

CONSTANT, BENJAMIN

Benjamin Constant, his importance for his time. Benjamin Constant (1767-1830) was a distinguished novelist (of one novel) and a committed and influential Liberal in the early Revolutionary sense. He has left a firm mark on many aspects of literary/social thought in France.

Benjamin Constant, the life. Constant was born in Lausanne, Switzerland, of French Huguenots who left France as dissidents as early as the sixteenth century. His father—like his grandfather and uncle—was a high ranking officer in the French Army, and Constant himself was soon to sign up with the Dutch States Army. Prior to that he had been carefully trained and educated by both his grandmothers, and was a zealous student under private tutoring in Brussels (1779), in the Netherlands (1780), and in Erlangen (1783), the Protestant University. Drawing on family connections, he moved from France to Scotland. There he accumulated sizeable gambling debts, which at his departure he promised to return and pay. In 1787 Constant returned to Scotland—traveling by horseback through England—and paid off his debts. (He was all this time writing fervently, but not publishing his work.) In 1792 he moved to the Court of Charles William Ferdinand, and then in 1795 made the acquaintance of Mme. De Stael, with whom he was to live and have a highly public affair, which lasted until 1811. After his separation from Mme. de Stael Constant devoted himself not only to the writing of his novel *Adolphe*, which he started in 1816, but to fervent political activity, becoming a member of the Council of State, and achieving election to the Chamber of Deputies.

Constant's political philosophy. Constant was familiar with much of Europe, and like many Frenchmen of his Revolutionary period, particularly admired the Constitutional Monarchy of England. In developing, and expounding, this opinion, Constant wrote and thought innovatively about the nature of government, which he firmly believed exists only to serve the people. The modern state, he believed, was too extensive and impersonal to proceed like the ancient classical democracies, on the basis of direct representation, and needed to adopt a new kind of democracy, fitted to mass culture and accepting commerce as its driving force. Constant's exposition of his political ideology drew wide attention, and was consulted and put into practice by a wide variety of new governments. The list, in its breadth, shows the extent of influence of Constant's liberalism: Spain, Portugal, Greece, Belgium, and social developments taking place in Brasil and Mexico.

Constant's fiction. *Adolphe*, 1816, Constant's one major work of fiction, shows with brilliant clarity the kind of Romantic ideology that pervaded European literature from the time of Goethe's *Werther*. The story is simple, but emblematic for the social/emotional world of Romanticism. The narrator is an introverted son of a government minister, who is of melancholy disposition, and has fallen under the influence of a rather cynical older friend. Under the spell of this viewpoint he devises a plan to seduce a beautiful Polish woman, ten years his senior. The seduction is successful, the pair fall in love, and lose all awareness of the world around them. Unfortunately, however, Adolphe's father, and many aiding voices, feel Adolphe is wasting his life. Much is done to break up the pair, and a final blow—a letter discovered by Ellenore, revealing Adolphe's decision to leave her—leads to her death, and his even deeper alienation from the world than he had been drowned in as a young man.

Reading

Primary source reading

Adolphe, trans. Tancock, 1990.

Secondary source reading

Wood, Dennis, *Benjamin Constant: A Biography*, 1993.

Further reading

Biancamaria, F., *Benjamin Constant and the Post-Revolutionary Mind*, 1991.

Original language reading

Todorov, T., *Benjamin Constant: La Passion démocratique*, 1991,

Suggested paper topics

Read and think about *Adolphe*, and then compare its message to the political activism of Constant, which appears based on a profound faith in mankind's democratic possibilities. Do you see any conflict between the novel and the political position?

Give some thought to the remarkable influence of Constant on political ideologies and rulers in post-Revolutionary Europe. Does Constant appear to you to have relevance and meaning for political developments in our own time?

Excerpt

http://quotes.liberty-tree.ca/quotes_by/benjamin+constant

First ask yourselves, Gentlemen, what an Englishman, a Frenchman, and a citizen of the United States of America understand today by the word 'liberty'. For each of them it is the right to be subjected only to the laws, and to be neither arrested, detained, put to death nor maltreated in any way by the arbitrary will of one or more individuals. It is the right of everyone to express their opinion, choose a profession and practice it, to dispose of property, and even to abuse it; to come and go without permission, and without having to account for their motives or undertakings. It is everyone's right to associate with other individuals, either to discuss their interests, or to profess the religion which they or their associates prefer, or even simply to occupy their days or hours in a way which is more compatible with their inclinations or whims. Finally, it is everyone's right to exercise some influence on the administration of the government, either by electing all or particular officials, or through representations, petitions, demands to which the authorities are more or less compelled to pay heed. Now compare this liberty with that of the ancients. The latter consisted in exercising collectively, but directly, several parts of the complete sovereignty; in deliberating, in the public square, over war and peace; in forming alliances with foreign governments; in voting laws, in pronouncing judgments; in examining the accounts, the acts, the stewardship of the magistrates; in calling them to appear in front of the assembled people, in accusing, condemning or absolving them. But if this was what the ancients called liberty, they admitted as compatible with this collective freedom the complete subjection of the individual to the authority of the community.