Mathias’s book tackles a subject that has received relatively little critical attention: the theoretical and historical dimensions of vision in Sand’s œuvre. According to Mathias, while some of Sand’s contemporaries as well as ours have portrayed her as unwilling to “see” the realities of her time, those few scholars who recognize visual qualities in Sand have not explored her concept of vision in real depth. Mathias hypothesizes that this critical blindness derives from the fact that the visual in nineteenth-century French fiction is too often associated with a narrow definition of realism. In her thorough consideration of vision in Sand, Mathias traces the evolution of Sand’s use of vision throughout her oeuvre and the different modes of vision present in the course of that evolution. She defines the originality of Sand’s handling of vision and the visual by illuminating the novelist’s efforts to bridge the gap between physical sight in realist fiction and the abstract vision of the idealist.

One of the strengths of this book is its persistent injunction to reconsider definitions and categories. In the initial chapter of the book, for example, Mathias emphasizes ways in which Sand’s early works participated in the realist “mimetic” portrayal of reality, an approach that aligns Sand with Balzac’s and Stendhal’s esthetics. For Mathias, more recent attempts to define realism by questioning the very possibility of representation offer a more fruitful understanding of Sand’s relation to fiction and “truth.” Mathias’s examples of the visual in Sand include mirrors and disguise in Indiana and Valentine, but point as well to fluidity and transformative processes in material reality, rather than its fixity. Through her close reading of passages from Sand’s early novels and autobiographical works, Mathias demonstrates how the novelist often filters the visual aspects of material reality through the individual perspective of her characters, highlighting Sand’s ability to portray the difference between reality and perception while celebrating creativity and—unlike her realist contemporaries—envisioning new possibilities.

Comparisons with realist writers also come into play in Mathias’s chapter on “The Visionary,” focusing primarily on Sand’s novels from the late 1830s and beyond. Unlike visionaries in Balzac, Stendhal, or Hugo, misunderstood and trapped within their own worlds, Sand’s later prophetic characters propose a synthesis of action and meditation, material reality and the utopian ideal. Sand’s originality, according to Mathias, lies in the political and moral dimensions of her characters’ aspirations and in the alternatives they offer to the ultimately fatal isolation of visionary characters in realist fiction. In her chapter on the visual arts, Mathias discusses Sand’s response to photography and book illustration as well as her own fascinating “dendrite” painting.

Regarding Sand’s fiction, Mathias applies Hollander’s term of “notional ekphrasis” to Sand’s creation of “virtual paintings” in her descriptions of people and landscape in order to establish the significance of the novelist’s visual perspective. Mathias’s analysis provides evidence again of Sand’s privileging the moral and subjective dimension of experience, here in the realm of esthetic response. Most revealing, perhaps, is Mathias’s explanation of how the psychological transformation of Sand’s characters leads to an enhanced appreciation of the esthetic, proof that for Sand, all classes are capable of esthetic awareness.

The chapter on Sand and scientific observation undoubtedly offers the most original understanding of Sand’s later œuvre. Her exploration of the natural sciences results in a syncretic integration of scientific observation and artistic appreciation of the dynamic and awe-inspiring elements of the natural world. Sand’s model characters aspire to understand nature, not to dominate it or dissect it, to grasp the whole system as well as the detail. Mathias argues that this approach constitutes the basis of Sand’s relation to literary realism as well, as seen in her essays of the late 1850s: literature should reflect ordinary experience without focusing solely on the ugly; it should strive for balance between seeing the detail and the understanding the general picture. Although Sand’s attempts to reconcile opposites of the visual and the visionary, of the material present and the future ideal, are not always successful, the process of elaborating a “third way” defines her creative quest.

Mathias has written a well-structured, articulate, and convincing work. She demonstrates an impressive mastery of Sand’s œuvre and draws on a significant corpus of literary theory and history, as well as Sand criticism, in order to illuminate Sand’s original conceptions of vision. Mathias’ examples, from both familiar and largely ignored works, are remarkably effective and analyzed with fine attention to detail. The occasional illustrations in the chapter on visual arts enhance our understanding of “notional ekphrasis” in Sand. Vision in the Novels of George Sand is a fascinating study, wide-ranging in scope. It offers not only an original perspective on Sand’s work but also a renewed challenge to the clichéd categories of literary history.
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