

Hoggard on d'Agoult, ed. Dupêchez (2012)

Agoult, Marie de Flavigny, comtesse d'. *Correspondance générale, Tome IV: 1842-mai 1844, et suppléments: 1830-1841*. Ed. Charles F. Dupêchez. Paris: Éditions Honoré Champion, (coll. Bibliothèque des correspondances, mémoires et journaux), 2012. Pp. 863. ISBN: 978-2-7453-2357-6

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Marie de Flavigny, the Countess d'Agoult, had not only a tumultuous, ten-year relationship with composer Franz Liszt; she also became an important figure in French intellectual life who, during her seventy-six years, wrote prolifically, including thousands of letters to Liszt, Sainte-Beuve, Alfred de Vigny, Lamartine, Hugo, Balzac and dozens of other luminaries. Gathering and documenting these writings, Charles Dupêchez has published the fourth of a projected ten-volume collection of Marie d'Agoult's correspondence; he has also written her biography, published a new edition of *Nélida* (d'Agoult's 1846 semi-autobiographical novel about her relationship with Liszt), and edited or written a number of works by or about her.

What makes volume four of d'Agoult's correspondence--dating January 1842-May 1844--particularly interesting is that it documents the period of the couple's separation through their cataclysmic rupture. The oddest feature of the volume, however, is that while letters to d'Agoult by every other correspondent are directly quoted, those from Liszt appear in third-person paraphrase. Dupêchez notes in the introduction that because the Liszt-d'Agoult correspondence has already been published (by Fayard in 2001, edited by Serge Gut and Jacqueline Bellas), readers should refer to that text for Liszt's direct words.

Volume four, therefore, remains focused on the countess herself. Each letter to and from d'Agoult is dated, numbered and documented by provenance. Extensive footnotes attest to Dupêchez's knowledge of his subject. The final 231 pages contain supplemental material, including 1830-1841 d'Agoult letters not included in the first three volumes; d'Agoult's 1842-43 daily agendas; her 1841-43 reflections on her childhood; a "Portrait d'Arabelle" (nickname for d'Agoult) by Louis de Viel Castel; d'Agoult's *Lettres écrites d'une cellule*, deeply personal reflections on her life; works dedicated to d'Agoult; a biographical index of correspondents, including dates of birth and death; additions and corrections to volumes I-III; and an index of names, with page references, of correspondents or of individuals mentioned in letters.

Volume four gives insight into the social, political and intellectual climate of mid-nineteenth-century Paris, including names from d'Agoult's daily agenda of those attending her gatherings; the letters also allow a glimpse of the courtly epistolary style of the day, including, for example, these words to d'Agoult from admirer Émile de Girardin, editor of the Parisian newspaper *La Presse*: "Je ne vous vois plus et ne pas vous voir pour moi, c'est ne pas respirer, ne pas vivre" (195).

The volume's greatest value is the light it shines on d'Agoult herself during the collapse of her relationship with Liszt and her rebirth as an intellectual in her own right. The woman who had defined herself through the man she loved emerges as an autonomous force (Whitney Walton in *Eve's Proud Descendants* named d'Agoult one of the four most significant female voices in the emerging French Republic). *Nélida*, begun in 1843, was d'Agoult's *cri de cœur* over a doomed relationship, but it also signals the ascendancy of Daniel Stern, d'Agoult's literary persona.

Her rebirth, perhaps encouraged by the aesthetic idealism of correspondents Georg Herwegh and François Ponsard, places l'idéal--the imagination's vision--at the center of her being, a path she followed the rest of her life. Her friend Louis de Viel Castel wrote in an 1843 portrait that d'Agoult lacked the capacity for "la sensibilité," a lack he saw as her greatest flaw (734). Had she had that trait, he argues, she would have been utterly absorbed into the being of her beloved, whereas (he addresses her), "votre âme, toujours orgueilleuse, ne subissait pas le joug de la sienne" (738). What Viel Castel saw as a deficiency in d'Agoult, however, was the result of a sober, deliberate choice, as these letters attest. From d'Agoult's perspective, the glorious life of sexual joy, of spiritual oneness, had ended. As she wrote Alfred de Vigny in February 1842, "après l'amour tel que j'ai ressenti il n'y a de possible que l'amitié" (43).

Did she lack, as Viel Castel claims, sensibility? In 1842 during a visit to Nonnenworth, Germany, d'Agoult writes about her complete absorption in a love within which "tout me venait de lui tout me ramenait à lui"--exactly the absorption into other Viel Castel said she was incapable of feeling, but one d'Agoult affirms: "Dès le premier instant j'eus la révélation d'une nature souverainement grande; je sentis, qu'invinciblement attirée, mon âme allait se perdre, s'abîmer dans la sienne; mais je sentis aussi que cette force qui m'entraînait était une force qui gravitait vers Dieu. . ." (785). Her subsequent self-creation, as these letters show, was an excruciating choice based on a series of steps reluctantly taken. Setting aside the woman who loved a particular man, she emerged a woman who lived for the ideal.

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