

# Introduction

*The Devil's Pool* (*La Mare au diable*) has always been George Sand's most popular work. Scholars and specialists may have their own preferences; but with the general public, this book has always been the favorite. It is her *Gigi*, her *Ethan Frome*, her *Pride and Prejudice*. It is one of the few Sand works that continued to be read during the long drought when most of her books were neglected, and at the present day it retains its supremacy. At the time of writing, 117 editions of works by George Sand are available in France. No fewer than fifteen of them are editions of *La Mare au diable*, and one of those is the overall Sand bestseller.

This popularity is not hard to explain. No other work by George Sand contains so many of its author's characteristic merits packed into such a short space. *The Devil's Pool* occupies a central position in her output, both chronologically and thematically. It belongs to the middle years of her long career; it is early enough to have ties with her first novels, it is advanced enough to contain anticipations of those still to come, yet it is also firmly grounded in the concerns and interests of its own era. Here is George Sand the critic of conventional marriage and other established institutions. Here is George Sand the regional writer, the sharp-eyed observer of distinctive local customs. Here is the political George Sand, the opponent of injustice, the advocate of the underprivileged. Here is the George Sand of fantasy, fairy tale, and nightmare. Here, above all, is the George Sand who knows how to tell a story. Moreover, *The Devil's Pool* contains these attractions in an unusually concise form. Like so many popular favorites (*Gigi* and *Ethan Frome* among them)—and unlike so many of Sand's books—it has the advantage of brevity.

When it was written, its author was forty-one years old. She was born on 1 July 1804 and was named Amandine-Aurore-Lucie

(or Amantine-Aurore-Lucile) Dupin. Her family background was distinctly unconventional, and contains complexities of relationship that are difficult to express clearly; standard English was never designed to deal with such situations. Her grandmother, for instance, was the product of an illegitimate union between the illegitimate son of King Augustus II of Poland and the illegitimate daughter of a common prostitute. The novelist herself was barely legitimate; her parents married three weeks before she was born. Her father was a second cousin of the last three Bourbon kings of France (Louis XVI, Louis XVIII, and Charles X); her mother's father ran a tavern.

In September 1808 her father died; but the remainder of her early life seemed to proceed along stable lines. Her paternal grandmother raised her on the family estate at Nohant until 1818, when, in the time-honored manner, the girl was sent to a Parisian convent to complete her education. (The convent was the Couvent des Anglaises, and most of the staff were British; in that unlikely environment were sown some of the seeds that would come to fruition over a decade later in "Lavinia.") In 1820 she returned to Nohant and, again in the time-honored manner, began to receive visits from possible husbands and their families. In September 1822, after five months' acquaintance, she married Casimir Dudevant.

Dudevant was twenty-seven years old. He may have seemed superficially suitable, but he shared very few of his wife's interests. Moreover, like many young men in that environment, he had developed habits of heavy drinking and sexual promiscuity, which proved hard to break after marriage. Disharmony and drink sometimes led him to be physically violent, and that was not calculated to improve the situation. His wife dealt with the increasing conflict and isolation in the home environment partly by turning to other men for a salvation they could never really provide (as "The Unknown God," among other works, will observe), but partly by doing something more practical—withdrawing into the realm of her own imagination. Probably in the early months of 1829, she began to write stories. When, at the end of 1830, she finally broke with her husband and went to live in Paris, she was already starting to think of a career as a professional writer. During 1831 she published, sometimes anonymously, sometimes under various pseudonyms, a number of short pieces and a full-length novel, *Rose et Blanche*, written in collaboration with Jules Sandeau. Dur-

ing 1832 she published her first independent novels, *Indiana* and *Valentine*, under the pseudonym she was to retain for the rest of her career: George Sand.

In many ways her choice of occupation was a logical one. Novel-writing had long been a recognized, socially acceptable activity for educated women. Mademoiselle de Scudéry's *Artamène ou le Grand Cyrus* (1649–53) and Madame de La Fayette's *La Princesse de Clèves* (1678) attained European celebrity; closer to George Sand's own lifetime, there was the example of Madame de Staël's *Corinne* (1819). Moreover, the demand for new novels was increasing, due partly to the increasing literacy of the general population, partly to the influence of Walter Scott (especially after the publication in 1823 of his *Quentin Durward*, with its French setting), and partly to social changes that made the old Classical novels seem outdated and unappealing. A new generation of Romantic writers was emerging. Their methods outraged the old and the conservative; such outrage led to conflict (notably in February 1830, at the first performance of Hugo's play *Hernani*), and such conflict attracted attention, and such attention was good for business. Consequently, publishers were eager to print works by young or youngish Romantics, especially controversial ones. *Indiana* and *Valentine* were issued in a world that had just seen the appearance of Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le noir* (*Red and Black*, November 1830), Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris* (March 1831), and Balzac's *La Peau de chagrin* (*The Wild Ass's Skin*, August 1831). Within the next twelve months Balzac's *Le Médecin de campagne* (*The Country Doctor*) and *Eugénie Grandet* would also be available.

For marketing purposes nineteenth-century France recognized three categories of fiction. A *conte* (short story) was too short to be published on its own; it might be printed in a magazine (complete in a single issue), or it might form part of a collection in volume form. A *nouvelle* (novelette—but without the English term's pejorative associations) was just long enough to be published as a separate volume, and might also be issued as a short serial, running for about a month in a weekly magazine. A *roman* (novel) was generally published in several volumes, and might be issued as a long serial, running for three to eighteen months in magazine form.<sup>1</sup>

By the time she came to write *The Devil's Pool*, Sand was already the author of several dozen *contes* and *nouvelles*. No exact

number can be given, because it is impossible to say where, in her work, short fiction begins and ends. Is “Le Poème de Myrza” (“Myrza’s Poem,” 1835) a story or a prose poem? Is *Lettres à Marcie* (*Letters to Marcie*, 1837) a *nouvelle* or a series of essays? Is *Aldo le rimeur* (*Aldo the Rhymester*, 1833) a story in dialogue or a play? Habitually she wrote what she wanted to write, without stopping to ask whether it conformed to any recognized literary genre.

In such a diverse body of work, different readers will have different individual favorites, but two of Sand’s early stories have always elicited particular critical praise: “Lavinia” and “The Unknown God.”

“Lavinia” was written in January 1833<sup>2</sup> and published two months later, in an anthology called *Les Heures du soir* (*Evening Hours*). At that time it bore a French title, “Une Vieille Histoire” (“An Old Story”); but when it was reprinted in George Sand’s own collection *Le Secrétaire intime* (*The Private Secretary*) in April 1834, it acquired the English title by which it has been known ever since: “Lavinia: An Old Tale.” Few works by Sand, long or short, have been so consistently praised. When, in 1850, the world’s most influential literary critic, Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve, listed the works by George Sand that he personally regarded as masterpieces, “Lavinia” was the earliest name on the list.<sup>3</sup> When, half a century later, Wladimir Karénine issued the first volume of her classic critical biography, she described “Lavinia” as “the most delightful of all George Sand’s delightful *nouvelles*. . . . It is one of the jewels in her crown. It is a story that can always be reread with pleasure. If ever a volume of her *Selected Works* is prepared, this little work, the product of such fine artistry, certainly ought to be part of it.”<sup>4</sup>

“Le Dieu inconnu” (“The Unknown God”) was written in January-February 1836<sup>5</sup> and published in September of the same year, in a two-volume anthology entitled *Dodecaton*. Among an unusually strong list of contributions—including works by Stendhal, Dumas, Mérimée, Vigny, and Musset—Sand’s new story was given pride of place at the start of the first volume. Again Karénine’s judgement is representative; she calls the tale “one of George Sand’s most perfect works, in style, conciseness, and finish.”<sup>6</sup> Like “Lavinia,” it is written throughout with a concentration and sureness that may surprise readers of the more discursive longer novels. The keynote is struck firmly at the very start; the narrative

then sets off confidently, with a clear sense of direction; every paragraph brings it closer to its goal, and the conclusion, when it arrives, seems to have grown almost inevitably from the initial situation. Due to the stories' thematic concentration and absence of digression, Sand's criticism of current marriage customs may seem even more radical here than in her full-length novels of the same period ("Lavinia" was approximately contemporary with the original edition of *Lélia*, and "The Unknown God" with its revision).

*La Mare au diable* (*The Devil's Pool*) was written in four days at the end of October 1845.<sup>7</sup> Part of the first chapter appeared on 7 December in Pierre Leroux's socialist magazine *La Revue sociale*, where it was entitled "Préface d'un roman inédit" ("Preface to an Unpublished Novel").<sup>8</sup> The whole *nouvelle* was published serially in the magazine *Le Courier français* from 6 to 15 February 1846. In manuscript, and in serial form, it was divided into eight chapters; the definitive division into seventeen chapters first appeared when it was reprinted in book form, in May 1846. In other respects the text underwent no significant revision of any kind.

The work's quality was immediately recognized, both by professional critics and by the general public. The term "masterpiece" (*chef d'oeuvre*) was used by many of its earliest readers—including the painter Delacroix<sup>9</sup>—and reappeared later in (for instance) the classic essays by Sainte-Beuve (1850) and Zola (1876).<sup>10</sup> By November 1846 a schoolteacher named Charles Aubertin was reading the book to his classes "as a model of prose style."<sup>11</sup> This too was the beginning of a long tradition. The book's brevity and status as an acknowledged classic made it an obvious choice for school and university study, and it remains a familiar course text in France to this day.

*The Devil's Pool* was the culmination of Sand's work in short fiction; she wrote few *contes* and *nouvelles* afterwards. During the late 1840s, she became increasingly involved in the theater and added a successful career as a dramatist to her work as a novelist. From that time on, any short or medium-length story tended to receive dramatic rather than fictional treatment. The only significant exceptions were the late-period *Contes d'une grand-mère* (*Tales of a Grandmother*), written for her granddaughters, and published between 1873 and 1876; but those little narratives obviously belonged to a different genre, and they required radically different approaches and techniques from adult fiction.

The true successors of “Lavinia” and *The Devil’s Pool* are to be found not in the children’s stories but in the stage plays of her final phase.

Modern editions of *The Devil’s Pool* customarily contain not only the story itself, but also two later documents: Sand’s “Notice” (“Prefatory Note”) completed on 12 April 1851 for an illustrated edition that was published the following year, and her essay on local marriage customs, “La Noce de campagne” (“A Country Wedding”), completed on 24 March 1846 and published serially in *Le Courier français* very soon afterwards, from 31 March to 6 April. Sand linked the essay loosely to the tale by presenting it as an account of the rituals observed at the wedding of Germain and Marie, while stressing that it formed no part of the story, which was complete in itself. “*The Devil’s Pool* has already been narrated to you in full,” she wrote to the editor of *Le Courier français*; “so slender a subject didn’t require any expansion. But as I told you, I’ve now succumbed to an impulse to describe the strange wedding rites observed by my local countryfolk. . . . The only merit of this little study is the interest that those curious customs may possibly arouse.”<sup>12</sup> A short essay written a few months earlier than *The Devil’s Pool*, “Les Mères de famille dans le beau monde” (“Mothers in Fashionable Society”), is also loosely related to the story (it is particularly relevant to the Dance of Death motif and the presentation of Widow Guérin), and has a further point of kinship with “A Country Wedding” in its lightly fictionalized mode of presentation; it too has therefore been included in the present volume.<sup>13</sup>

To provide the two earlier stories with a comparable supplement, we have selected Sand’s much-admired “Lettre à M. Nisard” (“Open Letter to Monsieur Nisard”). This was written shortly after “The Unknown God,” during the third week of May 1836;<sup>14</sup> Nisard’s critical essay on Sand’s novels had appeared in the *Revue de Paris* on 15 May, and the novelist’s reply was published in the same journal on 29 May. Although it is overtly concerned with the novels that Nisard had been reading, it has just as much relevance to “Lavinia” and even more to “The Unknown God,” which shares many of its themes (for instance, like “The Unknown God,” it presents the teachings of Christ not as a bulwark for the marriage customs of nineteenth-century France but as a challenge to them). Not surprisingly, Sand herself thought highly of it, and she used

it as the conclusion of her 1837 book *Lettres d'un voyageur* (*Letters from a Traveler*).

The present volume, then, includes not only the stories "Lavinia," "The Unknown God," and *The Devil's Pool*, but also the four nonfictional or semifictional pieces that are most directly related to them. We have placed those pieces in chronological sequence within the body of the volume itself, partly because the opening lines of "A Country Wedding" are designed to follow immediately after *The Devil's Pool*, and partly so that the development of Sand's art can be traced by any readers who wish to do so.

There is no room in a general introduction for a comprehensive examination of stories as many-sided as these, and, after all, Sand is not so incompetent at her chosen profession that she needs to have her creations explained by someone else. We must, however, say a few words about one aspect of her work that cannot be reproduced in translation—her prose style.

Perhaps Jules Lemaître hit on the most distinctive feature of George Sand's style when he described it as "easy."<sup>15</sup> That is certainly the feature that stands out if you set a page by Sand against a page by any of her contemporaries. One way or another, they all give the impression of laboring at their work. Balzac labors like a sculptor grappling with a recalcitrant block of granite, Flaubert like an etcher adding fine details under a magnifying glass. But Sand never seems to labor. Phrase follows phrase, sentence follows sentence, without the slightest hint of strain or effort. There are no jolts or surprises—either for good or for ill. (As Lemaître says, there is no "finesse or extraordinary brilliance.") Zola makes the same point: "Nothing ever catches your attention—neither a picturesque adjective, nor a novel turn of phrase, nor an odd juxtaposition of words."<sup>16</sup>

That may make Sand's style sound neutral or nondescript. In reality it is nothing of the kind; as Zola also observes, it is utterly "personal." In fact, it reflects its author's celebrated disregard for established conventions—when they are mere conventions. She won't dress her prose in the orthodox frills and flounces, any more than she will dress herself in such things. She won't submit to the literary rules laid down by the Académie Française, any more than she will submit to the social rules laid down by the French aristocracy. This doesn't mean that she will go out of her way to write "badly" ("badly" by the Académie's standards); but

neither will she go out of her way to avoid doing so. Of one such lapse she writes, "This grammatical fault has, I am told, attracted notice; but I think one should put into workers' mouths the turns of phrase that are most natural—even when they are incorrect; even when, in an emotional crisis of an exceptional kind, the characters are instinctively speaking (and thinking) in a more elevated way. After all, in ordinary life the most educated people commit hundreds of grammatical faults every day—and very rightly so."<sup>17</sup> Observe that last phrase. On occasions—"hundreds . . . every day"—it is not only permissible to break the rules, but "very right" to do so.

In another essay she explains "why I don't allow my publishers to correct my punctuation. . . . I don't believe that it should be determined by grammatical rules, I maintain that it should be more elastic, without any absolute rules. There are hordes of good textbooks on punctuation. You should read them, you should (when necessary) consult them, but you shouldn't abjectly submit to them. 'The style is the man,' goes the old saying. Punctuation is much more the man than style is." She illustrates this in detail, showing how different people will punctuate their speech and writing differently depending on their character, and how even one person (the actress Rachel, for instance) may punctuate differently at different stages of life. Indeed, one of the things that sets the good writer apart from the rulebook writer is a willingness to punctuate the same sentence construction differently in different contexts: "There are places where the text shouldn't be cluttered with punctuation, and other places where no mark of punctuation should be omitted. It becomes a matter of taste, and that's why I don't allow any absolute rules. For instance, in a dialogue between two people of different characters, I'd have them use different punctuation as well as different phraseology. In a rapid narrative I wouldn't allow many breathing-spaces, and even in a basic expository passage, I wouldn't chop into separate sentences what is merely a single mass of phrases contributing to a single idea." Therefore, she tends to punctuate more lightly than most of her contemporaries, using a comma where the rule book would demand at least a semicolon, or leading an idea forward fluidly with a semicolon where her male colleagues would end it emphatically with a period. Finally, noting the relation between language and social status, she suggests that many of the existing



middle-class rules will probably be eroded as more and more people from lower socioeconomic groups become literate. “I have no authority to simplify the rules of language, but I think they will simplify themselves by the admission of the so-called illiterate classes into the mainstream of bourgeois society—which is already far from rigidly homogeneous in terms of French usage.” But won’t the country’s great writers themselves incite everyone to throw off the tyranny of the rule book? “Alas, no—not while there are guardian academies of the dead letter, and while every writer wants to belong to them!”<sup>18</sup>

And indeed none of the stories in this volume is written entirely in Académie French. Each of them has its own linguistic quirks and peculiarities. “Lavinia” is strewn with Briticisms, “The Unknown God” with Biblicisms, *The Devil’s Pool* with the provincial idioms of Sand’s native Berry. There is a great writer’s love of language in this, but there is something deeper too. In “A Country Wedding,” looking back at the characters of *The Devil’s Pool*, Sand makes the following comments: “These people speak a dialect that may be too French for us; since the days of Rabelais and Montaigne, the progress of the language has lost us many of its old riches. That’s the way with any form of progress, and we simply have to make the best of it. However, it’s still a delight to hear those picturesque turns of phrase thriving in the ancient soil of central France—all the more so, because they really suit the good-natured placidity and entertaining garrulity of the people who use them.” Sand sees orthodox modern French—Académie French—as a constrained and impoverished language. Society has erected a set of arbitrary rules and imprisoned itself within their borders. Thus the writer’s use of idioms from other times (Rabelais, Montaigne, the Scriptures) and other places (Berry in *The Devil’s Pool*, England in “Lavinia”) serves a crucial purpose: it demonstrates that there is value (“treasure”) beyond society’s rule books. Moreover, the “true expression” of a people’s character is to be found in that people’s language, and may not necessarily be communicable in some other tongue. The privileged status of Académie French disadvantages underprivileged social groups (rural peasants, women) in two ways. First, such people can’t speak the Académie’s language (they don’t have the proper education); and secondly, even if they could speak it, it might not provide them with any “true expression” of their particular needs and difficulties.

Similar points were made by several writers in Sand's circle. In his 1856 "Réponse à un acte d'accusation," Hugo argues that conventional language acts as a force of social control by restricting what may be said. If there are pigs in power and whores on the streets, you are not allowed to say so, because society decrees that the words "pig" (*cochon*) and "whore" (*catin*) are impolite. You can express your complaint only in roundabout, euphemistic ways that underplay the extent of the problem and indeed misrepresent its nature. So the underprivileged remain underprivileged, while power remains in the hands of those who have written the rule book.<sup>19</sup> But perhaps the matter was never put more crisply and expressively than it was by Sand herself. The Académie, she wrote, "is a relic of literary feudalism."<sup>20</sup>

Sir Henry and Sir Lionel, in "Lavinia," are among the privileged few. The rule book was designed for their convenience, and they know exactly how to abide by it. ("In matters of love Sir Lionel was an accomplished hero. His heart may have been false to more than one infatuation, but his visible conduct had never departed from the proprieties.") Moreover, they speak a language that Sand prefers, on the whole, to her own. French, she thinks, "derives too much from a dead tongue, Latin"; it tends to favor the old ways, "it generates ornamental phrases too easily," it is ill adapted for a modern society. English may have its disadvantages (which she notes), but at least it "gets to the point."<sup>21</sup> So she relishes Sir Lionel's and Sir Henry's forthright Anglicisms, their cries of "dash it" and "for God's sake spare me," even while she mocks them. Speech is freer and more direct in Belgrave Square than in the Faubourg Saint-Germain; England has no dictators in its recent past and no academicians in its present. Yet Sir Henry and Sir Lionel are the prisoners of its rule book, even so. In the presence of their social inferiors they are secure. As long as Lavinia is an inferior (a nonaristocrat, a foreigner, a woman), as long as she hasn't learned the rule book's language, English gentlemen can "tease her mercilessly about her foreign accent and faulty turns of phrase." (Compare Germain in *The Devil's Pool*: "God have mercy on me, I'm so clumsy—whenever I try to say what I think, it always comes out all wrong!") But the new Lavinia is no longer an inferior. She has learned the rules (she is now "speaking remarkably pure English," which Lionel finds "more in accordance with his ideas—more in accordance with society"); yet she

refuses to be bound by those rules (there is, we are told, a touch of un-English “originality” in her speech). That originality—its colors, of course, not only her speech, but also her actions—is what defeats her male persecutors.<sup>22</sup> Nothing in their culture or education has equipped them to handle it. They remain trapped within the very rules that were designed to assist them.

“The Unknown God” shows us a similar situation. Social constraints and inhibitions perpetually keep the well-bred Leah from joining the Christians; her African slave woman, by contrast, is free to participate fully in the new faith as soon as she wishes to do so.

Sand’s prose does not go out of its way to flout convention. She writes with a serene indifference to the rule book, not with an entrenched hostility to it. She is not seeking to overthrow her society; she feels that its problems are more likely to be overcome quietly, by indirect means, than by overt opposition. Revolution, or even the imposition of reform laws on a reluctant country, is not her goal. (To take one example, she does not believe in giving the women of 1848 the right to vote. Society is not yet ready for it. “Before the status of women can be transformed in such a way, society itself has to be radically transformed.”<sup>23</sup>) Change, in her view, is best achieved from within, not imposed from without.

This is seen most strikingly in the conversations between the illiterate farmhands of *The Devil’s Pool*. Germain and Marie do not utter lower-class rural French; as Sand herself says at the start of “A Country Wedding,” they utter a middle-class urban translation of it. (A contrast may be drawn with some of her plays, which contain much closer imitations of regional dialect.) At first glance the effect may seem disappointingly tepid. Yet a more attentive reading will show that the middle-class urban conventions—the Académie conventions—are repeatedly being subverted by sly minor unorthodoxies of punctuation, syntax, and vocabulary. The prose of “Lavinia” and “The Unknown God” could be analysed in similar ways. Sir Henry and Sir Lionel do not speak in the dialect of the British aristocracy, Pamphilus and Eusebius do not speak in that of the Bible; they speak essentially in Académie French, but an Académie French occasionally disrupted with Bricisms or Biblicisms. For some readers at least, the effect is curiously unsettling—perhaps even more unsettling than a more overtly adventurous literary style might be; a single *ain’t* in an otherwise respectable scholarly monograph may be far more disruptive, and

have a much greater impact, than any number of *ain'ts* in an avant-garde novel. Nearly all of the time, Sand lulls her middle-class Parisian audience into a sense of security with familiar, unchallenging words and familiar, unchallenging sentence constructions; but occasionally she strikes a jarring note, and then we realize that she is heedless of the rules rather than subservient to them. Nearly all of the time, she is content to wear a crinoline; but she wears it because she wishes to wear it, not because society tells her to do so, and occasionally she will choose to wear something else instead.

The narrative of *The Devil's Pool* shows us, in microcosm, how such unobtrusive acts of independence may lead to social change. The little society of that story fosters the flirtations of the widow at Fourche, and allows the molestations of the farmer at Les Ormeaux, but its rule book opposes the marriage of Germain and Marie. That rule book, of course, has never been written down; but it is more powerful than any written document, because it is ingrained in the very hearts of the people—including Germain and Marie themselves. Mere legislation could do nothing against it; the government far away at Paris could pass any number of laws permitting people like Germain and Marie to marry, and the community at Belair would not be affected at all. (The story clearly shows us how remote Belair is even from Fourche, let alone from Paris.) Revolutions and counterrevolutions could overrun the country, Napoleons and Robespierres could arise and vanish, and life at Belair would remain the same. Yet the rule book is not the only thing ingrained in the local inhabitants' hearts; their hearts also contain forces that might be called "natural"—forces that are embodied in the Devil's Pool, and that are heard in the chance utterances of children who haven't yet learned the rules. Most of the time, those forces and the rule book get along harmoniously enough; but occasionally—it happens in this story when Germain and Marie are in the woods together—they clash. Then the rule book tries to deal with the forces of nature by ascribing them to the devil, or by prescribing certain social rituals to defuse them ("You mustn't come near it unless you throw three stones in the water with your left hand and make the sign of the cross with your right"), or both. The story doesn't reply by simply glorifying the forces of nature. Those forces aren't inherently good, any more than they are inherently devilish; it depends what you choose to

make of them. If Germain were a different sort of person, or if Marie were a different sort of person, the tale would proceed in a different direction; the chapter “Despite the Cold” shows us that. If Germain were like the farmer at Les Ormeaux, or if (on the other hand) he were so rigid that he could suppress his impulses altogether, then the rule book would not be challenged, and no social change would happen. But put a certain kind of person in a certain kind of situation, and the forces of nature *do* challenge the rule book—challenge it, sometimes, so persistently and effectively that they gain a little victory over it. At the end of the story, life at Belair seems to be going on exactly as it was at the start. No revolutions have happened, no demagogues have arisen, no laws have been enacted or amended. Perhaps the local inhabitants don’t even realize that any change has happened. But a change *has* happened; a rule has been quietly broken; and a precedent has been set for other people to break it too. The rule book will never be quite the same again. And next generation, perhaps, another situation will arise, and another rule will be broken . . .

Moreover, the tale itself is designed to encourage a similar kind of change in the minds of its middle-class Parisian readers. Like the story it tells, the tale operates unobtrusively, from within society rather than in overt opposition to society; many of its readers may be unaware, or only dimly aware, that their preconceptions are being challenged at all. After all, it attacks a prohibition that is no prohibition for its readers; in middle-class Parisian society, teenage Maries *do* marry twenty-eight-year-old Germaines, and nobody feels the slightest concern. Yet the prohibition has been craftily chosen. In itself it seems trivial, but it draws on two issues that are far from trivial. It indirectly reminds its readers that the lower classes do not share their own advantages (in a community where a man’s average life expectancy is about fifty years, Germain is already a senior citizen); and it indirectly rouses one of the most universal and emotive of all social taboos (Marie has been entrusted to Germain in loco parentis, which gives the encounter at the Devil’s Pool a hint of incest).<sup>24</sup> Similar comments could be made about the story’s subsidiary elements. The widow at Fourche and the farmer at Les Ormeaux pose no direct challenge to the reader; no Paris ballroom would accept such people for a minute. Yet their behavior is not altogether unlike patterns of behavior that are extremely common in middle-class Parisian

society (compare the widow in the novel with the “Mothers in Fashionable Society” whom Sand had contemplated a few months earlier). Here and elsewhere, the characters of *The Devil’s Pool* are kept at a distance from the reader—but not at a safe distance.

Sand’s influence on the novels of Charlotte and Emily Brontë, George Eliot, and Henry Handel Richardson has often been discussed. Her influence on the stories of E. Nesbit has been less frequently remarked; yet perhaps it goes just as deep.

Nor are her challenges directed only at nineteenth-century middle-class Parisians. Mindless conventions exist in every society, and her work is a perpetual incitement to live independently of them. Therefore, her stories are not mere milestones in the history of progress, pleas that have lost their relevance because the social reforms advocated by them have now taken place. No rule book or law code will resolve the conflicts they dramatize. They demand not simply a new method of supporting those in financial need, but a greater humanity in our dealings with our neighbors; not simply a revision of the marriage laws, but a return to the standards of Christ—which in some respects may offer an even more radical challenge to modern sexual customs than to nineteenth-century ones! Thus we cannot sit back comfortably and applaud Sand for aiming her shafts at our ignorant and unenlightened forebears. She is aiming at us too.

Her strategy commonly affects readers in a way that may be seen from Sainte-Beuve’s famous essay. Sainte-Beuve pronounces *The Devil’s Pool* “a little masterpiece,” a “charming idyll”; in its central chapters he finds “a succession of delightful, exquisite scenes, which have no match or model in any idyll, either ancient or modern.” He is utterly enthralled with it. Clearly, he doesn’t consciously recognize that the little parable offers any opposition, or even any challenge, to his own beliefs and standards. Yet subconsciously he is not entirely at ease. He keeps looking over his shoulder to assure himself that the proper cultural stereotypes are being observed: “Germain, like all men—even the strongest and bravest ones—is impatient by nature; Marie, like all virtuous women, is patience personified.” And so on. The opening chapter gives him a few moments of apprehension: “It always worries me when I see a philosophical idea used to advertise a novel.” (He means, of course, an idea that conflicts with his own. When writers advocate ideas that conform to his own, he is never conscious

that any special advocacy is happening at all—as a glance through his *Causeuses* will readily illustrate.) He breathes an audible sigh of relief when the philosophizing stops and the storytelling begins. In the narrative too there are things that fleetingly unsettle him: “In the chapter after ‘Evening Prayers,’ which is entitled ‘Despite the Cold,’ there was a moment when I was afraid that an annoying stroke of clumsiness might spoil the purity of the composition.” But after all (he reminds himself) life is like that; “coarsenesses”—rapes and seductions—do happen and can’t always be overlooked; and anyhow in this particular instance no harm is done: so he recovers his balance and goes on his way, without ever getting quite clear in his mind whether he has been disturbed by the possibility of an evil in society or of a misjudgement in a work of art.<sup>25</sup> In effect, he reads the tale in a way that excises its subversive elements and turns it into something less critical of nineteenth-century orthodoxy.

Indeed, the stories’ quiet challenge to society does not always, or even often, succeed. Usually, instead of changing the world, they are changed by the world—changed into something more conventional and more convenient. That would not have surprised their author; on the contrary, it is exactly what she would have expected. Subtle destabilizations—visits to the Devil’s Pool—have different effects on different readers; as we observed before, it depends what you make of such things. Change will occur only when a reader has (like Germain) both the sensitivity to feel that the rule book is being challenged and the integrity to avoid brushing the challenge aside in some socially acceptable way. That is a rare combination; and that, Sand would have said, is why change is always a slow process.

*The Devil’s Pool* describes itself not as a “study of concrete reality,” but as a “quest for ideal truth.” It stands in close relation to life, but it is not life; like many literary works of its era, it is, in Matthew Arnold’s phrase, a “criticism of life.” Its author keeps her eyes attentively on the way things are; its backdrop is modeled closely on the “concrete reality” of her local region, its characters behave very much as the people of her local region do behave; a steady stream of narratorial comments keeps reminding us of that (“countryfolk don’t eat fast”; “there’s a strong tradition of purity in some rural districts”; “in true country fashion, they were going to answer his questions with other questions”). But *The Devil’s Pool*

is not a photograph of the way things are; it is an exploration of the way things could, possibly, be. With regard to the way things are—with regard to “concrete reality”—Sand is as unillusioned an observer as Balzac himself. She offers no happiness for Lavinia or, except at death, for Leah; the happiness of Marie and Germain is won only with difficulty, and only in an environment “remote from the corrupting influence” of the urban privileged classes—an environment which the storyteller locates in the realm of “ideal truth” rather than “concrete reality” (though she also shows that such an ideal is no mere daydream—that it is closely tethered to the practicalities of life in certain real, and concrete, human communities). She has sometimes been regarded as a naïve optimist, someone who refused to face facts and looked at the world through rose-colored spectacles. In fact her writings proclaim no extravagant hope and promise no imminent millenium. Her portrait of life is an unglamorous one, and all the more strikingly so because it is presented so serenely.

When translating Sand’s work, it is customary to conform to the conventions of standard English in punctuation, syntax, and vocabulary. This is understandable; our language is not hers, and any attempt to imitate her prose in a foreign tongue would be foolish. In the following translations, however, we have ventured to depart from the tradition, and have occasionally introduced a forbidden punctuation mark or a nonstandard sentence construction that may suggest something of her own techniques. Nevertheless, we fully realize the dangers of this policy, and have endeavored to be cautious: she would wish us to subvert, not to rebel. The publishing industry has become more standardized in the two centuries since she wrote; the modern style manual imposes much greater uniformity than the nineteenth-century Académie was able to do, and leaves less room for individual variation. What present-day mainstream novel or history book is punctuated and paragraphed as idiosyncratically as Hugo’s *Les Misérables* or Michelet’s *Histoire de France*? Thus our departures from the rule book have had to be more sparing than hers; otherwise they would have looked like attempts at revolution rather than destabilization. In particular, the application of regional dialect is a delicate task. As Rosemary Lloyd has wisely remarked, “Any such venture risks, at best, being misleading, and at worst making the characters appear ridiculous.”<sup>26</sup> All previous translators rendered the



Berrichon passages of *The Devil's Pool* into standard English throughout, and probably with good reason; the works of so notorious a woman had to be made respectable before they could gain a hearing in the English-speaking world, just as the operas of Mussorgsky had to be purged of their idiosyncrasies before they could gain acceptance in Western opera houses. Nevertheless we think that today, when international travel is becoming more frequent and information is more freely exchanged across the globe, local dialects are starting to lose some of the ridiculousness noted by Lloyd. Not everyone now laughs at a Jewish or Cockney accent; John Clare's poems no longer have to be dressed in a suit and tie when they appear before the public; there is a growing belief that the citizens of New Delhi or Port Moresby are not committing any crime if they write a different English from those of Mayfair or Manhattan. And if it is misleading to give Germain and Marie the regional idioms of an Anglophone farming district, it may be even more misleading to transpose their dialogue into urban middle-class language without providing (as Sand herself does) an occasional reminder that the transposition *is* a transposition, and that in real life their speech would be neither urban nor middle-class. Readers who find the result unsettling may wish to consider why they are unsettled by it. And readers who do not find it unsettling may wish to consider whether they are doing what Sainte-Beuve did, and unconsciously editing away George Sand's subversiveness while they read.