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Chapter One of *The Sentimental Education of the Novel* by Margaret Cohen

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To avoid swamping my argument with a plethora of plots and characters, I employ a strategy familiar throughout the history of genre criticism from Aristotle and Hegel on tragedy to Todorov on the fantastic and Barthes on realism: I focus on one text where the features of the genre appear with particular clarity. At the same time, this strategy has its own limitations in the case of a subgenre that has been so neglected. Most readers cannot grasp the relevance of generalizations since they do not know the texts making up the generic field. To give some sense of its density, I also include references to other sentimental works.

My *Oedipus* of the sentimental novel is the 1799 *Claire d'Albe*, which Martin Lyons isolates as the great best-seller of the years 1816–20. I also select this text because Cottin was among the most acclaimed authors of her time. In addition, *Claire d'Albe* has the advantage of being short, in contrast with the 1805 *Mathilde*, which is often cited by Cottin's contemporaries as her best work.<sup>27</sup> Distilling the essence of sentimentality into a slim epistolary exchange, *Claire d'Albe* offers an economical presentation of sentimental codes that lends itself to reading and teaching.

### CONFLICTING DUTIES

The paradigmatic sentimental plot is a plot of double bind.<sup>28</sup> The sentimental novel catches its protagonists between two moral imperatives, each valid in its own right, but which meet in a situation of mutual contradiction. Collective welfare, which constitutes one term of the double bind, is aligned with an unstable cluster of Enlightenment abstractions including the public good, manners, society, reason, and other people's well-being. Against this imperative, the sentimental novel asserts the imperative to individual freedom, which it associates with happiness, choice, nature, the private, sentiment, and erotic love.

An adulterous love affair catalyzes the moral double bind in *Claire d'Albe*. The plot of adultery threatening collective welfare is a familiar

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*Lettres écrites de Lausanne* (1787) as well as Montolieu's *Caroline de Lichtfeld* (1786) are popular and well-received pre-Revolutionary examples of the sentimental subgenre.

<sup>27</sup> *Mathilde* is set during the Crusades (it was written over ten years before *Ivanhoe*). The novel narrates the pure but forbidden love between Mathilde, the virtuous, beautiful sister of Richard the Lion-hearted, and Malek-Adhel, the noble, sexy brother of Saladin, the Saracen king.

<sup>28</sup> I use double bind to characterize a "damned if you do, damned if you don't" situation rather than in the psychological sense given to the term by Gregory Bateson. One aspect of Bateson's analysis is nonetheless suggestive for sentimentality. According to Bateson, the double bind provokes a crisis in the subject's ability to interpret a situation. The sentimental double bind, too, provokes an interpretive crisis, as we will see.

scenario in the French novel from its prehistory in medieval romance. What distinguishes *Claire d'Albe* and other sentimental novels representing adultery is that adultery is not simply passion transgressing the law. Both positions in the conflict are given moral dignity.<sup>29</sup>

Cottin's novel tells the story of the young, beautiful, and virtuous Claire, who has married an upright older man, M. d'Albe, in accordance with her father's will. Living on M. d'Albe's prosperous country estate, Claire finds her comfortable life upset when her husband brings home a young cousin, Frédéric, who has become his ward. Frédéric's "supple and agile body" is on a par with his "original mind" and his "frank character," as Claire remarks upon meeting him.<sup>30</sup> Later, Claire's confidante, Elise, charges her with understatement: "Claire did not paint him as he appeared to me: he has the head of Antinous on the body of Apollo" (748). Frédéric and Claire fall in love, and Claire spends the remainder of the novel struggling over what to do.

Claire possesses the principal attributes of sentimental heroism: moral integrity, sensibility, and intelligence. Like other sentimental protagonists, she also wants to act virtuously. April Alliston perceptively observes that "The virtue of eighteenth-century heroines . . . does not consist, like manly virtue, in the performance of good deeds or serviceable actions but rather in the avoidance of fault. . . . The classical virtue of agency comes to be replaced by a feminine virtue of suffering."<sup>31</sup> In the sentimental subgenre, virtue is simultaneously the passive imperative to avoid fault and the active imperative to promote the moral order. Appropriately, sentimental virtue crosses gender lines even while sentimental novels with female protagonists outnumber sentimental novels with male protagonists. In similarly ambiguous fashion, sentimental novels describe virtue both in passive terms and with a dynamic language of combat recalling the heroism of the classical "*preux*" (cf. Rousseau's Saint-Preux). When Claire's son asks her "what is *virtue*," she replies, "It is strength, my son . . . it is the courage to carry out rigorously everything we feel to be good, whatever pain it may cause us" (734).

Despite her courage and rigor, however, Claire finds herself caught in a practical impasse. Claire's marital bonds link her to the collective, impli-

<sup>29</sup> The search for a morally valid alternative to collective welfare is already palpable in late-seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century novels of adulterous passion. It is at stake, for example, in the Princess of Clèves's famously implausible confession to her husband of her love for another man. Torn between passion and duty, Madame de Clèves seeks a third term to express her independent identity, although she can only find it with a gesture that scandalizes the norms of her society.

<sup>30</sup> Sophie Cottin, *Claire d'Albe*, 697. Subsequent page references will appear parenthetically in the text.

<sup>31</sup> Alliston, *Virtue's Faults*, 86.

cating her in its welfare. At the same time, her adulterous love reveals to her the conflicting imperative of individual freedom, specifically the freedom to choose one's partner. This freedom is missing from Claire's marriage, which her father arranged.<sup>32</sup> To underscore that Claire's marriage is problematic, Cottin represents her heroine as unhappy at the novel's beginning, although her husband is a caring and worthy man. Claire initially casts the source of her unhappiness in positive terms when she explores her dissatisfaction in a letter to Elise: "Should I not also bless my father for *having chosen* such a worthy husband for me?" (694, emphasis added).

Cottin uses the delineation of character to reinforce her text's organizing double bind. The two principal secondary characters each embody one of the opposing moral imperatives tearing Claire apart. M. d'Albe, the character on the side of collective welfare, is passionately devoted to the collective good: "He is like the center and cause of all the good that is done for miles around" (696). Frédéric, the advocate of individuality and independence, is a wild child from the mountains. Frédéric acts according to the spontaneous movements of his soul, unconcerned with how his actions will be viewed by others. Importantly, however, Cottin does not frame this action as immoral or amoral but rather as a natural base for morality. Claire writes to Elise, "I like his original personality, [*caractère neuf*] which shows itself without a veil and without a detour; this raw frankness which makes him lacking in politeness but never kindness, because the pleasure of others is for him a need" (697).

When the first French sentimental novel characterizes its heroine's inability to chart a course of action between affective choice and family obligation, Rousseau's Julie describes herself as torn by "conflicting duties [*devoirs opposés*]." <sup>33</sup> With this phrase, Julie eloquently captures the fact that each term in the sentimental conflict rests on a positively constituted moral imperative. Endowing individual freedom and collective welfare with equal measures of moral dignity, the sentimental novel does not, however, mute their respective dangers. It shows each imperative important in itself and destructive when pursued to the exclusion of the other.

Thus, in *Claire d'Albe*, Cottin shows love pursued without consideration for collective responsibility to result in social collapse. As Claire explains her dilemma to Frédéric,

<sup>32</sup> Cottin reinforces M. d'Albe's alliance with Claire's father by making them friends and having the father, now dead, buried on M. d'Albe's land.

<sup>33</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, 177. Subsequent page references will appear parenthetically in the text.

“Oh Frédéric! if it is true that you love me, learn from me to treasure our love enough never to taint it with anything base or contemptible. If you are everything for me, my universe, my happiness, the God that I adore; if all of nature shows me only your image . . . I am not guilty. . . . is it up to me to extinguish what a higher power has kindled in my breast? But because I cannot give my husband such feelings, does it then follow that I should not keep our sworn vows?” (741)

Refusing to describe her passion according to a traditional Christian scenario of sin, Claire associates it with “a higher power,” a notion of divinity formulated in Enlightenment terms. At the same time, Claire stresses that to act on her love would be to destroy “sworn vows,” the individual’s pledged responsibility to others that founds rational social organization. When Claire eventually chooses Frédéric over the collective, the novel bears out the truth of her words. She dies, and Frédéric, proclaiming himself “free” from all social ties, vows he will soon follow her (769).

*Claire d’Albe* also, however, draws attention to the potential abuse of collective welfare when pursued at the expense of individual freedom; neither imperative in the sentimental conflict suffices to define morality on its own. In a heroic effort to save her marriage, Claire gathers together her courage and sends Frédéric away. But M. d’Albe is so eager to preserve his family that he does not respect Claire’s handling of the situation. He takes advantage of Frédéric’s absence to try to destroy Claire’s love, telling her that Frédéric has been unfaithful although this is in fact not true. In lying, M. d’Albe himself betrays “sworn vows,” which is to say precisely the foundation of the marriage contract he is trying to preserve. Rather than working, his lie precipitates the novel’s final catastrophe. Claire and Frédéric only consummate their relationship after Frédéric returns to clear his name.

When I argue for the positive moral value of sentimental passion, I take issue with reigning materialist and feminist accounts of adultery in the novel that understand the situation as an expression of transgressive social energy. In Tony Tanner’s influential explanation, adultery allows the emergence of repressed forces of alterity that threaten bourgeois hegemony. Similarly, Nicola Watson frames adultery as the struggle of rebellious female desire against patriarchy when she astutely observes the importance of conflict in shaping sentimental texts: “The action to which she [the sentimental heroine] is subjected and through which she is produced as a sentimental subject is paradigmatically . . . the plot of the conflict between paternal fiat and sexual passion.”<sup>34</sup> But the adulterous conflict is so troubling because it reveals the ethical order divided against

<sup>34</sup> Nicola Watson, *Revolution and the Form of the British Novel*, 25.

itself.<sup>35</sup> Adultery is simultaneously transgressive and endowed with moral worth.

Cottin's contemporaries also understood sentimental passion as having positive moral significance. Indeed, one anonymous review took the opposite tack from Tanner and Watson when it discussed the collected novels of Cottin, associating the threat to society represented in sentimentality exclusively with the demands of collective duty. According to this review, sentimental love preserves individual liberty against the socially corrosive overemphasis on the welfare of all that French society had recently experienced in the Terror. Cottin's novels, it declared, are particularly suited to a generation disillusioned with the Revolution: "Thus, when the bloody tyranny of the praetorium oppressed the universe, ardent love and ardent Christianity, which, rightly understood, is love itself, consoled budding generations for their catastrophes."<sup>36</sup>

Adultery is one of two scenarios sentimental novels prefer to bring individual freedom into conflict with collective welfare. The other is family obstacles to marriage, and both coexist in the earliest example of the subgenre. In the first part of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, Julie falls in love with a man whose position runs counter to the interests of her family. After considerable anguish, she attempts to abolish the conflict between freedom in love and family welfare with sophisticated sleight of hand. She chooses freely to be unfree, to twist a notorious phrase from *The Social Contract* (I will return to the relation between the two texts), acquiescing willingly to a marriage with Wolmar. But the remainder of the novel makes clear that Julie cannot cheat on the demands of the heart. Rather than abolishing the conflict, her marriage raises it to a tragic pitch.

<sup>35</sup> My analysis also complicates David Denby's equation of sentimental morality with individual feelings. For Denby, "Sentimental love, the spontaneous experience of the heart, dictated by nature, is pitted against the social prejudice which sets obstacles of birth and fortune in its way, and the sentimental identification of the text is all on the side of the victims." David Denby, *Sentimental Narrative and the Social Order in France, 1760–1820*, 13.

<sup>36</sup> Review signed A. of the complete works of Riccoboni and Cottin, 14. Hegel was another contemporary who ascribed moral worth to individual love in his passing remarks on "modern romantic fiction" in the *Aesthetics*. Hegel writes, "Young people especially are these modern knights who must force their way through the course of the world which realizes itself instead of their ideals, and they regard it as a misfortune that there is any family, civil society, state, laws, professional business, etc., because these substantive relations of life with their barriers cruelly oppose the ideals and the infinite rights of the heart." Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 1:593. Referred to hereafter as A; subsequent page references will appear parenthetically in the text. In his discussion of the novel, however, Hegel does not consider the possibility that this conflict could end badly. Rather, he equates the modern novel with the bildungsroman, assuming that the protagonist will inevitably learn to balance affective rights with social duties. For Hegel, the hero's [*sic*] struggles

While the sentimental novel's plot schema may seem narrow, it in fact lends itself to a wide variety of "combinations" and "situations," to borrow Balzac's terms for sentimentality's richness on the level of plot, even if he offered it while proclaiming the death of the form.<sup>37</sup> Some of this variation is a matter of décor. Characters and events can have a range of historical and geographical identities, as Cottin's *oeuvre* makes clear. Cottin's works take us from the refined gentry on M. d'Albe's country estate to the warriors and nobility pursuing each other across the searing deserts of the Crusades in *Mathilde*; from the Russian aristocracy in the depths of Siberian winter in *Elisabeth* to the hypocrites, prudes, and rakes of proper Scottish society in *Malvina*.

Novels also vary the sentimental conflict depending on how they cast the protagonist's relation to it. This relation takes shapes between two poles: inclination and duty. Some novels align inclination with individual liberty and duty with collective welfare. In Montolieu's *Caroline de Lichtfield*, for example, the heroine's family marries her to the gruff but noble-hearted Count Walstein. "An interesting and unhappy victim of obedience," Caroline inclines to freedom, which she pursues in the form of a love affair with an elegant gentleman who turns out to be Walstein's friend.<sup>38</sup> But there are other possibilities. Richardson's *Clarissa* is remarkable because inclination is on neither side of the heroine's double bind. In *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, inclination is on both sides, which is the case of *Claire d'Albe* as well. It is also the case of *Eugène de Rothelin*, where the hero, Eugène, is torn between his love for his father and his love for a woman who belongs to a family that his father detests. Genlis's *La Duchesse de la Vallière* offers an uncommon variation on the paradigm: the heroine's inclination is on the side of collective welfare. In love with Louis XIV, Louise wants to remain virtuous. She only acts on her love under duress, when Louis uses his royal authority to kidnap her from the convent where she seeks refuge from his ardor as well as her own feelings.

With the character of Louis XIV, Genlis's text also gives a distinctive twist to the fundamental sentimental opposition between individual and collective. In loving Louis XIV, Louise falls for a man collapsing these two abstractions into one another ("L'état, c'est moi"). As this novel illus-

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"are nothing more than 'apprenticeship,' the education of the individual into the realities of the present, and thereby they acquire their true significance" (A, 1:593).

<sup>37</sup> Balzac, "Note de la première édition de *Scènes de la vie privée* [1830]," 1175.

<sup>38</sup> Isabelle de Montolieu, *Caroline de Lichtfield, ou Mémoires d'une famille prussienne*, 1:47. *Caroline de Lichtfield* is one of the few sentimental novels that end happily, thanks to the mediation of Caroline's lover, who did not realize that Caroline was married to Walstein when he first pursued a liaison with her. A devoted friend, who puts the happiness of others before his own, the lover convinces Caroline of Count Walstein's true worth, helping her to reconcile her socially ordained marriage and her heart.

trates, sentimental works generate diverse plots depending on how they align the unstable Enlightenment abstractions clustering around their founding ethical conflict. As in *La Duchesse de la Vallière* too, this variation finds primary expression in the delineation of character. In *Claire d'Albe*, Cottin tempts Claire with a man devoted to individual freedom, sentiment, and nature, while Claire's husband upholds social duty, reason, and culture. In *Corinne*, by contrast, Oswald is dazzled by a woman bringing together individual freedom, sentiment, and a nature that the novel identifies with artistic genius and the height of civilization, while Oswald's socially sanctioned choice is an artless girl belonging to stultifying country society. Meanwhile, Cottin's Mathilde in the novel of the same name discovers individual freedom in the person of a warrior motivated by natural impulses that take the form of sensibility, valor, and an acute sense of social duty. Cottin contrasts the noble Saracen, Malek-Adhel, with the artful courtier to whom Mathilde's brother, Richard the Lion-hearted, has betrothed her. This courtier, Lusignan, feigns social duty in order to pursue individual interest with coldly calculating rationality.

#### THE DOUBLE BIND OF LIBERALISM<sup>39</sup>

The sentimental novel's plot of virtue struggling with insurmountable moral conflict is an aspect of the form that makes little sense for critics writing from the vantage point of realism. They object to this plot, notably, for reducing to moral absolutes the complex play of power and interest that constitutes human affairs. In his account of tragedy, in contrast, Hegel puts the conflict between two purified moral principles at the foundations of the genre. Hegel's paradigmatic tragedy, *Antigone*, pits Creon, who "honours Zeus alone, the dominating power over public life and social welfare" against Antigone, who "honours the bond of kinship, the gods of the underworld" (A, 2:1213). Hegel writes, "the original essence of tragedy consists then in the fact that within such a conflict each of the opposed sides, if taken by itself, has *justification*; while each can establish the true and positive content of its own aim and character only by denying and infringing the equally justified power of the other" (A, 2:1196).

On the level of plot, this view of tragedy certainly resembles sentimentality. The combat between the two conflicting imperatives differs, however, in one significant fashion. While the sentimental plot delineates these

<sup>39</sup> I take this phrase from Waller's incisive analysis of *Adolphe* which in fact characterizes the politics of an entire subgenre. See *The Male Malady*, the chapter entitled "The Double Bind of Liberalism."

imperatives in powerful secondary characters, classical tragedy embodies these imperatives in its protagonists. In classical tragedy, then, the conflicting imperatives square off directly, in contrast to the sentimental novel where they meet in the conflicted soul of the protagonist whose torment defines her novelistic career. With this modification, sentimentality exploits the novel's formal ability to depict the nuances of interiority.<sup>40</sup>

But this difference in no way affects the similarity between the sentimental and the tragic dénouements. In the tragic dénouement, as Hegel remarks, "the individuals destroy themselves through the one-sidedness of their otherwise solid will and character, or they must resignedly accept what they had opposed even in a serious way" (A, 2:1199). The sentimental novel also ends when the characters embodying the conflicting imperatives take them to extremes. Placing collective welfare above everything, M. d'Albe lies in a desperate and misguided attempt to separate Frédéric and Claire. Placing individual freedom above everything, Frédéric then returns to overwhelm Claire with his love. Because the imperatives meet in the soul of the protagonist, she is the one destroyed when they are overdone. In *Claire d'Albe*, Claire dies, exhausted by violence from both sides of the double bind.

If tragedy resembles sentimentality on the level of plot, does plot in each genre convey a similar content? Hegel puts the plot of conflict at the foundations of tragedy because it addresses a fundamental truth about "ethical life." Defining tragedy's philosophical significance, Hegel writes,

The substance of ethical life, as a concrete unity, is an ensemble of *different* relations and powers which only in a situation of inactivity, like that of the blessed gods, accomplish the work of the spirit in the enjoyment of an undisturbed life. But the very nature of this ensemble implies its transfer from its at first purely abstract *ideality* into its actualization in *reality* and its appearance in the mundane sphere. Owing to the nature of the real world, the mere *difference* of the constituents of this ensemble become perverted into *opposition* and collision, once individual characters seize upon them on the territory of specific circumstances. (A, 2:1196)

With its plot of moral conflict, tragedy shows the difficulty of realizing ethical abstractions in ethical practice. In particular, it shows the difficulty of reconciling two poles of ethical life that are at issue in all tragic plots, according to Hegel. Hegel writes, "The range of the subject-matter . . .

<sup>40</sup> Hegel isolates an increased emphasis on interiority as an important difference between modern and classical tragedy. While the protagonists of classical tragedy "are firm figures who simply are what they are, without any inner conflict," "the poetic interest" of modern tragedy "lies in the greatness of the characters who . . . display the full wealth of their heart" (A, 2:1209; 1206).

may be variously particularized but its essence is not very extensive. The chief conflict . . . is between the state, i.e. ethical life in its *spiritual* universality, and the family, i.e. *natural* ethical life.” The conflict between universal and natural ethical life provides the subject matter of tragedy because “the full reality of ethical existence consists in harmony between these two spheres” (A, 2:1213).

The tragic plot not only represents this difficulty but resolves it, although this resolution takes the form of destruction and loss. In Hegel’s analysis, the tragic dénouement demonstrates that moral imbalance cannot survive for long. Tragedy “affords . . . the glimpse of eternal justice . . . [that] overrides the relative justification of one-sided aims and passions” (A, 2:1198). Calling eternal justice the “power supreme over individual gods and men,” Hegel also associates it with reason. “Rationality consists in the fact that the power supreme over individual gods and men cannot allow persistence . . . to one-sided powers that make themselves independent and thereby overstep the limits of their authority” (A, 2:1216).

“Always historicize,” Jameson asserts as materialist imperative in *The Political Unconscious*. Transforming Hegel’s analysis in light of Jameson’s dictum, we can liberate its significance for the sentimental novel. Sentimentality, too, is persuading its readers that a rational ethical order exists beyond any individual violation through its representation of conflict, excess, and destruction.<sup>41</sup> But the stakes of this persuasion belong to a historically specific ideology rather than constituting the necessary “substance of ethical life.” In opposing individual freedom to collective welfare, the sentimental novel addresses a fundamental tension fissuring French liberal political thought from its Enlightenment genesis.<sup>42</sup>

French liberalism is defined by the difficult if not impossible project to integrate negative and positive notions of rights, as Furet and Ozouf have observed of the two distinct notions of “freedom” informing “the French case.”<sup>43</sup> In the sentimental conflict, individual freedom expresses a negative notion of rights: rights as the individual’s rights to do what she or he wants. Collective welfare, in contrast, expresses a positive notion of rights, rights as the individual’s rights to participate in government. Furet and Ozouf ascribe the French interest in integrating negative and positive

<sup>41</sup> In suggesting that sentimentality vindicates rationality through loss, I complicate Denby’s assertion that sentimentalism belongs “firmly on the optimistic and triumphant slope of the Enlightenment project” (87).

<sup>42</sup> I use the term “liberalism” to designate an ideology that founds rational social order on liberty rather than “the conception of liberalism strictly speaking . . . which aims to protect the natural rights of individuals against all encroachments of power.” Furet and Ozouf, preface to *Le Siècle de l’avènement républicain*, 12.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

notions of rights to the hybrid inheritance of French Enlightenment political theory. French thinkers absorbed the Anglo-American tradition concerned with protecting the individual's negative freedom. At the same time, they incorporated "the inheritance of absolutism" with its vision of a strong state, as well as "the intellectual tradition of republicanism in Europe since the Renaissance."<sup>44</sup>

In France, liberal ideology is forged by a class that crosses traditional class distinctions. This class is made of the *noblesse de robe* and some members of the *noblesse d'épée* as well as professional, financial, and protoindustrial bourgeois.<sup>45</sup> An emerging social elite in the second half of the eighteenth century with considerable economic and cultural as well as some political power, it comes to full-scale political dominance with the Revolution, albeit in a situation of symbolic and social disarray. In an argument suggestive for the class genesis of sentimentality, Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret proposes that this elite's notion of merit founded on "moral worth and professional ability" starts to take precedence over a purely aristocratic notion of merit grounded in blood and valor around 1760.<sup>46</sup> The sentimental novel substituted its notion of merit as moral worth and intelligence for an earlier literary representation of merit as aristocratic virtue around the same time. *La Nouvelle Héloïse* was published in 1761.

Two examples will illustrate the liberal preoccupation with fusing negative and positive notions of rights across the life of the sentimental novel: one from the inception of the subgenre and one from when it was the dominant novelistic form. For my concerns, there is no better starting point than *The Social Contract* (1762). Appearing just a year after *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, Rousseau's political text opens with a similar predicament. While the notion of human society rests on a commitment to liberty ("to renounce liberty is to renounce being a man"), Rousseau also underscores the potential abuses of individual freedom if it is unrestrained. "How to find a form of association which will defend the person and goods of each member with the collective force of all, and under which

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Distinguishing between aristocrats and bourgeois as members of "distinct sociojuridical categories" in the second half of the eighteenth century, Immanuel Wallerstein observes that "the categories tend to overlap heavily as de facto capitalist entrepreneurs." Wallerstein, *The Modern World System*, 3:100. On the extent to which the nobility absorbed middle-class values, see Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret, *The French Nobility in the Eighteenth Century*.

<sup>46</sup> Chaussinand-Nogaret, *French Nobility*, 39. Chaussinand-Nogaret points out that ennoblement is justified as "the surest means of inspiring virtue" before 1760 (38). After 1760, "ennoblement is simply the official confirmation of the personal merit of those 'who combine virtue and the sentiments which make up the character and source of nobility.' It could not be said more clearly that nobility is not a matter of birth" (38–39).

each individual, while uniting himself with the others, obeys no one but himself and remains as free as before.’ This is the fundamental problem to which the social contract holds the solution.”<sup>47</sup> The social contract, of course, consists in a “reciprocal commitment between society and the individual” inaugurated by the complete alienation of one’s freedom in the general will.<sup>48</sup> Rousseau’s critics have long stressed how this notion is riddled with contradictions. In a lucid essay analyzing these contradictions, Louis Althusser makes the suggestive although undeveloped remark that Rousseau may have looked to literature for their resolution.<sup>49</sup>

To illustrate the liberal preoccupation with fusing negative and positive rights when sentimentality dominated the novel, we can also turn to an important political theorist who wrote a sentimental novel. During the Restoration, political polemic threw around the L-word with as much vigor as U.S. political debates of the 1980s and 1990s, and no thinker was more identified with liberal theory of the time than Benjamin Constant. “The double bind of liberalism,” is how Waller aptly titles her analysis of Benjamin Constant’s *Adolphe*, a text staging the paralysis of a hero torn between freedom and “a deep internalized feeling of responsibility . . . to others.”<sup>50</sup> Constant puts a similar conflict at the core of his political theory.

“Our current constitution expressly recognizes the principle of the sovereignty of the people, which is to say the supremacy of the general will over any particular will. This principle . . . cannot be disputed,” are Constant’s opening lines in his *Principes de politique* (1815).<sup>51</sup> But, he continues, “it does not then follow that the universality of citizens . . . can sovereignly dispose of the existence of individuals.”<sup>52</sup> How should a state founded on the positive rights of citizens to participate in government protect individuals’ freedom to dispose of their existence as they please? Constant’s solution was to propose negative rights beyond the reach of “the universality of citizens.” As founding tenet of the *Principes de politique*, he asserts, “Citizens possess individual rights that are independent of any social or political authority, and any authority that violates these rights becomes illegitimate. The rights of citizens are individual freedom,

<sup>47</sup> Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 60.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>49</sup> Althusser, *Montesquieu, Rousseau, Marx*, 160.

<sup>50</sup> Waller, *Male Malady*, 94. Waller makes clear *Adolphe*’s uncommon spin on the founding terms of the sentimental double bind when she foregrounds its suspect gender politics. Constant’s hero equates freedom with a rather vague desire for individuality rather than love, while collective welfare consists in “the ties that bind him to others and, in particular, Ellenore, an inappropriate woman” (94).

<sup>51</sup> Benjamin Constant, *Principes de politique*, 269.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 271.

religious freedom, freedom of opinion, including its public expression; the enjoyment of property, the guarantee against all arbitrariness.”<sup>53</sup>

“Minds possess a natural reason,” the preface to Constant’s work states, as if the proposition needed no explanation.<sup>54</sup> In affirming the power of reason, the sentimental novel resolves the conflict between negative and positive notions of rights in eminently liberal fashion rather than, as Hegel suggests, vindicating “the eternal substance of things.” But if Hegel’s schema of tragedy reveals the return to reason at stake in sentimental excess, it is because Hegel’s own “substance of things” is not eternal either. Critics have long attacked Hegel’s view that classical tragedy vindicates rationality as a modern misreading of antique divinity and fate. They have similarly criticized his account of the tragic conflict as an anachronism; Michelle Gellrich comments that it is premised on the modern notion of “an ethical individual with rights.”<sup>55</sup> Indeed, in confronting a conflict between “ethical life in its spiritual universality” and “natural ethical life,” Hegel’s tragic protagonist encounters a situation that resembles the conflict between positive and negative notions of rights structuring the sentimental novel.<sup>56</sup> Hegel places precisely these competing notions of rights, moreover, at the basis of his own contribution to political theory contemporary with the *Aesthetics*, the *Philosophy of Right* (1821).

“Freedom is both the substance of right and its goal,” Hegel declares in the opening to this text, very quickly differentiating freedom from a purely negative notion of rights: “If we hear it said that the definition of freedom is the ability to do what we please, such an idea . . . contains not even an inkling of the absolutely free will, of right, ethical life, and so forth.”<sup>57</sup> The substance of Hegel’s inquiry concerns how to protect what Hegel calls the individual’s “subjective” freedom while allowing the development of freedom in its “objective” form. Hegel locates the key to the problem in the state, which “bestow[s] on the powers of particularity [in this case, individuals] . . . both their positive and their negative rights” (PR, 177–78).

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 275.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 267.

<sup>55</sup> Michelle Gellrich, *Tragedy and Theory: The Problem of Conflict since Aristotle*, 68.

<sup>56</sup> The terms of the conflict do, however, take different concrete forms in classical tragedy according to Hegel and in sentimentality. In classical tragedy, natural and universal ethical imperatives conflict in a struggle pitting an individual representing the family against the collective. In sentimentality, negative and positive notions of rights conflict in a struggle pitting the individual against the family aligned with the collective.

<sup>57</sup> Hegel, *Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, 20; 27. Referred to hereafter as PR and cited parenthetically in the text.

*Antigone* makes an appearance in Hegel's inquiry concerning the constitution of freedom in order to clarify the role of the family in modern civil society. And when Hegel reads the play from the vantage point of political theory, he updates its tragic collision in frankly liberal-sentimental terms. In the *Philosophy of Right*, as in the *Aesthetics*, Hegel views *Antigone* as exemplifying "the supreme opposition in ethics and therefore in tragedy" (PR, 115). In the *Philosophy of Right*, however, this opposition confronts "public law . . . the law of the land" with the law of the private, sentiment, "the law of the inward life," in contrast to the *Aesthetics*, where it confronts universal and natural ethical spheres designated as the state and the family (PR, 115).

#### WOMAN'S DESTINY

In *Antigone*, as in society, the *Philosophy of Right* comments, the "supreme opposition in ethics . . . is individualized . . . in the opposing natures of man and woman" (PR, 115). Assigning women the work of private life to free up men for public affairs, Hegel exemplifies the gendering of the spheres common in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century liberalism. Throughout the life of the sentimental novel, liberal thinkers assume that those subjects fit to enjoy positive rights are male, excluding women from access to positive rights and limiting their enjoyment of negative rights as well. Given the liberal depoliticization of women, it may seem surprising that the sentimental novel prefers to address the conflict between negative and positive notions of rights using female protagonists. Julie, Mistriss Henley, Caroline de Lichtfield, Claire d'Albe, Mathilde, Malvina, Delphine, La Duchesse de la Vallière, Mademoiselle de Clermont, Adèle de Sénange well outnumber William \*\*\* in *Caliste*, Gustave in *Valérie*, Eugène de Rothelin, Adolphe, and Oswald in *Corinne*.

We can, I think, situate the sentimental novel's preference for female over male protagonists at the intersection of poetics and ideology. One important principle in tragedy is economy of representation. Differentiating the concentration of drama from the leisurely pace of epic, Hegel proposes that in drama, "the epic description of a world-situation in its entirety disappears," and all attention is focused on "the collision which provides [its] essential subject" (A, 2:1168). Hegel points out the consequences of this focus for the plot construction of tragedy, which he considers drama in its most concentrated form. Tragedy suppresses "incidental actions and characters in a sub-plot" that might distract from the central dramatic collision (A, 2:1167).

The sentimental novel exhibits similar tragic concentration in the situation that enacts its underwriting ideological conflict. A single action, the

choice of a beloved whom authority does not sanction, produces the collision between individual freedom and collective welfare with no need for further complication. Male and female protagonists alike encounter this collision in romantic relations despite the vast differences in nonfictional men and women's careers. Nonetheless, these vast differences give romantic dilemmas their greatest collective resonance when they confront a woman. For all but exceptional individuals throughout the life of the sentimental novel, "man has his actual substantive life in the state, in learning, and so forth, as well as in labour and struggle with the external world. . . . Woman, on the other hand, has her substantive destiny in the family," as Hegel observes when he discusses *Antigone* in the *Philosophy of Right* (PR, 114).<sup>58</sup> A woman's choice of erotic object unavoidably raises questions of collective welfare and can never be simply a matter of individual feeling. Whether the choice concerns a future marriage partner or love outside wedlock, it involves a woman's family and the welfare of her children, if she has any. In both cases, too, a woman who defies her family runs the risk of collective ostracism.

I thus explain the sentimental preference for women in inverse fashion to Armstrong clarifying the role of the female protagonist in the English domestic novel. Instead of enabling private plots to obscure collective conflict, French sentimental novels use female protagonists to give private relations their maximum collective resonance. At the same time, Armstrong's analysis is suggestive for the uncomfortable way in which the French sentimental focus on feminine destiny skirts the political. "By virtue of their apparent disregard for matters [of business and politics]," she writes, "plots turning on the sexual contract offered the means of passing off ideology as the product of purely human concern."<sup>59</sup> In resolving the tension between negative and positive rights with ethical narratives removed from political subject matter, French sentimental novels similarly avoid material that would foreground the vast gap between the aesthetic restoration of rationality and the "one-sided aims and passions" ruling public affairs (A, 2:1198).

When the sentimental novel uses female protagonists as paradigmatic liberal subjects, it assumes that the domestic sphere is a microcosm of collective life; that women's careers can grapple with problems that threaten the very makeup of the *res publica*. Such an assumption is, however, fragile, given the disparity between the ideological function

<sup>58</sup> Cottin makes a related observation in *Malvina*: "[N]ovels are the domain of women: they begin to read them when they are fifteen; at twenty, they live them out, and they have nothing better to do than write them when they are thirty . . . it belongs to women to capture all the nuances of a feeling which is the history of their life, while it is barely an episode in the life of men." Cottin, *Malvina*, x-xi.

<sup>59</sup> Armstrong, *Desire*, 42.

of Woman and women's juridical, political, and social status. Indeed, women writers may play such an important role in the sentimental novel because this disparity makes women particularly sensitive to both the distinction between negative and positive rights and the contradictions it can produce.

If a novel draws attention to the discrepancy between Woman's figurative ability to resolve political conflict and women's actual social standing, it can disrupt the sentimental return to reason. The discrepancy can, in fact, itself generate the plot of collision, as we shall see in sentimental social novels of the July Monarchy, which adapt sentimental codes to undermine liberal constructions of gender. The discrepancy is, moreover, already exposed and exploited in some exceptional sentimental plots where protagonists encounter obstacles in love deriving from the specifics of their social situations. Thus, Staël's heroines meet with objections from their beloveds' families because they engage in actions unacceptable for a woman (Delphine's divorce and Corinne's refusal to stay in the private sphere), although these actions would not taint a man. Depicting the powerful consequences of gender difference, Staël's works draw attention to the unthinkable problem elided in the liberal conflict between individual freedom and collective welfare: the problem of social inequality.<sup>60</sup>

#### A LIGHT TOUCH

Distinguishing the concentration of tragic representation from the panoramic focus of epic, Hegel epitomizes this difference with a single poetic code. In tragedy, as in drama more generally, "the epic *description* of a world-situation in its entirety disappears" (A, 2:1168, emphasis added). The effacement of description characterizes the sentimental novel as well. Sentimental novels delineate setting and the material aspect of characters only with a few attributes that are often commonplace. The action in *Claire d'Albe* takes place in a château that is "huge and comfortable" (694). Claire is introduced as "beautiful and attractive" while Frédéric is embodied in his "supple" and "agile" body (692; 697). When Saint-Preux first speaks of Julie, he mentions simply that she is "beautiful" before

<sup>60</sup> Waller makes a similar point about *Adolphe*, underlining that Adolphe's impasses advance his position while Ellenore's end in her death. As Waller suggests, the hero and heroine's asymmetrical careers reveal that if all citizens are created equal, they do not all have equal access to rights. For another version of this argument, see Carla Hesse's reading of Charrière's *Trois Femmes* in "Kant, Foucault, and *Three Women*," in *Foucault and the Writing of History*, ed. Jan Goldstein. Hesse astutely isolates the nucleus of sentimental collision when she analyzes Charrière's stories as representing a conflict between virtue and happiness.

praising her soul: “No, beautiful Julie; your charms had dazzled my eyes; never would they have distracted my heart without the more powerful charm which animates them” (6). Neither Saint-Preux nor Julie introduce their liaison with details on the locations where it unfolds. On the cover of her sentimental social novel, *Deux Originaux* (1835), B. Monborne places a line from Alexander Pope that well captures sentimentality’s descriptive restraint: “It is enough to be able, with a *light touch* / To place shadow here and there, light.”<sup>61</sup> The practice was also described as “the delicate touch.”<sup>62</sup>

Critics with a bias towards realism have long denigrated sentimental novels for their failure to describe material specifics in detail. Bardèche’s objections to their “conventional characters limited to two or three types, setting, milieu, manners, everyday life left undefined” are typical.<sup>63</sup> But the tragic paradigm allows us to grasp an absence incomprehensible from the vantage point of realism as a meaningful poetic choice. Sentimental novels, like tragedy, efface material details to concentrate all attention on the progress of the action. When Barthélemy Hadot explains the function of the light touch in her opening paragraphs to *Guillaume Penn* (1816), she makes clear that description dilutes sentimental action because it both presents material inessential to this action and delays its representation:

I will not try to describe the pleasant dwelling of the admiral [Penn]. What does the reader care that it is reached by an avenue of more than a quarter of a mile [*lieue*], which is covered, in summer months, by a dome of green; that the front staircase is made of twenty steps of white marble, which lead to a peristyle; of more than thirty feet, whose arch is supported by twelve columns of granite and alabaster, and which offers entrance into apartments where elegance yields only to opulence? *Anything that could be said would doubtless have no interest for sentimental souls* [*âmes sensibles*] *who want to see the famous sailor arrive in the bosom of his family.*<sup>64</sup>

I pick this example to underscore that sentimental writers avoid description not because they cannot do it, as denigrating twentieth-century discussions of the subgenre imply, but because they object to it on poetic grounds. Details concerning material aspect hold no interest for “sentimental” readers eager to get to the dramas of interior conflict.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>61</sup> B. Monborne, *Deux Originaux*, emphasis added. I am translating from Monborne’s French. See also F. Barrière’s review of *Mes loisirs*.

<sup>62</sup> Unsigned introduction to a selection from Michel Masson’s *Souvenirs d’un enfant du peuple*, 7.

<sup>63</sup> Bardèche, *Balzac romancier*, 14.

<sup>64</sup> Marie-Adèle Barthélemy Hadot, *Guillaume Penn*, 1:9–10, emphasis added.

<sup>65</sup> Claire, too, presents description as upstaged by more urgent matters of sentiment in an opening letter to Elise. Apologizing because she has failed to describe her surroundings

When Barthélemy Hadot's contemporaries praised the sentimental novel, they confirmed her observation. In the preface to an 1820 edition of Cottin's collected novels, for example, A. Petitot associated their "truth" with their disregard for material specifics. Cottin's novels "are not less sought after today than they were when they were new. Their success is independent of time and circumstances, because no one has known how to depict with more energy and truth the differing sentiments which stir a great passion. Her novels contain few details, few manners, few portraits."<sup>66</sup> "There are two kinds of truths: a material truth, a truth of facts; and a moral truth, a truth of ideas and sentiments," declared a review of a sentimental novel from 1818, placing sentimentality firmly on the side of moral truth.<sup>67</sup>

#### FEW DETAILS, FEW MANNERS, FEW PORTRAITS

The erasure of "a world-situation in its entirety" informs other sentimental narrative codes besides description (A, 2:1168). This principle shapes the scope and setting of the sentimental plot, the sentimental construction of character, and sentimental narration. Sentimental plots prefer the fewest characters necessary for the action, usually from one or two families in the same social circle. Claire, Frédéric, M. d'Albe, Elise, and Adèle, a visiting acquaintance of Claire's, comprise the entire cast of *Claire d'Albe*. The sentimental novel reinforces such restraint in how it handles setting. Sentimentality begins at home. These intimate family groups interact in domestic spaces: the salons, bedrooms, and gardens of the residence, although occasionally characters do travel. The more private the setting and the fewer the characters, the less structural chance there is for "a variety of incidental actions and characters in a sub-plot" that dilutes the intensity of tragic concentration (A, 2:1167).

Hegel's paradigm illuminates one further way the sentimental restriction of plot scope intensifies sentimental representation: by heightening the pathos of its founding collision. For Hegel, the most effective tragic actions occur between characters sharing familial and social identities, because these identities root the protagonists mutually not only in the ethical imperative each upholds but also in the imperative each seeks to destroy. As Hegel writes, "This sort of development [tragic] is most com-

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in detail, Claire comments, "the haven that will soon be yours . . . deserves to be described; but what would you expect? When I take up my pen, I can busy myself only with you" (693). Here, Claire's bond with her reader is the sentimental matter taking precedence over material aspect.

<sup>66</sup> A. Petitot, preface to Cottin, *Oeuvres complètes*, 1:lxixiii.

<sup>67</sup> A., review of *Albertine de Saint-Albe*, 416.