes interesting when the narrative of a certain work becomes a literary topos or when an existing literary topos becomes associated with a certain work to such an extent that the two appear synonymous. Within Polish literature, this seems to have happened with *Konrad Wallenrod* and the Wallenrodian treason for the national cause derived therefrom.

While foreign critics, such as Ukrainian poet Ivan Franko, see *Wallenrodism* as a typically Polish cult of treachery for which Mickiewicz himself is solely to blame,[1] and while it figures frequently in conspiracy theories concerning Poland, Polish critics see it mostly as an inadequate form of resistance, draining power from more overt forms. This did not diminish the role of Mickiewicz's paradigm that "the slaves' only weapon is deceit"[2] in Poland itself. However, the—at first glance at least—remarkably positive view of such conspirational thought in Poland offers possibilities for instrumentalization abroad. One can observe this after the 1830–31 November Uprising, when the attitudes of Russian intellectuals such as Pushkin or Bestuzhev towards Poles generally soured considerably: they saw their assumptions about Polish "untrustworthiness" confirmed.

This chapter can, of course, not sound the length, breadth and depth of Polish literary history in its entirety for works that take up this topos, nor is this necessary in the first place: most of this monumental task has already been completed by Polish literary scholar and author Stefan Chwin in his 1993 work *Literatura i zdrada* (*Literature and Treason*).[3] I would instead like to analyze two of the most recent traces that Mickiewicz's *Konrad Wallenrod* has left during its almost 200 year march through Polish literary history—two works that Chwin, for the obvious reason that they were published almost twenty years after his monograph, did not take into consideration: Szczepan Twardoch's *Wieczny Grunwald, powieść zza końca czasów* (Eternal Grunwald, A Novel from Beyond the End of Times, 2010) and Marcin Wolski's *Wallenrod* (2010). Both of these works ap-

1 Cf. Franko 2016.

2 "… jedyna broń niewolników – podstępy." Mickiewicz 1997: 290–91. All translations in this chapter are mine, B.M.

3 Cf. Chwin 1993.

peared in the National Center of Culture's alternate history series *Zwrotnice czasu* (The Switching Points of Time).[4]

The fact that the National Center of Culture propagates alternate history writing with its own book series should be viewed in the light of a wider trend in Poland where alternate history has flourished since 1989—not only in literature, as Netflix's first Polish original series *1983* has shown. As Magdalena Górecka pointedly notes, this is in part because utopias of the future have been discredited in Poland since the failure of the last utopian project that was attempted within its borders—that of Communism. According to her, the place of utopias has been relocated from the future to the past.[5]

Wallenrod or The Double Wallenrod

The first novel, Marcin Wolski's 2009 *Wallenrod*, is a spy novel set in an alternate history whose point of deviation is Piłsudski's death; thanks to treatment by a mysterious French doctor, the Marshal of Poland, instead of passing away in 1935, lives until 1941, which changes the course of history. Under Piłsudski's continued guidance Poland complies with German demands for Danzig and a road and train connection between Germany proper and East Prussia, cooperating with Germany in a "Zerschlagung der Rest-Tschecho*slowakei*" (its Czech parts become a German protectorate while Slovakia becomes a Polish one) eventually partaking in a successful invasion of the Soviet Union together with Francoist Spain, Italy, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria. After a war in the West against the Netherlands, Belgium and most importantly Great Britain and France, which is easily won by mostly German troops, the novel comes to its grand finale—Hitler gathering Europe's heads of state in the city of "New Jerusalem," built on the shores of the Dnieper River. This city is intended to serve as the capital of a newly established "Jewish Republic," on which he plans to use the first atomic bomb. Thanks to the bravery of a Polish fighter pilot who is smuggled aboard the plane that is carrying this deadly weapon, the bomb obliterates not Europe's heads of state and a large part of its Jewry, but instead annihilates practically the entirety of Nazi German leadership. After a successful Operation Valkyrie, Germany subsequently slides into a civil war which ends in the restoration of German democracy.

4 For a greater overview of this series, cf. Lemann 2011.

5 Górecka 2014: 12.

The novel is told from the perspective of Halina Silberstein, the daughter of a Jewish communist and a Polish *szlachcianka* ('noblewoman') who becomes Hitler's private secretary as a part of the Polish secret service and under the guise of the German Helena Wichmann. Aware of Hitler's "New Jerusalem" plot, she initiates its reversal under "my new pseudonym, which is close to the heart of every Pole: 'Wallenrod'!"[6] The fighter pilot who carries out the eventual bombing is Silberstein's cousin, who himself has to betray his gay lover: the German pilot assigned for the job.

Wallenrod is embedded in several significant traditions. Firstly, and most obviously, a *Wallenrodian* one—this is alluded to as early as in the work's title–which seems, of course, to be closely connected to the genre of the spy novel more generally. The novel's 'novelty' lies in its doubling: both the protagonist and Poland itself play *Wallenrodian* roles and achieve the right ends by the wrong means. Silberstein is the microlevel; Poland the macrolevel. This is made explicit in Silberstein's, sometimes ruthless, methods on the one hand and by Hitler himself repeatedly raping her on the other: both are mirrored in the novel by Poland's Realpolitik. Moreover, like Mickiewicz's Konrad Wallenrod, both Silberstein and Poland wait many years for the right time to strike.

The second tradition concerns World War II alternate history writing which, as Kathleen Singles notes, "constitute[s] perhaps the largest 'cluster,' related by choice of historical subject, of such works from about 1940 to present in the Western world."[7] As Singles points out, the most convenient and most popular events that serve as so-called points of deviation are "those which have been emplotted in history as having the most significant and wide-reaching consequences: wars, assassinations, inventions, elections,"[8] and World War II simply stands out as an event of singular importance in history in general and in Polish history in particular. The connection of Piłsudski's postponed death to World War II consists in his leadership steering Poland in a different direction in this conflict than its historical leaders had, radically changing the course of the war. Piłsudski's vision is emphasized time and again in the novel—examples of this are Winston Churchill's last words, spoken in a bunker underneath Whitehall in an all but occupied United Kingdom, shortly before his suicide:

6 "… moim nowym pseudonymem, bliskim serca każdego Polaka: 'Wallenrod'!" – Wolski 2012: 384.

7 Singles 2013: 50–51.

8 Ibid.: 49.

"We are all guilty of what happened. When, in the afterlife, I shall meet Piłsudski, I shall congratulate him on his choice and his farsightedness—only he was right when he proposed stopping Hitler before he grew strong."[9]

Halina Silberstein's thoughts, as she looks out at a London in ruins, play into that, too:

As I gazed upon this destroyed and humiliated city, my heart grew heavy and I thought of those Polish cities, flowering Warsaw, bustling Lwów and romantic Wilno. What would have become of them if we had not had Piłsudski's plan?[10]

The reader, of course, knows what would have happened to them, because it did: Warsaw was "destroyed and humiliated" instead of London; Lwów became a Ukrainian city and Wilno a Lithuanian one.

This brings us to the third tradition from which Wolski is writing and which is already present in the paratext: the novel is dedicated to Paweł Wieczorkiewicz (who also appears as one of its characters: "the famous historian"[11] by the same name). It is Wieczorkiewicz, a historian from the University of Warsaw and the Academy of Humanities in Pułtusk, who propagates the idea that Polish cooperation with Nazi Germany had been "the better choice" leading up to World War II in his 2004 story "Rydz-Śmigły na Placu Czerwonym w Moskwie w 1940 roku. Co by było, gdy Polska przyjęła żądania niemieckie?" ("Rydz-Śmigły on Moscow's Red Square in 1940. What if Poland had accepted the German demands?"). This idea, however, is older than Wieczorkiewicz. One of its most prominent proponents was Jerzy Łojek in his study *Agresja sowiecka 17 września 1939. Studium aspektów politycznych* ("The Soviet Aggression of 17 September 1939. A Study of its Political Aspects"), which appeared in the Polish underground press in 1979.[12]

One example of this school of thought's survival beyond Wolski's novel is referred to on the back of its second edition: the blurb, which laments the fact

9 "Wszyscy jesteśmy winni temu, co się stało. Kiedy w zaświatach spotkam się z Piłsudskim, pogratuluję mu wyboru i dalekowzroczności – on jeden miał rację, proponując powstrzymanie Hitlera, póki nie urósł w siłę." – Wolski 2012: 286.

10 "Gdy patrzyłam na ten obraz zniszczonej I upokorzonej stolicy, ściskało mi się serce I myślałam o polskich miastach, o kwitnącej Warszawie, gwarnym Lwowie i romantycznym Wilnie. Co stałoby się z nimi, gdyby nie plan Piłsudskiego?" – ibid.: 299.

11 Ibid.: 399.

12 Cf. Łojek 1979.

"that professor Wieczorkiewicz [who passed away before the novel's publication] could no longer read it," is provided by Piotr Żychowicz. This history writer, who was also one of the initiators of the campaign "Against Polish Camps," caused some controversy with his book *Pakt Ribbentrop-Beck czyli jak Polacy mogli u boku Trzeciej Rzeszy pokonać Związek Sowiecki* (*The Ribbentrop-Beck Pact or How Poland could have defeated the Soviet Union side by side with the Third Reich*, 2012), in which he attempts to counter several "myths of Polish victimhood," by showing how the Polish minister of foreign affairs Józef Beck supposedly time and again made fatal assessments and by highlighting the advantages of Polish cooperation with Nazi Germany which included saving parts of its Jewish population.

Żychowicz's book was highly criticized, by fellow historians Stanisław Salmonowicz[13] and Andrzej Nowak for example, who claim that this book

> … fulfills the wish of Russian and other propagandists, who want to show that Poland wholeheartedly wanted to join Hitler to murder Jews but did not do it because of its own stupidity. As such Poland (in this worldview) is both malicious and stupid.
> Mr. Piotr Żychowicz wants to save Poland from the charge of stupidity, but, in fact, emboldens it with his considerations … . Considerology, whatifology cannot, in the end, be verified or not. But one can practice it more or less responsibly. Mr. Piotr Żychowicz practices it very irresponsibly. I think that his master, Mr. Paweł Wieczorkiewicz, even though he started these considerations, would not have agreed with them. Surely, he would not have taken them this far, to such a treatment of Polish history, as Żychowicz has.[14]

13 Willma 2013.

14 "Realizuje ona dokładnie, dokładnie, zamówienie propagandystów rosyjskich i tych z innych narodów wrogich Polsce, którzy chcą pokazać, że Polska z całej swojej duszy chciała iść z Hitlerem i wymordować Żydów. I tylko z własnej głupoty tego nie zrobiła. A więc Polska jest (w tej wizji) połączeniem podłości z głupotą.
Pan Piotr Żychowicz chce ratować Polskę przed oskarżeniem o głupotę, ale de facto pogłębia to oskarżenie swoimi rozważaniami … . Historyczna mniemanologia, gdybologia, nie ma ostateczne warsztatowej weryfikowalności. Ale można ją uprawiać w sposób mniej lub bardziej odpowiedzialny. Pan Piotr Zychowicz uprawia ją w sposób bardzo nieodpowiedzialny. Myślę, że jego mistrz, pan Paweł Wieczorkiewicz, choć zaczął te rozważania, nie pochwalałby tego. Na pewno nie posunąłby się do tego, do takiego traktowania polskiej historii jak Zychowicz." https://wpolityce.pl/polityka/140224-prof-andrzej-nowak-o-ksiazce-pakt-ribbentrop-beck-piotra-zychowicza

Nowak clearly sees Żychowicz's use of the conspiratorial *Wallenrodian* idea as grist for the mill of conspiracy theorists targeting Poland, who see their assumptions about supposedly maliciously scheming Poles confirmed. One example of such thinking includes Russian ambassador to Poland Sergei Andreev's 2015 interview with Polish television station TVN, in which he judged Poland as guilty for starting World War II.[15] Another example is that of Russian ambassador to Venezuela Vladimir Zaemskii's article in the Venezuelan state-owned newspaper *Correo del Orinoco* from that same year, in which he alleged that Poland had wanted to be an ally of Nazi Germany and that Poland's Nazi-friendly politics had rendered cooperation between the USSR, France, and Czechoslovakia impossible.[16] At the same time, both ambassadors denied the 1939 Soviet invasion of Poland as such. Both ambassadors caused diplomatic upheaval with their claims. In any case, Nowak's words on Żychowicz could also be said about Wolski's novel (which, as should be stressed, is presented as a work of fiction and not as an assessment of a historical situation claiming scientific merit) although in less radical terms.

In his novel, the romantic idea that literature should not describe reality, but prescribe the future, from which *Wallenrodism* stems, has shifted: history is not described as it *has* been, but as it *could* have been—implying that this is also how it *should* have been. This carries in itself the risk of crediting the wrong means employed and discrediting the right ones (regardless of the ends). It also complicates a differentiated view of the Second Polish Republic, as it becomes the alternate version of the current Third Polish Republic that came into being after the democratic transition in the years 1989–91. It is therefore unsurprising that the Wieczorkiewicz school of thought, including his apostle Łojek and his disciples Wolski and Żychowicz, enjoys a certain popularity among the Polish far right—it figures prominently in right-wing newspapers like (formerly) *Uważam Rze* (whose editor in chief was Żychowicz), *Do Rzeczy* (for which he is currently an author) and *Gazeta Polska Codziennie*, as well as far right websites such as *www.nacjonalista.pl*. This is certainly a setting in which one is tempted to repeat Ivan Franko's harsh words about Mickiewicz's *Konrad Wallenrod*: "this grisly masterpiece … has for decades been dripping corrupting poison into the souls of the Polish youth."[17]

15 Cf. Grysiak 2015.

16 Cf. Zaemskiy 2015.

17 "[D]ies grausige Meisterwerk … träufelt seit Dezennien verderbliches Gift in die Seelen polnischer Jugend ein." – Franko 2016: 260.

Wieczny Grunwald or Not Quite Wallenrod

Twardoch's novel *Wieczny Grunwald*, which he claims was the one "in which I found my own voice and thanks to which I thought for the first time that I might actually be a writer,"[18] appeared on the six hundredth anniversary of the Battle of Grunwald, which gives the novel its name, and is cut from a wholly different cloth than Wolski's *Wallenrod*. Its narrator and protagonist, Paszko, is the bastard son of Casimir III the Great, King of Poland, and a Silesian girl, who grows up in medieval Nuremberg and eventually dies in the Battle of Grunwald, as Katarzyna Śliwińska phrases it, "fighting everyone."[19] He is, however, condemned to reliving the Polish-German conflict, as symbolized not only in the Battle of Grunwald, but in many other historical and future conflicts too, as well as eternally re-dying during these conflicts, playing roles on both the Polish and the German sides.

With his novel, Twardoch also takes up Mickiewicz's *Wallenrodian* glove, but not in such an obvious fashion as to allude to it in his title, as Wolski had done. Instead, the *Wallenrodian* scheme is deconstructed and subverted. This is initially made possible by Paszko's incessant doubt about his nationality. While Twardoch's hero and Wolski's heroine have their mixed heritage in common—Paszko is half Polish, half German and Silberstein is half Polish, half Jewish—they draw an entirely different conclusion. Silberstein, like Mickiewicz's Wallenrod after he rediscovers his national identity, is wholly committed to the cause of her nation and neither questions her inclusion therein nor others' exclusion therefrom. Paszko, who grows up in Nuremberg with some notion of his father's identity, is neither German nor Polish initially, i.e., he is both. In stark contrast to Wolski's Halina Silberstein, who might also have had reasons to doubt her sense of national belonging but does not, Paszko does. This priori undermines the Wallenrodian scheme.

Following this line of thought, whereas *Wallenrod* ends in a decisive Polish victory, *Wieczny Grunwald* is a novel-length stalemate that lasts until the final pages, where Paszko—who has become an "aanthropic" (sic!) half-human, half-robot—has had enough of the both senseless and ceaseless Polish-German conflict:

18 "... w której znalazłem swój własny głos i dzięki której po raz pierwszy pomyślałem, że może rzeczywiście jestem pisarzem." – Szczepan Twardoch on his Facebook account, 27 March 2019.

19 Śliwińska 2015: 290.

And suddenly I understand: I remember the myriads of my Grunwalds and Tannenbergs, and I remember all my deaths and not-dyings, and after myriads of times—I understand. And suddenly I understand: I do not have to do what I want to do and always will do. I drop my sword, throw off my kettle hat, I catch the reins of a horse, not mine, I catch the reins of a horse, whose owner is lying here, sinking into the field, I mount his horse and ride off.[20]

If we are to better understand *Wieczny Grunwald,* Jan Zając's view of the novel as the culmination, both in scope and the author's skill, of Twardochs earlier stories *Obłęd rotmistrza von Egern* (The Insanity of Captain von Egern, 2003) and *Otchłań* (Oblivion, 2005) as well as his novel *Sternberg* (2007), is helpful.[21] These two stories and this novel are all situated in an alternate history in which the French Revolution did not happen in France, but in Austria, and their protagonists—von Egern in *Obłęd* and *Otchłań*, the brothers Alexander and Carl Sternberg in their eponymous novel—are all conservative opponents of this revolution. Just one of these three manages to even remotely reach his own goals: Carl von Sternberg. He does so by means of compromise. These means seem to be unknown to von Egern, who goes insane, kills himself and, like Paszko, is condemned to re-living and re-dying, although not on the grand scale of *Wieczny Grunwald*. Alexander von Sternberg continues to fight a guerilla war without any hope of victory. The conservative attitudes expressed by all three protagonists can, of course, not be attributed to the author himself, but they do highlight that Twardoch is seeking a confrontation with the conservative, right wing school of thought in Poland.

He sought such a confrontation rather vehemently in 2011 after being honored by the Józef Mackiewicz Literature Prize committee for *Wieczny Grunwald*: in an essay entitled "Mackiewicz jako atrapa" (Mackiewicz, the Dummy) he writes that the Polish right's reading of Mackiewicz "can hardly be called a reading at all"[22] and, according to him, is a misreading and that Mackiewicz

20 "I nagle rozumiem: przypominam sobie miriady moich Grunwaldów i Tannenbergów, i przypominam sobie wszystkie moje śmierci i moje nieumarcie, i po miriadach razy – rozumiem. / I nagle rozumiem: nie powinienem robić tego, co chcę zrobić i co zawsze robię. Odpinam miecz, zrzucam kapalin, chwytam wodze konia, nie mojego, chwytam wodze konia, którego właściciel leży już tutaj i wsiąka w to pole, dosiadam tego konia i jadę." – Twardoch 2013: 208–09.

21 Cf. Zając 2016.

22 "Gwałtem tym jest potoczne odczytanie Mackiewicza, chociaż trudno tutaj w zasadzie mówić o czytaniu" – Twardoch 2011.

does not fit the one-dimensional image purported by the right. In the framework of this essay, he also comments on his own novel:

> My *Wieczny Grunwald* is among other things a phantasmagoric attempt to face the problem of humanity ruthlessly confronted with national identities, be they Polish or German.[23]

While one should hesitate to cite auctorial self-analyses, in *Wieczny Grunwald* this confrontation is, to a large extent, certainly achieved. In placing the possibly problematic nature of national identity at the center of his novel, a novel which has everything in common with a *Wallenrodian* story at first glance, Twardoch not only undermines the *Wallenrodian* scheme, as stated previously, but also pinpoints how this scheme works: those striving to be "Wallenrod" have to be perfectly sure of their national identity. This correlates with what Chwin calls Mickiewicz's "forgetfulness" in creating his own Wallenrod—anything positive concerning the Teutonic Order, anything negative about Lithuania is simply not mentioned, so as not to tarnish his protagonist's commitment.[24]

Perhaps it would be a little far-fetched to draw any wide-reaching conclusions from this brief commentary. It is, however, safe to say that *Wallenrod* and *Wieczny Grunwald* are indeed variations of the same Wallenrodian theme: Wolski's novel emphasizes and doubles it, Twardoch's novel negates it and renders it impossible. Even though it is tempting to conclude that this opposition has to do with the political standpoints of the two authors, the least we can say is that neither Wolski nor Twardoch could neglect Mickiewicz's hero in their rewritings of Polish history.

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23 "Mój 'Wieczny Grunwald' jest między innymi fantasmagoryczną próbą zmierzenia się z problemem człowieczeństwa skonfrontowanego z bezwzględnością tożsamości narodowych, polskiej i niemieckiej." – Twardoch 2011.

24 Cf. the chapter "O czym wolał nie pisać Mickiewicz w *Konradzie Wallenrodzie*?" in Chwin 1993: 422–47.

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Abstract

Since its publication in 1828 the material of Adam Mickiewicz's *Konrad Wallenrod* has frequently been taken up and used by other authors. This chapter explores two of the most recent examples of this, Marcin Wolski's *Wallenrod* (2010) and Szczepan Twardoch's *Wieczny Grunwald* (2010), and tries to answer

the question how Wolski and Twardoch confirm and/or subvert Mickiewicz's *Wallenrodism*, while placing their texts in a historical as well as political context.