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VISION IN THE NOVELS OF GEORGE SAND



Manon Mathias

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MANON MATHIAS

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,
United Kingdom

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
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First Edition published in 2016

Impression: 1

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Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

Library of Congress Control Number: 2015941035

ISBN 978-0-19-873539-7

Printed in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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Acknowledgements

This book could not have been written without the help and support of several people. Firstly, I would like to thank Caroline Warman for her exceptional support and encouragement during the completion of the doctorate which provided the basis for the book. A further source of inspiration came from Isabelle Naginski, whose groundbreaking studies first fired me with enthusiasm for George Sand; and from Tim Farrant, whose wealth of knowledge on the nineteenth-century novel provided much motivation and new ideas for developing and building on the original thesis. I am most indebted to the Arts and Humanities Research Council who funded the doctorate, and I would also like to give thanks to the Taylor Institution Library and to Trinity College, Oxford, for providing such friendly, supportive, and scholarly environments for the completion of the original research.

The book itself was completed whilst I was working at Bangor University and at the University of Aberdeen, and I would like to extend my warmest thanks to former and current colleagues for their sustained interest and encouragement through the various stages. I am most grateful to the two external readers for their thorough, perceptive, and helpful comments. Thanks are also due to the editorial team at OUP and particularly to the project manager, Priyanga Thangappan, for her assistance in the later stages of production.

Finally, I would not have been able to complete the work without the unfailing support and kindness of friends and family. Most notably, I would like to thank my parents, Hefin and Catrin; my brother, Daniel; my sister, Branwen; and my husband, Lewis.

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Abbreviations

- CH* Balzac, Honoré de. *La Comédie humaine*, ed. Pierre-Georges Castex, 12 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1976–81).
- Corr.* Sand, George. *Correspondance*, ed. Georges Lubin, 26 vols (Paris: Garnier, 1964–91).
- GS–GF* *Correspondance George Sand–Gustave Flaubert*, ed. Alphonse Jacobs (Paris: Flammarion, 1981).
- NLV* Sand, George. *Nouvelles Lettres d'un voyageur* [1877], ed. Ève Sourian (Paris: Des femmes, 2005).
- OA* Sand, George. *Œuvres autobiographiques*, ed. Georges Lubin, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1970–71).
- QAL* *Questions d'art et de littérature* [1878], ed. D. J. Colwell (Egham: Runnymede Books, 1992).

Introduction

During George Sand's writing career, from the 1830s to the 1870s, the relationship between seeing and truth became one of the central preoccupations of the novel. This was partly due to the development of realism, an aesthetic '[centrally] attached to the visual, to looking at things, registering their presence in the world through sight'.¹ The faith in physical eyesight as a way to truth was linked with the increasing dominance of empiricism as a way of thinking about mind and environment. On another level, there was a seemingly contrasting emphasis, particularly within art, on subjectivity and internal vision.² This was part of a growing awareness of the active role played by the mind in the process of perception.³ The period in which Sand was writing was a time of flux between theories of vision in an abstract sense and an empiricist understanding of sight.

The novel played an important part in these debates on objectivity and subjectivity and physical and abstract vision. Novelists from the period explored tensions between observation (linked with physical eyesight) and revelation (reached through internal, abstract vision). Stendhal, for example, might be famed for his objective novelistic mirror, but he doubles this image with his reference to the novel as a bow.⁴ Seemingly opposing dynamics are also at play in the work of Balzac, an author commended for his powers of observation, but famously referred to by

¹ Peter Brooks, *Realist Vision* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 3. Christopher Prendergast also states that 'Realism invites us above all to *look* at the world' (Prendergast, 'Introduction', in Margaret Cohen and Christopher Prendergast, eds, *Spectacles of Realism: Body, Gender, Genre* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), pp. 1–10, p. 5, original emphasis).

² In M. H. Abrams' terms, there was a move towards an 'expressive' theory of art. See Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), pp. 22–6.

³ See Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, pp. 57–8. See also Andrea Goulet, *Optiques: The Science of the Eye and the Birth of Modern French Fiction* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), p. 9; and Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), p. 16.

⁴ 'Un roman est comme un archet, la caisse du violon qui rend les sons, c'est l'âme du lecteur' (Stendhal, *Œuvres intimes*, edited by V. Del Litto, 2 vols (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1981–82), II, p. 699).

Baudelaire as 'un visionnaire'.⁵ Although critics such as Christopher Prendergast have argued that we need to move away from the preoccupation with the visual, there is much more to be said on this aspect of the novel, particularly since criticism has tended to consider nineteenth-century authors either as embodiments of the romantic 'visionary eye' or of the realist 'scientific eye', rather than fraught combinations of the two.⁶

In the case of George Sand, ocular metaphors have been applied to her writing since her early career. She was commended for her 'talent d'observation' in *Indiana* (1832), whereas later commentators focused on her so-called rose-tinted vision.⁷ Flaubert writes to her in 1871: 'malgré vos grands yeux de sphinx, vous avez vu le monde à travers une couleur d'or', and Henry James refers to the 'coat of rose-colour' applied in her novels in contrast with Balzac's 'omnivorous observation of the great human spectacle'.⁸ David Coward more recently refers to Sand's 'rose-tinted romans champêtres'.⁹ Sand herself also uses the terminology of vision to position herself in relation to Balzac: 'je voyais les choses humaines sous tout autre aspect [que lui], et je me souviens de lui avoir dit . . . vous voulez et savez peindre l'homme tel qu'il est sous vos yeux' (*Le Compagnon du Tour de France*, 1840, pp. 31–2). As Naomi Schor notes, 'truth . . . is always also a relationship to vision, observation, seeing'.¹⁰ Thus analogies of flawed vision are a means of indicating a lack of veracity in Sand's novels, as Sand herself suggests when she wonders whether she is 'incapable de voir la vie réelle, et condamné à caresser tout seul des illusions trop douces pour être vraies'.¹¹

Conversely, metaphors of ocularity have been reclaimed by some critics as a means of valorizing Sand's practice. Béatrice Didier asserts that 'George Sand veut voir et faire voir', and Isabelle Naginski argues that '[Sand's] form of "making real" was not so much being "realistic" as it

⁵ Charles Baudelaire, 'Théophile Gautier [I]', in *Œuvres complètes*, edited by Claude Pichois, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1975–76), II, pp. 103–28 (p. 120).

⁶ Prendergast, *The Order of Mimesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 59–61; Goulet, *Optiques*, p. 19.

⁷ Article published in *Le Temps*, 14 June 1832, quoted by Béatrice Didier, 'Notice', in *Indiana* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), pp. 356–72 (p. 359).

⁸ GS–GF, p. 348; Henry James, 'George Sand', in *French Poets and Novelists* [1878] (London; New York: Macmillan and Co., 1919), pp. 149–85 (pp. 185, 148).

⁹ David Coward, *A History of French Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 488.

¹⁰ Naomi Schor, *George Sand and Idealism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 44.

¹¹ Sand, 'Maître Favilla, Préface', [1855], in *Préfaces de George Sand*, edited by Anna Szabó (Debrecen: Kossuth Lajos Tudományegyetem, 1997), pp. 386–9 (p. 387, added emphasis).

was “making visible”.¹² Pratima Prasad also suggests that Sand’s novels ‘propos[e] new ways of looking at and imagining [the] world’.¹³ Such references hint towards the centrality of vision in Sand’s writing. But in most studies, ‘vision’ operates only as a dead metaphor. Although the term is repeatedly used by Robert Godwin-Jones in *Romantic Vision: The Novels of George Sand* (1995), for example, in his study, the precise meaning of ‘vision’ is not explained.¹⁴ Despite the use of visual analogies in comments on Sand’s texts, the theoretical and historical specificities of this dimension have not been explored, and this is the first study on vision in Sand’s novels.

My central claim is that Sand’s writing is fundamentally concerned with bridging the gap between physical sight and abstract vision. Rather than rejecting positivist reality, as has sometimes been maintained by critics, Sand valorizes the observation of our surroundings, but regards the process as an important stepping stone towards what she terms ‘la vérité’.¹⁵ The precise meaning of this term shifts throughout Sand’s œuvre, but it consistently retains an abstract and eternal dimension, beyond earthly reality. Although there are no records of optical studies in Sand’s library catalogue or her correspondence, and she is not known as a theorist of vision, she was widely read in philosophy, particularly that of the eighteenth century.¹⁶ Thinkers such as Condillac were already breaking away from classical models by arguing that our perceptions of time and space are not innate, as argued by Descartes, but rather, are gradually learned through bodily experience. Sand would have been aware of contrasting theories of vision, and in *Histoire de ma vie* (1854)—Sand’s own account of her development as an artist—she identifies two forms of seeing:

Tant que durera le monde, il y aura des fous occupés à regarder par terre sans se douter qu’il y a un ciel sur leurs têtes, et des fous qui, regardant trop le ciel, ne tiendront pas assez de compte de ceux qui ne voient qu’à leurs pieds. Il y a

¹² Béatrice Didier, ‘Préface’, in *Indiana*, pp. 7–32 (p. 16); Isabelle Naginski, *George Sand: Writing for Her Life* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991), p. 51.

¹³ Pratima Prasad, ‘Contesting Realism: Mimesis and Performance in George Sand’s Novels’, *Dix-Neuf*, 3 (September 2004): pp. 34–54 (p. 51), doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1179/147873104790719084>.

¹⁴ Robert Godwin-Jones, *Romantic Vision: The Novels of George Sand* (Birmingham, AL: Summa Publications, 1995). See, for example, pp. 2, 11.

¹⁵ Françoise Ghillebaert, for instance, refers to Sand’s writing as ‘[a] rejection of reality in favor of the search for the beau idéal’ (Ghillebaert, *Disguise in George Sand’s Novels* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), p. 16, added emphasis italicized, original emphasis underlined). Martine Reid also refers to Sand’s ‘manière de voir les choses comme elles pourraient être et non comme elles sont’ (Reid, ‘Préface’, in *Mademoiselle Merquem* (Arles: Actes Sud, 1996), pp. 7–19, p. 12).

¹⁶ References to Sand’s reading are included in *OA*, I, p. 1051. The eighteenth-century books Sand owned are also noted by Georges Lubin, ‘Les auteurs du XVIIIe siècle dans la bibliothèque de George Sand’, *Présence de George Sand*, 23 (June 1985): pp. 4–8.

donc une sagesse qui manque à tous les hommes, une sagesse qui doit embrasser la vue de l'infini et celle du monde fini où nous sommes. (*OA*, II, p. 334)

Sand insists that both physical, earthly observation and a more abstract 'vue de l'infini' are essential in order to reach '[la] sagesse'. Writing after the failures of the 1848 revolution, Sand's statement on vision is, to a large extent, a reflection of her metaphysical position at this point. But the notion of dual vision also feeds into her poetics, and the second argument running through this book is that the oscillation between bodily sight and conceptual seeing is central to Sand's conception of the novel.

The chapters in this study mark stages in Sand's engagement with conceptual models associated with realism—the social, the pictorial, and the scientific—and argue that Sand provocatively reworks these tropes so as not to represent reality as fixed and contained but as vibrant and constantly changing. The study is loosely diachronic, moving from Sand's introspective narratives in the early 1830s to her more hopeful novels of the 1840s, and from the privileging of subjectivity to a valorization of physical eyesight and scientific study. But whilst each of the chapters emphasizes the evolution of Sand's writing, they also show that certain questions (such as the prophetic dimension of Sand's work) are latent in some of her earlier novels, and that other issues return in later texts. Moreover, the study argues that the tensions between the physical and the conceptual, and the relations between the visual and the visionary, run throughout Sand's novels.

Chapter 1 compares Sand's early novels with those of Balzac and Stendhal by focusing on the representation of social reality and the friction between this practice and Romantic models of introspection. Sand's originality is revealed in these early texts through her socially constructive approach to internal vision. Chapter 2 considers the relations between a mystical, visionary poetics and an understanding of realism as political and social engagement both in Balzac and Sand. It is argued that Sand goes beyond both the realist preoccupation with the present and the Romantic concept of 'voyance', as she elaborates a visionary poetics that is essentially connected with politics and bodily reality. Chapter 3 foregrounds the historical and theoretical links between realism and the visual arts, and explores Sand's creative response to painting through notional ekphrasis, in contrast with Barthes' 'modèle de la peinture'. Chapter 4 considers a different form of external observation by examining the links between the novel and the 'scientific gaze'. Comparing Sand's approach to the natural sciences with the writings of other authors such as Flaubert and Zola, the chapter shows that Sand develops a distinctive response to scientific

perception. Her knowledge of geology and entomology leads not to control and domination over nature but to aesthetic and metaphysical wonderment. Sand rejects the scientific eye as a means of mastering and fixing the real and celebrates instead the dynamism and mystery of the natural world.

Through these examinations, I reveal Sand's originality in her syncretic integration of the physical with the abstract both on a thematic level and in her approach to the novel form. She refuses to be pinned down to one aesthetic position, and rejects both a narrow realism and a purely abstract poetics. Sand's fascination with the visual is not in itself unique in this period of intense collaboration between the arts and the explosion of interest in scientific observation. But Sand's constant negotiation between literal and conceptual vision challenge our perceptions of the novel in this period. Whereas her commitment to social problems and her preoccupation with the material world align her with certain conceptions of realism, the ways in which she intertwines this approach with a focus on the abstract, the eternal, and the mysterious require us to rethink the aesthetic terms of realism and idealism. Rather than reading Sand against realism, I propose that Sand's striving towards a union of opposites and her rejection of metaphysical and literary binaries lead to a different way of thinking about the novel and its possibilities, as she produces novels that are simultaneously realist, visionary, mystical, and scientific.

1

Realism and Introspection

Sand entered the literary scene with *Indiana* (1832) at the moment when realism in the novel 'became itself'.¹ There has been some debate over the past decades as to whether Sand's writing is realist or indeed 'antirealist'.² Since the publication of Naomi Schor's seminal *George Sand and Idealism* (1993), the overall consensus is of an increasingly intense Sandian deadlock with realism.³ However, if we examine the question within the framework of vision, it becomes clear that there exists in Sand's early writing a more sustained dialogue with realism than critics have thus far allowed. This is not simply on a surface level, but in terms of more nuanced understandings of realism incorporating reflexivity from within. Whilst adhering to certain expectations of realism, Sand simultaneously engages in a dismantling of the binaries on which the realist system relies, and questions our ability to understand the world through sight. This chapter will begin by considering the connections between Sand's early novels and realism and her particularly innovative approach to this aesthetic model. It will then examine the alternative, conceptual form of vision which Sand develops in her texts, and compare this with the attraction to introspection in Balzac and Stendhal. It will be argued that Sand distinguishes herself from her peers in that the internal visions in her novels reveal the blossoming of social and political consciousness. Further, unlike her colleagues who become increasingly concerned with the material world, Sand continuously negotiates between conceptual vision and physical sight.

¹ 'Realism became itself around 1830' (Sandy Petrey, *In the Court of the Pear King* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), p. xi).

² Naomi Schor, *George Sand and Idealism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 186.

³ Schor traces the development of a 'Sandian idealism' against a 'Balzacian realism'. See Schor, *George Sand and Idealism*, pp. 54, 51. Margaret Cohen argues that Sand is working 'against realism' from her first novel, and Harkness refers to *Lélia* (1833, 1839) as 'a refusal of realism'. See Cohen, *The Sentimental Education of the Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 123; Nigel Harkness, 'Resisting Realist Petrification in George Sand's *Lélia* and Balzac's *Sarrasine*', *French Studies*, LIX, no. 2 (April 2005): pp. 159–72 (p. 161), doi: 10.1093/fs/kni136.

SAND AND REALISM

In his analysis of Sand's œuvre, Émile Zola identifies Balzac and Sand as representative examples of two opposing tendencies:

Balzac et George Sand, voilà les deux faces du problème, les deux éléments qui se disputent l'intelligence de tous nos jeunes écrivains, la voie du naturalisme exact dans ses analyses et ses peintures, la voie de l'idéalisme prêchant et consolant les lecteurs par les mensonges de l'imagination... depuis bientôt un demi-siècle, le réel et le rêve se battent, partagent le public en deux camps, sont représentés par deux formidables champions qui ont tâché de s'écraser réciproquement.⁴

Zola is elaborating a lineage for his own literary project here, but such images of division have been influential in suggesting that Sand and Balzac's works are straightforward embodiments of two separate camps engaged in a hostile rivalry.⁵ Whilst Schor's intervention into the debate was crucial in raising Sand's canonical status, it also reinforced the perception of Sand as a lone figure outside the mainstream of nineteenth-century French fiction. Margaret Cohen's *Sentimental Education* (1999) continues the narrative of a Sandian 'competition' against realism, and Henry Majewski in 2002 notes that '[Sand's] novels should generally be read in a tradition outside the development of the mimetic, realist novel'.⁶ Although Sand's writing is certainly at odds with some of the precepts of realism, by reading her 'outside' this tradition, we are in danger of obscuring the important connections between Sand and her contemporaries.

In Susan Harrow's recent article on 'realism studies', Sand appears only under the remit of 'gender and sexuality studies'.⁷ Those few critics to have engaged directly with the question of realism and Sand have approached

⁴ Émile Zola, 'George Sand', in *Documents littéraires*, vol. XLII, *Œuvres complètes*, 66 vols (Paris: François Bernouard, 1928), pp. 153–86 (p. 156).

⁵ For summaries of this debate, see Pratima Prasad, 'Contesting Realism: Mimesis and Performance in George Sand's Novels', *Dix-Neuf*, no. 3 (September 2004): pp. 34–54 (p. 36), doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1179/147873104790719084>; Schor, *George Sand and Idealism*, pp. 40–2; and Isabelle Naginski, *George Sand mythographe* (Clermont-Ferrand: Presses Universitaires Blaise Pascal, 2007), pp. 170–1.

⁶ Cohen, *The Sentimental Education of the Novel*, p. 9; Henry F. Majewski, 'George Sand's Aesthetic Dream: Artists and Artisans in *Les Maîtres mosaïstes*', in *Transposing Art into Texts in French Romantic Literature* (Chapel Hill, NC: U. N. C. Department of Romance Languages, 2002), pp. 62–76 (p. 64).

⁷ Harrow refers here to Harkness' *Men of Their Words: The Poetics of Masculinity in George Sand's Fiction* (Leeds: Legenda, 2007). See Susan Harrow, 'Canonicity, Creativity, Capacity: French Realism Studies and the Researcher Community (A Case Study)', *Romance Studies*, 30, nos. 3–4 (July 2012): pp. 268–78, p. 271, doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1179/0263990412Z.00000000026>.