

Destins de Femmes

French Women Writers, 1750-1850

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28. Marie Catherine Sophie de Flavigny, Comtesse d'Agoult [Daniel Stern]

31 December 1805–5 March 1876



Fig. 28. Marie Catherine Sophie de Flavigny, comtesse d'Agoult [Daniel Stern], by H. Lehmann. Photo by B2Belgium (2019). Wikimedia, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/69/%22Marie_de_Flavigny%22_de_Henri_Lehmann_%28Petit_Palais%2C_Paris%29_%2848740090161%29.jpg, CC BY 4.0.

Nélida

Alle Erscheinungen dieser Zeit zeigen
dass die Befriedigung im alten Leben
sich nicht mehr findet.
Hegel.

C'était au mois de juin ; le soleil, à son midi, inondait l'horizon de clartés
; pas un nuage ne voilait la splendeur du ciel. Une chaude brise glissait

sur l'étang et se jouait dans les roseaux sonores. Près de la rive, à l'ombre d'un rideau de peupliers, sommeillait un couple de cygnes. Le nénuphar ouvrait ses ailes blanches sur le miroir des eaux. Dans une barque, amarrée au tronc d'un saule dont les rameaux flexibles formaient au-dessus de leurs têtes une voûte mobile et fraîche, deux beaux enfants étaient assis, qui se tenaient par la main. Le plus âgé pouvait avoir une douzaine d'années; c'était un garçon robuste, hardiment décollé, aux yeux noirs, au teint brun : un enfant des campagnes, épanoui au soleil, accoutumé à se jouer librement au sein de la mère nature. L'autre était une jeune fille qui paraissait avoir un ou deux ans de moins. Rien n'égalait la pureté de ses traits ; mais son corps frêle avait déjà cette grâce inquiétante des organisations trop délicates ou trop hâtivement développées ; son cou, d'une blancheur mate, fléchissait sous le poids de sa chevelure d'or ; une pâleur malade couvrait ses joues ; un léger cercle entourait ses yeux d'azur ; tout trahissait dans cette créature charmante l'alanguissement des forces vitales.¹

Marie Catherine Sophie de Flavigny, Comtesse d'Agoult [Daniel Stern] was born in Frankfurt-am-Main and died in Paris, daughter of Alexandre Victor François de Flavigny, a French nobleman who had emigrated during the Revolution, and Maria Elisabeth Bethmann, from an old family of German Jewish bankers converted to Protestantism. The family returned to France after Marie's birth, her father encouraging her love of French literature, her mother promoting her interest in German: Marie spoke both languages fluently. Visiting Frankfurt, she met Goethe who gave her a blessing. Educated from 1819–1821 in a

1 Daniel Stern, *Nélida*, ed. Charles F. Dupêchez (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1987), pp. 1–2.

Translation: All appearances of this time show that the satisfaction in the old life is no longer to be found. Hegel.

It was the month of June; the sun, at its noon, inundated the horizon with light; not a cloud veiled the splendor of the sky. A hot breeze slid over the pond and played in the sonorous rushes. Near the shore, in the shadow of a curtain of poplars, slept a couple of swans. The waterlily opened its white wings on the mirror of the waters. In a boat, tied to the trunk of a willow whose flexible branches made a fresh and mobile vault over their heads, two lovely children were seated, holding each other by the hand. The elder could be about twelve years old; it was a stout boy, boldly decoupled, with black eyes, with sun-browned skin; a country child, flourishing in the sun, accustomed to play freely in the heart of mother nature. The other was a young girl who seemed one or two years younger. Nothing equaled the purity of her features; but her frail body already had that disquieting grace of organizations either too delicate or too hastily developed; her neck, of a matte whiteness, bent beneath the weight of her golden tresses; an unhealthy paleness covered her cheeks; a light circle surrounded her azure eyes; all betrayed in this charming creature the languishing of vital forces.

convent, she pursued her education reading Chateaubriand, Rousseau, and Lamartine. In 1827, she married Charles Louis Constant, Comte d'Agoult, a cavalry colonel and steward of Madame the Dauphine, and they had two daughters, the first of whom died in childhood. Her salon drew writers and musicians from Vigny to Chopin to Heine. In 1833 she began her liaison with Liszt, the composer and virtuoso, and she left her husband for him in 1835, the two traveling through Italy together. She later divided her time between Rome, London, Paris, and the Rhineland. D'Agoult and Liszt had three children, notably Cosima who later married Richard Wagner. And d'Agoult began to publish. *Nélida* (1846) is an anagram of their last child's name, Daniel—he died aged twenty of tuberculosis—as well as of her own male pseudonym; readers found in it echoes of her liaison with Liszt. Her *Histoire de la Révolution de 1848*, published in 1850, remains a reference point for historians and marks her shift to non-fiction. D'Agoult, by now an ardent republican, hosted a leading republican salon under the Second Empire and is buried in Père Lachaise Cemetery. Her relations with Sand were complex; Balzac put her in his early novel *Béatrix* (1839) as the title character, for which she hated him thereafter. She maintained a long correspondence with Allart. Hugo, at her death, remarked in his private notebooks: "Peu de talent, petite âme."²

Opening one's first novel with an epigraph from Hegel, in German no less, is a bold move. The quotation reads, in essence: "All appearances of this time show that satisfaction in the old life is no longer to be found." The Comtesse d'Agoult, one might speculate, is concerned to be taken seriously—an entirely understandable position for an intelligent, serious woman in that place and time. Hugo, let us observe, was reluctant to accord her that honor. D'Agoult's grasp of German was rare in France in 1846, and she is right to make use of it; one thinks of her early meeting with Goethe, as of her years with Liszt, whose native tongue was German.

After the epigraph, we find elegant prose. This is all well and good, but Sand, no stranger to elegant prose, had already begun to show what could be done with an "enfant des campagnes" when the author allows them to narrate the novel instead of just starring in it. There is, briefly put,

2 Victor Hugo, *Choses vues*, ed. Hubert Juin (Paris: Gallimard, 2002), p. 1332.

a disconnect or disjunction between d'Agoult's Hegel, her sophisticated style, and the heroes she presents to us. This disconnect was not unknown in the mid-nineteenth century, but d'Agoult knew Sand, and one has the feeling she was gifted and imaginative enough to do otherwise. Finding the poetry in the everyday is perhaps more interesting than bringing it in on a platter. In short: this is interesting, elegant writing, and the epigraph from Hegel is possibly the most resonant part of that interest, in this very short extract. Certainly, d'Agoult deserves to be read today with some attention, and Hugo's remark at her death says as much about Hugo as about his intended target.

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