

INSPIRATION AND ITS EXPRESSION: THE DIALECTIC OF
SENTIMENT IN THE WRITINGS OF BENJAMIN
CONSTANT

INTRODUCTION

The maxims in Benjamin Constant's novel, *Adolphe*, have provoked a certain amount of interest on the part of scholars over the past several years. While some believe that the numerous maxims found in the novel are a vestige of classical form, aphorisms that do little for the literary work, others, more recently, have interpreted the maxims as a form of discourse that plays an important function in the work. On this level, they can be seen as an attempt to win the reader over to the perspective of the main protagonist, *Adolphe*, or they can be interpreted as an attempt to invoke closure within the work itself, with various characters seeking to impose their point of view on others (cf. Alison Fairlie 1981, and Colette Coman 1982). The maxim can also be interpreted as a search for truth, however, especially when maxims pronounced by the narrator are compared with maxims formulated by characters in the novel who seek to influence others, whereas the narrator's maxims appear to have a different function (for a discussion of these different positions, see V. Kocay, 1995).

In this paper I would like to propose that the maxim form, which often seems to express only various platitudes, is an inscription in the text of a different sort of text, a text of an ideological position. In order to show this, I will first present a synopsis of Constant's works, and then discuss in more detail the notion of religious sentiment as it is developed by Constant in his several volumes on religion. The notion of sentiment is the most important notion in these works, and perhaps in all of Constant's writings. It leads to an interesting development philosophically, and manifests certain affinities with the philosophy of Hegel, most notably with Hegel's *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, but also with the *Philosophy of History*. In its more simplified form, that is, as intimate sentiment, it is also the most frequent notion expressed in Constant's numerous maxims.

BACKGROUND

Constant's works can be divided into three distinct groups: his literary works, his political works, and his seven volumes on religion and religious forms. Researchers have long focused on the literary works, and more recently on his political tracts. The works on religion have remained relatively obscure (cf. Pierre Deguise 1966, and Patrice Thompson 1978). An abridged edition of these works was published recently in France (Actes Sud, 1998), and a more complete edition is currently in preparation (cf. *Oeuvres complètes de Benjamin Constant*).

Constant is well known as the author of the novel *Adolphe*. This short work has been edited on numerous occasions by various scholars, and has been translated into many languages. It is frequently included in the syllabus for courses on nineteenth-century French literature, perhaps most particularly because it nicely represents the transition from classicism to romanticism. Constant's style and language belong to the classical school, whereas the content of his work has more in common with romantic authors such as Chateaubriand and Hugo. The novel *Adolphe* has also provoked a great deal of interest from the moral perspective, however. It is the story of a young man with a promising career who decides to follow the example of his friend and find himself a mistress. He succeeds in his quest in Chapter Three of ten, and for the remaining seven chapters finds himself in a troublesome situation, namely, not knowing how to end his relationship with his mistress, Ellénore, who, he thinks, because of her unfavorable social situation, has become an obstacle to his career. While many have seen *Adolphe* as a weak character unable to break definitively with Ellénore, others have seen him as a careful manipulator of the reader's moral judgment. The maxim form is of considerable importance for this latter interpretation. But it is also possible to consider the character, *Adolphe*, as a kind of anti-hero who refuses to follow the traditions of his father and abandon Ellénore, but who is not entirely willing to commit himself to the new romantic ideal to which he aspires and which to a certain degree he creates. In this sense *Adolphe* is a tragedy, occasioned by the situation in which the main characters evolve.

Constant's first political tracts, *De la Force du gouvernement actuel de la France et de la nécessité de s'y rallier*, date from 1796 and deal specifically with the Revolution in France. Constant's position with respect to the Revolution can be expressed as follows: because the revolutionary government was able to consolidate its power, thereby underscoring its legitimacy, it was pointless to resist the government by counter-revolutionary

activity and thereby throw the country back into a state of civil war. This position is somewhat tenuous, however, for it could be used in almost any instance to justify whatever regime happened to be in power. Constant's seemingly innocent position is perhaps not quite as innocent as he would have liked to believe, for it implies acquiescence and perhaps even a tacit approval of the revolutionary government. However, it is clear from the position he takes against an increase in revolutionary activity, that his position is not simply an approval of the Revolution, or of its consequences. Constant's position is in fact a delicate one between two opposing and well-armed camps, and in this perspective may even appear foolish. But Constant's reasoning is more profound than a call for peace for the sake of peace, for it is fairly clear that he bases his support for the revolutionary government on principles that he considers of greater importance than the form or color of government. It was clear from an early stage that Constant's political notions were not so much a reflection of a particular ideology or form, as they were the expression of specific values such as individual freedom and social harmony. That is to say that political form was less important than the objectives to be achieved.

After Napoleon's retreat from Moscow in 1813, Constant published a text, *De l'Esprit de conquête et de l'usurpation*, denouncing dictatorship. This work, his first major success, was followed in 1815 by his work on political principles, *Principes de politique applicables à tous les gouvernements*, the objective of which was to outline the forms of government that best protected individuals from the all-intrusive powers of the state. His evident knowledge of political systems earned him an invitation from Napoleon, upon the latter's return to power in the Spring of 1815, to participate in the drafting of a new constitution that would guarantee individual freedoms and perhaps enable him to remain in power. Napoleon's experiment with individual freedoms was short-lived, however. It ended abruptly with the battle of Waterloo, and Constant was left in an awkward situation: he had rallied to Napoleon, the despised and now defeated dictator, after having repeatedly denounced the spirit of conquest, military rule and authoritarian regimes.

Following the restoration of the monarchy in France, Constant was nonetheless elected to the legislative assembly, where he served for many years and earned the reputation of a liberal who espoused freedom in various forms. He defended individual freedom, political freedom, religious freedom, and was a tireless defender of the freedom of the press. He remained actively involved in politics both as an elected representative and as the author of

hundreds of articles in various publications, until his death in 1830. (On Constant's life, see the excellent biography by Dennis M. Wood, 1993.)

Constant's reputation as a politician remained somewhat tarnished, however, because of his so-called flip-flop during Napoleon's return to power in 1815. After having decried dictatorship and usurpation both in writing and in speeches, often with only slightly veiled attacks against Napoleon, Constant suddenly seemed to reverse his position and support the dictator. This was inexplicable, if not unjustifiable, for many observers, and invited claims of opportunism and betrayal from enemies and former associates. Constant defended himself in a series of letters published in 1819, subsequently published separately as *Mémoires sur les Cent-Jours*, in which he basically reiterates the position he took in the aftermath of the French Revolution, that is, that the actual form of government was of less importance than the practice of government, and that the new constitution that he had drafted at Napoleon's request, if it had been adopted, would have gone a long way towards guaranteeing the kinds of individual freedoms that he espoused. It was after all, according to Constant, the application of the constitution that was primary and that would ultimately determine its worthiness.

CONSTANT'S RELIGIOUS AND SOCIAL THEORY OF PROGRESS

Whether or not one accepts Constant's justifications for his active involvement with government during Napoleon's return to power, it remains that his political beliefs are in some instances difficult to make precise. This in part explains why numerous works have been published recently on Constant's political thought. The works on religion are often ignored or overlooked in this context; however, most critics, seemingly adopting the position that these works are of an anticlerical nature, say little about Constant's actual beliefs. But it is most particularly on this precise point that his works on religion are of considerable importance, for it is in these works that Constant develops his perspective on historical development, a part of which is the notion of intimate sentiment as the defining feature of human beings.

From the perspective of his political writings, his many volumes on religion and polytheism would seem thus to represent a kind of anachronism, a vestige of XVIIIth century anti-clericalism (cf. Stephen Holmes, 1984); but a close reading of these works reveals that more is involved than a simple condemnation of atrocities committed in the name of the Church. It is in his works on religion, composed for the most part from 1802 to 1813, and especially during his more or less self-imposed exile in Germany at the residence of his second wife, Charlotte de Hardenberg, that Constant

developed the notion of sentiment as an intellectual construct that he could apply to other works as well as to real life situations, although it must be stated that he did not undertake the writing of these works in order to explore the notion of intimate sentiment. Rather, this complex notion, or construct, derives from a struggle with research methodology and with the means of presentation best suited to the material. Constant's struggle is chronicled in his journals from this period (cf. *Journaux intimes*), and is evident in the state of the manuscripts in the archives held at the University of Lausanne, Switzerland (cf. also P. Thompson 1994). Constant wrote and rewrote his material, frequently changing his point of view and hence his objectives. The final form that he gives to the published works betrays his belief in the importance of the notion of sentiment, both as a religious notion and as a philosophical tool. This is an important point to the extent that it speaks to the critique of idealism that the notion of intimate sentiment might evoke. Constant's subjectivist turn in fact evolves from his study of the anthropological material available to him at the time.

Constant's grappling with methodology betrays a dual perspective, and in fact constitutes the force of his later publications in the form of a dialectic of sentiment. On the one hand he attempted to produce an account of religious forms through the ages and in different geographical regions. From this perspective his works have more in common with anthropology than with philosophy or theology. He soon realized, however, that the amount of material available to him, and required to accurately describe the different religious forms, far surpassed his capacities, and was in any case of dubious importance. The knowledge available in the form of factual information continued to swell as scholars increasingly became aware of cultural diversities and historical developments. Furthermore, limiting his work to an account of known factual information would make his not only a superfluous publication – Constant was not himself an anthropologist and relied on specialists for their descriptions of past religious forms – but also a work of dubious importance, for there would be no common idea that held the material together. On the other hand, he understood that if he theorized religious forms, that is, if he made his material into a narrative form, he would then move beyond his “neutral” anthropological perspective and become involved in abstract reasoning, at which point his research would evolve on a different plane (cf. Thompson 1978 and 1991). Constant refers to these two perspectives as the historical and the didactic.

From his journals in particular – which have been useful in deciphering the manuscript material – but also from the manuscripts themselves, we know that Constant wrote and rewrote his material several times over, changing

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