



Nelida

MARIE D'AGOULT

Translated by Lynn Hoggard

Nelida

SUNY series, Women Writers in Translation
Marilyn Gaddis Rose, editor

Nelida

Marie d'Agoult

originally published in 1846
under the pen name Daniel Stern

Translated by
Lynn Hoggard

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Illustrations



Cover Art: Bust of Marie d'Agoult by Italian sculptor Lorenzo Bartolini, made during the summer of 1839 while Marie was in Tuscany with Franz Liszt. Courtesy Charles Dupêchez.

Illustration 1: *Marie d'Agoult*, from an 1843 portrait by French painter Henri Lehmann. Courtesy Musée Carnavalet, Paris.

Illustration 2: *Franz Liszt*, from an 1838 painting by F. Von Amerling. Courtesy Charles Dupêchez.

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Permission to reprint the 1843 portrait of Marie d'Agoult by French painter Henri Lehmann was granted by the Musée Carnavalet, Paris, France.

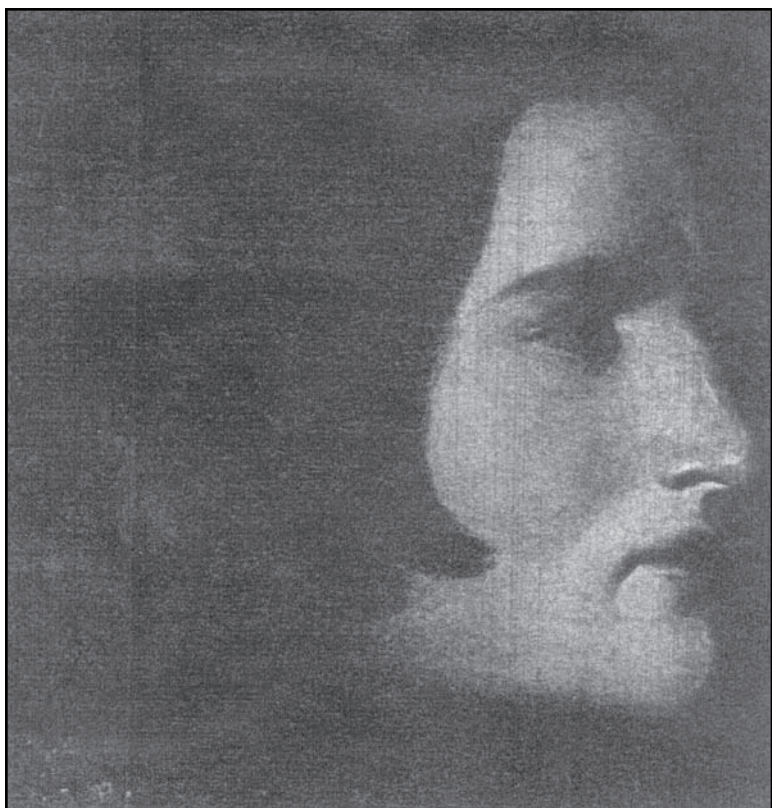
Permission to print a photograph of the marble bust of Marie d'Agoult by Italian sculptor Lorenzo Bartolini was granted by Charles F. Dupêchez.

Permission to print a photograph of a portrait of Franz Liszt by painter F. Von Amerling was granted by Charles F. Dupêchez.

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Marie d'Agoult in an 1843 portrait by French painter Henri Lehmann, student of Ingres. (Courtesy Musée Carnalvet, Paris.)



Franz Liszt, from an 1838 painting by F. Von Amerling. (Courtesy Charles Dupêchez.)

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Introduction

Maiden, Lover, Crone: A Sundered Trinity in Marie d'Agoult's *Nelida*

Her novel *Nelida* was the product of Marie d'Agoult's violent attempt to separate her destiny from that of pianist/composer Franz Liszt, who, for more than a decade, had been her soul mate and father to three of her five children. When in 1832 she met and fell passionately in love with Liszt (then twenty-one), Marie, then twenty-seven and mother of two young daughters, was unhappily joined in an arranged marriage to Count Charles d'Agoult. By late 1833 she and Liszt had probably become intimate in what appears to have been a mutually powerful physical, spiritual, and intellectual relationship. Several months after the death of her six-year-old daughter, Louise, in 1834, Marie discovered that she was pregnant with Liszt's child. Rather than save herself and her family from scandal by pretending that the child was her husband's (a not-uncommon practice in such circumstances), she left husband and daughter to become, between the years 1835 and 1840, the artist's muse and companion in love and wandering (*Années de Pèlerinage* [Years of Journeying], was the title Liszt gave the hundreds of pages of music composed during this early and fertile period of his career). One of the couple's three children, Cosima, repeated her mother's example by later leaving her own husband and two children to live with composer Richard

Wagner, whom she eventually married. Marie, however, never married Liszt (the most obvious reason being that divorce in France was then impossible; Marie's husband lived until 1875); instead, she returned alone to Paris at the end of 1839.

Although the two continued to correspond regularly and to see one another periodically, by late 1842 Marie had become convinced that a permanent break must occur. Liszt, not looking for an end to the relationship, at first seemed crushed by the rupture. In the words of d'Agoult biographer, Phyllis Stock-Morton:

[Liszt] wanted the freedom to take occasional breaks from the close union they had formed, to concertize and make enough to support his children, and return as he chose, to warm himself at the fires of their passion. (p. 64).

Marie, however, saw the situation differently. "I am willing to be your mistress," she had written Liszt in 1843, "but not *one* of your mistresses" (Dupêchez, 164). During the years they spent together, Marie had been intensely hurt by ongoing reports of Liszt's affairs with other women. Yet Liszt did not take seriously Marie's protests of having felt violated and humiliated by these successive and public liaisons (Liszt's views here were perhaps typical of his time; he would later write his daughters that their destiny as women was "to make life sweet and easy for those around" them [Stock-Morton, 158]). Shortly after her breakup with Liszt, Marie wrote bitterly to a friend:

Liszt wanted to make an easy mistress of me, one more vanity in a life of vanities, a woman good for showing off to others, one to relax with comfortably between two orgies. That role did not suit me; I tried it, so hesitant was I to break with the only being I had loved with passion and grandeur,

but the feeling at the center of my strength was outraged. . . . (*N.A.F.* 25182)

With the publication of *Nelida* in 1846 (first serially, then in book form), Liszt's attitude changed. Although he denied that the book upset him and even pretended that it was about someone other than himself, he never forgave its author, never stopped referring to her as "Nelida," and never missed an opportunity to punish her, either by denying her access to their children (who, born out of wedlock, were, by the law of the day, under his legal guardianship) or by telling her, in the regular correspondence they continued to share, about one or another of his new female relationships.

In contrast to the film portrayal of her (by Bernadette Peters in James Lapine's 1991 *Impromptu*) as a simpering, forever-pregnant hanger-on, Marie was in fact an accomplished woman of letters who later wrote more than a hundred articles, several short stories and plays, and eleven books, including a highly respected history of the 1848 revolution in France and a history of the Netherlands Republic, the latter receiving a commendation of merit by the Académie Française. She has since been recognized in Whitney Walton's *Eve's Proud Descendants* as one of four French women authors (along with George Sand, Delphine Gay, and Hortense Allart) to have most influenced a developing image of republican womanhood in postrevolutionary France.

Adopting the male pseudonym Daniel Stern (*Nelida* is an anagram for Daniel), she fashioned in *Nelida*, her only major novel, a fictional but strongly autobiographical account of her relationship with Liszt. Because the novel is the best existing record of the seminal years in Liszt's career and includes direct quotes from Liszt's letters to Marie, it is an important reference and a topic of heated debate among Liszt scholars.

A major criticism of the novel by Liszt biographers derives from the fact that the novel gives historically precise information in an otherwise fictional context. One biographer,

Ernest Newman, calls *Nelida* the work of a brilliant historian, more valuable for the fact that Marie's ability to fabricate and invent was, in his view, weaker than her eye for historical detail (125); whereas another, Alan Walker, writes that to regard *Nelida* as a historical document "would be absurd," since it is "mostly the product of Marie's fantasy," possessing "scarcely any literary merit" (396); a third, Derek Watson, summarily dismisses the novel as a "transparent concoction of fact into feeble fiction" (70).

The much-asserted weakness of the novel, its detractors argue, lies in its ending, in which Marie portrays the male character (a painter named Guermann Regnier) as crushed by an artistic challenge beyond his abilities while deeply regretting the loss of *Nelida*. Liszt, his partisans affirm, went on to ever-higher musical achievement and fame while enjoying many apparently satisfying liaisons with women. Marie's story, they argue, represents delusional wish fulfillment.

Yet much evidence in Marie's memoirs and in their mutual letters from the early years suggests that Marie's novel captures both the depth and power of the couple's relationship, for Liszt as well as for herself. Though *Nelida* was heavily based on factual information, Marie's intention in writing does not seem to have been to chronicle her history so much as to explore it, as well as to make a literary reputation for herself as writer Daniel Stern. When she began the book in 1843, her emotions were running high. Living apart, she and Liszt were still intimate. "[*Nelida*] was unconscious and timid," she would write years later. "It erupted from inside me like the measles, freeing me from a tormenting virus" (*N.A.F.*, 14330). When she learned from friends that a first draft sounded too much like a factual treatment, Marie undertook a major revision. Even so, François Buloz, editor of the prestigious *Revue des Deux Mondes*, turned the manuscript down because it appeared to him a settling of scores between the lovers. (Using a time-honored technique practiced by many male writers, including Ernest Hemingway in *A Farewell to Arms*, Marie had

fictionally killed off a lover whose counterpart had been faithless in real life while her literary protagonist holds true to her hard-won ideals.) Determined to get the story out, Marie then submitted the manuscript to the socialist *Revue Indépendante* where, to the horror of her royalist-leaning, aristocratic relatives, the novel appeared serially during the spring of 1846, becoming something of a Parisian *cause célèbre*. In the summer of that year the publisher Michel Lévy brought it out in book form.

Although the novel was popular reading for a time and gained some praise from critics, it was not hailed as a literary masterpiece. Biographer Charles Dupêchez notes that in its careful crafting and use of concision and ellipses, it was, if not a great work, nevertheless better than a number of George Sand's novels, to which Marie's were invariably compared (175). While avoiding excessive philosophizing and lengthy paeans to nature, it provides subtle analyses of passion, psychological astuteness, and authenticity of character (Introduction to *Nelida*, Dupêchez). In *The Rebel Countess*, biographer Richard Bolster notes that the novel's most revolutionary theme lies in its criticism of class distinctions and its compassion for workers (201). Drawing upon eighteenth-century techniques, it also brilliantly satirizes character (such as Nelida's socialite guardian, the Vicomtesse d'Hespel) and such attitudes as aristocratic snobbery, prejudice, and self-indulgence (as in its reference to nineteenth-century Geneva as a town of small-minded "merchants and Methodists"). Critic Edmond Scherer had already astutely noted in a nineteenth-century essay that for *Nelida* to have been fully successful as a novel would have required better development of the characters and of the psychology of their passions (Dupêchez, 175–176), failings typical, it might be noted, of a first effort. Marie would later call the novel her "first literary sin" that she would have gladly forgotten (Stock-Morton, 117). Elsewhere she refers to it as the epitaph of her youth: "Here lies Nelida. Her son Daniel [Stern] barely mourns her passing; sheds not a single tear" (Stock-Morton, 117).

In all fairness to both d'Agoult and Liszt, *Nelida* cannot be viewed primarily as an act of revenge. One reason is that her own words on the subject ring true: "I did not write [*Nelida*] to attack Liszt," she wrote her friend the painter Henri Lehmann, adding, "I have nothing to gain (even egoistically) by hurting the man who marked my life so deeply and who is the father of my three children" (Introduction to *Nelida*, Dupêchez). She certainly felt wronged in the relationship with Liszt, and she obviously had a strong sense of her own worth. Like most writers, she embellished her position (with the heroine, for example, being shamefully abandoned by her husband rather than, as was the case with Marie, abandoning him) while she clipped the wings of her male partner (Guermann Regnier, once he has abandoned Nelida, is so riddled with guilt that he is incapable of creating great art again and soon dies). Marie structured the novel in such a way that moral justice, as she saw it, would be done in art as it had not been done in life. Even so, instead of exacting real-life revenge at the expense of historical fact, these changes, among other things, serve a literary purpose (and, had they occurred in the work of a male writer, might scarcely have raised an eyebrow). In *Nelida* they highlight the heroine's solitude and, at the conclusion, the drama of her dilemma. By creating a new context and an alternative narrative independent of historical fact, the author accomplishes a personal, emotional purging through art that replaces the need for vengeance in life. Perhaps Marie's critics who have used the scorned-woman stereotype shortchange both her intelligence and her character. Her creative energies, in any case, seem to have been focused elsewhere. Dupêchez states: "[To call the novel an act of revenge] would cheapen the suffering felt by a woman in the face of the repeated infidelities of her lover. [*Nelida*] is above all a cry of deliverance from someone who feels freedom again" (176).

The published record, at least in the United States, has been slanted against Marie, since few of her writings have

been translated into English and, until 2000 when two appeared, no English biography of her was available. Liszt biographers, as mentioned earlier, by and large took Liszt's side in the controversy. And Marie had another formidable adversary. The female author George Sand, who had once been her close friend, later turned against her. (The possible reasons for the break are varied and complex, but seem to center on a mocking criticism by Marie in a letter to a friend concerning Sand's repeated liaisons with men, the letter then being shown to Sand by the treacherous friend.) Sand could and did bear grudges and was steadfast in her vengeance. Not only did she persuade her friend Honoré de Balzac, who at the time did not know Marie, to satirize both Marie and Franz in his 1839 novel *Béatrix*, but she also created a vicious caricature of Marie's so-called artificial intelligence in the figure of the Vicomtesse de Chailly in the 1841 novel *Horace*. Deeply hurt by the ridicule of both authors, Marie nevertheless bore the insult without public comment or effort to avenge herself, repeatedly trying to repair the friendship with Sand and even receiving Balzac to dine several times at her home.

Although most readers of the time were fascinated by the portrayal of the Liszt figure in the novel, the author's focus seems to have been on the female protagonist. Structure, emphasis, and point of view all suggest that the novel's main theme surrounds the trials of its eponymous heroine. "I wanted to paint a woman possessed with the sentiment of the ideal," Marie wrote her friend and fellow writer Hortense Allart, in whose home she had written much of the novel, "[a woman] who believed she would find that ideal in marriage, then in free love. She's mistaken and *should* die, but she lives. She will love again, but not a man (for no man is worth being loved as she has loved): She will love *all those who suffer*. From now on she will act, free and strong" (Stock-Morton, 115).

There are several possibilities worth addressing here concerning d'Agoult's intentional or unintentional motives

for writing *Nelida*. A brief overview of them might help clarify why *Nelida* was not originally read in the way d'Agoult seems to have intended. They may be summarized as follows:

1. Despite public and private statements that she was not seeking revenge, *Nelida*'s author, either through delusion or sheer malice, wanted to destroy Liszt and glorify herself.
2. The author was unaware that the novel's historical and autobiographical subtext, along with its criticism of Liszt, dominated its literary theme.
3. As a beginning novelist, the author was artistically unable to subordinate the historical subtext to the psychological and literary themes she sought to emphasize.
4. Regardless of the author's intent or achievement, readers of the day were drawn to the story of the peccadilloes of the living and highly celebrated Liszt counterpart rather than to the fate of his companion.

The first assumption, adopted by many Liszt partisans, can be modified if not totally dismissed upon close examination of d'Agoult's life—which generally illustrates a repugnance for behavior dominated by vengeance—as well as by study of her work, including *Nelida* (a discussion of which follows). She certainly meant to criticize Liszt, for in her eyes he had behaved badly. She certainly wanted to justify her own actions to the world, but she hardly seems to wish to destroy him. When, for example, the real Marie and Franz fled to Switzerland together, Marie apparently paid the couple's expenses; however, *Nelida*'s author explicitly states that the poor but proud artist insisted on financing the couple's expenses, using his modest personal resources. Since the public would not have known otherwise, Marie's novelistic detail hardly seems the assassin's stroke; rather, it seems deliberately protective of Liszt. Later in the novel, Guermann's dalliance

with the siren Elisa Zepponi is presented almost tenderly, the seduction by the redoubtable Elisa being so overwhelming, so engaging, so thrilling as to be virtually irresistible. Marie's word that she did not wish to destroy Liszt can be trusted. She wants the right to tell her version of a story like her own. Rather than being a blood cry for vengeance, *Nelida's* "cry of deliverance" signals a turn toward the future, not the past—a point frequently missed by critics.

The second possibility, concerning the author's unconscious motives, may have been true at the time of the novel's first draft, but becomes dramatically less so by the major rewriting, when the novelist was quite aware of how the novel might be read and, according to her own comments and those by literary friends, had made substantial revisions to modify its historical parallels. The third possibility, concerning writerly craft, has credibility. Though literarily gifted, Marie was new to the novel form and had had little practice with the subtleties of creative fiction. Few authors could have mastered in a first attempt a major and complex interweaving of novelistic themes, subtly shading one while highlighting another (particularly considering how she notes that the novel "erupted" out of her). She was a novice, and with this book she apparently had little of Wordsworth's "emotion recollected in tranquillity." One of the novel's most powerful strengths, however, lies in the freshness and intensity of its description of the heroine's pain, which, given the novel's genesis, seems to have functioned, unconsciously but brilliantly, as a kind of literary ambergris.

The final possibility, concerning readers' preference for the male figure, is almost certainly true as well. Nineteenth-century France was not, on the whole, a society in which women were regarded as having a destiny apart from men ("Women don't think," her friend the poet and statesman Alphonse de Lamartine had written her, "but sometimes a mysterious voice speaks in them," Stock-Morton, 129). Moreover, Liszt was the *monstre sacré* of his day; from most readers' perspectives, the novel was about him. Few people

of the time would have been visionary enough to read the novel as a primal cry for woman's sexual and social emancipation, themes that were to dominate Marie's later writings. Generations would pass before the sorrowful tale of an abandoned heroine no longer obscured the nascent theme of a woman's right to self-determination and fulfillment.

Beyond questions concerning the novelist's motives or the novel's historical or emotional accuracy lie more provocative ones about the message within the book itself. Rising to speak like the ghost of Ugolino in Dante's *Inferno*, Marie in *Nelida* revives the dialogue of her relationship with Liszt and underscores her sense of herself as a woman with the right to an autonomous destiny. The story that emerges, while not exculpating its creator from blame, nevertheless humanizes her in the telling, as it clearly and precisely recounts her tale of passion, sacrifice, humiliation, and despair. In fact, because it is a work of fiction, the novel *performs* its creator's struggles in a literarily dense and metaphorical way. We should bear in mind where Marie stood emotionally at the time she wrote *Nelida*. The intimate relationship with Liszt, for which she had abandoned social and financial security, was over (although she continued to affirm the value of their relationship until her death in 1876 at age seventy-one). She had long since surrendered any notion of bourgeois respectability. She had twice been savaged in novels by her contemporaries. She was struggling to meet her financial obligations and to sustain a relationship with her four remaining children (struggles she would ultimately lose). Coming from a family marked by a history of depression and suicide, she was emotionally fragile and subject to extended periods of serious illness that occasionally kept her in bed for long periods of time. *Nelida* is far more interesting and important for the insight it gives into this nineteenth-century woman's effort at self-examination and spiritual regeneration than as a study in blame and bitterness or as research into fact versus fiction. By listening carefully to her voice in *Nelida* we may begin to understand something of how Marie's intel-

lect and imagination worked and how she conceptualized her personal dilemma, as well as that of her fictional heroine.

Biographer Dupêchez sees thinly disguised historical figures in the characters of the novel, especially and most notably in the main characters Nelida as Marie d'Agoult, and the painter Guermann Regnier as pianist/composer Franz Liszt. Dupêchez sees Nelida's guardian figure, the Vicomtesse d'Hespel, as the Marquise Le Vayer, at whose home Marie had met Liszt in December 1832. Nelida's mentally handicapped convent friend Claudine, says Dupêchez, is Adélaïde Françoise de Clermont Mont Saint-Jean, a girl Marie had rescued from persecution by classmates in circumstances similar to those described in the novel. In the Mother Superior he sees a "*travesti*" Abbé Lamennais, the antiroyalist cleric whose theories of religious and social reform deeply influenced Liszt and Marie. And in Elisa Zepponi, the Italian *femme fatale* who seduces both Nelida's husband Timoleon and Guermann Regnier, Dupêchez sees an amalgam of all the women in Marie's nightmares, including Princesse Cristina Belgiojoso, pianist Camille Pleyel, dancer Lola Montes, and Comtesse Julie Samoyloff (174–175). He notes that events in the novel also have historical parallels, including the couple's flight into Switzerland, their sojourn in Italy, Liszt's rivalry with Austrian pianist Sigismond Thalberg, Marie's serious illness while in Italy, and Liszt's appointment as Kappelmeister to the Grand Duke at Weimar (175).

Such parallels do exist, providing rich lore for literary and biographical study, but perhaps the connection between real characters and events and fictitious ones is both more layered and more creative than Dupêchez has allowed. Perhaps d'Agoult's imagination is not as sterile as some of her critics have claimed. Assuming that she wrote *Nelida* in an effort to reflect and comprehend an overwhelming loss, it's possible and even likely that she would examine and explore facets of her own personality in a fictional context to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses and to see where

they might ultimately lead. That examination need not be assumed to be narcissistic; rather, it is one of the activities of the creative mind, which so often studies the world through the only sure lens it has: the self. Concerning the protagonist of his own masterpiece, Gustave Flaubert has so provocatively remarked: “Madame Bovary, c’est moi.” *Nelida*, quite simply, helped Marie analyze and reconstruct her life.

Although the emphasis in this discussion is on the novel’s major female characters rather than on Guermann Regnier—the latter having already been widely studied and analyzed by Liszt biographers—a few comments about him are in order. In a work that consciously plays with name connotations (where one satirical reference, for example, by the multilingual Marie refers to a “Madame de Blonay”), it is significant to note that, although Guermann is French, not only is his first name foreign (Germanic here rather than Hungarian), but also that the name’s first syllable carries ambivalent connotations in French: the word *guerre* means *war*, whereas the similarly pronounced *guère* means *hardly*, and the verb *guérir* means *to heal*. Guermann’s name, then, suggests a warrior who can heal or a healer who can hurt; but, as his treacherous behavior later proves, he is also “hardly a man” in the behavior he shows toward Nelida. Similarly, *Regnier* (containing the negative verb *nier*: to deny) also suggests *reigning*—a dominant drive of his nature. He is a man who carries strong positive and negative charges within himself. His own destiny depends on how ably he can control and balance those forces. His inability to maintain balance, the author suggests, ultimately derives from a failure of education, both emotional and intellectual. His impulses are too undisciplined, too indulged to allow him to remain on a steady path. The fact that he craters psychically and creatively after his separation from his muse and that he lies dying at novel’s end, signaling his spiritual bankruptcy, also sets the stage for the final test of the female protagonist, for not only is Guermann dying, but he is dying in the company of another woman, Nelida’s arch rival Elisa Zepponi. Never-