

Emerson Read George Sand. And So Should You!
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In 1839, Thackeray, then Paris correspondent for the New York *Corsair*, cautioned Americans against "muddy French transcendentalism," epitomized by George Sand's "religious manifesto" *Spiridion*. He "trust[ed] in heaven that German art and religion will take no hold" in America but feared the effect of the "mysterious transcendental talk" of the French.

The warning came too late. Margaret Fuller had already read Sand's vision of a post-Christian religion that would exit the cloister to act in the world and was promoting la Jeune France to her circle as closer to their "Psycho-theism" than were the Jena Romantics. The *Christian Examiner* would soon tolerate reading Sand and Orestes Brownson argue for translating *Spiridion* in Ripley's European writers series.

Reading *Spiridion* made Emerson reverse his initial dismissal of Sand as a morbid "Parisian Corinna." Now Sand's "wonderful opulence of mind," "marvelous" knowledge of "nature & society & books," and "scholastic" perspective made him conclude "I must read more of this new De Stael before I know her." When he finished that project, Emerson had reread *Spiridion* and read at least eighteen more of Sand's works. His reading of Sand outwent Fuller's in both extent and appreciation. He came to rank Sand's masterwork *Consuelo* above Goethe's fiction as "truer," her characters the "servants of great ideas, and of the most generous social ends."

Privately, Emerson repeatedly acknowledged Sand's "great genius" and "extraordinary spirit," copied and recopied citations from her writing, and defended her work (against Thoreau's abjection of fiction, against Carlyle's dismissal of her "Gospel of Fraternity" and "new Heaven-on-Earth" as "a detestable *phosphorescence* from the dead body of Christianity"). He evaluated Sand a "classic" writer (in Sainte-Beuve's sense of one who enriches the human spirit with the discovery of some moral verity and successfully embodies his/her thought), and thus a writer who surpassed his own achievement. Publicly, Emerson admired Sand's individualism and her fiction's representation of "real life." His writings appropriate her phrases without acknowledgement or attribute them only to "a brilliant French writer."

Emerson's journal notes on Sand cluster around topics of genius, inspiration, aesthetics, the art of writing, and, especially, spiritual "realism" and ethical, that is religious, idealism. Her works that address the transformation of religious faith in the context of contemporary questioning of institutional Christianity especially attracted him (*Spiridion*, *Consuelo* and *La Comtesse de Rudolstadt*), while *Le Compagnon du Tour de France*, and *Lettres d'un Voyageur* figure importantly as the focus of his meditations on religion turned from mystical vision and inspired revelation to practice. Emerson lamented he could not "write the novels for the people!" and emulate Sand, Plato, and others who successfully embodied in writing or social action the "doctrine of the secret societies[,] the fraternity of the best joined for benefit through the world."

I will argue the importance of scholars becoming familiar with the work of a writer who loomed so large in Emerson's view and in the transnational transcendentalist movement.