

‘Apprendre à voir’: The quest for insight in George Sand’s novels
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This study positions the novelist George Sand (1804-1876) within her literary, philosophical and ideological context by identifying a series of turning points in her writing which valorise different means of experiencing and knowing the world. The thesis as a whole aims to re-assess Sand’s contribution to the nineteenth-century novel as a writer of intellectual standing and importance, demonstrating that she engages with an issue of key relevance to nineteenth-century thinking, which is the relation between different ways of looking and understanding or knowing the world, which I term ‘insight’.

My investigation is set apart from existing scholarship in that it is the first to take vision as the focus of a study on Sand’s work. Despite the fact that the nineteenth-century novel is often considered as a ‘visual’ form, from Hugo’s transcendent visions to Zola’s empirical observation, the visual dimension of George Sand’s work has been either overlooked or reduced to a rose-tinted view of the world and other analogies of flawed or defective vision. I argue that Sand demonstrates a continuous commitment to different means of engaging with the world in visual terms, and that this incorporates conceptual seeing, prophetic vision, and physical eyesight. I demonstrate that this operates both on the level of plot and on a metapoetic level, in the sense that Sand’s distance from Realism is founded on her espousal of multiple approaches to understanding and representing the world.

Distinguishing itself from previous monographs on Sand through its focus on her epistemological and intellectual development throughout her literary career, this study takes representative examples from Sand’s entire œuvre as its corpus. This decision is based on the study’s aim of carrying out a sustained analysis of the ways in which Sand’s writing is engaged in the quest for insight. Throughout the thesis my close readings of the texts are complemented by examinations of Sand’s ‘vie intellectuelle’ in the sense of her diverse political and philosophical reflections, her views on art, and her studies in the natural sciences, and the way in which these interests reflect and engage with contemporaneous cultural and intellectual trends.

The Introduction outlines the parameters and the methodology of the thesis. I firstly position Sand in her commercial, critical and literary context before introducing the central topic of the thesis, which is the link between the novel and different ways of seeing and understanding. I demonstrate that visual metaphors are often used to describe Sand’s writing but that a study of vision in her work is lacking. In the final part of this Introduction I elaborate on the structure of the thesis and account for the methodological decisions taken in this study.

Chapter One, ‘Early visual models’, examines Sand’s early visual education as recounted in *Histoire de ma vie* (1855). I highlight the fact that Sand engages with reality on several different levels from a young age, as her vivid imagination, her tendency towards prophetic visions, and physical examination of the natural world all emerge as key aspects of her childhood. Since these different faculties are initially in conflict with each other, I argue that it is the imagination, or the inner eye, which dominates in the first period of her writing. The second section of this chapter is an analysis of *Indiana* (1832) and *Lélia* (1833) as examples of this. I demonstrate that the tension between Sand’s different visual capacities is reflected in the conflicting aesthetic codes of *Indiana*, in which the heroine’s inner visions contest with the more prosaic and historically grounded realism of the rest of the model. I then show that the internal mode of experiencing the world takes over in *Lélia*. Although the imagination enables these characters to glimpse the ideal, I demonstrate that the retreat from the external world into the world of the inner eye does not lead to social and

personal solutions. The final section in this chapter considers the transformation which takes place in Sand's position towards the end of the 1830s, analysing the indications in Sand's early novels and prefaces that the internal model of vision will develop into a constructive faculty through increased engagement with the present and through the projection of the vision outwards into the future.

In Chapter Two, 'George Sand and the visionary', I investigate the shift in Sand's writing towards a more constructive and engaged model of vision by showing that Sand's inner eye model develops into the visionary. After demonstrating that Sand's intellectual and philosophical evolution in the late 1830s and her engagement with socialist doctrines leads to a more positive outlook, I examine the representation of visionary characters in her novels, focusing my analysis on *Mauprat* (1837), *Le Compagnon du Tour de France* (1840), *Consuelo* (1842-3), *Le Meunier d'Angibault* (1845) and *Le Pêché de Monsieur Antoine* (1847). I identify the main characteristics of Sand's visionaries before considering the way in which these characters reach a position of insight. This enables me to demonstrate that Sand favours a cooperative and equal approach to learning, in alignment with her novels which offer multiple possibilities rather than a dogmatic, monolithic discourse to be forced on the reader.

In the next sections of this chapter, I show that the visionary characters transcend their present circumstances through their rejection of social practices, unorthodox and syncretic beliefs, and liberation from gender expectations. This leads into an analysis of Sand's flexible understanding of time, demonstrated both in the visionary characters and in her novels which are prophetic narratives. I show that Sand rejects contemporary literary practices by refusing to conform to the mimetic model in her novels and privileging instead a visionary poetics which depicts the way in which French society will be configured in the future rather than reflecting the present. Finally, this chapter also demonstrates that an exclusive commitment to the ideal and the abstract is insufficient for Sand's aims by this point in her writing, and that she now advocates double vision: an awareness of the present in combination with the envisioning of the future. This operates both in the representation of her visionary characters, who only succeed through a combination of vision and pragmatism, and on the level of plot, as Sand's visionary or prophetic novels become increasingly grounded in a recognisable contemporary world.

Chapter Three, 'The function of the visual arts in the 1840s novels', is an exploration of Sand's literary engagement with the visual arts. My readings in this chapter are primarily focused on a representative selection of texts which illustrate Sand's manipulation of painterly techniques in the service of her moral vision, examining an autobiographical text (*Un Hiver à Majorque*, 1841), two pastoral novels (*Le Meunier d'Angibault*, 1845, *La Mare au diable*, 1846), and an adventure novel (*Le Piccinino*, 1847). I begin by providing an account of Sand's experiences of artworks, drawing on *Histoire de ma vie* to show that her response to visual images is primarily creative and interactive, suggesting that her interaction with visual arts in her novels will be inventive rather than imitative.

This chapter then reveals two important ways in which Sand employs the model of painting in her novels. Firstly, I demonstrate that she uses the painterly model as a creative template for refashioning current reality in the mind. I develop the previous chapter's examination of Sand's 1840s novels by arguing that, in addition to reconfiguring reality through her visions of the future, Sand also puts into practice a process which I term 'repainting'. I show that Sand creates virtual paintings which aim towards the depiction of a more socially progressive and purposeful reality, in contrast with the original.

Secondly, I show that Sand uses painterly techniques to describe landscapes from specific character viewpoints in order to demonstrate the acquisition of 'le sens pittoresque', which I interpret as a form of aesthetic insight. I show that, in her focus on the perspective from which the painterly impressions are viewed and created, Sand draws attention to the fact that this aesthetic insight is acquired only by those characters who have reached a true understanding and acceptance of themselves and their place in the world. The final section of this chapter is an examination of Sand's critical writings on painting, arguing that these provide further evidence of Sand's creative rather than transcriptive approach to the visual. Despite her repeated insistence on the inadequacy of words in conveying visual phenomena, Sand continues to describe landscapes and natural vistas in her novels since her descriptions of the natural world play a central role in the moral and ideological aims of her writing. The chapter therefore contests the critical assumption that Sand uses the painterly model in order to create an illusion of accuracy and veracity. Rather than using the model of painting in this way, in alignment with Barthes' theory of 'le modèle de la peinture' which claims that painting is a means of bolstering the mimetic thrust of the literary text, Sand, I argue, uses painting in order to appeal to an understanding of her work as a direct, 'natural' form of communication, whilst also allowing her to put forward complex messages which have the potential to undermine the contemporary social order.

Chapter Four, "L'artiste naturaliste": contemplating the natural world in the later novels', looks at the final stage in the Sandian quest for insight from the mid-1850s to the 1870s. I identify a shift in Sand's attitude during this period, as she now considers an aesthetic appreciation of the world to be inadequate in truly understanding its workings. Rather, I demonstrate that Sand's later works privilege scientific knowledge and the physical observation of nature as a means of apprehending the world. Setting this thesis apart from other surveys of Sand's interest in the natural sciences, I then interlink Sand's scientific learning with the poetics of her later novels.

This first section in this chapter examines Sand's studies in the natural sciences by situating her interest in geology and botany in the context of her work and in the wider intellectual context. Looking in particular at *L'Homme de neige* (1859), *Valvèdre* (1861), *Laura* (1865) and the *Contes d'une grand-mère* (1874-1876), I then proceed in the next sections by examining the representation of nature in her works. I demonstrate that, although Sand encourages the detailed observation of nature, she rejects an overly narrow and exploitative method. I reveal that Sand puts forward an approach which takes into account not only the microscopic details of nature, but also its inherent vitality, beauty and multiplicity. This is demonstrated through examples of interactive engagement between man and nature in her novels and short stories.

Further, I consider Sand's engagement with the question of apprehending the natural world on a broader level. I argue that Sand's later works constitute investigations into the different possible means of learning about the world. This I demonstrate by examining the characters in these novels, which embody various epistemological approaches. I show that Sand rejects both the self-absorbed artist and the overly narrow scientist, and that her ideal figure is the 'artiste naturaliste' from the title of this chapter. Through these characters, I argue, Sand advocates a combination of science and art and attention to both the details of nature and a great appreciation of the natural world as a whole. The final section of this chapter demonstrates that Sand's espousal of what I term a multidisciplinary approach to knowing the world forms a major part of her distance from Realism. Rejecting what she views as a narrow and monolithic approach to reality, Sand advocates instead a poetics which takes all facets of the world into consideration. The final chapter thus re-evaluates the last period of Sand's writing as a corpus of works which merit further study, not only as part of Sand's œuvre but as an important contribution to the French novel and its

interaction with a central question at this point in French intellectual history: the rivalry between different epistemic models and the consolidation of separate disciplines.

The Conclusion considers excerpts from Sand's writings at the very end of her career in order to reaffirm the central thesis that Sand's conception of vision is of a process which operates on several levels. I show that Sand's understanding of the world as multiple and constantly evolving leads her to advocate an approach to reality which transcends binary systems of thought, culminating in a reconciliatory position which combines three elements: the material and physical; the infinite and visionary; and the personal and imaginary.

The study as a whole therefore challenges the prevailing critical perception of Sand's œuvre as one which follows a pattern of decline and contraction after the 1850s, as I reveal a model of expansion in her writing. I demonstrate that Sand moves from her focus on the personal in her early novels which privilege internal vision, to wider social concerns in her novels of the 1840s in which she aims to reconfigure reality through the process of repainting and through prophetic insights, through to the final period of her writing when her studies in the natural sciences lead her to advocate the physical observation of nature as fundamental to our understanding of the world. Rejecting the perception of Sand as a writer of sentiment at the expense of thought, I argue that Sand's work constitutes a continuous quest for understanding, both of the physical world and of the abstract 'vérité', and show that she ultimately promotes a syncretic approach to comprehending the world, in her aim to open her readers' own literal and figurative visual faculties. Through this examination, I not only posit that Sand's work provides us with an insight into nineteenth-century perceptions of vision and knowledge, but also reveal the dynamism of her idealism, as her conception of the world as multiple and constantly evolving results in novels which combine the physical, the visionary and the imaginary.