Watercolours and Dendrites, Lakes and Seascapes:

Water Imagery in George Sand's Work

Edited by

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Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

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This book first published 2018

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-5275-1579-6
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-1579-6

Cover image: Le bord de la Creuse à Gargilesse, promenade habituelle de George Sand / River Creuse in Gargilesse, George Sand's customary walk. Dessinateur Eugène Grandsire. Lithographie Joliet. Date: 19th century. Open license.
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http://www.bn-limousin.fr/items/show/144

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments xi

Introduction xiii
Françoise Ghillebaert

Chapter One: Life and Death in Bodies of Water

Part 1: Drowning Imagery

Death by Water: A Triad of Ambiguity in *Indiana* and *Lélia* 5
Abbey Carrico

De l'eau noire du suicide à la féerie merveilleuse de l'illusion blanche 39
Àngels Santa

Part 2: Water and the Initiatory Journey

L'héroïne gothique face à l'abîme aquatique dans *Indiana* (1832) et *Consuelo* (1841) 61
Marilyn Mallia

Eaux courantes, sublime et passion dans *Jean de la Roche* 85
Corinne Fournier Kiss

Chapter Two: Relationships in Aquatic Contexts

Part 1: Ecocriticism and Human Relationships with Nature

Water Worlds: An Ecocritical Approach to "La Reine Coax" 109
Annie K. Smart

Watery Prison or Paradise: Isolation and Relation in *Un hiver à Majorque*..... 133
Rachel Corkle

Part 2: Homosocial Relationships and Liquid Metaphors of Kinship

Eau et homosociabilité dans *Teverino* 153
Françoise Ghillebaert

Hospitality and Fluid Kinship in *Indiana* 181
Phillip Griffith

Chapter Three: Water as a Source of Artistic Creation

Part 1: Water and Tears in the Arts

Watercolours and *Dendrites*, Lakes and Seascapes: Water in George Sand's Visual Art 213
Emilie Sitzia

Larmes et apprentissage dans l'œuvre de George Sand..... 237
Lara Popic

Part 2: Water and Authorial Creativity

Water Symbolism in *Histoire de ma vie* and *Marianne*: Catholic Narratology of Atonement 267
Nancy Ann Watanabe

Symboles et spectacles de l'eau marine dans *Le Drac* 293
Nicola Pasqualicchio

Contributors 323

Abstracts 329

List of Primary Works and Characters 337

PART 1:

WATER AND TEARS IN THE ARTS

WATERCOLOURS AND *DENDRITES*, LAKES AND SEASCAPES: WATER IN GEORGE SAND'S VISUAL ART

EMILIE SITZIA

George Sand lived among painters and had a solid knowledge of their work. While it has been stated by some that her knowledge of plastic arts (theory and techniques) was limited,[1] it is obvious from her education, her friendships, and her own artistic practice that this was not the case. Indeed the young Aurore had private drawing lessons with a certain Mademoiselle Greuze, who claimed to be the daughter of the famous painter Jean-Baptiste Greuze,[2] and she furthered her education in early 1831 with drawing lessons, possibly with the portrait painter Candide Blaize.[3] Her friendships extended into the art world, taking in a broad range of artists including Thomas Couture, Eugène Delacroix, Horace Vernet, Théodore Rousseau, Jean-Baptiste Corot, Auguste Clésinger, Nadar, Eugène Fromentin, and many more.[4] Furthermore, her own artistic practice spanned techniques from drawing to watercolour, *dendrite*,[5] and oil painting, and themes from

[1] Bertrand Tillier, "George Sand et les peintres de son temps," 19, 26.
[2] Christian Bernadac, *George Sand: Dessins et Aquarelles*, 10.
[3] Ibid., 63.
[4] Nicole Savy, "L'amour de l'art, le goût des images," 99–100.
[5] Sand uses the term "dendrite" for the first time in 1874 in a letter to Edmond Plauchut where she states: "Je m'amuse beaucoup à dessiner et je fais de notables progrès dans l'art des *dendrites*." George Sand, *Correspondance,* 23 : 680. See note 1 for an explanation of her art.

landscape to caricature, still life and portraits.[6] She produced more than 3000 visual works that are still little known or studied.[7] George Sand possessed an educated eye and was a skilled artist.

Sand said that she limited her writing on art and rarely wrote directly about art because she felt painters were the best placed to talk about their own practice.[8] However, she may not have wanted to express herself publicly on art for two main reasons. Firstly, she did not want to compromise her friendships with artists, as she mentions this is one of the main risks of art criticism:

> … j'ai plusieurs amis peintres. Mon devoir serait de commencer par louer les uns que j'admire et de critiquer les autres que je n'admire pas, et dans toute cette justice distributive, mes affections seraient bien compromises. (I have several painter friends. My duty would be to start by complimenting the ones I admire and criticizing the ones I don't admire, and in all this distributive justice, my friendships would be compromised.)[9]

Secondly, Sand shows in her introduction to *Elle et lui* that she was very aware of every artist's limitations: "le public ne nous permet guère de cumuler" several art forms ("the public doesn't allow us to practice several art forms)[10] and that while Romanticism promoted a brotherhood of the arts,[11] a writer had to stay a writer to be taken seriously and an artist had to remain in the realm of images. Therefore, Sand felt that promoting her visual art as such could be perceived as

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[6] See Bernadac, *George Sand: Dessins et Aquarelles,* for the most complete catalogue to date.
[7] Dario Gamboni, *Potential Images: Ambiguity and Indeterminacy in Modern Art*, 256.
[8] Nicole Savy, "George Sand et les arts visuels : romantisme et nature," 1.
[9] George Sand, *Correspondance,* 6 : 506–507.
[10] George Sand, *Elle et Lui*, 1.
[11] David Scott, "La fraternité des arts," 11.

"impertinent."[12] But she did value her artistic practice. When she claimed her independence from her husband and moved to Paris, her career path was still undecided and she asked her friend Emile Regnault to set up two desks in her new apartment: a writing desk and another dedicated to her artistic practice at that time, painting Spa boxes.[13]

Spa boxes were a popular fashion item in the early nineteenth century. The trend came from the water town of Spa in the Liège province in Belgium. They appeared in the first half of the seventeenth century. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth century they had become collectors' items all over Europe for their detailed artistic elaboration. These boxes have diverse functions: writing boxes, glove boxes, tobacco boxes, game boxes, powder boxes, candy boxes, etc. They are traditionally decorated with intricate landscapes and organic motifs such as flowers, branches, or animals.[14] The artistic styles of the boxes depend on the painters themselves, but are often influenced by eighteenth-century decorative art, such as works by Jean-Antoine Watteau or Jean-Honoré Fragonard. The boxes entered the Parisian market in the early nineteenth-century through the practice of three members of the Xhrouet family, who were famous for such decorative works.[15] Blank boxes were therefore available to George Sand, who began decorating them. She mostly produced landscapes and flower motifs, which were especially inspired by Dutch tulip still lifes. Unsurprisingly, representations of bodies of water also play a big part in her Spa box iconography. Sand took her decorative work for these boxes very seriously. Her letters show her taken by a passion for technical exploration and the

[12] Sand, *Correspondance* 24 : 87.
[13] Ibid.,1, 227.
[14] Bernadac, *George Sand: Dessins et Aquarelles,* 54–55.
[15] Ibid., 56.

challenges and disappointment of her work. For example, she recounts a battle against "cette gueuse de vernis" ("this wretched varnish") that first does not dry and then eats the colours.[16] She worked on these boxes six hours each day and saw this work as a professional occupation, rather than a hobby.[17] The success of her novel *Indiana* in 1832 drove her away from the visual arts as she then dedicated most of her time to writing. However, she still practiced the visual arts intermittently, as in 1841, when she was busy painting watercolours of flowers, butterflies, lizards, and shells.[18]

Within her artistic production, the most original works are undoubtedly her two periods of dendrites and watercolour production.[19] Dendrite is a term that Sand used to qualify and describe her very personal technique. Working with much diluted watercolour (or gouache), she started by staining the background of her work. On that background stain, she superimposed or juxtaposed other blots of colour that she diluted with added water or manipulated by pressing them with Bristol papers, sponges, or wads of rags. In this manner, she created a ground on which her interpretative work started. With brushes, pencils, or gouache, she reinforced contours, completed images, added characters and drippings, then firmed up and completed her composition to make it legible for the public.[20]

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[16] Sand, *Correspondance,* 1 : 605, 622, 716, 871.
[17] Bernadac, *George Sand: Dessins et Aquarelles,* 61.
[18] Savy, "George Sand et les arts visuels," 7; Thillier, "George Sand et les peintres de son temps: un rendez-vous manqué?" 24.
[19] We leave aside here her relationship to portrait painting and portrait production. For more on this, see Bernadac, *George Sand: Dessins et Aquarelles,* 81–90 and Alexandra K Wettlaufer, *Portraits of the Artist as a Young Woman: Painting and the Novel in France and Britain, 1800-1860*.
[20] Bernadac, *George Sand: Dessins et Aquarelles,* 134–135; Nicole Savy, "La découverte des dentrites" *George Sand, une nature d'artiste*, 161.

Her first period of dendrite production took place between 1860 and 1865. These dendrites are on a somewhat smaller scale than her later ones and are exclusively mineral. More abstract in nature and limited in number, the works are marked by a lower level of intervention on the original image. That is, Sand added fewer characters and highlights, leaving the pictorial space open to the viewer's interpretation. This coincides with her period of intense interest in crystals and her writing of the novel *Laura, voyage dans le cristal* (1864). Sand's visual explorations of mineral landscapes in that period are thus closely connected to her current interest and writing. Mustière remarks that Sand's passion for mineralogy, paleontology, and natural sciences in general is representative of the general response of the literary world to the scientific debates of the time. He claims that her work as well as Jules Verne's work paved the way for the scientific novel and the genre of science fiction.[21]

Her second period of dendrite production began in 1873. In contrast with the first period, her dendrite techniques were then very controlled and purposeful. Sand often used the technique to create foregrounds such as fields, vegetation, rocks, or the seaside.[22] The compositions were then reworked with watercolour or gouache to achieve great levels of precision. Her meticulous attention to the details of the landscape locates Sand's work as an integral part of the landscape revolution that took place in France in that period. Her visual references changed. It was a time when landscape painting gained in popularity. Landscape painters focused on a minute observation of nature and the detailed transcription of natural phenomenon, paving the way for the emerging Impressionist group. Artists such as the Barbizon school

[21] Philippe Mustière, "Étude psychocritique croisée de *Laura* de George Sand et de deux romans de Jules Verne," 197.
[22] Bernadac, *George Sand: Dessins et Aquarelles*, 153.

painters reached unprecedented levels of success for landscape painters—exhibiting regularly at the Salon, gaining distinctions such as the "légion d'honneur," and being financially rather successful in the developing bourgeois market. Sand also tried to market her works within the framework of the fashionable *autograph* (handwritten short text or small drawings sold by artists or writers) to make a small profit to go towards her granddaughters' savings.[23] This is partly why her granddaughters Aurore and Gabrielle and their dog Monsieur Fadet are recurring motifs in the dendrites and watercolours of that period.

There are only a few in-depth analyses of Sand's visual artwork and they mostly stay at the cataloguing stage. Christian Bernadac, Nicole Savy, Sophie Martin-Dehaye, and Manon Mathias lead the way, but the interest in her visual work is still largely dependent on her reputation as a writer rather than on its inherent artistic qualities.

This essay proposes to explore water both as subject and medium in George Sand's visual art. We will first look at water as a recurring motif in her visual works. The network of her liquid visual references will be studied. Water has been used in many ways in the visual arts: from the ponds and rivers of the Dutch painters to Gaspar Friedrich's sea and fog as expressions of the Romantic sublime. George Sand shows her aesthetic preferences and ideological allegiances through her references. She also shows her awareness of fashion through the use of lake and river motifs, which were then very popular on Spa boxes. Her general fascination with water and landscapes places her within the landscape revolution taking place in France at the time and reflected in the success of Jean-Baptiste Corot and the Barbizon school.

Water will then be studied as a privileged medium for Sand. Watercolour often implies a certain fluidity and loss of

[23] Ibid., 154.

control on the part of the painter. George Sand's dendrites seem to go further than chance painting. This essay will question if this practice is linked to the writer's production, as the writer/painter harnesses the fluid chance process with a narrative and constructs precise images from abstract motifs.

Through a synthesis of existing studies and a close analysis of George Sand's visual works and the context in which they were produced, we hope to demonstrate the importance of water both as motif and medium in George Sand's artistic practice as well as to establish George Sand as a full-fledged visual artist.

1. Water as Object

As this volume testifies, water is central in Sand's writing. It is also one of the main motifs of her pictorial production. Water, however, has been used in many different ways throughout art history, and so studying the presence of water as an object in Sand's work allows us to understand her place within these different art historical traditions.

1.1 Lakes and Rivers in the Spa boxes: Dutch and Italian Traditions

Landscape is a big part of the production of Sand's formative years.[24] Bucolic countrysides, *chaumières*, lakes, and rivers are omnipresent in her early drawings. She drew more intensely while she travelled or shortly after her return. Interestingly, she seems to have already used her memory and imagination as much as her powers of observation in these early landscapes. These works show a predilection for the inclusion of ruins in picturesque landscapes, which often feature a lake or a river. Occasionally, they evoke the works

[24] Bernadac, *George Sand: Dessins et Aquarelles*, 22–24.

of the young Paul Huet, Jean-Baptiste Corot's Italian landscapes, or Fragonard's early works. The main visible visual references in that period are undoubtedly the Dutch landscape painters as well as Poussin and Italian-inspired "ruin" landscapes.[25] As Savy remarks, when Sand arrived in Paris in 1830 she eagerly visited the Louvre and the Luxembourg Museum and was most impressed by the Flemish and Italian masters.[26] It is therefore unsurprising that her artistic production for her Spa boxes shows similar artistic influences. One piece, *Coffret de Spa, George Sand et son fils* [27] is a good example of this influence. In an oval composition, a landscape bathed in golden light is seen through a dark stone arch that frames the composition. The landscape is split: on the right side, there is a ruin overgrown with vegetation and two peasant women chatting, and on the left, there is a river with green banks that runs into the distance. Blue misty mountains close the horizon. In the foreground, Sand and her son are seen from behind looking out to the river. The use of the river as a tool to create depth and interesting light effects in the landscape was typical of Dutch seventeenth-century landscape painting.[28] On the other hand, the use of golden light, architectural framing, and the presence of the ruin and picturesque locales was a current practice in classical landscapes of Italy, such as in the work of Poussin and the "Grand Tour" production of French eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century artists such as Fragonard or Huet. Water, in addition to being a staple of Dutch landscape painting and a useful tool to create depth, is also a traditional motif of the Spa boxes. The boxes were often decorated with landscapes representing a famous castle

[25] John Pinto, *City of the Soul: Rome and the Romantics*, 72–87.
[26] Savy, "George Sand," 7; Savy, "L'amour de l'art," 101.
[27] Bernadac, *George Sand: Dessins et Aquarelles*, 69.
[28] Julius Held and Donald Posner, *17th and 18th century Art*, 232–235.

close to the town of Spa, the Chateau du Mont Jardin. The river had a key role in these landscapes as a geographical marker but also as an emblem of the waters at Spa. The water in the Spa box compositions can therefore be seen as a sign of Sand's awareness of the fashion for such motifs in Spa boxes, a witness to her classical artistic knowledge of Dutch landscape, and an awareness of the technical and poetical potential of water in landscape painting. The inclusion of the two characters referring to her own life (Sand and her son) looking out to the river hints to a different influence, that of the Romantic painters.

1.2 Expression and the Sublime: Romantic Tones

Another marked influence on Sand's visual production is the Romantic landscape. Sand was particularly impressed with the work of such artists as Huet and Richard Parkes Bonington. In 1838 she writes to Huet that:

> Je crois entendre le bruit de l'eau, ce mouvement de course vagabonde qui vient droit dans les jambes du spectateur m'a presque fait reculer au premier coup d'œil jeté sur votre gravure, tant il est vrai, bruyant et rapide (I think I hear the sound of water, this vagabond running movement that goes straight into the legs of the spectator and almost got me to back up as I glanced at your engraving that is so true, so noisy and so fast).[29]

As Vaughan notes, in Romantic landscapes water is used as a tool to convey emotion and a sense of heroism while trying to maintain a balance between "observation and expression."[30] Water was seen to have the capacity to reflect a range of emotions, stimulate the imagination, and instantly impact on the viewer's state of mind. Sand's watercolour, *Paysage de*

[29] Sand, *Correspondance*, 4 : 371–372.
[30] William Vaughan, *Romanticism and Art*, 180.

Fantaisie: Pêcheur, lac et montagne bleues [31] clearly demonstrates this use of water in her work. A mirror-like lake occupies the center of the composition, reflecting the soft lavender-blue mountains in the background. Liquid emerald vegetation frames the lake, the grass merges into the water, and the trees are reflected on its surface. The light-grey sky with its soft cottony clouds occupies half of the composition. On the lake, a tiny fisherman stands on a small boat, his thick line in the water. The landscape, with its soft harmony of colour and fluid composition, exudes a peaceful stillness. Water, immobile and calm, reflects the state of mind of the artist. The work is clearly defined in its title as a fantasy landscape and here, faithfulness to nature recedes to leave more room for the artist's personal expression. Sand emphasized the importance of emotion in her visual work when she said:

> Nous ne savons pas dessiner, mon ami, mais nous savons aimer, et c'est l'âme de tous les arts (We do not know how to draw, my friend, but we know how to love, and it is the soul of all arts).[32]

Interestingly Sand's focus on individual emotion and her use of mineral watercolour pushes her, as with other Romantic painters such as Friedrich, towards abstraction.[33] Works such as *Taches III*,[34] which she kept in a notebook composed between 1875 and 1876, are testament to such explorations. The abstract work, composed of a background of various shades of green dotted with blue, red, and dark green blots, was kept by Sand in its primitive abstract dendrite state.

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[31] Bernadac, *George Sand: Dessins et Aquarelles*, 116.
[32] Sand quoted in Bernadac, ibid., 28–29.
[33] Robert Rosenblum, *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko*, 1975.
[34] Bernadac, *George Sand: Dessins et Aquarelles*, 176.

Another aspect of Romantic landscape that reappears in Sand's works is the attempt to express the sublime through nature. Sand, as did her contemporary Romantics, longed to express the infinite, the sublime:

> Nous avons pour notre Malheur le sentiment de l'infini, et toutes nos expressions ont une limite rapidement atteinte. (We have, unfortunately, the feeling of the infinite, and all of our expressions have a limit that is quickly reached).[35]

As Honour notes, a technique commonly used in Romantic paintings to express this sentiment of the sublime is the placement of very small figures in the composition that, by breaking the realistic scale, instill a certain grandeur to the surrounding nature.[36] While Sand uses this technique in most of her landscapes, it is particularly noticeable in her late period dendrites, where the figures of her granddaughters and Fadet the dog are used as such scale breakers. This technique enhances the effect of being in awe of nature and the impact of the sublime on the viewer.

Water is used in these compositions as a channel for the expression of individual sentiments, a quest for the infinite, and a manifestation of the sublime. There is therefore in Sand's artworks an interesting tension between the call of reality and the expression of personal emotions.

1.3 Landscape Revolution: Corot and the Barbizon School

The second half of the nineteenth century saw a landscape revolution. The market for landscape painting developed along with a growing bourgeois clientele. Realist landscape paintings made their way into the Salon. As Savy notes, Sand was hostile to the realism seen in Courbet or Manet's works.[37]

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[35] George Sand, *Histoire de ma vie*, 6 : 43.
[36] Hugh Honour, *Romanticism*, 77–82.
[37] Savy, "George Sand et les arts visuels," 6.

Sand's comments on the Salon of 1868 are testament to her taste:

> J'ai passé la journée au salon … Il y a un Courbet à se tordre de rire. Pour celui-là c'est fini. … Deux Corot admirables. Deux Daubigny très beaux; deux Fromentin exquis et très originaux. (I spent the day at the salon … There is a hilarious Courbet. For him it's over. … two excellent Corots. Two very beautiful Daubignys; two exquisite and very original Fromentins).[38]

For Sand the duty of the painter is twofold: "fidélité à la nature, vérité du sentiment (fidelity to nature and truth of emotion)."[39] Savy highlights Sand's preference for Théodore Rousseau (*Coucher de soleil en Auvergne*, *L'Allée des châtaigniers*).[40] Rousseau was a friend of Maurice Sand and was for a little while a potential suitor to Augustine Brault (cousin and "adopted daughter" of George Sand).[41] She was therefore very familiar with his work and his exploration of a realist landscape focusing on light as he looked to revive seventeenth-century Dutch painting.[42] To Sand and Rousseau, Realism was a link between people and land, and it aimed at sincerity. On the advice of Sand, Rousseau spent some time living in the Indre.[43] Sand herself had drawn the river Indre in *Au fil de l'eau I* and *Au fil de l'eau II*.[44] Her drawings represent the riverbanks and the life along the river: picturesque houses, lush vegetation, people, and boats. There, realism prevails and water is a structuring force in her artistic

[38] Sand, *Correspondance*, 20 : 803–804.
[39] Savy, "George Sand et les arts visuels," 6.
[40] Ibid., 6.
[41] Musée de la vie romantique, *George Sand une nature d'artiste*, 132.
[42] Linda Nochlin, *Realism*, 38.
[43] Musée d'Orsay, "Théodore Rousseau. Mare près de la route" last consulted May 31st, 2017.
[http://www.musee-orsay.fr/fr/collections/oeuvres-commentees/recherche/commentaire/commentaire_id/mare-pres-de-la-route-17901.html?no_cache=1].
[44] Bernadac, *George Sand: Dessins et Aquarelles*, 102.

production. However, interestingly, when she focuses on expressing light, as she did in her work *Paysage de montagne avec des barques sur un lac*,[45] fantasy takes over. The watercolour is bathed in an orange glow that tints the still water of the lake and the grass of the foreground. In the background light, purple mountains frame the composition. This imaginary landscape manages to convey the light effects of a sunset over a lake in a very convincing manner. Mathias remarks that for Sand it was important to distinguish between the mechanical representation of reality and truthfulness to that reality.[46] As Gamboni emphasizes, it is noticeable that the members of the Barbizon school "whose unorthodox textures and techniques, conveying a sharp and inventive awareness of the artificiality of plastic means, sometimes remind us of the experiments of George Sand and Victor Hugo."[47] Gamboni goes on to analyse the tensions between depth and surface, and medium and subject, which Sand and the Barbizon school landscape painters have in common, even though they used different techniques.

While Sand admired the Barbizon school painters for being true to nature, it is the idealised landscapes of Corot that she emulated more closely in her own artistic production. In her 1873 Salon notes, Sand noticed some "beautiful Corots."[48] Sand also attended the Corot retrospective in 1875 (225 works), but it was not a revelation for her as she already knew his work quite well. In a letter to her son she exclaimed: "Tu sais que j'ai une passion pour les Corot. Ça ressemble à de la

[45] Ibid., 167.
[46] Manon Mathias, *Vision in the Novels of George Sand*, 75.
[47] Gamboni, *Potential images: Ambiguity and Indeterminacy in Modern Art*, 63.
[48] Sand as cited in Thillier, "George Sand et les peintres de son temps: un rendez-vous manqué?," 16.

dendrite idéalisée." ("You know that I have a passion for Corot's paintings. It looks like idealised dendrite").[49]

This quotation highlights the link between Corot's work and Sand's own. As Mathias notes, "Sand's own painterly practice is founded on subjectivity, the imagination, and individual interpretation rather than detailed recordings of the environment."[50] This is where she and Corot differ from the school of Barbizon. To Sand and Corot, painting is about rediscovering existing motifs in nature and idealising them or recomposing with them. Corot's vaporous compositions share with Sand's dendrites the uncertainty and interpretive fluidity of the reality they represent.

As we have seen, water as a theme in Sand's work allows us to trace a network of liquid references: Sand is an artist of her time navigating between tradition, Romanticism, and Realism. We will now further explore how water is more than a subject matter for Sand, but a material to create with.

2. Water as Medium

Watercolour is a technique using pigment ground in gum as a binder. It is usually applied with brushes and water to a paper surface. Transparency, the core characteristic of this medium, allows artists to play with effects including light, layers, depth, and colour glow. With watercolour, the compositions are built in the opposite manner to oil painting: instead of adding opaque layers over the painted surface, the watercolourist uses the white of the paper. The artist therefore needs to plan emptiness. To create the desired colour, the artist adds more or less water to the original pigment. Watercolour is well known by artists as an unpredictable medium, one that always implies a certain level of chance as

[49] Sand, *Correspondance*, 24: 289.
[50] Mathias, *Vision in the Novels of George Sand*, 75.

well as improvisation and adaptability on the part of the artist. Watercolour is also well known for its depth of colour, light effects, and use of spontaneous reactions such as dribbles and runs. It is a sensory and elusive medium.

Watercolour has a long history in the Eastern and Western world. While some artists such as Peter Paul Rubens and Fragonard used watercolour for their preliminary studies as a medium to explore composition, others, such as Albrecht Dürer, used it for finished works. It was in Britain that the first national school of watercolourists emerged, and this was closely linked to developments in landscape painting (from the topographical tradition to the grand tour landscape souvenirs).[51] Watercolour was established as an independent medium by masters such as Paul Sandby, Thomas Girtin, and Joseph Mallord William Turner.[52] Richard Parkes Bonington, a friend of Delacroix, is often credited for bringing watercolour to the fore in France. In continental Europe, Delacroix, Daumier, and Paul Huet were skilled practitioners of the medium. George Sand, a friend of Delacroix and of Huet, was of course exposed to many works employing this technique.

2.1 Interpretive Impulsion

Sand's use of water as a medium (with watercolour and gouache) motivated her artistic style. For example, *Le secret de la chaumière IV*[53] is an elaborate composition using the full technical potential of water. In the foreground, a blue angled layer marks a river, surrounded by rhythmical dark green bushes made with the regular patting of wadded rags. In the middle ground, grass and a road are represented on the

[51] William Vaughan, *British Painting: The Golden Age*, 183.
[52] John Gage, *Colour in Art*, 119.
[53] Bernadac, *George Sand: Dessins et Aquarelles*, 161.

white paper by almost transparent brushstrokes. A rock on the road to the left of the composition creates depth and eases interpretation. The center of the work is composed of dark-blue and khaki-green drippings, orange stamps, and stained blue areas, that all come together as a tree grove and a small country house hidden behind the trees. Fluidity, the liquid nature of the medium, is exploited here with great skill. Chance is tamed, completed, and reconstructed to render the composition legible to the viewer. The use of water as a technique forces Sand to use her own imagination as a shaping force. Sand explained her imaginative process as such:

> Cet écrasement produit des nervures parfois curieuses. Mon imagination aidant, j'y vois des bois, des forêts ou des lacs, et j'accentue ces formes vagues produites par le hasard." ("This crushing creates sometimes curious veins. With the help of my imagination, I see woods, forests or lakes and I accentuate the vague shapes produced by chance").[54]

Sand highlights that not all images produced are suitable for interpretation and completion, especially when it comes to landscape compositions:

> … pour le paysage il faut beaucoup d'essais avant d'obtenir un résultat qui permette l'interprétation car on voit tout ce qu'on veut, comme dans les nuages dans ces résultats du hasard (for the landscape you need to go through many attempts before obtaining results that allow for interpretation as you see all you want in those chance results, like in clouds).[55]

While Sand's work method can seem very modern, it was by no means new. At the end of the eighteenth century, Alexander Cozens already recommended the use of random stains to compose landscapes in his book, *A New Method of*

[54] Sand quoted in Henri Amic, *Georges Sand: mes souvenirs*, 47.
[55] Sand, *Correspondance*, 23 : 699.

Assisting the Invention in Drawing Original Compositions of Landscape (1785).[56] However, we do not know if Sand had access to this publication. Furthermore, as a child, Sand already trained her imaginative power in the evenings by the fireplace: she describes in *Histoire de ma vie* how she saw shapes in the fireguard that she imagines to be landscapes and magical animals.[57] What this technique creates is that it frees the "potential image"[58] and uses imagination as a shaping force promoting the interpretive impulsion of the artist. As Sophie Martin-Dehaye emphasised, Sand attempts to "chercher l'ailleurs et la précision dans sa propre imagination" ("look for that other place and for precision in her own imagination").[59]

2.2 Technical Skills

Gamboni claims that the practice of dendrite "in theory … involves no technical skills."[60] We argue that on the contrary, this practice requires a number of technical skills, similar to those necessary for any work with watercolour. The artist needs to select pigments and colours; decide on the transparency of the layers (the level of dilution of the paint); compose the overall image and lay out the backgrounds, leaving the necessary empty spaces; create effects (pressing Bristol papers, patting with wadded rags, creating blots, controlled runs, etc.); imagine and recompose the image according to the result of this process; and finalise the image with added lines, details, characters, highlights, etc. While the

[56] Alexander Cozens. "A New Method of Assisting the Invention in Drawing Original Compositions of Landscapes." 62-71.
[57] Bernadac, *George Sand: Dessins et Aquarelles*, 6.
[58] Gamboni, *Potential images: Ambiguity and Indeterminacy in Modern Art*, 15.
[59] Sophie Martin-Dehaye, *George Sand et la peinture*, 59.
[60] Gamboni, *Potential images: Ambiguity and Indeterminacy in Modern Art*, 210.

dendrite practice implies a certain loss of control and acceptance of chance events in the process, it also demands that the artist regain control through imagination and technical skills. The indistinct layers of washes, drippings, runs, and dribbles need to be re-imagined, harmonised, firmed up, and reconstructed for the image to work for the viewer. Similar to the work of Leonardo da Vinci, Edgar Degas, or Odilon Redon, Sand uses "natural fragments as 'ferment' for the imagination."[61] But these fragments are always composed in the dendrites and the results are controlled images. As Mathias claims, "rather than reproducing reality, Sand exploits the moral and emotional power of painting, and foregrounds its potential to reconfigure the original."[62] She translates and to some measure idealises reality to create her work.

2.3 Writing with Water

The similarity of process between writing and the dendrite creation process is interesting to study. In effect, collecting and using fragments of reality as starting points for composition is very similar to the process of the realist writers. As Barthes emphasises:

> toute description littéraire est une vue … . Décrire, c'est donc placer le cadre vide que l'auteur réaliste transporte toujours avec lui (plus important que son chevalet), devant une collection ou un continu d'objet inaccessible à la parole dans cette opération maniaque" ("every literary description is a view … . Describing is thus placing the empty frame which the realist author always carries with him (more important than his easel), before a

[61] Ibid., 108.
[62] Mathias, *Vision in the Novels of George Sand*, 71.

> collection or a continuum of objects which cannot be put into words without this obsessive operation").[63]

Commenting on Balzac's *Sarrasine*, Barthes describes here a process of literary creation very similar to that of the dendrite creation.

The collection of elements from real life, the harnessing of a fluid abstract process (time, for example) with a constructed narrative, and making the narrative visible are some key elements of writing. Peter Collier states that realist writing implies an "all seeing point of view, making visible what is usually out of sight." [64] The watercolour and dendrite processes follow this principle as what is suggested by water is then made visible by the artist. For Sand, painting, like writing, serves to reveal life, to capture a moment in time:

> C'est dans la belle peinture qu'on sent ce que c'est que la vie: c'est comme un résumé splendide de la forme et de l'expression des êtres et des choses, trop souvent voilées ou flottantes dans le mouvement de la réalité. (It is in the beautiful paintings that we feel what life is: it is as a splendid summary of the form and expression of beings and objects, too often veiled or floating in the movement of reality).[65]

This essay set out to explore the role of water as a subject and a medium in George Sand's watercolours and dendrites. Her use of water as a subject anchors Sand as an artist of her generation negotiating between tradition, Romanticism, and Realism and dedicating a large proportion of her production to landscape painting.

Utilising water as a medium revealed other aspects of Sand's art. While it has been argued that her work involves little technical skill, Sand was an experienced watercolourist

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[63] Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, 61–62.
[64] Peter Collier, *Artistic Relations: Literature and the Visual Arts in Nineteenth-Century*, 8.
[65] Sand, *Histoire de ma vie*, 8 : 199.

and dendritist. She possessed advanced technical skills. The identified importance of interpretive impulse in her visual work as well as the links drawn between the dendrite process and the writing process lead us to believe that further parallel studies of the two processes would be fruitful. A close analysis of a text and her concurrent dendrite production, for example, might serve to link the two processes and bring forward new insights. The most interesting relationship between textual and artistic production would be during the period of the writing of *Laura, voyage dans le cristal* and its parallel dendrite production. Further research would also be necessary to compare, from a more gendered viewpoint, the pictorial production of Victor Hugo and George Sand. The study of Victor Hugo's visual work is already underway in writing by Rodari or Picon. In contrast, there is a dearth of material on Sand's visual output. Her works suffer from being scattered in diverse collections (including a number of private collections) and from a regular dismissal of their quality by specialists and non-specialists, who may or may not have accessed her work in its entirety. In short, she suffers from issues of partial collecting, historical neglect, and disregard common to many women artists of her time.

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