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Martine Reid, *George Sand*. Translated with a foreword by Gretchen van Slyke. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018. xxi + 258 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$29.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-271-08106-9.

Review by Claire White, University of Cambridge.

It has been just over twenty-five years since the publication of Naomi Schor's *George Sand and Idealism*—a landmark feminist work which, like it or lump it, is still a pillar of Sand studies, and a touchstone for anybody interested in the history of aesthetics in nineteenth-century France. Schor began her book, readers might recall, on a personal note: by revisiting an evening “sometime in the mid-fifties” that she spent baby-sitting for her younger sister and reading André Maurois's biography of Sand, *Lélia* (1952).^[1] As a pre-teen—“I must have been around eleven or twelve at the time”—Schor derived from Maurois's biography, and its emphasis on Sand's “scandalous love life,” a keen fascination—indeed, “a desire to *be* George Sand” (p. 2). With a forty-year distance, Schor recognised this “misplaced” identification for what it was: a legitimate response to a misogynistic biography that had given little due to Sand's achievements as a writer and thinker. “By identifying with Sand the lover,” Schor confessed, “I had inadvertently (and perhaps inevitably) reproduced the first stage of Sand studies, the biographical” (p. 2). The “second stage,” Schor declared—and to which she only progressed in her mid-thirties—was “*reading her*” (p. 3).

Much, of course, has changed in Sand scholarship in the intervening quarter of a century. Indeed, it is surely a sign of how seriously, for the most part, the writer's artistic and intellectual accomplishments are now taken that Martine Reid's biography of Sand does not feel the need to grapple overtly with the revisionist imperative Schor's account implied. Yes, Reid's adept translator Gretchen van Slyke clarifies in her Foreword that the biography “gives a central place to literature” (p. viii) and that it “reveals multiple facets of the life of George Sand, not just her husband, lovers, and children” (p. ix). And Reid herself, in the Introduction, describes her desire to “refute a few die-hard clichés” (p. 3) about the writer, who continues to occupy a “modest place” (p. 2) in current literary histories as well as on school and university syllabi. But the key note of Reid's commanding biography, which originally appeared in French with Gallimard in 2013, is undoubtedly one of balance, rather than vindication or protest.^[2] In painting what Reid calls her “unfinished portrait of a *great* woman” (p. 3, original emphasis), she blends, effortlessly, the works of Sand's literary imagination with her extraordinarily prolific correspondence (“In manuscript form [or lost but attested] there are now some 19,600 letters written by George Sand,” [p. 44]); her political commitments with her priorities and

concerns as a mother and proprietor; her love of botany and music with her activities as “a remarkable businesswoman” (p. 139).

For all the biography’s even-handedness, Reid does not play down the misogynistic judgements of Sand’s contemporaries: the writer was, she reminds us, variously dubbed “a ruminating sphinx,” “the mum of mush,” and “the novel-writing cow” (p. 2). Nor does Reid underestimate the importance of those men (though not only men—there was also the actress Marie Dorval), who became Sand’s lovers. These relationships are depicted in their subtle light and shade, as parts, however significant, of a continuously evolving life with its many competing material and emotional demands. In Majorca with Chopin, Sand cared for her convalescent lover, sourced everything for the household, helped the cook, “schooled Maurice and Solange ‘for six or seven hours a day,’ and ‘as usual...spent half the night working on [her] own account’” (p. 87). What we would now readily describe as “multi-tasking” (in contemporary lore, a woman’s congenital talent) emerges as one of the keys to Sand’s hard-earned independence, with all its attendant sacrifices and compromises. And it is on this independence—artistic, personal, intellectual—that Reid’s biography insists. “The [name] I’d been given,” Sand wrote in *Story of My Life*, “I made it all by myself and all alone after the fact, by my own work... I live, from day to day, on this name that protects my work” (p. 15). Fittingly, Reid frames her own story of Aurore Dudevant’s life with an account of the writer’s journey to her famous pseudonym, tracking its mutations from “J.S.” and “J. Sand” (the editor of *Le Figaro*, Henri Delatouche suggested these signatures for the first texts co-written by Aurore and Jules Sandeau), to the “G. Sand” of *Indiana* and *Valentine*, then the French form “Georges”—and, finally, with the publication of *Lélia* in July 1833, “George Sand.” Speculating on the inspiration behind Aurore’s choice of pseudonym, Reid reflects—in a homely metaphor that would not look out of place in Sand’s correspondence—that it resembles “a puff pastry layered with odd bits of history and legend” (p. 15). What matters, Reid makes clear, is that this was not only an authorial identity, but one used in daily life: “Aurore Dudevant [...] shook up the cues of gender, yielded to the urge to engender herself, abolishing the notion of the *family* name and everything relating to history, inheritance, affiliation, that it connotes. Thanks to the pseudonym, ‘the individual named G[eorge] Sand’ is no longer anybody’s daughter or wife; she becomes the son/daughter of her works” (p. 15). Sand’s life, as Reid tells it, is in essence the story of that self-determination.

Endowed with an impressive lightness of touch, and remarkable concision, Reid’s biography is clearly meant to be accessible to a non-specialist readership. In this, however, the book sacrifices none of its scholarliness: the thorough index makes it a valuable reference work, and specialists can trace the wealth of translated citations through the footnotes (where references are to French editions of Sand’s works, and fuller context on the sources is often provided). For the general reader, Reid paints a vivid picture of the social world Sand moved in: she spells out the entrenched social conventions and prejudices with which women writers and artists of the period were bound to negotiate; the gendered separation of spheres that was enshrined in Napoleon’s Civil Code of 1804; the prescriptions, and prohibitions, attached to women’s movements, dress, and behaviour. Keenly aware, moreover, of the enduring fascination with Sand’s changing style, Reid conjures up those well-known images around which clichés of the writer have settled: the cigar-smoking, independent woman in frock coat and trousers; Eugène Delacroix’s 1838 painting of a dark, sensuous Sand, absorbed by Chopin’s piano-playing; Félix Nadar’s 1864 series of photographic portraits of a mature Sand with crimped hair, modest outfits, and a placid smile... There are also more, less familiar, images that Reid evokes for the reader: Alfred de Musset’s “charming portraits [of Sand] in pencil and ink,” for instance, as

well as his caricatures (p. 65). Details and locations of the art on which Reid draws are usefully provided in the footnotes, but the book would have been enhanced if the publisher had wished to include at least a few of these images.

Telling the story of Sand's life (1804-76) means, of necessity, rehearsing those grand historical shifts that it spanned, and with which, one way or another, it was so deeply entwined: the fall of Napoleon Bonaparte's Empire; the revolutions of 1830 and 1848; and the birth of the Third Republic in 1870, ushered in with France's defeat at the hands of the Prussians, and swiftly followed by the Paris Commune. Reid conjures up these episodes of political idealism, trauma, disappointment, and rupture, homing in on the precise ways in which they mattered to Sand. The bulk of the book is straightforwardly divided into three broad periods (1804-1831; 1832-1851; 1852-1875), with shorter parentheses at the beginning and end, devoted to 1832 (the year in which Aurore became "George Sand"), and the year of Sand's death (1876), respectively. While the transitions between the three central chapters hinge on episodes of personal and professional importance, they also acknowledge the hand of political history in shaping, directly or indirectly, Sand's career. In the month that the Bourbon monarchy was toppled, Aurore met her future lover and co-author Jules Sandeau, leaving Berry for Paris to embark on her writing career a few months later. "For a moment", Reid writes, "a fresh wind of youth and liberty seemed to sweep over Paris and all of France. There was an apparently fortuitous coincidence between the destiny of a young provincial woman in an unhappy marriage and the destiny of the nation" (p. 56). By May 1832, *Indiana* had been published. That Sand recognised this "coincidence" is suggested by *Indiana* itself: Sand has her heroine flee from the Île Bourbon and her despotic husband, Colonel Delmare, only to arrive back in France upon the outbreak of revolution—her first sight, on disembarking in Bordeaux, of the *tricolore* atop the city walls... Such moments in Sand's fiction offer not so much the collision of personal and political narratives as a self-ironizing displacement of the political: Indiana immediately falls unconscious. But "to understand [Sand's] growing interest in politics," Reid argues, "one has to recall her disappointment in a revolution 'gone totally rotten' in July 1830" (p. 71).

Much of the central section of this book is duly devoted to Sand's growing engagement through the 1830s and '40s with the so-called "social question," and the accompanying politicization of her fiction, leading up to her extraordinary role in the provisional government that was installed by the 1848 revolution. With "a pass from Ledru-Rollin giving her access to all the members of the government" (p. 111), Sand became—in the words of Alexis de Tocqueville—"a sort of statesman" (p. 116). Charged with writing editorials for the government's official newspaper, *Bulletin de la République*, as well as government circulars, Sand became a vital *porte-parole* for the nascent Republic. Reid relates these weeks of frenetic activity in Sand's life in the detail they deserve. Not least because this period of idealism, and the rapid collapse of the Republican dream, was lived with an intensity that is often lost from those literary-historical accounts (Sartre, Barthes, Bourdieu, etc.) that turn around the disillusionment of 1848—and which have little to say about Sand. Her own despondency, of course, was complete: "my soul will be forever crushed," she wrote to Charles Poncy, "for I no longer have any hope for my remaining time on earth" (p. 120). Although she would meet with Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte to plead "for republican friends of hers who had been sentenced to death, life in prison, or deportation to Algeria" (pp. 126-27), such appeals provoked accusations of betrayal from socialists and republicans, which left Sand bitter: to her editor Pierre-Jules Hetzel, she declared in February 1852: "I most gladly offer... *my resignation from politics*" (p. 128; Sand's emphasis).

And yet, Reid argues, in her third chapter (1852-1875)—where she also places a welcome emphasis on Sand's relatively understudied theatre—the writer “did not abandon politics” (p. 151) in this period, but rather adapted to the constraints of Louis-Napoléon's repressive regime. What might be seen as a rupture in Sand's writing around the Second Republic can instead, Reid ventures, be understood as “a steady rhythm of expansion and transformation” (p. 129). Such talk of adjustment and compromise holds relatively little appeal, perhaps, for the literary historian keen to discern a more decisive impact of politics on aesthetics. But Reid is concerned throughout the book with tempering overdrawn categories and distinctions—not least that thorny relationship between “realism” and “idealism.” “Balzac is ‘the river of truth,’ while Sand represents ‘the river of dreams,’ as Émile Zola later put it. Things are obviously more complicated than that,” Reid insists (p. 59). To this end, she describes the writers' mutual sympathies, reminding the reader that Balzac asked “his ‘comrade’ Sand” to pen the preface to his *The Human Comedy*—even if the “project fell by the wayside” (p. 81).

Ultimately, Reid offers Sand's own declaration as “a good summary of her aesthetics”: “There is no more truth in reality made ugly than in a prettified ideal” (p. 133). It is a statement, the reader senses, that has guided Reid in turn—bound, as the biographer of Sand is, to extract the writer from misogynistic cliché as much as the idolization of a particular type of feminist criticism. Indeed, it is surely one of the virtues of Reid's account that it allows its overarching narrative of Sand's defiant self-determination, her self-reliance, and her powerful protests for women's civil rights, to be tempered by certain ironies. Sand's troubled relationship with her (illegitimate) daughter Solange, whom she disinherited, ultimately betrays, for all its complexities, a desire to protect the family's reputation and property—handed down instead to her beloved (legitimate) son Maurice. It is, as Reid acknowledges, hard to reconcile the spirit of Sand's romantic fiction— “where love bursts upon the scene in one fell swoop for two penniless youngsters” (p. 158)—with the matter-of-fact letter she wrote to her son's tutor in 1857 on the need to find Maurice a good match: “If you know of a young person [...] with a pleasant face, good and reliable character, domestic inclinations... plus the appropriate means..., Maurice would pay you a visit. [...] [Maurice] is healthy, and he has a fine pedigree. His future wife would have to have good blood as well so that we could hope for fine, adorable children” (pp. 157-58). Here, Sand voiced precisely those aristocratic concerns “that she condemned in her books” (p. 158). Elsewhere, she insisted on the primacy of women's “natural mission: the love of family,” for women are, she added, “forever slaves to their own hearts and innards” (p. 175). “Reading her,” to recall Schor's “second stage” of Sand studies—and specifically, reading her *across* her fiction, autobiography, correspondence, theatre, journalism, essays, and more, as Reid does—inevitably means confronting these contradictions.

The reader of Reid's biography, however, will undoubtedly find the greatest irony reserved until last—and not of Sand's making, but rather inscribed on her death certificate, at her son's behest: “at ten o'clock in the morning, Madame Lucile Aurore Amantine Dupin (known as George Sand), aged seventy-one years old, *without any known profession...* widow of the late François Baron Dudevant, daughter of the late François Élisabeth Dupin and Antoinette Sophie Victoire Delaborde, died in her château of Nohant, her primary residence, located in this commune” (p. 205; my emphasis). What begins with Aurore's journey to a pen name ends with Sand's relegation to parentheses, and an obliteration of her professional identity. Reid's story of Sand's life offers a further, important chapter in the ongoing repudiation of that erasure.

NOTES

[1] Naomi Schor, *George Sand and Idealism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 1.

[2] Martine Reid, *George Sand*. Collection Folio biographies (n° 98). Paris: Gallimard, 2013.

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