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# Ernest Newman's *The Man Liszt* of 1934: Reading its Freethought Agenda \*

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Ernest Newman's *The Man Liszt: A Study of the Tragi-comedy of a Soul Divided against Itself* was published in 1934 and received a hostile critical reception.<sup>1</sup> Although Newman saw his work as representing an impartial and progressive approach to biography, the majority of critics read it as a work of calculated and unreasonable bias. In this article I examine the genesis and reception of *The Man Liszt* to explain why the author and the critics differed so much on what the book meant. After examining the views and opinions of both sides, I offer a new interpretation of what *The Man Liszt* represented to Newman in light of what we have come to know about Newman's personal life since *The Man Liszt* was published. I speculate that Newman subconsciously used *Liszt* as a vehicle to express his freethought ideology, an ideology that could never countenance Liszt's worldviews, but one that explains the author's sympathy with Liszt's first long-term lover, Marie d'Agoult. I argue that Newman's insistence that the Liszt biography was an objective and impartial one was a screen behind which another agenda was operating.

The study of music biography has been energised recently, principally through the work of Jolanta T. Pekacz.<sup>2</sup> For Pekacz, 'Music biography as a genre has rarely been an object of theoretical and methodological reflection.'<sup>3</sup> She believes that there is 'typically ... no

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<sup>1</sup> Ernest Newman, *The Man Liszt: A Study of the Tragi-comedy of a Soul Divided against Itself* (London: Cassell, 1934; reprinted, London: Victor Gollancz, 1969; 2nd imp., 1970). References are to the 1970 impression.

<sup>2</sup> Jolanta P. Pekacz, 'Memory, History and Meaning: Musical Biography and its Discontents,' *Journal of Musicological Research* 23 (2004): 39–80; Jolanta P. Pekacz, ed., *Musical Biography: Towards New Paradigms* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Pekacz, 'Memory, History and Meaning' 40.

presentation—never mind discussion—of method, as though biography were an area of self-evidence and universality.<sup>4</sup> In this article, a study of Newman's biographical method is crucial in understanding his claims for objectivity, for while the method may be at first glance self-evident, it belies a wholly different purpose. Pekacz further writes that 'historiographical premises and narrative techniques remain largely unchallenged' in the study of biographies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>5</sup> My aim here is to read *The Man Liszt* as a reflection of Newman's freethought ideology, a reading the critics could not have undertaken; for it is only recently that Newman's association with freethought has been revealed in detail. This article is a study of the historiographical premise behind this Liszt biography, and of its personal, freethought narrative.

Ernest Newman's name appears frequently in many studies on music criticism in the twentieth century; indeed, to many music-lovers and musicologists around the world he is a household name. He is best remembered as a journalistic music critic *par excellence*, especially for his columns in *The Sunday Times* from 1920 to 1958, and for his monumental biography of Wagner.<sup>6</sup> Newman has been fondly remembered as a champion of Berlioz;<sup>7</sup> as a leading light in the music education of the British;<sup>8</sup> and as a stickler for objectivity and transparency in criticism.<sup>9</sup> Some even say he was among the greatest music critics ever to have lived.<sup>10</sup> Newman has also been defined as a quintessential British institution, akin to the Anglican Church and parliamentary government.<sup>11</sup> As a writer he is very often praised for his eloquence, style and wit. As one of his contemporaries noted, 'Mr. Newman could write about barbed wire and still be interesting.'<sup>12</sup> Of all his works, Newman's biographies have remained his most enduring achievements. According to William Mann, writing in the 1980s, writing biographies brought Newman the greatest satisfaction.<sup>13</sup> Newman's list of books is a long one and includes biographies of Gluck, Richard Strauss, Elgar, Hugo Wolf, Beethoven and five biographies of Wagner.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Pekacz, 'Memory, History and Meaning' 44.

<sup>5</sup> Pekacz, *Musical Biography* 6.

<sup>6</sup> Ernest Newman, *The Life of Richard Wagner*, 4 vols (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1933, 1937, 1941, 1946). The paperback edition was published by Cambridge University Press in 1976 and inaugurated that press's music list.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Peter Heyworth, ed., *Berlioz, Romantic and Classic: Writings by Ernest Newman* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1972).

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Ralph Hill, *Challenges: A Series of Controversial Essays on Music* (London: John Williams Limited, 1943) 9. See also Patricia Vincent, 'The Young Person's Appreciation of Ernest Newman,' *Fanfare for Ernest Newman*, ed. Herbert Van Thal (London: Arthur Baker, 1955) 173–80.

<sup>9</sup> See, generally, Ernest Newman, *A Musical Critic's Holiday* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1925).

<sup>10</sup> For example, see Geoffrey Sharp, 'Ernest Newman,' *Musical Review* 21 (1960): 77; Frank Howes, *The English Musical Renaissance* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1966) 351.

<sup>11</sup> Basil Maine, *Behold These Daniels: Being Studies of Contemporary Music Critics* (London: H. & W. Brown, 1928) 15.

<sup>12</sup> Ralph Hill, *Reflected Music and Other Essays* (London: Methuen, 1930) 10.

<sup>13</sup> William Mann, 'Ernest Newman,' *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, vol. 13, ed. Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan, 1980) 163–4 at 163.

<sup>14</sup> *Gluck and the Opera: A Study in Musical History* (London: Bertram Dobell, 1895); *Richard Strauss* (London: John Lane/The Bodley Head, 1904); *Elgar* (John Lane/The Bodley Head, 1906); *Hugo Wolf* (London: Methuen, 1907); *The Unconscious Beethoven* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1927). The Wagner biographies are *A Study of Wagner* (London: Bertram Dobell, 1899); *Wagner* (London: Dent, 1904); *Wagner as Man and Artist* (London: Dent, 1914); *The Life of Richard Wagner*, 4 vols (New York: Knopf, 1936–47) and *Wagner* (London: Novello, 1940).

At the beginning of 1934, while writing the second volume of his four-volume biography of Wagner, Newman decided to write a biography of Liszt. According to Vera Newman's memoir of her husband, the decision to undertake the Liszt biography appears to have been made on the spur of the moment.<sup>15</sup> But, as Vera was soon to discover, Newman had already done 'a lot of preliminary work,' for she suddenly found herself with a substantial amount of copy ready for typing.<sup>16</sup> Although Newman had made detailed notes towards the 1934 biography, the idea of a life of Liszt had been in Newman's mind for some decades, and a smaller biographical study had been written over twenty years previously.<sup>17</sup> The 1934 project was a wholly separate undertaking.

*The Man Liszt* comprises ten chapters, arranged in approximate chronological order, covering 336 pages: 1 'The unreliability of the older Liszt biographies'; 2 'The beginnings of the d'Agoult affair'; 3 'The development of the d'Agoult affair'; 4 'The end of the d'Agoult affair'; 5 'Béatrix and Nélida'; 6 'Liszt and the Princess Wittgenstein'; 7 'The separation from the Princess: the duality of Liszt's soul'; 8 'Full Franciscan, full Zigeuner'; 9 'The questionable evidential value of Liszt's letters: the Olga Janina episode'; 10 'The actor.'

In chapter 1, Newman surveys previous Liszt biographies. He is particularly scathing of Lina Ramann's biography, published between 1880 and 1894,<sup>18</sup> but considers Peter Raabe's 1934 biography the 'most reliable' to date.<sup>19</sup> Newman was dissatisfied with all previous attempts at Liszt biography and put up a case for his psychological study. In chapters 2, 3 and 4, Newman re-examines the circumstances surrounding Liszt's affair with Marie d'Agoult. Countess d'Agoult (1805–76) was a freethinker and writer, who used the pen-name Daniel Stern. She was once married to Charles Louis Constant d'Agoult, but left him for Liszt, with whom she lived for approximately four years. It was assumed in previous Liszt biography that d'Agoult manipulated Liszt; but Newman argues that their liaison was a mutually considered one and suggests the Countess was not the over-bearing character she had been typecast as in previous biographies. These chapters, especially chapter 4, discuss Liszt's ferocious temper, duplicity and other unsavoury aspects of his personality such as his 'arrogance' and 'philandering'.<sup>20</sup>

Chapter 5 discusses two works: *Béatrix*, written by Balzac between 1838–44; and *Nélida*, written by d'Agoult under the pseudonym Daniel Stern and published in 1846, which was a chronicle of her years with Liszt. Both books present extremely unflattering reminiscences of Liszt, and Newman uses them to bolster his own argument that Liszt was a self-obsessed and cold-hearted man. In chapter 6, Newman examines Liszt's relationship with Princess Carolyne Sayn-Wittgenstein, whom he met in 1847, and the period in which Liszt worked in Weimar. Newman portrays the Princess as a bluestocking who impeded Liszt's development as a composer and who contributed much to the ostracism of the pair by Weimar locals. Newman further suggests that, in the Weimar years (1848–61), Liszt was wearing a 'mask'

<sup>15</sup> Vera Newman, *Ernest Newman: A Memoir* (London: Putnam, 1963) 119.

<sup>16</sup> Vera Newman, *Ernest Newman* 119.

<sup>17</sup> Ernest Newman, 'Franz Liszt,' *Musical Times* (October 1911): 633–39; (November 1911): 708–11; (December 1911): 778–80. This was a much more favourable appraisal of Liszt and focused on Liszt the composer rather than on aspects of his personal life that came under scrutiny in *The Man Liszt*.

<sup>18</sup> Lina Ramann, *Franz Liszt als Künstler und Mensch* 3 vols. (Lepizig, 1880–94).

<sup>19</sup> Peter Raabe, *Liszts Leben* (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1931).

<sup>20</sup> Newman, *The Man Liszt* 87, 102.

and had become an 'actor.' Chapter 7 details the demise of Liszt's relationship with Princess Sayn-Wittgenstein and is one of the few places in the book where Newman discusses in any detail Liszt as a composer by, for example, praising his early piano works. Chapter 8 contains the most detailed character portrait of Liszt, with Newman drawing on material in previous chapters to list all of Liszt's unbecoming traits. Chapter 9 is a recounting of an association Liszt had with one of his students, a troubled individual named Olga Janina, who Newman believed had experienced Liszt's malicious temperament first hand. He uses her testimony to strengthen his case against the composer. The final chapter is a summing up of Liszt's complex character, with Newman concluding that Liszt was a troubled, dual character who was unable to keep the extremes of his emotions and behaviours in check.

In general terms, Newman wanted to write a biography that was fair and objective. 'Musical biography,' he wrote, 'has always tended to the diffusion of a romantic legend rather than an impartial record of the sober truth.'<sup>21</sup> Newman was critical of the way in which Ramann's biography of Liszt had used as evidence the composer's responses to a questionnaire. He was equally critical of the hand the princess had played with Ramann in the blackening of Marie d'Agoult's reputation. Newman saw Ramann's biography as a dishonest one and wanted to correct the image of the countess as a manipulator. At the same time, he wanted to expose the extreme degree to which the princess exercised a conniving and manipulative influence over Liszt. The over-riding aim of *The Man Liszt* was, however, to study the duality of the composer's character. Newman mentions Liszt's own description of himself as 'half Zigeuner, half Franciscan,'<sup>22</sup> then cites other writers who have noticed this same duality—even tripartite—compartmentalisation of the composer's character:

Henry Thorbes describes him as 'one-third minstrel, one-third chevalier, one-third Franciscan.' Other descriptions of him have been 'half saint, half charlatan,' 'half priest, half circus-rider.' Always, after studying him, there remains the impression of a soul hopelessly divided against itself.<sup>23</sup>

Here, Newman's subtitle is revealed and his own purpose in this biography articulated: Newman sees *The Man Liszt* as both a historically corrective biography and, although it is not a psychobiography, he sees it as a psychological study that tries to explain Liszt's personal failings. Newman saw Liszt as a flawed human being for his inability to come to terms with, or reconcile, the competing personas—the convivial man of the salons, the virtuoso, and the thoughtful creative artist' versus the unflattering descriptions listed earlier.<sup>24</sup> By his own admission, Liszt saw the need to reconcile these facets of his personality and that he was in need of 'self-correction.'<sup>25</sup> In explaining the sub-title of his work, Newman wrote that, 'We shall find, in the course of the present study, good reason for doubting whether Liszt ever succeeded in

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<sup>21</sup> Newman, *The Man Liszt* 1.

<sup>22</sup> This description was mentioned in a letter to the princess from Liszt on 13 August 1856. See La Maria [Marie Lipsius] ed. *Franz Liszt's Briefe*, 2nd ed. (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1900) 316, cited in Alexander Rehding, 'Inventing Liszt's Life: Early Biography and Autobiography,' *The Cambridge Companion to Franz Liszt*, ed. Kenneth Hamilton (Cambridge: CUP, 2004) 14.

<sup>23</sup> Newman, *The Man Liszt* 8.

<sup>24</sup> Newman, *The Man Liszt* 8–9.

<sup>25</sup> Newman, *The Man Liszt* 8–9.

even approximately harmonising these three elements in his being.<sup>26</sup> Through hyperbole and sarcasm in the narrative, Newman frequently derided his subject, which rankled the majority of critics who reviewed it and made them question the author's impartiality.

*The Man Liszt* begins with a foreword in which Newman details his motivation for writing it:

As his [Liszt's] career touched that of Wagner at so many points, I felt myself under the necessity, in the course of my second Wagner volume, of defining Liszt himself more accurately than I could persuade myself had yet been done. I soon found, however, that to attempt this with even the smallest prospect of success meant devoting a disproportionate amount of space to Liszt in what is, after all, a Life not of Liszt but of Wagner. Then, finding myself with so much Liszt material on my hands, and becoming more and more fascinated with the contradictions of his complex nature, and more and more conscious that none of the existing biographies, not even the admirable recent one of Peter Raabe, takes stock of all we know about Liszt, I was suddenly assailed by the temptation to make him the subject of a full-length psychological study.<sup>27</sup>

Newman then discusses his theoretical framework derived from *Aspects de la biographie* by André Maurois.<sup>28</sup> In the previous year, 1928, Maurois had delivered six lectures at Trinity College, Cambridge, for the Clark foundation. He chose 'Aspects of Biography' as his theme, which was inspired by the title of the Clark lectures given the previous year by E.M. Forster entitled 'Aspects of the Novel.' The six lectures were revised and published as a book in 1929. Maurois's biographical theory was established in a set of introductory questions:

Is there such a thing as modern biography? Is there a literary form different from that of traditional biography? Are its methods legitimate or ought they to be abandoned? Ought biography to be an art or a science? Can it, like the novel, be a means of expression, a means of escape for the author as well as for the reader? Such are some of the questions which we shall be able to examine together; and that we may be loyal to the spirit of this foundation, our examples will be taken from English literature.<sup>29</sup>

Maurois then elaborated on the virtues of modern biography:

The modern biographer, if he is honest, will not allow himself to think: 'Here is a great king, a great statesman, a great writer; round his name a legend has been built; it is on the legend, and on the legend alone, that I wish to dwell.' No. He thinks rather: 'Here is a man. I possess a certain number of documents, a certain amount of evidence about him. I am going to attempt to draw a true portrait. What will the portrait be? I have no idea. I don't want to know before I have actually drawn it. I am prepared to accept whatever a prolonged contemplation of my subject may reveal to me, and to correct it in proportion to such new facts as I discover.'<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Newman, *The Man Liszt* 9. Newman, unlike Thorbes, discusses Liszt's duality, not a tripartite persona.

<sup>27</sup> Newman, *The Man Liszt* xi. Peter Raabe, *Listz's Leben*.

<sup>28</sup> André Maurois, *Aspects de la biographie* (Paris: B. Grasset, c. 1930); English translation: *Aspects of Biography*, transl. S.C. Roberts (Cambridge: CUP, 1929). All quotations are from the English edition. Newman made his own English translations.

<sup>29</sup> Maurois, *Aspects of Biography* 5–6.

<sup>30</sup> Maurois, *Aspects of Biography* 12.

In his foreword, Newman scrutinised Maurois's specific question as to whether biography is an art or a science and decided that his own approach in his Liszt biography lay somewhere between the two:

If the present volume partakes to some extent of the character of each of these types [art and science], it has not been because, in writing it, I have consciously striven after a compromise of this kind. I have had before me, in the first place, the purely scientific ideal of accumulating all the relevant facts and setting them before the reader without prepossession and without prejudice. If a scientific word must be found for my method of procedure, perhaps I may be allowed to say that it has been inductive rather than deductive: I have not started, in the nineteenth century manner, from a definite point of view in my reading of Liszt's character and then used the arbitrarily selected material to drive this point home to the reader; I have marshalled the material and then tried to allow it to impose upon me the conclusions that seemed to me immanent in it.<sup>31</sup>

Despite the obvious evidence of painstaking research, most of the critics who reviewed this book did not accept Newman's claim that he was objective.

*The Man Liszt* was loathed by most who reviewed it. Although recognised by some as 'painstaking and well documented,'<sup>32</sup> and as a product of 'tireless research,'<sup>33</sup> the majority of critics accused Newman, either directly or indirectly, of writing a debunking, or mocking, biography. Constant Lambert could not even agree that the prevailing 'Liszt Legend' as described by Newman existed. Perhaps, he argued, there was no need to mock Liszt: 'No one believes in the old Liszt Legend any more, and no one wants to.'<sup>34</sup> But most of the reviewers thought Newman's book a wholesale debunking of the legend, even though Newman protested that it was no such thing. In the foreword Newman had written:

In collecting the relevant evidence as to the whole Liszt my intention has not been anything in the nature of that 'debunking'—an odious word for an odious thing—that is so much to the taste of certain modern biographers who, unable to see or to understand the complexity of human nature, take merely a malicious delight in exposing a great man's weaknesses or absurdities. It is because Liszt is so complex that his character becomes so fascinating a study to the modern biographer.<sup>35</sup>

Few scholars would disagree that Liszt's life should present to any biographer a particularly rich subject. However, most reviewers agreed that Newman had, in fact, written a mocking book, despite Newman's claim to the contrary. In fact, before the book was even published, Vera Newman had come to her own conclusion while she was typing up the manuscript. As Vera recounted, *The Man Liszt* 'was what one might call a debunking kind of book. When I ventured a remark to this effect one day, I was told to get on with the typing and never mind the criticism.'<sup>36</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Newman, *The Man Liszt* xiii–xiv.

<sup>32</sup> Constant Lambert, 'Heads I Win, Tails you Lose,' *The New Statesman and Nation* 12 (January 1935): 46.

<sup>33</sup> L.A. Sloper, [untitled], *The Christian Science Monitor Weekly Magazine* 11.

<sup>34</sup> Lambert, 'Heads I Win, Tails you Lose' 47.

<sup>35</sup> Newman, *The Man Liszt* xvi.

<sup>36</sup> Vera Newman, *Ernest Newman* 119.

Vera's description of the book was to be shared by many of the reviewers. Edward Sackville West, for example, commented that a 'more thoroughly debunking book is hard to imagine.'<sup>37</sup> Although Lambert appreciated Newman's effort in avoiding the debunking 'spirit',<sup>38</sup> he claimed Newman had failed because of its clear bias against Liszt: the line between the marshalling of facts and the 'unconsciously subjective interpretation of them' was considerably blurred.<sup>39</sup> In his review of *The Man Liszt*, Richard Aldrich wrote sarcastically that Newman 'abhors "debunking"—an odious name for an odious thing, as he calls it. Nothing like that for Mr. Newman. Like Mimi, he doesn't want to kill Siegfried—he only wants to chop off his head. And quite thoroughly he does it.'<sup>40</sup>

Paul Henry Lang also found it ludicrous that Newman denied the book was a debunking one. Lang agreed that the word 'debunking' was an odious one and claimed it to be an inadequate description of what Newman had done in this biography. Lang strongly criticised the book's lack of focus on music, and found it objectionable that Newman should write in the vein of a psychologist rather than a musicologist.

Some reviewers took Newman to task for putting Liszt on trial—in a kangaroo court. At various stages in *The Man Liszt*, Newman employs legal allegories in putting his case. For example, he describes some earlier Liszt biographers as dealing with a 'prosecutor' and 'defendant',<sup>41</sup> and coming to a 'verdict' of the court.<sup>42</sup> Specifically, he later accused Lina Ramann for sullyng the Countess's character before she could 'be put into the witness box' and that the 'court was prejudiced.'<sup>43</sup> If Newman's allegorical techniques were to enlighten, even to entertain his readers, the reviewers were unimpressed. In an unsigned article in *Musical Opinion* of February 1935, the review's very heading, 'Rex vs Liszt,' plays on Newman's legal terminology. Here it is used as a broadside to attack both Newman's integrity and his aims in the book: 'In this book, Mr. Newman seems to hold a Treasury brief, and he has got up his case so well that the man Liszt will be lucky if he gets off with less than a hanging. It consists of an endless series of indictments, each supported by documents given more importance than a sworn affidavit.'<sup>44</sup>

Some reviewers explicitly commented on the success of Newman as Liszt's prosecutor. While commending Newman as a 'distinguished critic and biographer',<sup>45</sup> Sloper went so far as to suggest that Newman had missed his calling in life: 'Perhaps [Newman] would have been even more successful as a lawyer than as a critic and biographer.'<sup>46</sup> Acting as a prosecutor, Edward Sackville West believed Newman to have 'overstated the case'<sup>47</sup> against Liszt, and other writers, such as Paul Henry Lang and Constant Lambert, were far from satisfied that

<sup>37</sup> Edward Sackville West, 'Task of Egeria,' *Spectator*, 7 December 1934: 888.

<sup>38</sup> Lambert, 'Heads I Win, Tails you Lose' 46.

<sup>39</sup> Lambert, 'Heads I Win, Tails you Lose' 46.

<sup>40</sup> Richard Aldrich, 'Ernest Newman on Liszt's Loves,' *New York Times Book Review*, 17 March 1935: 5.

<sup>41</sup> Newman, *The Man Liszt* 5.

<sup>42</sup> Newman, *The Man Liszt* 6.

<sup>43</sup> Newman, *The Man Liszt* 21, 23.

<sup>44</sup> Unsigned, 'Rex v. Liszt,' *Musical Opinion* (February 1935): 409.

<sup>45</sup> Sloper, *Christian Science Monitor Weekly Magazine* 11.

<sup>46</sup> Sloper, *Christian Science Monitor Weekly Magazine* 11.

<sup>47</sup> Sackville West, 'Task of Egeria' 890.

Newman gave Liszt a fair hearing. For Lambert it was 'clear which side [Newman] lies,'<sup>48</sup> but Lang was much more incensed, describing Newman's book as 'extraordinarily biased.'<sup>49</sup> Sloper simply described the book as an entirely subjective one, observing that any notion of objectivity was 'foreign' to Newman.<sup>50</sup>

Although Newman occasionally commented favourably on Liszt, the critics agreed that Newman's portrayal of Liszt was unfair. Indeed, one gets the impression on reading *The Man Liszt* that Newman disliked the composer intensely. Many times Newman wrote of Liszt's bad manners, lack of chivalry, his duplicity, vanity, womanising and arrogance. The book reads, in parts, as though Newman had taken the high moral or psychological ground and sneered at Liszt's inadequacies. *The Man Liszt* is, despite Newman's protests to the latter, a debunking biography and, in the words of Robert Anderson, 'Newman neither played fair nor had he the slightest intention of doing so.'<sup>51</sup> Newman's invective was responsible in large part for such an assessment. In chapter 4 alone, Newman described Liszt as 'drunk with vanity and reeking with vulgarity' and as a 'young careerist and social climber,' further describing Liszt's life as an 'outward waste.' Such judgmental and colourful language was not considered by the critics to be words from the pen of an impartial critic or biographer.<sup>52</sup>

Limited by the restrictions of space in a newspaper columns, many of the critics could not go into detail and list Newman's more egregious errors. This task fell to Carl Engel, who wrote at considerable length of the book's failings in the large space afforded him by *Musical Quarterly* in April 1935.<sup>53</sup> Engel's review was systematic, thorough and devastating because, more than any other review, it put Newman's reputation on the line.

Engel's review of *The Man Liszt* was the first of two articles by him that called into question Newman's credibility as a scholar: Engel commented both on the bias of the biography as well as its mocking nature. In the first article, which was a scathing review of the Liszt book, Engel accused Newman of being 'a crank,'<sup>54</sup> and one who 'pursues the ends of the historian with the methods of a pamphleteer.'<sup>55</sup> He summed up the book's limitations by claiming it to be full of 'inaccuracies, omissions, distortions, exaggerations.'<sup>56</sup> The most serious of Engel's criticisms of *The Man Liszt* were Newman's unforgivable errors in translation. Newman could read fluent German and French and had done so for decades. Engel devoted considerable space in his review to pointing out the most glaring and obvious mis-translations.

There is no question that Engel, and some of the other reviewers, found *The Man Liszt* offensive. It was, for them, hastily written, irresponsible in the marshalling of evidence and riddled with errors, thus having little or no scholarly worth. It was, in every sense, not just a debunking biography, but a fundamentally biased one, and was far removed from Maurois's

<sup>48</sup> Lambert, 'Heads I win Tails you Lose' 46.

<sup>49</sup> Paul H. Lang, 'Mr. Newman Tries to Debunk Liszt,' *Saturday Review*, 25 May 1935: 18.

<sup>50</sup> Sloper, *Christian Science Monitor Weekly Magazine* 11.

<sup>51</sup> Robert Anderson, 'Liszt Tragi-comedy,' *Musical Times*, February 1970: 160. This comes from a review of the 1969 reissue of the *The Man Liszt*, published by Victor Gollancz in 1969.

<sup>52</sup> Newman, *The Man Liszt* 86, 105, 110.

<sup>53</sup> Engel, 'Views and Reviews,' *Musical Quarterly* (April 1935): 230–40.

<sup>54</sup> Engel, 'Views and Reviews,' April 1935 231.

<sup>55</sup> Engel, 'Views and Reviews,' April 1935 231.

<sup>56</sup> Engel, 'Views and Reviews,' April 1935 239.

ideal of a modern biography. Newman was, for most of the critics, a biographer behaving badly. They could not accept the author's claim of objectivity. They thought that, if Newman was a modern biographer, he was a debunking biographer. For the critics, such a biography was deemed ahistorical and, ultimately, unethical. It seems to me that none of the critics would have opposed this book so violently had Newman displayed less hyperbole and vitriol in his narrative. Not all of the critics picked up on errors of fact, but they still disliked the book. *The Man Liszt* is noble in its stated intention. It is thoroughly researched, Newman's argument is clear and it successfully challenges and explains to a convincing extent Liszt's dual personality. But its tone is mocking and reads as though Maurois's guidance for modern biographers had been completely ignored.

But is there another reading of this biography? What other factors might have led Newman to write this sort of biography? Why was Newman's tone towards Liszt so sarcastic? In trying to understand the reasons why Newman derided Liszt's character and to understand why he wrote this kind of biography, one needs to look beyond the reviews and examine Newman's early life and works. *The Man Liszt* was not Newman's first attempt at disrespectful biography—he had previously written such works with his *A Study of Wagner* (1899) and *The Unconscious Beethoven* (1927), though these earlier biographies were not as extreme as *The Man Liszt* in their debunking spirit.<sup>57</sup> *A Study of Wagner* was 'not intended to add another to the many "Lives" of Wagner, but to make an attempt at estimating the work of his practical achievements on the one hand and of his theoretical speculations on the other.'<sup>58</sup> This meant a study of the genesis of Wagner's major music-dramas (extolling Wagner as a genius) while simultaneously deriding Wagner as a philosopher in a long chapter that sought to expose the composer as an intellectual bankrupt—mainly for his home-spun philosophising that, Newman claimed, lacked scholarly sophistication. Although in *The Unconscious Beethoven* Newman's primary goal was to analyse Beethoven's composing formulae, he spent a considerable amount of space in the first chapter detailing the less savoury aspects of Beethoven's personality. By the time *The Man Liszt* was written, Newman had considerable experience writing biographies that, disrespectful in tone, flirted with the debunking model. But Newman's freethought ideology is the key aspect of his life that explains his *modus operandi* in *The Man Liszt*.

Nigel Scaife has suggested that Newman's biography of Liszt failed principally because Newman could not accept, or refused to accept, Liszt's religiosity—a worldview that was anathema to the freethinker who was also an atheist or agnostic.<sup>59</sup> It was in the 1890s that Newman's freethought ideology was most pronounced, though he was a staunch freethinker all his life. Newman's role model and mentor was the prolific late Victorian literary critic, rationalist and leader of the academic freethinkers, John M. Robertson, described by Newman as the 'greatest influence my own intellectual life has ever experienced.'<sup>60</sup> Robertson was the editor, for a time, of one of the leading freethought newspapers, the *National Reformer* and, later,

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<sup>57</sup> See note 14.

<sup>58</sup> Newman, *A Study of Wagner* vii–viii.

<sup>59</sup> Nigel Scaife, *British Music Criticism in a New Era: Studies in Critical Thought, 1894–1945*, DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 1994, 169.

<sup>60</sup> Ernest Newman, 'Appreciation,' in John M. Robertson, *A History of Freethought Ancient and Modern, to the Period of the French Revolution*, vol. 2, 4th ed. (London: Dawsons of Pall Mall, 1969) xxii. The first edition was published in 1936 in London by Watts and Co.

the *Free Review*, to which Newman contributed many essays on freethought topics, notably atheism, pseudo-science and articles mocking religion, especially Christianity. For much of the 1890s, Newman worked in Robertson's shadow, and wrote *Pseudo-philosophy at the End of the Nineteenth Century* under the pseudonym Hugh Mortimer Cecil. This was regarded by some as one of the most rigorous and defining freethought books of the period.<sup>61</sup> It was an angry, hostile, disrespectful book towards three of Newman's contemporaries—Benjamin Kidd, Henry Drummond and A.J. Balfour—who Newman saw as pedalling conservative religious worldviews that were against the then-modern idea of progress and, more particularly, evolutionary theory. So incensed was Newman towards these three writers that, in defiance, he dedicated the book to the memory of Charles Darwin. The book is laced with sarcasm and scorn for Newman's subjects. For example, on page 35, he writes of Kidd's 'grotesque misconception' and complains of his loose argument. Later, he writes of Drummond's 'fatal felicity in vapid epigram'<sup>62</sup> and, on one of Drummond's arguments, he writes in this derisive way: 'The jargon is the jargon of pseudo-science, but the ideas are the ideas of the curate at the YMCA.'<sup>63</sup> Kidd and Drummond are later described by Newman as 'glaringly fallacious.'<sup>64</sup> And, while Newman found Balfour less offensive than the other two subjects of the book, he is nevertheless still ridiculed:

All his work gives the one impression of a mind of no ordinary acuteness in certain departments of thought, but for the most part failing in broad synthetic views, and with at times an unreasoning petulance that suggests the word effeminate, and recalls the limp parliamentary figure that the caricaturists have made familiar to us.<sup>65</sup>

These brief passages are representative of the rambunctious narrative that Newman employs in his most aggressive freethought works, a narrative that is everywhere evident in *The Man Liszt*. This narrative or invective is, of course, common in journalism, and was a narrative common in freethought literature. Nigel Scaife believes that Newman modelled this style of criticism on some of the more famous freethought orators, such as Charles Bradlaugh (1833–1891) and W.G. Foote (1850–1915). Moreover, he suggests that it was a talent polished via Newman's involvement with the Liverpool Branch of the National Secular Society—to which he belonged in the 1890s, becoming its President in 1894—during which he became a prolific public speaker:

It was undoubtedly here that he [Newman] fulfilled his apprenticeship as a skilled dialectician. His uncompromising and anti-religious articles ... are keenly argued with considerable verbal dexterity. The debating techniques of orators such as Bradlaugh, G.W. Foote and Robertson are undoubtedly reproduced in his writings. The dialectic

<sup>61</sup> Hugh Mortimer Cecil, *Pseudo-philosophy at the End of the Nineteenth Century: Volume 1, An Irrationalist Trio—Kidd, Drummond, Balfour* (London: University Press Limited, 1897). Praise for this book as an exemplar of cutting-edge freethought see the advertisement for *Pseudo-philosophy*, in *University Magazine and Free Review* 11 (1899) 405 where an extract is reproduced, without full citation, from the *Literary Guide*. John M. Robertson also reviewed the book extremely favourably, see John M. Robertson, 'Current pseudo-philosophy,' *University Magazine and Free Review* (1 May 1897): 190–96.

<sup>62</sup> Newman, *Pseudo-philosophy* 105.

<sup>63</sup> Newman, *Pseudo-philosophy* 119.

<sup>64</sup> Newman, *Pseudo-philosophy* 179.

<sup>65</sup> Newman, *Pseudo-philosophy* 180.

strategy of gradually and persuasively drawing together a series of facts which are brought to bear on a final conclusion which was only dimly previsualized at the start was one that Newman was to employ with considerable panache.<sup>66</sup>

The freethinkers were also staunch republicans and denounced the aristocracy and its trimmings: it is no wonder, therefore, that Newman derided Liszt's regal connections and held the composer in contempt for so unashamedly seeking aristocratic company, money and privilege.

In light of Newman's devotion to both freethought and Robertson it can be claimed that Liszt offended Newman's freethinking sensibilities (just as Newman had been offended by Kidd, Drummond and Balfour) and that this was the source of Newman's bias. Just as Newman had mocked Kidd, Drummond and Balfour, so he had debunked Liszt. But there are two further issues that help explain this freethought connection. The first is Newman's very positive portrayal in the biography of Marie d'Agoult and, second, the death of John M. Robertson in the year before *The Man Liszt* was published. In chapter 2 of *The Man Liszt*, Newman is furious that Marie d'Agoult was given such bad press in the Ramann biography. In this book, Newman reports that the countess is made out to be manipulative, that she forced herself on Liszt, and eventually seduced him. Rather, Newman argues that Liszt and d'Agoult were genuinely in love and it was Liszt, not d'Agoult, who instigated their affair. This attempt at historical re-writing is admirable on Newman's behalf, but it has been argued that Newman irresponsibly interpreted and used the evidence.<sup>67</sup> While Newman had long been a freethinker, he was also a feminist, so his sympathy with restoring d'Agoult's reputation is understandable.<sup>68</sup> But Newman's devotion to Marie d'Agoult may also be explained by the fact that the countess was also, like Newman, a freethinker and rationalist, and he had probably encountered her name in freethought literature during the most ardent freethought period, the 1890s. Newman had written two lengthy essays on the Swiss critic-philosopher, Henri Frédéric Amiel,<sup>69</sup> who wrote enthusiastically of d'Agoult's *Esquisses morales et politiques* (1849) in the *Bibliothèque universelle de Genève*.<sup>70</sup> In *Esquisses morales*, d'Agoult had argued that religious worldviews were increasingly irrelevant. Newman had written along these same lines in his earliest freethought essays in the 1890s.<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, d'Agoult was well connected to the leading French critic, C.A. Sainte-Beuve (1804–1869)—also one of Newman's critical role models—and had recommended Hippolyte Taine's (1828–1893) *Les origines de la France contemporaine* (1876–1894) to her daughter Claire.<sup>72</sup> Newman and other freethinkers, especially Robertson, were influenced by Sainte-Beuve and Taine in their own writings. Nineteenth-

<sup>66</sup> Scaife, 'British Music Criticism' 139.

<sup>67</sup> Carl Engel, 'Views and Reviews,' *Musical Quarterly* (April 1935): 231–35.

<sup>68</sup> An example of Newman's enthusiasm for feminism is evident in 'Woman and Music,' *Free Review* (April 1895): 48–62.

<sup>69</sup> Ernest Newman, 'A Note on Amiel,' *National Reformer*, 26 February 1893: 136; 5 March 1893: 147–48; 12 March 1893: 163–64; 19 March 1893: 180–81; 26 March 1893: 200; Ernest Newman, 'Amiel,' *Free Review* (October 1895): 44–57; (November 1895): 197–205.

<sup>70</sup> Detailed in Phyllis Stock-Morton, *The Life of Marie d'Agoult, alias Daniel Stern* (Baltimore, MA: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000) 175.

<sup>71</sup> See, for example, his 'Morality and Belief,' *National Reformer*, 15 September 1889: 170; 22 September: 188–89 and 'Our Morality,' *National Reformer*, 4 June 1893: 355–57.

<sup>72</sup> Stock-Morton, *Life of Marie d'Agoult* 244.

century freethought in both France and England engaged deeply with positivism, rationalism, feminism and republicanism—all topics that were addressed in d'Agoult's many writings. Newman had probably read d'Agoult's writings and had found much to admire in them, which had then further alienated him from Liszt.<sup>73</sup> Could it be that Newman's resentment of Liszt was fuelled, even defined, in proportion to his empathy for the countess? Would Newman have written a different sort of biography had the protagonists' worldviews been not so close to home? There is no hard evidence to answer these questions: one can only speculate that Newman's freethought ideology had a considerable bearing on the biography, a point of view which is complicated by the possibility that Franz Liszt may have been Ernest Newman's scapegoat in his grief for Robertson, who died in 1933.

The death of Newman's greatest friend and most significant mentor grieved him very much; Newman began writing his Liszt biography only a year after Robertson's passing. Writing to Henry George Farmer, professor of music at Glasgow University in 1943, Newman still appeared to feel bereft at Robertson's death: 'How the world has changed since we last met! J.M.R. [Robertson], Elgar, Delius, and fifty others of the people I knew have all gone: only some half-dozen of my old friends still survive.'<sup>74</sup> It is telling that Robertson is listed first in Newman's list (Elgar and Delius died the year after Robertson). The tone of Newman's letter is uncharacteristically melancholy, unlike his usual upbeat and lively style in his correspondence with Farmer. Robertson's death, it seems, affected Newman greatly and its impact on Newman's life—and works—is not to be underestimated.

Although Newman claims he became interested in Liszt's life through his work on Wagner, the Liszt of 1934 might be read as a homage to Robertson and freethought. Did Robertson's death rekindle Newman's youthful loathing of religion and the aristocracy, and were these emotions projected onto Liszt in this biography? It is very likely that *The Man Liszt* was a subconscious demonstration of Newman's grief for Robertson, played out in a spectacular fashion that championed freethought personalities and rationalism, but despised the religious and the irrational personality and worldview that he considered Liszt to have had.

In addition to celebrating freethought, Newman may also have written this biography in order to make money. Biography—especially of the debunking sort—had become lucrative in the United States and the United Kingdom by the 1930s. Figures cited by John A. Garraty show that, between 1916 and 1930, 4800 new biographies were published in North America, and that in 1929 alone, there were 667 new biographies, which was twice the annual average for the period.<sup>75</sup> These figures are relevant to Newman, for his books were always sold on both sides of the Atlantic. Garraty further cites some particularly successful examples of biographies that reached sales in excess of fifty thousand copies, the royalties from which would have been lucrative. In England, the demand for biography was insatiable and, by 1937, it was felt by at

<sup>73</sup> Further to literature cited in his *Liszt*, Newman probably read d'Agoult's *Essai sur la liberté considérée comme principe et fin de l'activité humaine* (3 eds: 1847, 1863, 1880); *Lettres républicaines* (1848); *Histoire de la révolution de 1848* (3 vols., 1851–1853) and *Florence et Turin* (1862).

<sup>74</sup> Letter from Ernest Newman to Henry George Farmer, 29 April 1943, Special Collections, University of Glasgow, MS Farmer 47/30. Quoted with kind permission.

<sup>75</sup> John A. Garraty, *The Nature of Biography* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1958) 110.

least one biographer that the market had become flooded.<sup>76</sup> Part of the enthusiasm for biography in general, and debunking biography in particular, was triggered in 1918 by the publication of Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians: Cardinal Manning, Dr. Arnold, Florence Nightingale and General Gordon*, which exposed 'the wordliness of Manning, the harsh muddle-headedness of Arnold, the ill-temper of Florence Nightingale, the eccentricity of Gordon.'<sup>77</sup> So confronting was Strachey's book that its impact on biographical writing has been equated with the impact of Schoenberg on the history of western music.<sup>78</sup> According to Paul Murray Kendall, after the publication of *Eminent Victorians*, a 'host of imitators sprang up. Debunking biographers laid low the heroic figures of the past, exuberantly proving that marble statues had feet of clay.'<sup>79</sup> Hence, Newman's *The Man Liszt*. Although Newman was adamant that his *Liszt* was not a debunking biography, it was most certainly cast in this mould, and it could be concluded that the debunking model must have been an attractive medium for Newman, given its prominence in England. In, in fact, he managed to write a biography in Strachey style, he had much money to make from such an enterprise.

Newman insisted that *The Man Liszt* was objective and grounded in principles of biographical best practice as suggested by André Maurois. This may well have been Newman's intention at some point in the book's genesis, but its narrative is an unmistakably freethought one. Without knowing of Newman's freethought ideology, the critics could not, of course, have read the book along these lines. But the critics did read *The Man Liszt* as a debunking biography, a mode of writing to which Newman was accustomed in many of his freethought writings, especially *Pseudo-philosophy at the End of the Nineteenth Century* and in some of his music biographies. But the freethought ideology is apparent in *The Man Liszt* in much more concrete ways: it can be read as an expression of his sympathy with the freethinking Marie d'Agoult and as an expression of grief for John M. Robertson. With the benefit of new knowledge about Newman's personal life, his freethought ideology appears to have loomed much larger in *The Man Liszt* than either he, or his critics, recognised.

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<sup>76</sup> Garraty, *Nature of Biography* 110. No source is provided for the remark about the insatiable demand; Harold Nicolson is quoted, without reference, regarding the saturated market.

<sup>77</sup> Harold Nicolson, *The Development of English Biography*, 3rd ed. (London: Hogarth Press, 1947) 150.

<sup>78</sup> Paul Murray Kendall, *The Art of Biography* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1965) 113.

<sup>79</sup> Kendall, *Art of Biography* 113.