

## **Reading the Absence: The Shaping of Male Characters and their Crises in the Void**

In the early nineteenth century, three of France's most popular writers — Mme Cottin, Mme de Krüdener and Mme de Staël — published sentimental, early-Romantic novels all portraying male protagonists in a state of crisis. These crises, and the protagonists' characters as a result, are shaped by many absences throughout the novels. Absent fathers, the lack of ability to create or possess a desired woman, and the absence of words all influence the Romantic heroes' personalities and actions. In turn, those personalities and actions substantially impact the heroines' futures. Ultimately, as this paper argues, Cottin, Krüdener and Staël show how roles created for women are frequently untenable and unjust, particularly when conceived by men undergoing their own socio-political and/or identity crisis. This allows the writers to challenge the patriarchal order. To ascertain precisely how absences and voids are, seemingly paradoxically, endowed with creative power, and are able to give shape to crucial elements of the novels, this paper looks at theories of positive-negative space.

Cottin's epistolary novel *Claire d'Albe* (1799) tells of twenty-two-year-old Claire, in an arranged marriage to an older man. The majority of the letters are from Claire to her friend Elise, and therefore the novel possesses a double female narrative: Cottin writing Claire, and Claire narrating the story's events. When M. d'Albe's adopted nineteen-year-old son, Frédéric, arrives to assist with d'Albe's manufacturing business, he and Claire fall in love. Claire is established in Frédéric's and d'Albe's eyes as a perfect ideal of womanhood. However, both men's image of perfection conforms to polar opposite character-types, and the inability to uphold the simultaneously expected positions of virtuous angel and sexually desirable object cause Claire to fall fatally ill.<sup>1</sup> Frédéric dies soon afterwards.

Krüdener's epistolary novel *Valérie* (1803) comprises letters from Gustave to his friend Ernest, written whilst travelling with friends of his late father: a Count and his much younger

wife Valérie. During his adolescence, Gustave had created the image of an ideal woman in his mind whilst wandering through the Swedish countryside. He now projects this ideal onto Valérie, with whom he falls desperately in love. His unrequited love, sexual frustration, and lack of political, economic or social power, provokes insanity, and, sick in mind and body, Gustave dies.

In Staël's *Corinne* (1807), Scottish noble Oswald falls in love with the eponymous Italian poet-actress whilst touring Italy. Oswald's previous relationship with another woman had greatly disappointed his father, who died believing that his son defied his wishes. Henceforth, Oswald swears he will only marry a woman who would meet his father's approval. It transpires that Corinne is the half-sister of Lucile Edgermond, whom Oswald's father had chosen for his son's future bride, after deciding against Corinne. Although celebrated in Italy, Corinne is alienated in Britain because of her decision to pursue her career. Afraid of contradicting his father's wishes, Oswald returns to Scotland and marries Lucile. He later revisits Italy and finds Corinne dying of unrequited love.

Frédéric, Gustave and Oswald conform to Romantic hero stereotypes: wandering, solipsistic, self-isolating, and victims of unrequited love. They are also frequently deprived of power, be it social, economic or political. As Allan argues, "[m]asculine disempowerment is traditionally a key tenet of the *mal du siècle*" commonly associated with Romantic literature.<sup>2</sup> Constant's Adolphe, for instance, is continually described as weak and ineffectual.<sup>3</sup> Certainly in Cottin's, Krüdener's and Staël's novels, lack of power is a key issue in the crisis of masculinity which arises for the male protagonists. Yet, whilst these women writers negotiate critical territories alongside their celebrated male contemporaries, they do so differently. The Romantic hero typical of canonical male French Romantic writers, such as Chateaubriand and Sénancour, is often described as 'a seeker characterised by his self-conscious search for ideality'.<sup>4</sup> Chateaubriand's René, for example, is a wanderer 'dissatisfied with society' who

attempts to discover an ideal world in the real world, ‘turn[ing] first to ancient civilizations and then to the New World in his search for ideality’.<sup>5</sup> Sénancour’s Obermann ‘seeks to know ideality through flashes of intuition. He does not conceive ideality externally like René. As a wanderer Obermann travels in pursuit of sensations from which he will later attempt a recreation of ideality’.<sup>6</sup> Vigny, on the other hand, ‘believes that man can find ideality through thought’ and ‘uses his intellect in the pursuit of the romantic quest [for ideality]’.<sup>7</sup> The Romantic heroes of Cottin and Krüdener, however, believe that ideality is to be found in woman, and spend their time seeking to create such a model of perfection. Cottin and Krüdener use the figure of the Romantic hero and his stereotypical quest for ideality to discuss late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century debates over what a woman should be and what her role should constitute. Staël also plays with expectations when it comes to Romantic stereotypes. For later male French Romantic writers such as Baudelaire, Vigny and Nerval, the figure of the doomed poet is male, following the vogue of 1770s Britain and Germany. However, Staël’s fatally misunderstood poetic genius is female. Staël portrays a patriarchal system which, through rules and gender binaries, cruelly treats and socially isolates Corinne and causes Oswald to descend into a state of crisis and melancholy, reliant on absent figures to make his decisions. Therefore, whilst Cottin, Krüdener and Staël all engage with Romantic stereotypes propounded by their male contemporaries, they do so to draw attention to issues faced by women: they have an unrealistic ideality projected on to them, and are forbidden from entering the public sphere of writing and publishing.

This article presents the first comparative study of Cottin’s, Krüdener’s and Staël’s portrayal of absence and the significant role it plays in their work. Initially it explores how a father’s absence haunts the novels’ spaces and impacts the young male protagonists’ characters and actions, causing a state of personal crisis. It then examines how the novels’ perceived negative space and time — empty rooms, erased portraits, paintings unable to capture the focal

point, illusory models, narrative ellipses, and silences — all become crucial in the delineation of the male protagonist's thought process and feelings, and thus enhance the initial crisis created by paternal absence.

Paternal absence is not unusual for literature of this era. Eighteenth-century France saw several changes to the ways in which literature portrayed father figures. Many novels of the 1730s, 1740s, and 1750s “portrayed a family world in disarray, whether in novels by women in which wives confronted the abuses of husbands or in novels by men in which tyrannical fathers were opposed by rebellious and sacrilegious sons”.<sup>8</sup> The 1760s, 1770s, and 1780s saw a more positive patriarchal image appear.<sup>9</sup> In fact, in general, “[m]arriage and family life were romanticized in plays by Mercier, Diderot, and Dejaube”.<sup>10</sup> The title of Florian's play *Le bon père* [*The Good Father*] indicates the turn towards this trend, and “[t]he fathers in Baculard d'Arnaud's widely published *Tests of Sentiment* (1770-80) seem almost incapable of being anything but good”.<sup>11</sup> However, “almost as soon as they were established as virtuous and emotional figures [...], fictional fathers began to be effaced; they were lost, absent, dead, or simply unknown”.<sup>12</sup> In novels of the Revolutionary decade<sup>13</sup> and the Romantic era, absent fathers were particularly common, just as “[p]aternal models were scarce in early nineteenth-century French society” more widely.<sup>14</sup> This period witnessed changes in the patriarchal order with the removal of the King, the nation's father, and it is therefore unsurprising that the action of so many novels penned at this time “takes place in the absence of the father”.<sup>15</sup> Certainly the heroes and heroines of some of the most famous (early-)Romantic literature — including Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's *Paul et Virginie* (1788), Chateaubriand's *René* (1802), Staël's *Corinne* (1807), and Musset's *La Confession d'un enfant du siècle* (1836) — are without fathers and feel the effect of that loss.

As many children were left orphans in the wake of the Terror, the absence of a father figure was not only reflected in literature, but also played an important role within it, causing

impotence, crises, and/or tragic destruction, as Lynn Hunt argues.<sup>16</sup> Laforgue, too, in his discussion of the “the malaise of the young Romantic man of 1830”, notes that “indeed, the majority of these romantic youths suffer from being sons without fathers”.<sup>17</sup> He uses the Œdipal myth to discuss male youth in the Romantic movement, since “when examined from an anthropological point of view, it is the mythical expression of that which the Romantic movement sought to establish as a philosophy of meaning”.<sup>18</sup> Birkett, Cohen and Allan focus on the absence of fathers in women’s writing. Birkett examines Staël’s *Corinne*, Sand’s *Mauprat* (1837) and *Lélia* (1839), and Rachilde’s *La Marquise de Sade* (1887), arguing that “[s]ons and daughters who collude with paternal power are drawn to destruction”.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, discussing *Corinne*, Cohen argues that “[t]he inability to bury the dead Father drags son and daughter alike into the melancholy abyss”.<sup>20</sup> Allan argues that as the father figure began to disappear from novels, “men lacked the role models to navigate the civil world”, and shows that Staël and Duras “address a search for fathers through fatherlands” instead.<sup>21</sup>

Paternal absence has therefore previously been identified as a crucial element in Staël’s *Corinne*, but, despite also featuring significantly in Cottin’s *Claire d’Albe* and Krüdener’s *Valérie*, it has not been analysed in these novels. In all these texts, paternal absence, like other absences analysed in the present discussion, finds itself paradoxically filling space at the same time as emptying it. Yet, whilst Birkett acknowledges with regard to *Corinne* that “[t]he first effect of the father’s absence is to make more visible to his heirs the marks of his presence everywhere in their landscape”, the father figure’s presence through absence has not been examined in *Claire d’Albe* and *Valérie*.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, despite Birkett’s comment, an examination of spaces which are paradoxically both full and empty has thus far not been carried out with regard to any of these novels. This paper aims to rectify this omission, casting light on women writers’ use of Romantic themes to highlight problematic conditions for their sex through their discussion of men.

The notion of a shape-creating void — a space paradoxically both empty and full — is explored by Stephen Kern in his discussion of positive-negative space.<sup>23</sup> Kern extends arguments relating to painting and sculpture into discussions on literature and philosophy. He argues that “art critics describe the subject of a painting as positive space and the background as negative space”, adding, however, that “[p]ositive negative space’ implies that the background itself is a positive element, of equal importance with all others”.<sup>24</sup> He presents the work of sculptor Alexander Archipenko as a prime example to illustrate the concept of positive-negative space, since the latter “created figures with concaves and voids”.<sup>25</sup> Kern notes that, even in war “empty space took on special importance [...] no-man’s land was its positive-negative space”.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, in literary narratives traditionally thought to deal with the notion of emptiness, such as Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, “the empty space [i]s overpowering” and “the void supplies the focus”.<sup>27</sup> Kern’s arguments employ the terms ‘figure’ and ‘ground’ deriving from *Gestalt* theory, whose “basic concept is that of an interacting figure, a form or process in a foreground that stands out against a background or ‘ground’”.<sup>28</sup> For Kern, ground is as important as figure when analysing the impact of space, and emptiness and absence are key to unlocking crucial elements of artistic work. Kern extends his argument to incorporate the emptiness of silence, stating that “[p]ositive negative time is silence”.<sup>29</sup> Expanding on this, and on the importance of the unwritten or unspoken, Simone Maria Puleo successfully applies Kern’s theory to an analysis of Faulkner’s work.<sup>30</sup> Considering the concept of positive-negative space developed in Kern’s arguments and extended by Puleo allows this article to highlight the fact that, in early-nineteenth-century French women’s writing, what is initially perceived to be empty space is in fact full, and that both grounds and silences exert significant influence on figures. In so doing, this paper argues that, in defining both themselves and their attitude to women, Cottin’s, Krüdener’s and Staël’s Romantic heroes find that what is important is actually what is absent.

### **Portraits and Paintings in Staël's *Corinne*: The Absent Father's Domination of 'Ground'**

If Staël's Oswald (and Corinne, the object of Oswald's affection) is the subject of his world, his recently deceased father, no longer physically present in that world, is relegated to the background. Initially, upon the father's death, the foreground — “this castle that I have since seen deserted and devastated, like my sad heart” — appears unfilled.<sup>31</sup> The home, space of childhood safety and happiness, is symbolically dominated by emptiness. However, although we learn of the patriarch's death from the opening page, he nonetheless represents a background which, throughout the novel, shapes Oswald's foreground. Indeed, the impact of the words ‘deserted’, ‘devastated’, and later also ‘empty’ (*Corinne*, 333), is soon balanced by the repetitive focus on what is still present: “When I entered my father's bedroom, I saw his coat, his armchair, his sword, which were still there as they had been before; still there” (*Corinne*, 333). Despite the emptiness of the ground (castle and bedroom) caused by the lack of an expected presence, the objects which belonged to the absent father (coat, chair and sword) are still sufficient to create a profound effect on the figure within the seemingly empty ground. The setting becomes ‘positive-negative’ space, since, despite its emptiness, it is loaded with emotion and meaning.

It is this emotion and meaning which shape the lives of the figures: “In Staël's novel, *Corinne ou l'Italie* (1807), the father-figure is both present and absent: absent in death, but present in the traces of meaning that remain for negotiation”.<sup>32</sup> Initially Oswald's grief causes him to wander aimlessly, caring little for his health. He becomes a tragic, melancholy, Romantic figure, who even “had found, in the most terrible moments of his despair, that his reason was on the point of leaving him” (*Corinne*, 44). His state of personal crisis reaches a climax when he falls in love, and finds that his personality and future decisions become

constructed, to the detriment of his own happiness, by the power of the father in the void. As for the figure of an Archipenko sculpture, “the void supplies the focus”.<sup>33</sup>

Twice, the backgrounds of paintings or empty spaces within paintings reinforce these ideas. On the first occasion, when visiting Naples, Oswald dives into the sea to save a drowning man. Back on land, he puts “his hand on his chest to look for the portrait of his father” (*Corinne*, 359), and discovers that “it was still there; but the water had faded the picture so much that it was hardly recognisable” (*Corinne*, 359). The water erases the father from the foreground of the portrait, just as death erases him from the foreground of Oswald’s life, and the pain of his absence is replayed. Corinne then restores the picture, explaining that she is able to do so because she knew the late Lord Nelvil. This discovery leads to Corinne’s revelation that she previously lived in Britain, where she was unhappy because of the restrictions on women’s behaviour and socially alienated because of her desire to pursue her career. Oswald eventually learns that his father had specifically disapproved of her as a potential bride. The erased father not only lives again in the story which must be told following the portrait’s restoration, but assumes crucial power over events as Oswald is reminded of his father’s disapproval of active and creative women. As his image re-materialises, symbolically refilling the void in the portrait, so too does his influence begin to shape his son. This influence over the unhappy course of events which are now to unfold peaks when Oswald later reads a letter in his father’s hand confirming that he definitively wished his son never to marry Corinne: “Tell my son [...] my wishes in this matter; I am sure that he will respect them, even more so if I am no longer living” (*Corinne*, 468). Even the patriarch himself is fully aware of the powerful impact he will have because of his absence. Oswald bows to his father’s wishes, rejecting his own desires. He thus finds himself condemned to a marriage with Lucile which does not provide him with love or happiness, and which provokes Corinne’s death. The very absence of the father dictates Oswald’s future inability to pursue love. Therefore, just as his present melancholic character is



marked out by his grief at his father's disappearance from the world, his future melancholic character and state of personal crisis are marked out by the father's dominance over events from the void.

The second painting in the novel to highlight the power wielded by the patriarch from the background is one which depicts the son of Cairbar — a character from the Ossian cycle of poems published by Scottish writer James Macpherson in the 1760s. Oswald gazes at this painting, whose central focus echoes clearly the image that dominates Staël's own narrative:

[[I]t shows the son of Cairbar, sleeping on his father's tomb. For three days and three nights he has been waiting for the bard who is due to honour the memory of the dead. This bard can be seen in the distance, making his way down the mountain. The father's shadow hovers in the clouds. The countryside is covered with freezing fog. The trees, although bare, are stirred by the winds, and their dead branches and dried leaves still follow the direction of the storm.] (*Corinne*, 237–238)

The painting is filled with images of absence. Firstly, it is dominated by death: nature is dead, and the tomb reminds us that the father belongs to the past. Secondly, where Cairbar's shadow does appear, it is in the background amid the cloudy setting, not alongside his son, the painting's major figure. Thirdly, even the son, in his sleeping state, displays little life, showing that the figure is influenced by the ground (in *Gestalt* terms). This is so in more ways than one, for he would not be present at all were it not for his duty towards the absent father: he has been waiting to honour the memory of the dead. Thus, the negative space of the painting becomes charged with meaning, which in itself gives meaning to the central figure and his actions. This painting acts as a metaphor for Oswald's situation. He, too, is grieving for his absent father and finds that his life and actions are moulded by the positive-negative space of the patriarchally dominated background. In fact, this painting strongly echoes two instances in which the lost

father's shadow appears in the clouds above Oswald and Corinne, reminding them of the hopelessness of their love. At Terracina, Corinne reveals:

As I was looking at the moon, it was covered by a cloud, and the sight of this cloud was macabre. I have always thought that the sky gave an impression of being sometimes *paternal* and sometimes angry, and I am telling you, Oswald, this evening it condemned our love. (*Corinne*, 289)<sup>34</sup>

Then, dying, Corinne

lifted her gaze to the heavens, and saw there the moon covered by the same cloud to which she had drawn Lord Nelvil's attention when they stopped on the seashore on the way to Naples. Dying, she pointed it out to him again, and, as she drew her final breath, her hand fell back down. (*Corinne*, 586)

The powerful condemnation of the absent father not only brings Corinne to the point of death, but also reappears to meet her at the moment of her passing. The lives of the protagonists are cruelly shaped, therefore, by the patriarchal domination of the void and the influence this has over the personality, actions and future of the male protagonist.

### **Silence, Absence and the Œdipus Complex: Cottin's Frédéric and Krüdener's Gustave in Crisis**

Oswald is not alone in being cast into crisis by an absent father, in having that loss compounded by other absences, and in having the combination of absences influence his life. In the epistolary novels *Claire d'Albe* and *Valérie*, Cottin's Frédéric and Krüdener's Gustave also find that their lack of biological father shapes their characters and destinies. Like Oswald, these two men exhibit Romantic tropes: melancholy (due to grief and later also forbidden love) and

wandering (without a father as guide). Unlike Oswald, however, Frédéric and Gustave are granted a replacement father figure.

In *Claire d'Albe*, Frédéric's personality is largely influenced by his position alone in the world, lacking education, guidance and a male role model. The eponymous heroine states: "Poor young man! If we were to cast him out thus into the world, at nineteen years old, without a guide, without a friend [...] what would become of him?".<sup>35</sup> Thus far, the situation has caused Frédéric to become unrefined and coarse: "he is completely unaware of etiquette" (*Claire*, 16); "He is a novel character [...]. You find in him the broad and vigorous traces of man when he first left the hands of the divinity" (*Claire*, 20). Frédéric therefore turns to an older relation, M. d'Albe, as his adoptive father, for guidance. Claire states: "I asked Frédéric why he called M. d'Albe his father. 'Because I have lost mine', he replied" (*Claire*, 23), and when asked whether he could leave M. d'Albe without regret, Frédéric replies: "I would never console myself" (*Claire*, 22).

This is also true for Gustave, who, similarly, has lost his biological father. In fact, fragments of Gustave's mother's diary reveal that his father had in fact been absent even while alive, during Gustave's childhood: "Your father, absent for several months, returned yesterday from Stockholm".<sup>36</sup> Upon seeing his father, the young Gustave hides behind his mother, because he "believed that there was a stranger" (*Valérie*, 185). Like Frédéric, Gustave is taken in by family friends: the Count and his wife Valérie. Also like Frédéric, Gustave initially praises his new father figure:

he will be able to guide me himself in the new career he wishes me to enter, and [...] in completing my education himself, he will be able to fulfil the sacred duty that he undertook on adopting me. What a friend, Ernest, this second father is! What an excellent man! (*Valérie*, 26)

Yet, whilst replacement fathers initially fill the void, they do not solve the male protagonist's problems; rather they compound them. Frédéric and Gustave suffer the same inability to possess the women they love as does Oswald. However, in their case, it is not the absent father who obstructs their love, but the replacement father; for each falls in love with the new father's young wife. Therefore, for Gustave and Frédéric, the arrival of an adoptive father leads to tragedy, this time by way of a psychological crisis — an Oedipus complex — which eventually results in their death. Laforgue argues that, in the Romantic literature of the 1830s, the “motifs which directly have to do with Oedipus penetrate the texts”.<sup>37</sup> We can extend Laforgue's argument about the Oedipus myth's relevant application to earlier Romantic texts, such as those written by Cottin and Krüdener, which remain un(der)studied. Upon realizing their love for their replacement mother figures, Gustave and Frédéric alienate their replacement fathers. Frédéric eventually rejects the friendship of d'Albe, arguing: “Believe me, Claire, friendship, faith, honour, everything is false in this world” (*Claire*, 147), whilst Gustave turns to outright hatred: “my jealousy was hungry for new torments, and I felt, too, that I was breaking my remaining links to virtue by beginning to hate the Count” (*Valérie*, 130). Gustave's situation strongly echoes Freud's notion of Oedipal desire, “defined as a constellation of desire for the mother as a sexual object and hate of the father as a rival” (Simon and Blass, 1991, 163). In his youth, Gustave tells his mother: “The woman who is to be my companion must resemble you in order for her to possess all my soul” (*Valérie*, 188). Thus, as I have argued elsewhere,

[i]f Gustave's ideal woman is the representation of his own mother, and Valérie becomes the embodied human form of that ideal, consequently, she must remind him of his mother [...]. This being the case, the reason for Gustave's rejection of the Count becomes abundantly clear: He is jealous of the patriarchal figure's possession of the maternal representation.<sup>38</sup>

Therefore, expanding on my previous arguments, the male protagonist's attempts to create the ideal woman is directly linked to his rejection of the adoptive father and the absence of his biological father. His tragic downfall is instigated both by the lack of his true father and his lack of ability to possess the ideal woman.

Frédéric's and Gustave's rejection of their replacement patriarchal figures causes the crisis created by the absence of their biological fathers to return to shape their characters. The *comte's* ability to direct Gustave's career and education fails with Gustave's hatred, and Gustave is left with a further absence marking out his personality and life choices: a lack of any political, economic or social power. In an age which strongly associated masculinity with these types of power and which expected men to engage in the public sphere whilst women remained absent from it,<sup>39</sup> Gustave thus finds himself stripped of his masculine identity. He becomes a wanderer, who engages in personal introspection and "long reveries" (*Valérie*, 188), who values emotion (stereotypically associated with women) over reason (associated with men),<sup>40</sup> who reads Romantic poetry rather than engaging in business or politics, who lacks purpose in the public sphere, and who is continually weak: "I am the weakest of men" (*Valérie*, 62; c.f. 96). This lack of power realigns him with his absent biological father, for his Romantic melancholy, intense emotion, and need for solitary space echo his father's traits, as the *comte* reveals: "Your father, my dear Gustave, had the same need to be alone; his delicate health made him fear the wider world" (*Valérie*, 48).

Similarly, although d'Albe has introduced Frédéric to the stereotypical masculine roles of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries — business (employment in running d'Albe's factory (*Claire*, 18)), and politics and law (which d'Albe argues should not concern women (*Claire*, 28)) — the attempts to educate Frédéric in this domain also fail. It is Frédéric's unrefined nature that dominates the novel's dénouement, when his actions become brutal. The

writer of the introduction to the 1831 edition of *Claire d'Albe* argues: “There is no excuse for a young man, no matter how impassioned he may be, to choose the moment when a woman is half dead to satisfy his love. [...] [T]his is a truly painful form of brutality”.<sup>41</sup> It is the early absence of a father figure and role model which ultimately fashion both Gustave’s and Frédéric’s characters, therefore, and not the adoptive father’s influence.

The Oedipal crises faced by Frédéric and Gustave are, like Oswald’s character and crisis, formed and highlighted in negative space and images of emptiness. This endows these voids with creative and influential power and transforms them into positive-negative space. In the cases of Cottin’s and Krüdener’s novels, positive-negative space is often best seen in the novels’ presentation of silence. Bindeman argues that there is “a connection between silence and the concept of negative space”, and that “[b]oth silence and empty space in this way have substance”.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, it is appropriate that silence should highlight the Oedipus complex of these two protagonists, for the narrative progression of the Oedipus myth itself is strongly connected to the absence of words: “Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex turns on the silence of the prophet Teiresias [sic]”.<sup>43</sup> In Sophocles’ tale, Oedipus calls on Tiresias, the Theban prophet of Apollo, to help identify King Laius’s murderer. Tiresias knows Oedipus is responsible for killing Laius, his own father, but insists that Oedipus would prefer not to know the identity of the guilty party. For Sophocles, as for Cottin and Krüdener over two thousand years later, silence causes empty or negative space to seem paradoxically full. The blind seer’s desire to conceal the truth from Oedipus is in vain,<sup>44</sup> for, in itself, the “silence is accusatory”,<sup>45</sup> and therefore “Tiresias is aware that his silence would not alter the course of events”.<sup>46</sup>

Silence is a key feature in the development of both Gustave’s and Frédéric’s characters. As Gustave’s feelings for Valérie materialise, they do so in (even because of) silence:

I am sure, my friend, that only the fear of loving the woman whom I do not dare name [...] has made me believe.... I do not know how to express to you what I feel. (*Valérie*, 41)<sup>47</sup>

Similarly, after the *comte* asks Gustave to explain his suffering, Gustave writes: “I took his hands impetuously; I pressed them to my breast; and my voice, as tied as my tongue, could produce not a single sound” (*Valérie*, 132). Frédéric also finds himself silenced, as Claire’s words reveal: “The poor man! What a state he is in! He does not speak and is consumed by silence” (*Claire*, 79). When Claire begins to realise what is happening in Frédéric’s mind and the actions he may take, she actually insists upon silence: “we must be silent” (*Claire*, 60; 64). Yet, the fear and tension created by the absence of words cause an oppressive weight (rather than emptiness) to fall on the heroes. Silence creates a depression and feeling of powerlessness that makes their illicit love stronger, yet more impossible to bear.

Furthermore, not only do we begin to see the personalities and emotions of the novels’ heroes formed within the silence imposed on them. We also gain information about them in the blank spaces and silences of what is not written. Puleo builds on Kern’s theory, by expanding the concept of positive-negative space to include the emptiness of the unwritten. She argues that “the unwritten is conceptually spatial” and “occupies an immaterial space, as opposed to the ‘actual’ written text that is explicit and printed on the page”.<sup>48</sup> She continues:

The common flaw of terms such as unwritten, subtext, and absence is that they solely denote negativity or obscurity; yet, some holes can be filled through context and thus are not completely negative. Nor do the aforementioned terms provide insight as to how plot holes function within the architectural structures of narrative time and space. Instead, the term “positive-negative space” accounts for the special

attention [...] dedicate[d] to descriptions and abstractions of “seemingly empty” or “in-between” spaces in narrative.<sup>49</sup>

Of the forty-five letters which comprise Cottin’s epistolary novel, thirty-two are written from Claire to Elise. Whilst there are a few letters from Elise to M. d’Albe, the reader never sees any of Elise’s letters to Claire. Nonetheless, we know that these missives exist beyond the textual space of the novel, because Claire engages with them throughout. The silence of these unwritten parts of the narrative forms a void surrounding the explicit textual space presented to the reader. Genette employs the term implicit ellipsis to refer to missing information “which the reader can infer only from some chronological lacuna or gap in narrative continuity”.<sup>50</sup> The implicit ellipsis is noted in Cottin’s text when Claire replies to unseen questions or comments. Such comments and questions frequently seem to focus on Frédéric, and thus, it is in the void that information lies regarding his character, personality and actions. In Letter XI, for example, Claire writes: “You ask me if I would have been easy if my husband had witnessed my most recent conversation with Frédéric?” (*Claire*, 33), indicating a warning from Elise present only in implicit ellipsis. In Letter VII, Claire’s words make even clearer that, beyond the textual space of the novel, Elise has perceived danger in Frédéric’s character:

I would have been rather surprised if my very well-deserved praise of Frédéric had not caused my very judicious friend to reproach my enthusiasm; for I can neither speak of things as I see them, nor express things as I feel them without her censure vetoing my judgements immediately. It is possible, my dear Elise, that I have thus far only seen the favourable side of Frédéric’s character. (*Claire*, 21)

Concealing Elise’s words in fact endows them with greater power, one which derives from the mystery of not knowing precisely what was said.



Elise's warnings are sometimes, in fact, masked by a double absence: not only are the letters in which these descriptions appear never presented to the reader, but also the words of Elise's descriptions themselves remain unfinished: "Why, Elise, are you poisoning my attachment to Frédéric with your broken words and interrupted sentences?" (*Claire*, 39). As the void becomes deeper in this way, the suspected danger posed by Frédéric's character becomes too great to speak of, and the power of the unwritten increases. Elise's suspicions are later revealed to be accurate. The textual void is therefore paradoxically full of information and truth.

In Krüdener's *Valérie* much is also noted from unspoken and unwritten words. Letter XII from Ernest to Gustave attempts to distract Gustave from his constant thoughts about Valérie. Yet, "the reply to this letter from Ernest has not been found" (*Valérie*, 50). We are left to infer, therefore, how Gustave's character might react to such a suggestion. This becomes easier upon reading Letter XXI, which reveals Gustave's own attempt to distract himself, and contains another type of absent textual space. The ellipsis here is not temporal, as with Elise's missing letters in *Claire d'Albe*. Rather, it is an example of what Genette terms paralipsis: where "the narrative does not skip over a moment of time, as in ellipsis, but it *sidesteps* a given element".<sup>51</sup> Gustave sidesteps a description of his pain and crisis, yet, in so doing, he reveals the truth of his situation to the reader. He provides Ernest with a lengthy description of Venice (*Valérie*, 78-80), stating: "I paint for you everything that surrounds me in order to avoid talking to you of a passion which I cannot tame" (*Valérie*, 80). We glean much about Gustave's feeling of personal crisis from the description of Venice which supplants the description of emotions; for the city's depiction becomes a metaphor for the words to which he cannot give voice. He begins with a highly negative focus on the city's bondage, writing of the "terrible prisons" (*Valérie*, 78) and "the silence which dwells in these vast passageways" (*Ibid.*). We should note

again here the negative connotations of silence. Gustave, too, is both silenced and fettered, though by his unspeakable, unrequited love rather than by any government.

Not only do Frédéric and Gustave suffer because the women they desire are replacement mother figures; they also suffer because their imaginations have created the image of an ideal woman, who becomes impossible to possess, for she cannot truly exist. Where the crisis of the Oedipus complex was seen in silences and ellipses, the attempts and failures to create or possess the image of an ideal woman is seen through the novels' depictions of the plastic arts.

After a discussion with d'Albe in which the latter describes his wife's qualities, Frédéric reveals how he projects his imagined ideal on to Claire:

In the spring of my youth [...] I created the image of a woman such as I needed her to be in my heart. This enchanting dream accompanied me everywhere; nowhere did I find a model of it. However, I have just recognised it in the image your husband has described. (*Claire*, 31–32)

Similarly, in his adolescence, Gustave states: “I have been with an ideal, charming person, whom I have never seen, but whom I do see nonetheless. My heart is thumping and my cheeks burning. I call her. She is shy and young, like me, but she is infinitely better” (*Valérie*, 188).

Later, Gustave confesses his transferral of this ideal on to Valérie:

[I]n seeing you, I only saw your resemblance, I only saw this same image that I had carried in my heart, seen in my dreams, perceived in all natural scenes, in all the creations of my young, fiery imagination. (*Valérie*, 166)

Unable to possess Claire and Valérie in body, Frédéric and Gustave turn to other means. Frédéric focuses on portraits of Claire, but finds that they lack the perfection he desires: “It is not Madame d'Albe [...] you have not succeeded even in capturing one of her moments”

(*Claire*, 51-52). Towards the end of the novel, Elise writes: “I took Claire’s portrait from my breast, and I placed it next to him; [...] he looked at it for a long time; finally he gave it back to me coldly and said: ‘It is not her’. Then he remained silent” (*Claire*, 134). The painted medium does not capture the true essence of his ideal woman, and the perceived absence of the painting is mirrored in the void of his words.

For Gustave, the failed attempt to create a model of Valérie causes pain. When the *comte* and his wife leave Gustave alone in Venice, he meets a young Italian woman, Bianca, whose appearance reminds him of Valérie. In a ludicrous dressing-up episode, Gustave attempts to mould Bianca into Valérie. He buys clothes similar to Valérie’s and asks Bianca to wear them, arranges Bianca’s hair to resemble Valérie’s, and asks her to sing the same songs as Valérie. However, in order to persuade himself of his creation’s accuracy, he must obscure the focus on the figure in the ground, and remove the lens of reality: “I half closed my eyes in order to see less distinctly [...]. My imagination reached an incredible point; reality had disappeared” (*Valérie*, 125-126). By his own admission, he realises that this episode is nothing but an illusion. He is quickly interrupted, and his attempt to sculpt Valérie anew undermined, by the arrival of Bianca’s brother-in-law. Gustave comments, “I emerged from a cloud [...] Bianca was there like a marionette” (*Valérie*, 126), revealing that upon his return to reality, he views her as lacking humanness altogether. As Hilger writes, ‘Bianca becomes the imperfect copy of the unattainable ideal’,<sup>52</sup> and Gustave’s attempt to create a model of the perfect woman fails. Later, as he lies dying, Gustave is not able to summon up the image of Valérie at all (*Valérie*, 193). His notion of the perfect woman is, in fact, much like Frédéric’s, defined more by its absence than its presence, and more by what it lacks than what it possesses.

## **Conclusion**

Our analysis of three works by popular early nineteenth-century French women writers, has shown that “[w]hen negative space surrounds an object or image, it not only helps to define the boundaries of positive space, it also can carve out a shape of its own”.<sup>53</sup> Throughout Cottin’s *Claire d’Albe*, Krüdener’s *Valérie*, and Staël’s *Corinne*, negative or empty spaces carve out the shape of the male heroes’ characters, thought processes and life crises. The initial absence in these novels, which acts as a catalyst for later events, is the absence of a biological father. However, this absence is highlighted and often compounded by others. Frédéric, Gustave and Oswald are all shaped by voids filled with power: background spaces dominated by the will of the dead, silence, missing text, erased paintings, and portraits and models unable to capture the focal point accurately. This leads to two significant conclusions. Firstly, if ground is as important as figure when analysing the impact of space, then what is unwritten is just as important as what is written when analysing the impact of words. Secondly, it is through an understanding of the concept of positive-negative space that we begin to appreciate the importance of emptiness and absence in unlocking the key elements of these women’s narratives and their portrayal of men. For, in defining both themselves and their attitude to women, the Romantic heroes of Cottin, Krüdener and Staël find that what is important is actually what is absent.

We can extend our conclusions further, however; for ultimately, the reader witnesses a process of women writers creating male characters who, in turn, attempt (and fail) to create and/or to possess their ideal woman. Whilst male early-Romantic writers such as Chateaubriand, Senancour and Vigny show their male protagonists searching for ideality through, respectively, utopian societies, intuition and the inner recesses of the mind, or intellect and rational thought, early-Romantic female writers show male protagonists attempting to find ideality in women. Furthermore, whilst for canonical male Romantic writers, such as Baudelaire (following the trends of writers such as Goethe or Keats), the Romantic stereotype

of the doomed poet is male, Staël's doomed poet is female. Staël uses the reversal of expected roles to her advantage. Instead of portraying a male poet unable to live up to the expected masculine role of businessman, politician, or military man, she portrays a female poet socially alienated because of the male-dominated society which outlines the ideal of female domesticity and expects her to conform to it. Cottin, Krüdener and Staël undertake their discussion of the 'ideal woman' during the very era when women's roles were indeed being defined for them by men who, themselves, lacked both male role models and the ability to define their own masculinity clearly. Cottin, Krüdener and Staël show how the created roles for women were untenable and unjust as a result of being created by men in a state of socio-political and/or identity crisis of their own. "According to Birkett [...] daughters imagining resistance to the constraints of the father's desire must come to terms with the parallel desire of the brother-clan to overthrow the father".<sup>54</sup> All three male protagonists in these stories fail to overthrow the father figure. The women writers who create them, however, challenge the father figure in a much wider context: not that of their personal families, but rather that of the patriarchal system. As Cottin, Krüdener and Staël make clear, the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century patriarchal order was disastrous for both men and women: it forced its will on to men, who, unable to live up to it, then forced their will on to women. Valérie, Claire and Corinne are all held to impossible standards, and the latter two die in their failure to maintain them. Gustave and Frédéric die upon realising that the objects of their love are unattainable or lost, and Oswald remains haunted by his decision and the loss of Corinne. Happiness is therefore precluded for both genders.

Like the crises of their male characters, Cottin's, Krüdener's and Staël's ultimate challenging of the patriarchy is also enhanced by engagement with positive-negative space. For, in focusing on the void — background spaces, empty images, even the unwritten textual space beyond the narrative itself — they open our views and broaden the horizons of the

expected. As Kern argues, “[i]f figure and ground, print and blanks, bronze and empty space are of equal value, or at least equally essential to the creation of meaning, then the traditional hierarchies are also open to revelation”.<sup>55</sup> This means that

Value was henceforth to be determined by aesthetic sensibility, public utility, or scientific evidence and not by hereditary privilege, divine right, or revealed truth.

The old sanctuaries of privilege, power, and holiness were assailed, if not entirely destroyed, by the affirmation of positive negative space. (Ibid.)

In attributing such power to positive-negative space throughout their novels, Cottin, Krüdener and Staël succeed in making powerful social commentary upon the patriarchal system itself and upon the socio-political situation of the men and women experiencing it. They hint that once we learn to look beyond the expected dominant figure in the foreground, we might begin to consider something beyond the expected dominant socio-political situation in which we live.

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<sup>1</sup> Christie Margrave, *Writing the Landscape: Exposing Nature in French Women's Fiction, 1789-1815* (Cambridge: Legenda, 2019), 175.

<sup>2</sup> Stacie Allan, *Writing the Self, Writing the Nation: Romantic Selfhood in the Works of Germaine de Staël and Claire de Duras* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2018), 93.

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin Constant, *Adolphe*, Texte établi et présenté par Jacques Bompard, (Paris: Fernand Roches, 1929), 48; 100; 103.

<sup>4</sup> George Ross Ridge, *The Hero in French Romantic Literature* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1961), 16.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 19-20.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 22-23.

<sup>8</sup> Lynn Hunt, *Family Romance of the French Revolution* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 23.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Elinor G. Barber, *The Bourgeoisie in 18<sup>th</sup>-Century France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015 [1955]), 80.

<sup>11</sup> Hunt, *Family Romance*, 24.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>13</sup> ‘[O]n the eve of the Revolution, fathers are very much at issue in literature. Paul and Virginie come to a tragic end because they do not have fathers; Lolotte, Fanfan, and Alexis reach happy endings when they find their lost fathers’. Hunt, *Family Romance*, 34.

<sup>14</sup> Allan, *Writing the Self*, 106.

<sup>15</sup> Hunt, *Family Romance*, 34.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Pierre Laforgue, *L'Œdipe romantique: Le jeune homme, le désir et l'histoire en 1830* (Grenoble: ELLUG, 2002), 13. All translations my own.

<sup>18</sup> Alana Eldrige, ‘Review of Pierre Laforgue, *L'Œdipe romantique: Le jeune homme, le désir et l'histoire en 1830*’, *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, 35:3-4 (2007), pp.667-668.

- <sup>19</sup> Jennifer Birkett, 'Life without Father: Revisions of Paternity in Women's Writing in France', in Lieve Spaas (ed.) *Paternity and Fatherhood* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), 95.
- <sup>20</sup> Margaret Cohen, 'Melancholia, Mania, and the Reproduction of the Dead Father', in Karyna Szmurlo (ed.), *The Novel's Seductions: Staël's Corinne in Critical Inquiry* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1999), pp.95-116 (113).
- <sup>21</sup> Allan, *Writing the Self*, 91.
- <sup>22</sup> Birkett, "Life without Father," 85.
- <sup>23</sup> Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Stephen Kern, *The Modernist Novel: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
- <sup>24</sup> Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space*, 153.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 301.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 167-170.
- <sup>28</sup> Joseph E. Brenner, *Logic in Reality* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010), 144.
- <sup>29</sup> Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space*, 170.
- <sup>30</sup> Simone Maria Puleo, *Under Construction: Positive-Negative Space in Faulkner and Beyond* (Electronically published doctoral thesis, Florida Atlantic University, 2012) <<http://fau.digital.flvc.org/islandora/object/fau%3A4044/datastream/OBJ/view>> [accessed 1 December 2018].
- <sup>31</sup> Madame de Staël, *Corinne ou l'Italie* (France: Gallimard, 1985 [1807]), 316. Hereafter references to this text appear in parentheses after the quotation. All translations my own.
- <sup>32</sup> Birkett, "Life without Father," 87.
- <sup>33</sup> Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space*, 167-170.
- <sup>34</sup> My emphasis.
- <sup>35</sup> Madame Sophie Cottin, *Claire d'Albe*, ed. Margaret Cohen (The Modern Language Association of America: New York, 2002), 17. Hereafter references to this text appear in parentheses after the quotation. All translations my own.
- <sup>36</sup> Madame de Krüdener, *Valérie* (Paris: Éditions Klincksiek, 1974), 185. Hereafter references to this text appear in parentheses after the quotation. All translations my own.
- <sup>37</sup> Laforgue, *L'Œdipe romantique*, 14.
- <sup>38</sup> Margrave, *Writing the Landscape*, 158.
- <sup>39</sup> See: Joan B. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988).
- <sup>40</sup> For the physician Jacques-Louis Moreau, 'woman is a being in whom emotion exercises dominion over reason', Paul Hoffmann, *La Femme dans la pensée des Lumières* (Paris: Ophrys, 1977), 168. See also: Jacques-Louis Moreau, *Histoire naturelle de la femme*, 3 vols (Paris: Duprat; Letellier, 1803), I, 122-123.
- <sup>41</sup> H.D. 'Introduction' to Mme Cottin, *Claire D'Albe* (Paris: Hiard, 1831), 8.
- <sup>42</sup> Steven Bindeman, *Silence in Philosophy, Literature, and Art* (Leiden; Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2017), 53.
- <sup>43</sup> Raoul Mortley, *From Word to Silence: The Rise and Fall of Logos*, 2 Vols (Bonn: Hanstein, 1986), I, 112.
- <sup>44</sup> Indeed, the very paradoxical (albeit archetypal) concept of a 'blind seer' implies the filling of darkness and emptiness with ultimate enlightenment, turning a negative space into a positive-negative one.
- <sup>45</sup> Kenneth King, *Writing in Motion: Body — Language — Technology* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2010), 80.
- <sup>46</sup> Silvia Montiglio, *Silence in the Land of Logos* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 197.
- <sup>47</sup> Original ellipsis.
- <sup>48</sup> Puleo, *Under Construction*, 2.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.
- <sup>50</sup> Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 108.
- <sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.
- <sup>52</sup> Stephanie M. Hilger, *Women Write Back: Strategies of Response and the Dynamics of European Literary Culture, 1790–1805* (Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2009), 139.
- <sup>53</sup> Bindeman, *Silence in Philosophy, Literature, and Art*, 53.
- <sup>54</sup> Lieve Spaas, 'Mythical Constructs and Social Realities', in Lieve Spaas (ed.), *Paternity and Fatherhood* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), 5.
- <sup>55</sup> Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space*, 180.