

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, PhD

ADOLPHE. 1816 BENJAMIN CONSTANT (1767-1830)

OVERVIEW

Background The advent of Romanticism marked many of the finest literary texts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in France. Think of a short list of such texts. *La Princesse de Cleves* by Mme de Lafayette, the voluminous heart filled work of Victor Hugo and Chateaubriand, the confessional outpourings of Jean Jacques Rousseau, the emotion rich poetry of Lamartine, Alfred de Musset, or the novel *Dominique* (Eugene Fromentin, 1862.) The text before us, *Adolphe*, was created in 1816, and lies square in the opening out of a new French sensibility. No simple formula encompasses this surge of fresh tuned literary—also musical, pictorial, architectural—creations, which pour over us like a breaking dam, and pre indicate the rise of what in a few decades we will be calling Modernism—Gide, Proust, Apollinaire-- as the nineteenth melds into the twentieth. Romanticism, meanwhile, will have opened a unique position in human expressiveness, and found its way to new provocations of our creative self-definition.

Auteur Benjamin Constant was a polymath, world traveler, young (and older) lover, prolific writer, particularly on topics like human freedom, liberty., the justified place of law and order in society—in other words he was a classic romantic. His only novel was *Adolphe*, in which he clearly also created an autobiography, a self-portrait in the form of a young man caught up in an ultimately fatal love affair. There is, of course, far more to say of this autobiography—we say a little below—but let it first be said that what may seem to us, in *Adolphe*, a very fine sensitivity to the place of freedom and restraint in social interactions, plays out in Constant's more formal works into a fascination with parliamentarianism as the most liberal and least burdensome form of government. (The relations of Adolphe to Ellenore, his lover are so fine-tuned that they might be compared to the finesse relationships of different interacting parts of a government.)

There is a brisk, clear flowing, and simple narrative related by the main character, Adolphe, who doubles very well as Constant himself. That is the substance of the autobiography, whose author, Constant, is at the same time writing his own life account. We are reading a novel, about a lovelorn young man, a novel which is at the same time an autobiography of the novelist, a lovelorn young man.

Story Adolphe himself, in the novel, is a young man in his early twenties who is completing his university studies at Goettingen, and who is spending a few post graduate months with a family friend, a mid-life gentleman, who is living with his much younger paramour, a young lady named Ellenore who has born him two children.

The flow of the novel tracks the growing infatuation of Adolphe for Ellenore, their love affair and inseparability, their ultimate steps into scandal, as Ellenore splits farther from her paramour, and the community grows aghast at the impropriety festering in their midst. In the end, it is no great surprise to learn, the morally shaky Ellenore dies of what we may call ultimate moral confusion, while Adolphe survives to tell the breathless story.

The story itself is the seamless account of the growing passion of Adolphe and Ellenore for one another. The valence of passion shifts now in one direction, now in the other, with very few oases in which the two lovers can feed on the intoxication of being together. (They are both, of course, tortured by the consciousness of 'living in sin,' while at the same time their mutual lust will give them no moment of peace.) Constant proves his artistic brilliance by the way he sees the world simultaneously from now one, now the other of the two lovers' infatuations. He rivals such students, of the exquisite torture of love, as Goethe in *Werther*, or as Dante in the story of Paolo and Francesca.

Autobiography and real life The story of Adolphe and Ellemore and their transitory but to them global passion, occupied a preeminent role in Constant's creative development. His best known Romantic-intellectual contact—to make the obvious point-- was with Mme de Stael with whom he was for seventeen years both lover and intellectual partner, exchanging letters, collaborating on texts, and travelling widely; sharing together the pleasures of the highest German thought levels---Goethe, Schiller—with which they interacted deeply. To which it should be added that from the Benjamin Constant / de Stael affair there resulted a high degree of fructuation of western European thought and awareness. There is reason to think that the rich contribution of Constant to European thought on political science, comparative religion, and psychology all had their origins in Mme. de Stael's bed. That was in any case the reading during Constant's lifetime, although in his later years—and after the success of *Adolphe* as a book-- Constant did all he could to dampen any suggestions of the bond between his text and his relation to Mme. de Stael.

CHARACTER

Adolphe is the central figure in the events of the novel, *Adolphe*, in which Benjamin Constant depicts seminal moments in his own life, and those of his lover presenting herself from the inside. The art trick, of Constant, is to present himself both as master of ceremonies of the whole world drama, and as a continually tortured main figure of the entire drama before us.

Illustrative moments

Waking Adolphe only slowly realizes that love is possible between himself and Ellemore. He is of a romantic nature, yet of a careful and timid spirit, and therefore needs some external impetus to address her. That impetus comes in the form of a chance tale of another man, who was successful in seducing a woman he has fallen for. Why can't I do it too? Adolphe wonders.

Family scene Adolphe, Ellemore, and the father of Ellemore's two small children find themselves sitting together in the parlor. An awkward moment, in which the sixty year old senior makes it plain that he wants Adolphe to get out.

Breaking point Ellemore's paramour finally has enough, and forbids Ellemore to see any more of Adolphe. This is the breaking point for Ellemore, who leaves the house and her two children. She will live on for a while, with Adolphe, but before long she will succumb to her misery and die.

Dependence Adolphe, on his own with Ellemore, has fallen seriously in debt to her, and depends on her to cure him from duel wounds. He has sacrificed any power to govern the path of his romantic life. He is not sure where to turn.

Death. Finally Ellemore succumbs to the mounting distresses of losing her children and losing any family stability. Her death was inevitable from the time she first yielded to Adolphe. She dies.

Parallels

Goethe's *Werther* (1774), like much Romantic art, gladly deals with the often tragic sorrows of Romantic love. Like Werther, Adolphe gravitates toward a love affair which he knows will have no happy ending. It was expected, by Adolphe's dad that he would continue, after college, in the career path set out for him, by his father's role as a government minister. But in the end, intervention by a needed friend of his father was necessary, Adolphe yielded to his father, and effectively killed Ellemore, simply by unplugging himself from their sustaining love.

Discussion Questions

What *should Adolphe have done, to feel and cause less pain?* This question, which lies at the center of the present novel, pinpoints the entire text's query, about the beauty and tragedy of romantic love. Is not such love, which brings chaos to middle class existence, destined to create tragedy? Must something so beautiful and seductive be so destructive?

What *resolution can we provide, to the harsh dilemma created when Ellemore's longtime lover asks Adolphe to leave?* The request is justified—Adolphe is an intruder, even an unwanted intruder—and two small

children are involved. But where does that leave Adolphe? By this time he is hugely indebted to Ellemore for needed loans, and, as it worked out, for healing him after he has been wounded in a duel. Has it not become the point of the tale that it is risky to enter 'innocently' on an affair of the heart?

Given our brief historical review of Romanticism in French literature, would you say *Adolphe* is typical for the Romantic imagination?

Does Ellemore's death seem to you to make sense given the perplexity of the life situation she allows to overtake her? Does Romanticism fall short, when it comes to humor and irony?

Does Adolphe make an effort to avoid the fatal trap he can see approaching him—expulsion from paradise? Or is he too young and naïve? Does he establish any personal rapport with Ellemore's long-time lover? Would that have been possible for Adolphe?