

# BENJAMIN CONSTANT AND 'ADOLPHE'

'Je ne veux rien voir fleurir près de moi. Je veux que tout ce qui m'environne soit triste, languissant, fané . . .'

Letter to Madame de Charrière, 21st March, 1788.

**F**EW great writers have left less flattering portraits of themselves than Benjamin Constant in his solitary novel. *Adolphe* is a masterpiece, but it possesses in a pre-eminent degree that peculiar unpleasantness which is sometimes said to be characteristic of nearly all great art, and most of those who have studied it at all attentively must recall occasions when, overcome by a physical malaise, they have had to lay the book aside, unable to continue their reading.

This feeling, which only disappears with long familiarity, is not confined to modern readers. The audiences of friends to whom Constant used to read his novel aloud in the ten years which passed between its composition in 1806 and its publication in 1816 were 'revolted' by the character of the hero. The persistence of this feeling cannot be disregarded by the critic and the reasons for it are not difficult to discover. In this book, the novelist, using the immense powers of analysis which he had inherited from a great tradition, gives a remorseless catalogue of his own failings. One may feel a secret envy for the vitality of Racine's characters, for the ferocity with which male and female rend one another and which speaks directly to primitive feelings that lie buried beneath layers of civilization in all of us. One feels nothing of the sort for the hesitations and vacillations of *Adolphe* which inflict appalling suffering on one unhappy woman. Yet honesty compels us to recognise that his findings are not less universal than Racine's. He makes articulate feelings which, potentially at any rate, are common to us all, but which we instinctively prefer to keep hidden. His revelations have nothing to do with the comfortably vague *mal du siècle* of the next generation; they are not blunted by that soothing mixture of sentiment and showmanship which made Rousseau so attractive to his contemporaries, and they are completely free from the melodramatic element which tainted the work of some of the greatest of the nineteenth-century masters. They are presented with a nakedness which shatters complacency. Far from trying to excuse himself, Constant's hero sedulously pushes his virtues into the background and is at pains to underline and condemn his weaknesses.

Paul Bourget has spoken of 'cette coexistence dans une même âme, de la lucidité de l'esprit la plus inefficace et du pire désordre sensuel ou sentimental.'<sup>1</sup> It is difficult to understand or to forgive

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<sup>1</sup>*Oeuvres complètes I Critique Essais de psychologie contemporaine*, Paris, 1899, p. 21.

a man who is clearly endowed with immense intellectual gifts and who makes such ill use of them. The word 'forgive' illustrates the peculiar relationship between the reader and the book, and the intensity of the experience. For there is a world of difference between the faintly remote princes and princesses of seventeenth-century tragedy and this man who seems at times to be altogether too close to us, as though his creator had succeeded too well in the work of self-exposure. We seem to see the speaker bearing down on us, singling us out in a room full of people. He catches us by the lapel of the coat, peers at us with his weak eyes and begins to tell us the latest news of his relations with Mme de Staël or his senile affair with Mme Récamier. 'Cette furie qui me poursuit l'écume à la bouche et le poignard à la main,' he cries of Mme de Staël. 'Je suis las de *l'homme femme*'—he plucks at our coat for emphasis—'*dont la main de fer m'enchaîne depuis dix ans. . .*' And so the appalling stream continues.

We can only fully appreciate *Adolphe* when we know what manner of man the author was and something of the age in which he lived. Constant was not a dilettante, a man of letters who frittered away his life in drawing-rooms and happened almost by accident to write a great novel. He was not merely a gambler and duellist, the lover of Mme de Staël and the unsuccessful suitor to whom Mme Récamier refused what are politely termed *les dernières faveurs*. He was one of the most brilliant intellects of his time, a considerable scholar, an original thinker and a distinguished and ultimately successful liberal politician. He was a pioneer in the study of comparative religion and though his great book on religion, which took forty years to write, has long since been superseded, it can still tell us a good deal about the intellectual climate of the age. His political writings were among the ablest produced in his time and the best of them—the attacks on despotism and the pages on militarism in *De l'esprit de conquête et de l'usurpation*—so far from losing their freshness, read like a description of contemporary Europe.

Constant was born in 1767 and died in 1830. His life thus covers one of the most troubled and fateful periods of modern European history. It is a period which bears a striking resemblance to our own with its wars and revolutions, its perplexity and its instability. Constant's wide interests and insatiable curiosity brought him into close contact with the life of his time and his weaknesses made him a victim of its spiritual and intellectual upheavals. 'Adolphe,' said the author of the first Russian translation of the novel in words which can be applied to Constant himself, 'Adolphe n'est ni Français, ni Allemand, ni Anglais, c'est l'élève de son siècle.' He was in the fullest sense a child of his age and he was perfectly endowed by mind, temper and his cosmopolitan upbringing to interpret it to a later generation.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>The essential documents are: *Journal intime*, ed. Melegari (Paris, 1895); the autobiographical fragment, *Le cahier rouge* (Paris, 1907); *Lettres de Benjamin Constant à sa famille*, ed. J.-H. Menos (Paris,

## II.

*Adolphe* is a great novel for three reasons. It is a searching criticism of a section of European society at a crucial moment in its history. It makes articulate the spiritual unrest of the most sensitive and intelligent members of that society. Finally, it explores a problem which belongs peculiarly to our own time with an insight and a technical originality that make it a landmark in the history of the novel.

The theme possesses at once the simplicity and the complexity of a seventeenth-century tragedy. A young man of twenty-two has just completed his studies with some distinction at the University of Göttingen. His father is the minister of one of the German Electors and intends his son to follow in his footsteps; but he feels that before settling down the son should see something of the world and the problems with which he will have to deal. Adolphe arrives at a little German principality to spend a few months at the Court and to continue his studies. Soon after his arrival he becomes entangled with the mistress of a certain Comte de P——, a Polish woman who is ten years older than he and the mother of the Count's two illegitimate children. Adolphe is not in love with Ellénore, never has been, is indeed incapable of loving anyone. He drifts into the liaison with Ellénore out of boredom and loneliness and a desperate need to fill the void which he feels within himself. But though his illusions about his feelings for Ellénore soon vanish, he cannot make up his mind to leave her. He postpones his return home for six months. There is a breach between Ellénore and the Count and to Adolphe's dismay she follows him to his native town. He discovers that his father is on the point of ordering her expulsion, and out of generosity and a mistaken sense of chivalry he runs away with her first to Bohemia, then to Warsaw, where she has inherited her father's estates. The bond becomes more and more wearisome, but he still hesitates to break it. The friction between them grows until finally Ellénore discovers that Adolphe, under pressure from a friend of his father's who is minister at Warsaw, is plotting to leave her and dies a broken woman.

Constant drew heavily on his personal experience for his materials. He was not content with making Adolphe a portrait of the artist. Family, friends and mistresses were all grist to his mill. The portraits of his father and Mme de Charrière are barely disguised. Ellénore is a composite character. Mme de Staël, Mrs. Trevor, Anna Lindsay and Julie Talma all played their part in her creation. And Adolphe uses practically the same words to describe his life at D . . . that his creator had used twenty years earlier in the letters to Mme de Charrière describing his adventures at the Court of the Duke of Brunswick.

Critics have complained that some of his characters are unconvincing and that others are faintly drawn.<sup>3</sup> These criticisms

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1888). Gustave Rudler's great study, *La jeunesse de Benjamin Constant, 1767-1794* (Paris, 1909) is indispensable and contains a large number of letters which have not been published elsewhere.

seem to me to be caused by a failure to grasp the novelist's purpose, by an unconscious comparison between the presentation of his material in the novel and its presentation in the diaries and letters. It is true that *Adolphe* is an 'autobiographical novel,' but it is autobiographical in a very unusual way. Life and art are so closely interwoven that it is sometimes difficult to decide whether the novel followed life or whether life followed the novel, for some of the events of Constant's later life read like a repetition of scenes from *Adolphe*.<sup>4</sup> An autobiographical novel is not the same as an autobiography and *Adolphe* must not be judged as though it is. It must be judged as a work of art. Our experience in reading it differs profoundly from our experience in reading the *Journal intime* or the *Cahier rouge*. The artist selects and rearranges his everyday experience until it is transformed into a fresh pattern. This pattern is the novel. His characters are in no sense 'contemporary portraits'; they are imaginative creations which possess precisely as much or as little life as is necessary for his purpose. Each one of them represents a particular strand in the final pattern and becomes the vehicle for the novelist's criticism of a concrete situation.

These virtues can only be illustrated by a detailed examination of the text:

'Je venais de finir à vingt-deux ans mes études à l'université de Göttingue.—L'intention de mon père, ministre de l'Electeur de . . . , était que je parcourusse les pays les plus remarquables de l'Europe. Il voulait ensuite m'appeler auprès de lui, me faire entrer dans le département dont la direction lui était confiée, et me préparer à le remplacer un jour. J'avais obtenu, par un travail assez opiniâtre, au milieu d'une vie très-dissipée, des succès qui m'avaient distingué de mes compagnons d'étude, et qui avaient fait concevoir à mon père sur moi des espérances probablement fort exagérées.'<sup>5</sup>

Göttingen carries us back to the Germany of the Romantic Movement, the Germany of a hundred tiny principalities and the easy-going student life with its indulgences and its *folies*. This life is contrasted with the dullness and respectability of the measured life of the bureaucrat. There is an ominous inflection about the word *intention*. The dream begins to fade; the life of dissipation must be put behind one; unruly desires must be curbed and forced into the mould of conventional respectability, into the uniform life of the 'department,' the position of 'trust.' The ironical *espérances probablement fort exagérées* marks the beginning of a conflict not merely between two different temperaments, but between two

<sup>3</sup>Faguet is the chief culprit. V. *Politiques et moralistes du dix-neuvième siècle*, I ère série, Paris, 4th ed., 1894, pp. 203-7.

<sup>4</sup>It is not possible to speak with certainty on this point as the novel is believed to have undergone considerable revision between 1806 and 1816. V. Rudler's Introduction to his critical edition (Manchester University Press, 1919).

<sup>5</sup>I have used Rudler's text, which retains contemporary spelling, throughout. All italics in the quotations which follow are mine.

different ways of life. This becomes apparent in the third paragraph:

'Je ne demandais alors qu'à me livrer à ces impressions primitives et fougueuses qui jettent l'âme hors de la sphère commune, et lui inspirent le dédain de tous les objets qui l'environnent. Je trouvais dans mon père, non pas un censeur, mais un observateur froid et caustique, qui souriait d'abord de pitié, et qui finissait bientôt la conversation avec impatience.'

The words, *les pays les plus remarquables*, in the first paragraph are intentionally conventional. One may well visit all the European countries in a spirit of correct admiration and even sow one's wild oats before settling down to become an excellent administrator. It is far otherwise with the *impressions primitives et fougueuses*. For here the conflict between the rebellious individual and social convention is radical and dangerous. We can see already that the father is more than a personal portrait, is the symbol of certain accepted values. It is his voice that we shall hear at Caden and at Warsaw reminding his son of his abilities and begging him not to fritter away his life by sacrificing it to *impressions primitives et fougueuses*.

Although the father is a symbol of certain standards, these standards do not command unqualified respect:

'J'avais dans la maison de mon père adopté sur les femmes un système assez immoral. Mon père, bien qu'il observât strictement les convenances extérieures, se permettait assez fréquemment des propos légers sur les liaisons d'amour. Il les regardait comme des amusemens, sinon permis, du moins excusables, et considérait le mariage seul sous un rapport sérieux. Il avait pour principe, qu'un jeune homme doit éviter avec soin de faire ce qu'on nomme une folie, c'est-à-dire, de contracter un engagement durable, avec une personne qui ne fût pas parfaitement son égale pour la fortune, la naissance et les avantages extérieurs. Mais du reste, toutes les femmes, aussi long-temps qu'il ne s'agissait pas de les épouser, lui paraissaient pouvoir, sans inconvéniens, être prises, puis être quittées: et je l'avais vu sourire avec une sorte d'approbation à cette parodie d'un mot connu: Cela leur fait si peu de mal, et à nous tant de plaisir.'

These are the views of the eighteenth-century libertine with their shallow respect for *les convenances extérieures*, and their emphasis on *fortune, naissance* and *avantages extérieurs*, the values of a society which had lost its moral fibre or, as Constant himself put it, 'd'une société toute factice, qui supplée aux principes par les règles et aux émotions par les convenances, et qui hait le scandale comme importun, non comme immoral, car elle accueille assez bien le vice quand le scandale ne s'y trouve pas.'<sup>6</sup>

Constant was too great a writer to be the dupe of such a society and he goes on to point out that the expression of these opinions by parents has a disastrous effect on the moral education of their children:

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<sup>6</sup>Preface to the Third Edition. V. Rudler, p. (xv).

'Ces règles [he says of the principles which are undermined] ne sont plus à leurs yeux que des formules banales que leurs parents sont convenus de leur répéter pour l'acquit de leur conscience, et les plaisanteries leur semblent renfermer le véritable secret de la vie.'

It must always be remembered that the Constants came of old Calvinist stock, but the convictions which had once driven them into exile had first weakened, then turned into a revolt against traditional morality. Juste Constant's own life was far from blameless and in spite of his insistence on the *convenances extérieures* its laxity had had a decisive influence on his son's character. Now the puritan conscience is ineradicable and it may well remain intact without exercising any practical influence on conduct. This is one of the clues to the tragedy of Adolphe and one of the secrets of Constant's greatness as a novelist. In the novelist the puritan conscience was transformed into that sovereign honesty which stamps a man as a great writer. The phrases, 'Je ne veux point ici me justifier,' 'Certes, je ne veux point m'excuser,' 'En relevant ainsi les défauts d'Ellénore, c'est moi que j'accuse et que je condamne,' which occur so frequently in *Adolphe*, are not vain moralising; they are a sign of the writer's consciousness of his responsibility and of the sureness of his apprehension of moral values which give his work its weight and place it in a different class from the productions of the other novelists of the Romantic period.<sup>7</sup>

The other decisive influence in Adolphe's life is the (anonymous) Mme de Charrière.

'J'avais à l'âge de dix-sept ans vu mourir une femme âgée, dont l'esprit, d'une tournure remarquable et bizarre, avait commencé à développer le mien.<sup>8</sup> Cette femme, comme tant d'autres, s'était, à l'entrée de sa carrière, lancée vers le monde qu'elle ne connaissait pas, avec le sentiment d'une grande force d'âme et de facultés vraiment puissantes. Comme tant d'autres aussi, faute de s'être pliée à des convenances factices, mais nécessaires, elle avait vu ses espérances trompées, sa jeunesse passer sans plaisir, et la vieillesse enfin l'avait atteinte sans la soumettre. Elle vivait dans un château voisin d'une de nos terres, mécontente et retirée, n'ayant que son esprit pour ressource, et analysant tout avec son esprit. Pendant près d'un an, dans

<sup>7</sup>Compare, for example, Goethe's view as reported in the *Journal intime*: 'Souper très intéressant chez Goethe. C'est un homme plein d'esprit, de saillies, de profondeur, d'idées neuves. Mais c'est le moins bonhomme que je connaisse. En parlant de *Werther* il disait: "Ce qui rend cet ouvrage dangereux, c'est d'avoir peint de la faiblesse comme de la force. Mais quand je fais une chose qui me convient, les conséquences ne me regardent pas. S'il y a des fous, à qui la lecture en tourne mal, ma foi tant pis!"' (*Melegari, op. cit.*, p. 9.)

<sup>8</sup>This is an example of the way in which Constant modified his facts. Mme de Charrière died in 1805 when he was thirty-eight years old.



nos conversations inépuisables, nous avions envisagé la vie sous toutes ses faces et la mort toujours pour terme de tout. Et après avoir tant causé de la mort avec elle, j'avais vu la mort la frapper à mes yeux. . . .

'Cet événement m'avait rempli d'un sentiment d'incertitude sur la destinée, et d'une rêverie vague qui ne m'abandonnait pas. Je lisais de préférence dans les poètes ce qui rappelait la brièveté de la vie humaine. Je trouvais qu'aucun but ne valait la peine d'aucun effort. . . .'

A comparison between this passage and the description of Mme de Charrière in the *Cahier rouge*—too long to set out here—illustrates very well the difference between the methods of the novelist and the autobiographer. The passage from the *Cahier rouge* does not possess the *finality* of the passage from *Adolphe*. The writer confines himself to a particular incident—the escapade in England—which has no general significance. The portrait in *Adolphe* 'places' Mme de Charrière. She is here clearly 'the eighteenth century in person' for the hero.<sup>9</sup> It is not merely that every word contributes something essential to her character, but that every trait assumes a larger significance and is essential to the novel. She encourages his revolt against the *convenances*, teaches him to rely only on his intellect and to analyse everything with it, until finally his belief in life is profoundly undermined. He perceives the dangers of this teaching, but it does not prevent him from adopting her habits of mind or from being deeply infected with her scepticism. He recognises that the *convenances* though *factices* are 'necessary' and that disregard of them leads to frustration and disappointment. For excessive analysis without positive belief must work destructively and it was precisely positive belief that was singularly lacking in Mme de Charrière and her protégé.

It can now be seen that the characters divide into two groups—those who conform to accepted standards as Adolphe's father and the Baron de T . . . ('vieux diplomate dont l'âme était usée') conform, and those who like Adolphe, Ellénore and Mme de Charrière revolt against them. The rebels are people with great gifts but unstable characters who could only have turned their gifts to good account in an ordered society.

The connection between the individual and society is a close one and is implied in every action, in every word that he speaks:

'Je me rendis, en quittant Göttingue, dans la petite ville de D . . . . Cette ville était la résidence d'un Prince, qui, comme la plupart de ceux de l'Allemagne, gouvernait avec douceur un pays de peu d'étendue, protégeait les hommes éclairés qui venaient s'y fixer, laissant à toutes les opinions une liberté parfaite, mais qui, borné par l'ancien usage à la société de ses courtisans, ne rassemblait par là même autour de lui que des hommes en grande partie insignifiants ou médiocres.'

The description of D . . . evokes again the Germany of the Romantic Movement, the liberal princes who protect enlightened

<sup>9</sup>Sainte-Beuve, *Portraits littéraires*, III, p. 275.

men and guarantee freedom of opinion. Their excellent intentions, however, are frustrated by convention and they end by surrounding themselves with people who are for the most part 'insignifiants ou médiocres.' The word *médiocre(s)* is the basis of Constant's criticism of society. It is placed intentionally at the end of the passage—marking the decline from *éclairés*—and it occurs in other places where it is given the same force:

'Les maris étaient dépourvus de sentimens aussi bien que d'idées; les femmes ne différaient de leurs maris que par une *médiocrité* plus inquiète et plus agitée, parce qu'elles n'avaient pas, comme eux, cette tranquillité d'esprit qui résulte de l'occupation et de la régularité des affaires.'

The picture of the factions, jealousies and dubious morality, which are characteristic of a highly sophisticated society, emerges with striking clarity from his account of D . . . . It is a picture of intellectual and emotional bankruptcy. The women are vain, empty, restless; the men are potentially no better, but the external discipline imposed by *la régularité des affaires* provides a slender barrier against open anarchy.

In other places the criticism becomes specifically moral:

'J'avais contracté, dans mes conversations avec la femme qui la première avait développé mes idées, une insurmontable aversion pour toutes les maximes communes et pour toutes les formules dogmatiques. Lors donc j'entendais la *médiocrité* dissertar avec complaisance sur des principes bien établis, bien incontestables en fait de morale, de convenance ou de religion, *choses qu'elle met assez volontiers sur la même ligne*, je me sentais poussé à la contredire; non que j'eusse adopté des opinions opposées, mais parce que j'étais impatienté d'une conviction si ferme et si lourde.'

J'ai toujours ignoré comment s'était formée une liaison [between the Count and Ellénore] qui, lorsque j'ai vu pour la première fois Ellénore, était, dès longtemps, établie et pour ainsi dire *consacrée*.'

The words that I have underlined in the first of these two passages emphasise the complete confusion of values which existed in society and the hollowness of the conventions. The word *consacrée* in the second passage provides the appropriate comment on a society in which a liaison, however irregular, only needs to last a certain time to take on something of the sanctity of marriage.

On the next page he proceeds to give an interesting defence of the irritation that society arouses in him:

'L'étonnement de la première jeunesse, à l'aspect d'une société si factice et si travaillée, annonce plutôt un coeur naturel qu'un esprit méchant. Cette société d'ailleurs n'a rien à en craindre: elle pèse tellement sur nous, son influence sourde est tellement puissante, qu'elle ne tarde pas à nous façonner d'après le moule universel. Nous ne sommes plus surpris alors que de notre ancienne surprise, et nous nous trouvons bien sous notre nouvelle forme, comme l'on finit par respirer librement dans un spectacle encombré par la foule, tandis qu'en entrant, on n'y respirait qu'avec effort.'



The contrast between the *coeur naturel* and the *société si factice et si travaillée* points to the dilemma of the sensitive person in a corrupt society. Revolt against the *convenances* leads to waste and disorder, but acceptance leads to the blunting of one's finer faculties and the impoverishment of one's emotional life. The homely image of a person becoming accustomed to the stale air in a room expresses very well both the degradation of the process of levelling down and the hopelessness of resistance.

In such passages Constant appears as the champion of civilisation and the natural order. He is the intellectual aristocrat, the remorseless critic of a sham nobility. The fate of the natural human being in an unnatural society is one of the central themes of *Adolphe*. Constant, like all great writers, sets his personal stamp on certain words which recur again and again. *Accoutumer* is one of them. For the characters become habituated to a certain kind of society, to a certain round of feelings and to certain knowledge about themselves, and this warps and corrodes their natural qualities. In a striking sentence he observes:

'Ce n'est pas le plaisir, ce n'est pas la nature, ce ne sont pas les sens qui sont corrupteurs; ce sont les *calculs* auxquels la société nous *accoutume*, et les réflexions que l'expérience fait naître.'

Among his other favourite words are *travestir*, *dénaturer*, *calculs*, *flétrir*, *déchirer*, *briser*, *factice*, *faiblesse*—

'La *justesse* de son esprit était *dénaturée* par l'emportement de son caractère.'

All these words suggest their opposites. They point to standards which are not observed, principles which are transgressed, an order which is disintegrating from within.

### III.

The originality of Constant's experience is inseparable from the originality of his method, and there is a sentence in Chapter II which throws a good deal of light on both:

'Presque toujours pour vivre en repos avec nous-mêmes, nous travestissons en calculs et en systèmes nos impuissances ou nos faiblesses. *Cela satisfait cette portion de nous, qui est, pour ainsi dire, spectatrice de l'autre.*'

There are a number of ways in which Constant's art reminds us of that of the seventeenth-century masters, but the analysis of emotion is not one of them. There is properly speaking no such thing as analysis in a poet like Racine or a novelist like Mme de La Fayette. There is instead intuition, the sudden spontaneous insight of the characters into the hidden places of the mind which disrupts personality. Thus we are told of the Prince de Clèves:

'Il ne trouvait de tous côtés que des précipices et des abîmes.'

It is not until the end of the eighteenth century that the artist (as distinct from the moralist or the diarist) deliberately sits back, takes his feelings to pieces, explains their causes and passes judgment upon them. The words '*cette portion de nous, qui est, pour ainsi dire, spectatrice de l'autre*' show to what lengths the

ravages of self-consciousness had gone. The result may appear to be the same, but the way in which it is produced is not. 'J'ai voulu peindre dans *Adolphe*,' said Constant in the Preface to the second edition, 'une des principales maladies morales de notre siècle, cette fatigue, cette incertitude, cette absence de force, cette analyse perpétuelle, qui place une arrière-pensée à côté de tous les sentimens, et qui par là les corrompt dès leur naissance.'<sup>10</sup> Racine's characters are destroyed by a violent conflict, those of the nineteenth-century novelists by a process of gradual corrosion, a paralysis which spreads over their minds and feelings and reduces them to complete impotence. Constant uses an ingenious adaption of the method of Racine to present a nineteenth-century situation. The events described in *Adolphe* extend over four years, but by deliberately telescoping time, by compressing his story into a *résumé* of less than a hundred pages, Constant achieves the intense concentration of emotion, the same density that we find in Racine instead of the slow diffusion of emotion that we find in *l'Education sentimentale*. It is this which makes his experience so overwhelming and sometimes so revolting.

The difficulties and dangers of this method are immense. It needs intellectual integrity and clear-sightedness amounting to genius. For one of the principal dangers is that the mind, speculating about its own processes in retrospect, will end by distorting and falsifying the *données*. It is the temptation to which Rousseau succumbed. The other great danger is that the novel will cease to be a work of art at all and will degenerate into a psychologist's case book. This, it seems to me, is what happens in the later volumes of *A la recherche du temps perdu* and in *Les hommes de bonne volonté*.

Constant succeeded brilliantly where most of his successors failed. When we compare the opening of the *Confessions* with some of Adolphe's comments on his own experience, we have a very good idea of the quality of Constant's mind:

'Je forme une entreprise qui n'eut jamais d'exemple, et qui n'aura point d'imitateur. Je vais montrer à mes semblables un homme dans toute la vérité de la nature et cet homme sera moi. Je me suis montré tel que je suis; méprisable et vil quand je l'ai été, bon, généreux, sublime, quand je l'ai été: j'ai dévoilé mon intérieur, tel que tu l'as vu toi-même, Etre éternel.'

The theatrical tone is at once suspect and Rivière has pointed out that the adjectives *bon, généreux, sublime, vil, méprisable* actually prevent us from perceiving the feelings themselves; we see only Rousseau's interpretation of them. Constant's tone is very different:

'L'amour, qu'une heure auparavant je m'applaudissais de feindre, je crus tout-à-coup l'éprouver avec fureur.'

'Je me sentais, *de la meilleure foi du monde*, véritablement amoureux.'

'Offerte à mes regards dans un moment où mon coeur avait

<sup>10</sup>*Adolphe*, ed. Rudler, p. [xi].

*besoin d'amour, ma vanité de succès*, Ellénore me parut une conquête digne de moi.'

'*Adolphe*,' wrote Guy de Pourtalès, 'apportait la preuve que la partie la plus sérieuse et la plus riche de l'homme est intimement mêlée en lui à ses duperies et à sa littérature.'<sup>11</sup> Constant's attitude is one of extreme circumspection. He is determined to separate illusion from reality, false feelings from true, the feelings themselves from the interpretation which the mind automatically places on them to protect itself. It is not simply that he possessed that *vue directe*—that luminous glance—into the complexity of the human heart which Rivière declared to be singularly lacking in Flaubert: it is that we perceive the feeling and the moral judgment as separate and distinct. We do more than that. We perceive the simultaneous existence of different levels of feeling, the *partie la plus riche de l'homme* and his *duperies*, 'the need of his heart for love and of his vanity for success.' The *impuissances* and *faiblesses* are never converted into *calculs* and *systèmes*.

When this method is turned on *Adolphe* the results are impressive. He is not merely the pivot of the book; he is, strictly speaking, the only character in the book. Everything is rigorously subordinated to a single aim—to illuminate the deepest and unexplored places of his personality. In reading *Adolphe* I am sometimes reminded of an X-ray photograph, but an X-ray photograph in which one sees the blood flowing and the nerves throbbing. There are four main factors in his make-up: an intense vitality, an extreme shyness derived from his father, a deep-seated pessimism and, most important of all, what he calls *un besoin de sensibilité*:

'Ma contrainte avec lui [he says of his father] eut une grande influence sur mon caractère. Aussi timide que lui, mais plus agité, parce que j'étais plus jeune, je m'accoutumai à renfermer en moi-même tout ce que j'éprouvais, à ne former que des plans solitaires, à ne compter que sur moi pour leur exécution, à considérer les avis, l'intérêt, l'assistance et jusqu'à la seule présence des autres comme une gêne et comme un obstacle.'

It must be recognized that the *impressions primitives et fougueuses* already referred to are the sign of a genuine vitality, but this vitality made intellectual discipline and direction essential, and it is here that intellect failed. The absence of discipline and direction meant that shyness and artificial social convention acted as a dam which inhibited the proper functioning of nervous energy. As a result, *Adolphe's* feelings are constantly wasting themselves in useless eruptions. 'Mon esprit,' he said, 'm'entraînait au delà de toute mesure.' The reaction against this waste produced a no less dangerous lassitude which in turn undermined his vitality:

'Je n'avais pas cependant la profondeur d'égoïsme qu'un tel caractère paraît annoncer. Tout en ne m'intéressant qu'à moi, je m'intéressais faiblement à moi-même. Je portais au fond de mon coeur un besoin de sensibilité dont je ne m'apercevais pas; mais qui, ne trouvant point à se satisfaire, me détachait

<sup>11</sup>*De Hamlet à Swann*, Paris, 1924, p. 177.

successivement de tous les objets qui tour-à-tour attireraient ma curiosité.'

'Constant,' said Rudler in his great study, 'arrive en même temps . . . au dernier degré de la langueur vitale et de la lucidité intellectuelle.'<sup>12</sup> The weaknesses which are analysed with such skill in this passage are as different from the moral debility of the heroes of Chateaubriand and Musset as the method of Constant is from their wordy productions. The statement that Adolphe only took a feeble interest in himself points to a profound despair which paralyses *action*, but not *thought*. A large part of the book is devoted to the elucidation and analysis of this *besoin de sensibilité* which was undreamed of in the psychology of the seventeenth-century writers and which bears no relation to the *froidueur* and the *indifférence* that their characters display towards one another. What is disconcerting about Adolphe is that he is at once almost unbearably sensitive and insensible to the point of brutality, that he possesses great reserves of emotion but gives the impression of complete aridity. While it is true that his life is continually disrupted by gusts of violent feelings, these feelings are indeterminate and unattached. The intellect is incapable of directing them towards any useful end and they can never be *adequate* substitutes—I emphasise the word for reasons which will be apparent later—for other feelings that he does not possess. For the clue to the contradictions of Adolphe's character lies in the fact that he did not possess certain feelings which a normal person must be expected to possess. He is perpetually trying to create the missing feelings, to convince himself that he does possess them, that he is reacting normally to a particular situation. The strain gives the first part of the novel its restless, destructive movement—a movement which is reflected in phrases to which Constant has given a peculiar resonance: 'La fatigue d'une agitation sans but,' 'Je me débattais intérieurement' and—most striking of all—'Une agitation qui ressemblait fort à l'amour.' But every time the intellect, which is so ineffectual in directing emotion into fruitful channels, shatters the illusion and reveals him to himself as he really is. Only his 'curiosity'—a sinister word in *Adolphe*—is engaged and it vanishes because the heart is empty.

The genesis of the love affair with Ellénore is of particular interest. A friend of Adolphe's at D . . . has been paying court to a lady-in-waiting and after a long and arduous suit succeeds in seducing her. He is so overjoyed at his success that Adolphe jumps to the conclusion that a love affair is the proper solution of his own emotional problems. In other words, the connection with Ellénore does not originate in spontaneous attraction; it originates in an *idea*, in a theory of Adolphe's about his feelings:

'Tourmenté d'une émotion vague, je veux être aimé, me disais-je, et je regardais autour de moi; je ne voyais personne qui m'inspirât de l'amour, personne qui me parût susceptible d'en prendre. J'interrogeais mon coeur et mes goûts; je ne me sentais

<sup>12</sup>*La jeunesse de Benjamin Constant*, 1767-1794, p. 384.

aucun mouvement de préférence.'

The tragedy lies in the need of filling this interior void at all costs, of finding some means of stilling the devouring *agitation*. He naturally selects the person who can only stimulate and exasperate his own restlessness because she, too, is 'en lutte constante contre sa destinée,' has about her 'quelque chose de fougueux et d'inattendu':

'Ellénore n'avait qu'un esprit ordinaire: mais ses idées étaient justes, et ses expressions, toujours simples, étaient quelquefois frappantes par la noblesse et l'élévation de ses sentimens. Elle avait beaucoup de préjugés, mais tous ses préjugés étaient en sens inverse de son intérêt. Elle attachait le plus grand prix à la régularité de la conduite, précisément parce que la sienne n'était pas régulière suivant les notions reçues. Elle était très religieuse, parce que la religion condamnait rigoureusement son genre de vie. . . . Ellénore, en un mot, était en lutte constante contre sa destinée. . . . Cette opposition entre ses sentimens et la place qu'elle occupait dans le monde avait rendu son humeur fort inégale. . . . Comme elle était tourmentée d'une idée particulière, au milieu de la conversation la plus générale, elle ne restait jamais parfaitement calme. Mais par cela même, il y avait dans sa manière quelque chose de fougueux et d'inattendu, qui la rendait plus piquante qu'elle n'aurait dû l'être naturellement. La bizarrerie de sa position suppléait en elle à la nouveauté des idées.'

'Ce n'est *elle* [Mme de Staël] que sous le rapport de la tyrannie,' said Rosalie de Constant in a letter to her brother.<sup>13</sup> There is a great deal more of Mme de Staël in Ellénore than Constant admitted or than is sometimes admitted by his critics. The way in which he modified her character is interesting. He may have felt obscurely that in real life Mme de Staël was the dominant partner in the relationship and that it was she who was responsible for the waste of his great gifts. In the novel he takes his revenge. Ellénore is endowed only with an 'esprit ordinaire' and after intolerable suffering on both sides it is Adolphe who destroys her though he ruins himself in the process. The passage closes with one of Constant's rare and lovely images:

'On l'examinait avec intérêt et curiosité comme un bel orage.'

This image not only concentrates the diffused emotions of the whole scene; it marks a definite phase in the development of the novel. Adolphe is still the detached observer, but he will not remain so for long. The 'bel orage' looks forward ironically to another sort of storm.

'Je pensais faire, en observateur froid et impartial, le tour de son caractère et de son esprit. Mais chaque mot qu'elle disait me semblait revêtu d'une grâce inexplicable.'

The focus is shifting. The 'Je pensais faire . . .' shows that he is no longer altogether the detached observer, that he is becoming

<sup>13</sup> 12th July, 1816. V. *Adolphe*, ed. Rudler, p. 149.

enveloped in the 'storm.' A few lines later and it has happened.

'Je ne croyais pas aimer Ellénore; mais déjà je n'aurais pu me résigner à ne pas lui plaire.'

He succeeds in making her fall in love with him and the blunt statement: 'Elle se donna enfin tout entière,' is followed by the famous passage which begins, 'Charme de l'amour, qui pourrait vous peindre!' This passage is not, as it is sometimes said to be, a 'lyrical outburst' in the manner of Chateaubriand. It is a close piece of psychological analysis, but it has an immense élan which gives it a special importance. The movement of *Adolphe* is a twofold one. There are sudden élans, sudden expansions of feeling, but intimately connected with them is the reverse movement—the sudden contraction which deflates the feeling of fulness like a bubble and leaves only a desperate sense of emptiness and exhaustion. The 'Charme de l'amour' is followed almost immediately by

'Ellénore était sans doute un vif plaisir dans ma vie: mais elle n'était plus un *but*; elle était devenue un *lien*.'

The theory of the 'goal' and the 'bond' dominated Constant's personal life as it dominates the life of his hero. The intellect proposes the wrong 'goal,' directs feelings into the wrong channels, or at any rate allows them to flow into the wrong channels.<sup>14</sup> With a highly sensitive person this leads to a thoroughgoing emotional disorder:

J' avais souffert deux heures loin d'elle de l'idée qu'elle souffrait loin de moi. Je souffrais deux heures près d'elle, avant de pouvoir l'apaiser.'

'Je souffrais d'ignorer son sort, je souffrais même de ne pas la voir, et j'étais étonné de la peine que cette privation me causait.'

The feelings are described with Constant's customary lucidity, but it is clear that they are *substitute*-feelings—substitutes for the feelings which were lacking in his make-up and which he was perpetually trying to create. This means that all his nervous energy is converted into 'suffering,' into that personal and highly original suffering which springs from the perception of his own incompleteness. Nor should we overlook the speaker's 'astonishment'—it is mentioned more than once in the book—at his sufferings, astonishment that he is capable of such depths of feeling at all. The explanation is given by Adolphe himself in the next chapter:

'Je n'étais qu'un homme faible, reconnaissant et dominé; je n'étais soutenu par aucune impulsion qui partît du coeur.'

One of the most remarkable expressions of his emotional instability, of the ceaseless friction of feeling, occurs when he writes (under pressure from Ellénore) to ask his father's permission to

<sup>14</sup>It is significant that the only happy period of Constant's life came after the last love affair with Mme Récamier when he settled down to humdrum married life with Charlotte von Hardenberg and devoted the whole of his energies to their proper 'goal' which was politics.



spend another six months at D . . . :

'La réponse de mon père ne se fit pas attendre. Je tremblais, en ouvrant sa lettre, de la douleur qu'un refus causerait à Ellénore. . . . Mais en lisant le consentement qu'il m'accordait, tous les inconvénients d'une prolongation de séjour se présentèrent tout-à-coup à mon esprit. Encore six mois de gêne et de contrainte, m'écriai-je. . . .'

When the time comes for his departure he describes his emotion in some sentences which are one of the glories of this sombre master piece:

'Il y a dans les liaisons qui se prolongent quelque chose de si profond! Elles deviennent à notre insu une partie si intime de notre existence! Nous formons de loin, avec calme, la résolution de les rompre, nous croyons attendre avec impatience l'époque de l'exécuter; mais quand ce moment arrive il nous remplit de terreur; *et telle est la bizarrerie de notre coeur misérable, que nous quittons avec un déchirement horrible, ceux près de qui nous demeurions sans plaisir.*'

#### IV.

Paul Bourget once declared that the whole drama of *Adolphe* lies in 'la continuelle destruction de l'amour dans ce coeur de jeune homme par la pensée, et le continuel effort de la maîtresse pour reconstruire à force de passion et de tendresse, le sentiment qu'elle voit s'écrouler.'<sup>15</sup>

This view cannot be accepted without reservations. I have tried to show that the role of the intellect is other than Bourget suggests; but it is true that both Adolphe and Ellénore up to a point mistake the shadow for the substance and in the last part of the book she tries ironically to reconstruct an illusion.<sup>16</sup> For *Adolphe* has three phases. The first is the pursuit of the 'goal'—the conquest and seduction of Ellénore. The second is the period of disenchantment—the discovery that there is no 'goal.' In the third, the 'goal' is the rupture with Ellénore.

In the last phase there is a new alignment of forces and Adolphe, in spite of himself, makes common cause with his father and the Baron de T . . . in the destruction of his mistress. When his father writes:

'Votre naissance, vos talens, votre fortune, vous assignaient dans le monde une autre place que celle de compagnon d'une femme sans patrie et sans aveu. Votre lettre me prouve déjà que vous n'êtes pas content de vous. Songez que l'on ne gagne rien à prolonger une situation dont on rougit. Vous consommez inutilement les plus belles années de votre jeunesse, et cette perte est irréparable.'

—he is voicing thoughts which have already occurred to Adolphe himself:

<sup>15</sup>*Op. cit.*, p. 23.

<sup>16</sup>*Cf.* 'Elle me crut: elle s'enivra de *son* amour, qu'elle prenait pour le *nôtre*. . . .'

'Je me plains de ma vive contrainte, de ma jeunesse consumée dans l'inaction, du despotisme qu'elle exerçait sur toutes mes démarches.'

The father's voice is heard again as Adolphe prepares to leave for Poland, and in Poland it is echoed by the Baron de T . . . , who becomes, as it were, an extension of the father's role:

'Toutes les routes vous sont ouvertes . . . mais souvenez-vous bien qu'il y a entre vous et tous les genres de succès un obstacle insurmontable, et que cet obstacle est Ellénore.'

These words reverberate in Adolphe's mind and they do not fail to make an impression:

'Ces mots funestes, entre tous les genres de succès et vous, il existe un obstacle insurmontable, et cet obstacle, c'est Ellénore, retentissaient autour de moi.'

The drama is more complex than at first appeared. The outer conflict between father and son, between the individual and society, is reflected in the inner conflict in Adolphe's mind. The voices of the father and the Baron are like the chorus in a Greek tragedy. Whatever their shortcomings they represent a norm. The *convenances*, we remember, are *factices mais nécessaires*. Convention is beginning to assert itself:

'Chère amie, lui dis-je, on lutte quelque temps contre sa destinée, mais on finit toujours par céder. Les lois de la société sont plus fortes que les volontés des hommes. Les sentiments les plus impérieux se brisent contre la fatalité des circonstances. En vain l'on s'obstine à ne consulter que son *cœur*: on est condamné tôt ou tard à écouter la *raison*. . . . Je serai toujours votre ami. J'aurai toujours pour vous l'affection la plus profonde. Les deux années de notre liaison ne s'effaceront pas de ma mémoire: elles seront à jamais l'époque la plus belle de ma vie.'

In another passage he reflects:

'Ah! si le ciel m'eût accordé une femme que les *convenances sociales* me permissent d'avouer, que mon père ne rougit pas d'accepter pour fille, j'aurais été mille fois plus heureux.' . . .

These passages reveal the extent to which Adolphe has compromised with society. The attitude that he displays is not held up to admiration. His father's disapproval of the connection with Ellénore is understandable, but there is no genuine *moral conviction* behind this disapproval. The intentional vulgarity of the first passage and the *convenances sociales*, which always have a derogatory meaning, in the second provide all the comment that is necessary.

It is in other places that we must look for that peculiar wisdom which the book distils. It has not been sufficiently remarked that it contains a number of general statements which read for all the world like maxims lifted from the pages of the seventeenth-century moralists:

'C'est un affreux malheur de n'être pas aimé quand on aime. Mais c'en est un bien grand d'être aimé avec passion, quand on n'aime pas.'

'L'empchement, l'injustice, la distraction même se réparent. Mais la dissimulation jette dans l'amour un élément étranger qui

le dénaturation et le flétrit à ses propres yeux.'

'Cette duplicité était fort éloignée de mon caractère naturel: mais l'homme se déprave, dès qu'il a dans le coeur une seule pensée qu'il est constamment forcé de dissimuler.'

They are not abstractions or conclusions which are imposed on experience from without. They are statements of general validity which emerge logically from his experience. They are always dramatically appropriate—the last quotation is a particularly good example—and fall into their appointed places, carrying in each case the revelation of Adolphe to himself a stage further. They provide a background of sanity which places Adolphe's disordered feelings and the shabby *convenances* in their true perspective. It is this that gives the whole book its incomparable poise and maturity.

The more one studies the text of *Adolphe*, the more impressed one is by the skill with which it is constructed, with which the diverse strands are woven into the pattern. The inner and outer conflicts revolve like concentric circles. Phrases and words are constantly echoing and answering one another. The 'travail assez opiniâtre au milieu d'une vie très dissipée,' which had distinguished Adolphe from his fellow-students, is recalled to show that while he had wasted his youth in idleness less gifted men 'par le seul effort d'un travail opiniâtre et d'une vie régulière, m'avaient laissé loin derrière eux dans la route de la fortune.' The 'bel orage,' which he had complacently examined from without, becomes another kind of storm—'Notre vie ne fut qu'un perpétuel orage.' In the same way images dovetail neatly into one another, contributing to the strength and tautness of the book. Ellénore makes a desperate effort to break down the opposition to her which has grown up in Adolphe's mind:

'Elle aurait voulu *pénétrer dans le sanctuaire intime* de ma pensée, pour y briser une opposition sourde qui la révoltait contre moi.'

When she succeeds by the intermediary of a third person in breaking into the 'sanctuary,' it is only to find it deserted:

'C'est un grand pas, c'est un pas irréparable, lorsqu'on dévoile tout-à-coup aux yeux d'un tiers les replis cachés d'une relation intime. Le jour qui *pénètre dans ce sanctuaire* constate et achève les destructions que la nuit enveloppait de ses ombres; ainsi les corps renfermés dans les tombeaux conservent souvent leur première forme, jusqu'à ce que l'air extérieur vienne les frapper et les réduire en poudre.'

There is something stuffy and unnatural about the connection between Adolphe and this woman who is ten years his senior which gives us the sensation of two people living in an airless, over-heated boudoir without any contact with the outside world. As soon as it is brought out into the open for a moment and discussed with other people it begins to crumble away.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup>As an example of the extent to which they were cut off from the normative influence of society, he remarks of his conversation with the 'intermediary':

I have said that the images dovetail into one another, but the connection between them is so close that it would be more exact to call them sections of a single expanded image. Ellénore's attempt to break down Adolphe's opposition to her provokes a contrary movement which is expressed in the third or final section of the image:

'Que je n'entende de vous, dit-elle, aucun mot cruel. Je ne réclame plus, je ne m'oppose à rien; mais que cette voix que j'ai tant aimée, que cette voix, qui retentissait au fond de mon coeur, n'y pénètre pour le déchirer.'

Although the 'storms' described in the closing chapters remind us of the bitter encounters between Racine's characters, the resemblance is a superficial one. They are the sign of nervous exasperation and their function is to reveal an interior, subterranean process of dissolution<sup>18</sup>:

'Nous vivions, pour ainsi dire, d'une espèce de mémoire du coeur, assez puissante pour que l'idée de nous séparer fût douloureuse, trop faible pour que nous trouvassions du bonheur à être unis. . . . J'aurais voulu donner à Ellénore des témoignages de tendresse qui la contentassent. Je reprenais quelquefois avec elle le langage de l'amour: mais ces émotions et ce langage ressemblaient à ces feuilles pâles et décolorées, qui, par un reste de végétation funèbre, croissent languissant sur les branches d'un arbre déraciné.'

The passage is constructed out of simple materials which seem at first to give it a literary flavour; but when we look into it, we see how effective the first sentence is in describing the atmosphere of gradual dissolution. The 'reste de végétation funèbre,' the 'feuilles pâles et décolorées' and the dying fall of 'croissent languissant sur les branches d'un arbre déraciné' convey not merely the dissolution of an attachment, but the disappearance of all feeling. It is characteristic of Constant's images that they nearly all lead back to the speaker. It is Adolphe himself who is the 'arbre déraciné.'

These images are not numerous—it is this that makes them stand out with such power—but each one leads logically to the next and marks a further stage in the process of decay. The sections of the landscape image are as closely linked as those of the image of the 'sanctuaire intime,' and the separate strands of the images winding in and out of one another give the book its rich complexity:

'C'était une de ces journées d'hiver, où le soleil éclaire tristement la campagne grisâtre, comme s'il regardait en pitié la terre qu'il avait cessé de réchauffer. . . . Le ciel était serein:

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'Les reproches d'Ellénore m'avaient persuadé que j'étais coupable; j'appris de celle qui croyait la défendre que je n'étais que malheureux.'

<sup>18</sup>Cf. 'La vérité se fit jour de toutes parts, et j'empruntai, pour me faire entendre, les expressions les plus dures et les plus impitoyables.'

mais les arbres étaient sans feuilles: aucun souffle n'agitait l'air, aucun oiseau ne le traversait, tout était immobile, et le seul bruit qui se fit entendre était celui de l'herbe glacée qui se brisait sous nos pas. Comme tout est calme, me dit Ellénore, comme la nature se résigne! Le cœur ne doit-il pas apprendre à se résigner?'

Constant's experience is never merely personal. The autumnal imagery, with its emphasis on death and decay, faithfully reflects the age that produced it. The change from autumn to winter, too, has its point. It marks the beginning of a new phase of the experience and it brings out the difference between Ellénore and Adolphe. In spite of her extravagances, Ellénore stands for life and vitality, as Adolphe stands for an arid intellectualism which destroys both. The barren beauty of the scene, the pale sunshine which no longer warms the earth and the sigh of resignation leave an almost painful sensation of life running to waste. Adolphe's dilemma is not less painful. What feeling persists stiffens, becomes hard and brittle as a frozen immobility steals over it.

It has been said that Constant was lacking in imagination and unfavourable comparisons between his style and Chateaubriand's were not uncommon among nineteenth-century critics. Faguet, for example, called him 'un Chateaubriand qui n'est pas assez poète pour faire de son ennui une grande mélancolie lyrique.'<sup>19</sup> This judgment seems to rest on a misunderstanding of the nature of imagination. All that it means is that instead of writing a poetical prose in the manner of the Romantics with their large blurred effects, Constant confines himself strictly to the prose use of language. His genius like Racine's is the genius of the French language. In English and German literature there is often an unanalysed residue in the feelings presented. We are conscious of intimate stresses and frustrations beating behind a wall of words, and this makes a whole poem or a whole novel vague and blurred. In Constant's prose there is no vagueness and no blur. He possessed the great French masters' power of seizing the obscurest feelings at the moment of their formation and translating them into exact language. Not a shade, not a tremor escapes him. This is not all. What is striking about his style is the number of different notes that he succeeded in extracting from his instrument. It ranges from passages of precise analysis and adaptations of the seventeenth-century moralists to passages like 'Charme de l'amour' and the autumnal imagery of the closing chapters which reveals his exceptional delicacy in rendering the shift and change of mood, his power of enclosing in a concrete image feelings which seem to lie just beyond language.

His clear-sightedness and restraint are seen at their best in the descriptions of Adolphe's state of mind at the time of Ellénore's death:

'Ce n'était pas les regrets de l'amour, c'était un sentiment plus sombre et plus triste. L'amour s'identifie tellement à l'objet aimé, que dans son désespoir même il y a quelque charme.

<sup>19</sup>*Op. cit.*, p. 191.

Il lutte contre la réalité, contre la destinée; l'ardeur de son désir le trompe sur ses forces, et l'exalte au milieu de sa douleur. La mienne était morne et solitaire. Je n'espérais point mourir avec Ellénore. J'allais vivre sans elle dans ce désert du monde, que j'avais souhaité tant de fois de traverser indépendamment. J'avais brisé l'être qui m'aimait: j'avais brisé ce coeur, compagnon du mien, qui avait persisté à se dévouer à moi, dans sa tendresse infatigable. Déjà l'isolement m'atteignait.'

The speaker begins by defining the normal reactions to a situation, then he turns suddenly on himself and shows how his reactions differ from the normal. The movement of the passage is characteristic. Love may mistake its strength, but the vigour behind the 'lutte contre la réalité' and 'l'ardeur de son désir' is genuine and it is contrasted with the horrible sinking sensation that one feels in 'La mienne était morne et solitaire.' The short, broken phrases, 'J'avais brisé l'être qui m'aimait,' 'J'avais brisé ce coeur, compagnon du mien,' fall like blows striking down the mistress and, at the same time, driving into Adolphe's mind the consciousness of his own isolation.

'Je sentis le dernier lien se rompre, et l'affreuse réalité se placer à jamais entre elle et moi. Combien elle me pesait, cette liberté que j'avais tant regrettée! Combien elle manquait à mon coeur, cette dépendance qui m'avait révolté souvent! Naguère, toutes mes actions avaient un but. J'étais sûr, par chacune d'elles, d'épargner une peine ou de causer un plaisir. Je m'en plaignais alors. J'étais impatienté qu'un oeil ami observât mes démarches, que le bonheur d'un autre y fût attaché. Personne maintenant ne les observait: elles n'intéressaient personne. Nul ne me disputait mon temps, ni mes heures: aucune voix ne me rappelait quand je sortais: j'étais libre en effet; je n'étais plus aimé: j'étais étranger pour tout le monde.'

This is the final stage in the revelation of Adolphe to himself. He had been living in a world of illusion, carefully shielded from the uncomfortable world of everyday life by Ellénore's extraordinary though oppressive devotion. Now the awakening, which he had dimly perceived like an uneasy dreamer, has come. The final link snaps and 'l'affreuse réalité' imposes itself upon him. He has reached his 'goal,' he has rid himself of the 'bond' only to find that life has suddenly lost his meaning, that he has become an outcast in a world that he does not know. The problem lies in the 'besoin de sensibilité' and it is insoluble. Ellénore ministered to his need and for a time gave him the illusion of fulfilment. It is Adolphe's incapacity for certain feelings which makes her at once a tyrant and a necessity, so that her death dissolves the 'bond' without solving the problem. The aim of the passage is the definition of a particular state of mind. It moves with mathematical precision from one point to another, from the shock of awakening in 'Je sentis le dernier lien se rompre' to the complete helplessness of 'J'étais étranger pour tout le monde.' The perception that there is no longer any 'goal,' that no one is interested in him any longer are stages on the way. The short, staccato phrases perform a different



function in this passage. They express a powerful sensation of disintegration, as though the speaker were falling apart.

'*Adolphe*,' wrote Pourtalès, 'a enrichi le monde d'une souffrance nouvelle.'<sup>19</sup> The interior void, the feeling of life ebbing into the sand, which is the heart of *Adolphe*, is something new in European literature. It is different from Pascal's *angoisse métaphysique* and from the sense of emptiness and waste that we feel in *l'Éducation sentimentale*.

When we compare *Adolphe* with the productions of our own time, we may easily conclude that its direct influence on the development of the novel has been very great. This is almost certainly a mistake. It is rather that the way in which man and society have developed has imposed a certain method on the novelist. Constant was the first representative of a fresh situation and his novel is an eminent example of a new technique.

Constant's maturity and the way in which his moral experience is an integral part of his emotional experience give *Adolphe* its immense stature among modern novels, make it a standard by which other writers can be tested. Far from being merely a personal confession, it is the record, as all great art must be, of something that happened to human nature as a whole. It records the disintegration of the unity of the individual in a hostile environment. All *Adolphe*'s best faculties—his magnificent intelligence, his nervous vitality—are at odds with one another and contribute to the work of destruction, and this makes him the ancestor of the heroes of innumerable modern novels. The unity of the individual is restored in Balzac, but it is an artificial and not an organic unity. It is only accomplished through simplification and omissions, and the surface complexity and bustle of the *Comédie humaine* fail to conceal a profoundly immature view of life. Constant's unerring sense of moral values is one of his outstanding merits, but it is clear that his hold on them is precarious, that humanity is turning its back on them and moving in the other direction. Its absence accounts for the emptiness of Flaubert's novels and the vacancy and fatuity of his characters, bringing him closer than he was aware to fulfilling his sinister ambition 'to write a novel about nothing.' Proust and Gide show how far the process has gone since Flaubert. Indeed, a comparison between Constant and Gide—a writer whose background and habits of mind are similar in some respects—provides a salutary comment on the fashionable and admiring description of Gide as 'the greatest living writer.'

MARTIN TURNELL.

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<sup>19</sup>*Op. cit.*, p. 217.

## COMMENTS AND REVIEWS

This number comes out at the normal interval after the last—which is to say that the Editors have not yet succeeded in making up the lag. Difficulties at the printing-house have been insuperable.

Readers will find that the review section is again short. The Editors intend to include a greater proportion of reviewing in the next number. There is, however, not only the problem of space; to get the due reviewing done becomes more and more difficult as the connexion disperses.

The next number will contain a further instalment of the essay on Chaucer. (If the present instalment exhibits any defect of proof-reading, that is because John Speirs is at Cairo and to send the proofs there and back was out of the question). There will also be a further instalment of *A Critical Theory of Jane Austen's Writings* by Q. D. Leavis, and a survey of the Irish Novel by D. J. Enright.

### MILTON AGAIN

*A PREFACE TO PARADISE LOST*, by C. S. Lewis (Oxford University Press, 7s. 6d.).

In recent years some of the noisiest thwacks on the literary battlefield have been delivered by those who have felt themselves called on to defend Milton against his 'modern detractors.' Mr. C. S. Lewis, whose little book is intended as a contribution to the defence, is at least courteous to his opponents; he genuinely wishes to persuade and not merely to browbeat them. But I doubt whether *A Preface to Paradise Lost* will in fact persuade many of those who have examined their reasons for disagreeing with the customary attitude towards the poet.

It can hardly be too often repeated that the first aim of literary criticism is, by means of a supple and disciplined attention to the use of words, to explore and assess the sensibility of each particular writer, to discover, that is, the range and quality of that perceptiveness, physical and moral, which nourishes and is nourished by the life of the emotions. Any discussion of literature not informed and controlled by this purpose is bound to be peripheral—at best—or irrelevant and misleading. In the light of this simple truth Mr. Lewis's account of Milton's aims and achievement is seen to be built up from the outside; it does not strike to the centre.

The point can be illustrated from Mr. Lewis's justification of the Miltonic style. The defence is founded on a distinction, elaborated in several sections, between 'Primary epic,' intended to be listened to (the *Iliad*, *Beowulf*), and 'Secondary epic,' intended to be read (the *Aeneid*, *Paradise Lost*). The style of Virgil and Milton, the argument proceeds: