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# "ADOLPHE," A SWISS MASTERPIECE

by Geoffrey H. Buchler, University of Lausanne

Benjamin Constant de Rebeque, born in Lausanne on the 25th October 1767, was the son of Juste Constant, a professional soldier in the service of the United Provinces of the Netherlands, whose family had ramified for generations along the northern shores of Lac Léman. He died in 1830 far away from the town which commemorates his great Romantic genius to this very day. You only have to cross the Alps and arrive in that town of charm and self-made magnificence, to see the splendour of the "Avenue Benjamin Constant" and the tribute paid to him in the "Bibliothèque Cantonale et Universitaire".

The author of "Adolphe" was known long before the publication of his book in 1816, for in the preface to his adaptation of "Wallenstein" in 1808, Benjamin Constant had made it quite clear where his sympathies lay, being a very favourable representative of the nascent Romantic movement, and also a member of the subversive Coppet group which had already been the departure-point of Mme. de Staël's "De l'Allemagne". Not surprisingly, therefore, "Adolphe" was initially regarded as an early attempt to apply the doctrines of the new literature to the French novel.

From the time that he first read to his friends out of the unpublished manuscript, there has been an irresistible compulsion to look from the work back to the author, rather than to let the work expand on its own terms and according to its own specific qualities. In fact, the purpose of this article is to suggest that "Adolphe" is a far more unified work of art than what facile distinctions between language and content might indicate, because there is a vision of the human situation in

Constant's novel which calls for and imposes a closely corresponding descriptive technique. Furthermore, the study of this vision and its accompanying technique will show that the relationship of "Adolphe" to the Romantic movement is more fundamental than is commonly imagined. What Constant had really in common with the writers of Romanticism was not a taste for eloquent expressions of phrase or rhythmical prose sentences, but a sharp sense of the uniqueness and preciousness of the individual, and a subsequent dissatisfaction with all these literary representations of Man which attempt to plot his nature in terms of general principles. Constant shared what a recent historian, writing on Romanticism, called "the determination to allow room for the relative and the concrete". This is where Constant's romanticism lies: in his view of the human condition, in his search for words able to capture the manifold complexity of the individual. In fact, embracing both content and language.

"Adolphe", which has a firm place as one of the masterpieces of French Literature, portrays a true and compelling picture of the inconsistencies and misconceptions of the human heart, which unable to find ever any respite, neither knows what it wants, nor what it doesn't want. "Si Benjamin Constant", wrote Gustave Planche in his "Portraits Littéraires", "n'avait pas marqué sa place au premier rang parmi les orateurs et les publicistes de France; si ses travaux ingénieux sur le développement des religions ne le classaient pas glorieusement parmi les écrivains les plus purs et les plus diserts de notre langue, s'il n'avait pas mis au service de la philosophie son élocution limpide et colorée, son nom serait encore sûr de ne pas périr, car il a écrit 'Adolphe'".

"Adolphe", taken by itself, is a singularly sober tale, sparingly written and studded with maxims of general wisdom brilliantly expressed. It is indeed classical in its form, avoids particularities of setting and lacks both local colour and sense of the historical moment. The form of the work reaches towards the universal, removes us at once and irrevocably from the contingencies of history and the distractions of details. Where Balzac immerses his characters in a specific historical context, displays them against the world of objects, and achieves his

general meaning by going beyond them, Constant moves at once into the realm of the unspecified human problem, a position from which he is dislodged only because his notebooks and letters supply the personal particulars he so deliberately left out of his work. "Les Liaisons Dangereuses" of Choderlos de Laclos, is strikingly similar to "Adolphe" in its absence of picturesque detail and its fondness for analysis, but it is saved from the restrictive fate of being called a "personal" novel only because we know so little about Laclos, and because what we *do* know about the man reveals so little about his motives for writing the book. As a result, when we read "Les Liaisons Dangereuses", we concentrate on Valmont and Madame de Merteuil, on their analyses of others, on the strategy and tactics of absolute domination; however, when we read "Adolphe", we concentrate on Benjamin Constant's difficulties with Madame de Staël and other women in his life. If we cut "Adolphe" loose from its autobiographical moorings for a moment, and if, instead of concentrating on Benjamin and Germaine, we examine Adolphe and Ellénore as individuals enmeshed in a curiously human and far from unique situation, we may be able to see it as a work that deals, sometimes indirectly but always incisively, with psychological, social, and moral questions that remain peculiarly relevant in our own time.

Benjamin Constant was thoroughly conscious of the general value of the intensely personal story he had compounded. Adolphe represented more than Constant himself, more than the case of an isolated individual whose plight has no specific significance for others. The preface he wrote for the second edition was sub-titled "Essai sur le caractère et le résultat moral de l'ouvrage", and after defending himself against the charge of having drawn portraits of his friends in his work, he went on to deliver a sermon, not unlike Laclos' preface, proving "le danger de ces liens irréguliers" and of coquetry in general. A short passage written for this preface but omitted from the published text gives a strong suggestion of Constant's belief in the general applicability of "Adolphe": — "J'ai voulu peindre dans Adolphe", he wrote, "une des principales maladies morales de notre siècle: cette fatigue, cette incertitude, cette absence de force . . . cette

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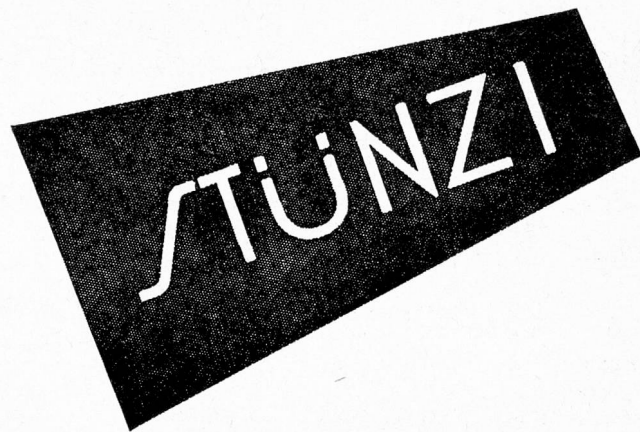
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analyse perpétuelle, qui place une arrière-pensée à côté de tous les sentiments, et qui par là les corrompt dès leur naissance . . . Et ce n'est pas dans les seules liaisons du cœur que cet affaiblissement moral, cette impuissance d'impressions durables se fait remarquer: tout se tient dans la nature. La fidélité en amour est une force comme la croyance religieuse, comm l'enthousiasme de la liberté".

Constant was well advised to leave out this section, for the vigour and deeply-felt sincerity with which it is infused are completely at variance with the conventional and fraudulent moralizing of the preface as it was printed. He is engaged, of course, in a study of a variety of the "mal du siècle", the ailment of the man unable to find a meaningful rôle in life for himself. However, where René and others express their melancholy with lyricism but without attempting to get to the bottom of it, Adolphe obtains what consolation he can, not in rhetoric but in analysis. His analysis, however, is not the analysis of love, it is directed very precisely at an assessment of the effects of the absence of love in a situation that is meaningless without it; "C'est une relation terrible que celle d'un homme qui n'aime plus et d'une femme qui ne veut pas cesser d'être aimée".

Two words, "le but" and "le lien" signify in this work some very distinctive and clearly marked stages of evolution. As "*un homme sans but*", Adolphe is a young man, having not yet found his rôle in life, feels himself to be useless, superfluous, and lacking in direction. A little later, after reflection and analysis, he finds that in his particular society love represents an occupation, a possible goal: in fact, "*l'amour est un but*". Then he celebrates his conquest with a brief lyrical passage on the mysterious and hard-to-define "*charme de l'amour*". It is one thing to achieve one's goal, but quite another to live with it: "*le but devient un lien*"; the charm of love has vanished, and the rest of the book is concerned with Adolphe's effort to find a way to break the bonds that link him to his conquest. Finally with Ellénore's death he has turned a full circle: he personifies "*un homme sans but*", and is again the aimless individual he had been at the beginning, but now in a more profound and tragic sense.

Adolphe begins and ends his journey as a young man with no clear conception of his rôle or purpose in life. Ellénore, obviously, provides no answer to his problem, and the question that underlies all his preoccupations, "Quel est mon but?" is only an aspect of the wider question that is put indirectly: "What is man's goal, his purpose?" The question of purpose is raised from the individual level to the general, when Adolphe's uncertainty finally evokes a sombre picture of the human condition, of man's need to cling to some support, to grasp at any form of belief: ". . . dans

la nuit épaisse qui nous entoure, est-il une lueur que nous puissions repousser? Au milieu de torrent qui nous entraîne, est-il une branche à laquelle nous osons refuser de nous retenir?" The voice is that of Constant, the life-long student of religion and author of "De la Religion considérée dans sa source, ses formes et ses développements" (1824-1831).

The numerous and varied allusions to Constant's own strifes and struggles in relationships with women, more especially Anna Lindsay, Charlotte von Hardenberg and the illustrious Mme. de Staël, only serve to heighten Ellénore as an amalgam of his experience of women, and that in his relationship with Ellénore, Adolphe feels and behaves as do a large number of men; but although an ordinary man's experience of sexual matters is mixed with other worldly preoccupations, in Ellénore and Adolphe the essential psychological truth is isolated and intensified by the removal of all irrelevant circumstances and the manipulation of essential ones. The main subject is thus thrown into the highest possible relief. The instinct of Ellénore to seek the natural securities of a settled life, and Adolphe's basic vanity and natural desires combined with fears of becoming too involved, clarifies his need to pursue the easy and flattering conquest of an older woman socially isolated because of irregular sexual life. Whence the ideology of the whole process; this tragedy of sexual love, by which Adolphe by his very nature pursues, wins and immediately tires, whereas Ellénore, more slowly aroused, only yields when she has made up her mind. Whilst she tries to assert her every power over him, the more he is ashamed of his own ingratitude, the more he resents being so obviously put in the wrong. Whereas today there are means for distraction, in "Adolphe" the tragic end is the only way of slipping out of such a psychological "dead-end". Quite noticeably, the main theme is most rapidly undertaken and exhausted. More explicitly, the transition from the idyllic but illusory happiness of the "charme de l'amour" to the resentment of the fact that "elle était devenue un lien" is effected in less than five hundred words.

The nature of the feelings themselves, however, is much more difficult to portray with exactness. Constant's attempt to do so reveals his mistrust of single-term designations of emotions, his unwillingness to use only one noun or adjective to convey the essence of a complex feeling. He had discovered the inability of a single word like "amitié" to throw light into the dark recesses of the heart. Constant in fact seldom used one term where two would have captured a sharper degree of feeling.

Three books, apart from "Adolphe", and which were not available until many years after his death, elucidate in a very detailed and analytical manner a good deal of information about himself which conjures up quite strongly the

autobiographical nature of his not-yet-written masterpiece. They were "Le Cahier Rouge", "Cecile" and the "Journal intime". Far and away, they incorporate the most precise elements of Adolphe's life and his innermost thoughts and preoccupations.

Benjamin Constant's quite intensified elaboration of a specific "point-de-vue" reveals itself most forcefully in Adolphe's supremacy as a man, distinct from that portrayed in his counterpart. Lazy, a moral coward, but a master of self-analysis and deception, Adolphe uses his intelligence to obtain what he wants and to avoid or postpone any unpleasant consequences; using ingenious arguments to confound self-accusation into acquiescence, to transform qualms of conscience into unworthy thoughts over which reason and far-sightedness triumph. His character is the great achievement of the book, whereas Ellénore is a composite figure and may be thought, however close she may be to agreed generalizations about women, to lack the consistency and unity of a supreme artistic creation.

Constant's recourse to the analytical and ideological methods, as noticeably demonstrated, was the outcome of his Romantic distaste for inflexible principles, a distaste seen in regard both to society and to literature. It would seem that Constant's technique in the writing of his masterpiece was far less influenced by the style of an age whose literary production dissatisfied him than by his own personal preoccupation with the task of reproducing in literary form the complexity of the living individual. What spurred Constant on to the formation of his analytical cum ideological method and the creation of "Adolphe" was an artistic vision which can only be compared to that of the whole Romantic period which followed him.

Undoubtedly, there exists in this book a virtue both singular and almost magnetic which attracts us and comes to mind whenever we are witnesses or actors in a moral crisis of some importance. There is hardly a page in this novel, if it is a novel, and for my part I have great difficulty in believing it, which does not bring about a sort of examination of consciences. Whether it concerns us or our most beloved friends, it is never in vain that we can consult this story of great simplicity, containing such a distressing moral. In whatever way this work may project its quite remarkable sense of beauty, it forces one to think and reflect as though a similarity with the truth had been struck in such a way as to deceive us in believing we had actually seen the personage himself. Each of the thoughts inscribed in this formidable episode is so genuine, so guileless, so finely analysed and denuded with so much supplication to the sorrows of the heart, that every one of us is likely to yield to the temptation of recognizing therein his own image, or that of his dearest ones.