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H-France Review Vol. 18 (June 2018), No. 133

Manon Mathias, *Vision in the Novels of George Sand*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. 192 pp. \$110.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-19-873539-7.

Review by Pratima Prasad, University of Massachusetts, Boston.

For some time now, scholars have been questioning the received idea that George Sand was an idealist writer whose novelistic art stood in opposition to the realism of her (male) contemporaries. Manon Mathias's exploration of vision in Sand's novels brings a refreshing and unique perspective to this conversation. The book's central claim is that Sand's *œuvre* was aimed at "bridging the gap between physical sight and abstract vision" (p. 3). As such, Mathias throws into sharp relief the ways in which Sand's novels disrupt the divide between realism and idealism and blur the boundaries between the two canonized modes of novelistic production in nineteenth-century France: Romanticism (which we tend to associate with introspection and abstract vision) and Realism (which emphasized physical observation and mimetic representation). *Vision in the Novels of George Sand* is conceptually profound in its articulation of vision and the visual; at the same time, it is lucidly written and accessible. The book also casts a wide net, relating the concept of vision to literary esthetics, social utopianism, painting, and scientific investigation.

Mathias's study moves chronologically through Sand's corpus. Chapter one reads Sand's early novels, such as *Indiana*, *Valentine*, and *Lélia*, as they engage with what may be termed as visual realism, or the practice of reproducing social reality. Placing Sand alongside Honoré de Balzac and Stendhal, Mathias argues that the uniquely Sandian deployment of mirror imagery--metaphor *par excellence* of the realist coda--points to reality as unstable and not fixed, and she calls for a rethinking of "the parameters of the realist debate" (p. 41).

In the second chapter, the book turns to Sand's ocular poetics as they are manifested both in internal and abstract forms and through the figure of the visionary. Sifting through Sand's engagement with the work of novelists (such as Victor Hugo and Balzac), as well as that of philosophical thinkers (such as Lamennais and Leibniz), Mathias examines revelatory and prophetic vision in the utopian and political novels of the 1840s, such as *Le Compagnon du tour de France*, *Consuelo*, *Le Pêché de Monsieur Antoine*, and a later work, *La Ville noire*. Reflecting a commitment to social and moral change, the visionary dimension of these novels, Mathias argues, "distinguishes itself both from a realism preoccupied with the present and from a Romantic conception of 'voyance' as incompatible with the material and with the political" (p. 70).

Focused on the visual arts, chapter three challenges the *de facto* association of painterly techniques in the novel with realism. Sand, for her part, "engages with painting in her novels to recreate reality rather than to fix or frame it" (p. 71). Highlighting Sand's role as a reflective consumer and critic of visual art, the chapter argues that she practices a "notional ekphrasis" that imagines a moral and social reconfiguration of reality. Some of the novels considered in this chapter are *Un Hiver à Majorque*, *La Mare au diable*, and *Le Meunier d'Angibault*.

The fourth chapter tackles the scientific gaze as it relates to the nineteenth-century novelist's art. Sand's attraction to, and engagement with, the natural sciences was similar to those of Gustave Flaubert, Jules Verne, and Émile Zola. Sand's scientific eye, however, refuses to fix the world; rather, it views the natural world with "wonderment," celebrating its "dynamism and mystery" (p. 5).

Since the late twentieth century, monographs on the work of a single author have waned substantially in literary studies. Post-structuralist theory of the 1970s obliterated previously held notions that a single identity or author could give coherent meaning to a corpus of texts. This demise of the author, so to speak, ran parallel to the rise of cultural studies. Scholarship in literature took on a thematic, cultural, and political focus. This trend presented—and continues to present—a conundrum for George Sand scholars. While Sand's contemporaries like Hugo, Balzac, and Flaubert had several critical works of traditional literary scholarship dedicated to them, the fiction of George Sand had been largely ignored. Instead, much attention was paid to her unconventional and supposedly scandalous life in the form of biographies. Modern-day scholars wishing to fill the gap in scholarship on Sand's works were faced with the challenge of producing a book-length work on Sand when single-author studies were no longer *de rigueur* in literary criticism.

Two foundational works in the 1990s—Isabelle Naginski's *George Sand: Writing for Her Life* [1] and Naomi Schor's *George Sand and Idealism* [2]—navigated through this challenging critical landscape with brilliance and verve. Focused primarily on Sand's novelistic production, Naginski's and Schor's studies also did not lose sight of the pressing cultural, esthetic, and philosophical questions that were relevant to scholars in the 1990s. More recently, *Men of their Words: The Poetics of Masculinity in George Sand's Fiction* by Nigel Harkness [3] continued in this vein by attending to Sand's texts in the context of contemporary critical interest in gender. Martine Reid's biography of George Sand [4], unlike several twentieth-century biographies, gives the author her due as an intellectual heavyweight: Sand's life is inseparable from the novels, plays, autobiographical texts, and correspondence that she authored, and from her political and scientific thought. Reid's biography has been recently translated into English [5].

Mathias's monograph fits within the trajectory taken by Sand scholarship in the past three decades. Its close textual readings of Sandian texts are buttressed by robust discussions of the immense cultural changes that took place during the nineteenth century, in domains such as visual technologies and the natural sciences. *Vision in the Novels of George Sand* is an ambitious and successful monograph. It has much to offer even the seasoned Sand scholar. Meticulously researched and clearly written, it makes a robust contribution to nineteenth-century French literary studies.

#### NOTES

[1] Isabelle Naginski, *George Sand: Writing for Her Life* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993).

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

[3] Nigel Harkness, *Men of their Words: The Poetics of Masculinity in George Sand's Fiction* (Oxford: Legenda, 2007).

[4] Martine Reid, *George Sand* (Paris: Gallimard, 2013).

[5] Martine Reid, *George Sand*, trans. Gretchen van Slyke (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 2018).

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ISSN 1553-9172