

[Please do not quote]

The senses in 1816: the case of Benjamin Constant

On 14 April 1815, Napoleon summoned Constant to deliberate with him on a revised constitution for the Empire, so heralding his much-debated liberal turn. There followed a week of intense debate, culminating in the publication of the Acte additionnel in the *Moniteur* of 23 April.

Constant's collaboration with Napoleon was long to haunt him, as this print makes clear. It was published in *La Foudre*, a royalist paper, in 1822. On the eve of Napoleon's entry into Paris, Constant had rallied to the Bourbons and denounced the Emperor as a latter-day Attila. A month later, he was nominated to the Conseil d'État: this is what the print purports to depict, alongside the disaster which Napoleon's 'invasion' represented in Royalist eyes. Constant was at pains to justify his apparent volte-face in the *Mémoires sur les Cent-Jours*, to this day a major historical source: only Napoleon, he concluded, could save France from invasion and here too was an opportunity for the Emperor to reinvent himself as a constitutional leader.

This is not the only satirical representation of Constant in *La Foudre*. In fact, there are many instances, all following a similar pattern. In issue number 87, Constant is represented as a chameleon (unnumbered plate juxtaposed with one representing Jacques-Antoine Manuel under the common title 'Ménagerie libérale' between pp. 92 and 93). The barely cryptic legend establishes the print as the pretext for printed satire where Constant is the subject of a sustained political attack. Animal imagery again, though differently used; its meaning remains latent in 'Le double serment'.

Constant is a self-professed modern. He is the theorist to whom we owe the formulation 'the freedom of the moderns'. What I shall term a discourse of the senses — one where the senses are explicitly an object in some flux — is connected to Constant via the paradox of modernity as it is articulated in his work: the rise of individualism proceeds from losses which rebound on the individual. I shall comment, not on his political writings, but on Constant's *Adolphe* (1816). Even though this, his sole published novel, has long been received as a narrative of the senses, the significance of this dimension for Constant's theory of modernity has not yet been addressed; given the immense influence of Constant's model, this is a serious gap. *Adolphe* is a first-person narrative, ostensibly a found manuscript preceded by the avis of a fictional publisher into whose hands it has fallen. I shall claim that *Adolphe* prompts a revision of conceptions of the freedom of the moderns derived from his political theory.

Benjamin Constant (1767–1830) is an important theorist of freedom, in particular the variety he terms the freedom of the moderns, namely, freedom of choice. Contemporary evaluations of Constant testify to the salience of the rupture which this conception implies: the freedom of the moderns is itself modern. Yet the scope of Constant's theory is wider than his reception implies. Constant can also be identified with a strand in intellectual history which continues to this day, where the concern is with the increasing opacity of ends, individual and collective. This issue is prominent in fiction, where it is presented as a risk that arises from choice. Alongside the freedom of the moderns, I argue that we need to assess the significance of the literature of the moderns, with which Constant can also be identified, in particular through the short novel, *Adolphe*, which he published in

1816. What the literature of the moderns tells us is that modern life and individualization alike prompt evaluations of freedom. From the point of the agent too, individualism gives increasing prominence to such evaluations. Constant does identify a number of social and psychological factors which account for the emergence and the impact of the freedom of the moderns (e.g. growth in population in mass societies; the emergence of the commercial state of society; shifts in how we evaluate elements of the human make-up, for instance, the senses). But what is at stake in the freedom of the moderns extends beyond this emergence and, if we take a historical perspective on the kind of freedom which Constant identifies as modern, compels us to scrutinize its causal impacts. Ultimately, I argue, the literature of the moderns tells us as much about this problem as the tradition of political thought with which Constant has been above all identified.

What was expected from Constant, resident in London at the time, was something quite different, given his close political involvement in the 100 Days. Constant had kept the manuscript of *Adolphe* with him, alongside many of his other manuscript works, and had made a number of public readings of the novel, including one in Paris in the already highly active week during which he was drafting the *Acte additionnel* at Napoleon's request. Note the strong identification with the protagonist in the course of the reading. Unlike some other works I'll mention, *Adolphe* is a relatively brief novel. Before it is ever published, it enjoys some notoriety. Though its beginnings are altogether private, it comes to be publicly identified with Constant in advance of publication — in ways which may well mean that its eventual readership overlapped with those who had attended these readings.

This was Constant's sole published venture in fiction. His motivation to publish in 1816 was financial. It sold in France for 3.5 fr and Colburn paid Constant 1400 fr for the rights (the annual income of a family of farm labourers in 1815 was about 400 fr), in other words about £220. Austen made in total £310 for *Mansfield Park* and only £39 for *Emma*, taking into account losses which she had to assume arising from a second edition of *Mansfield Park* (Murray was to offer Byron 1500 guineas for the rights to Canto IV of *Childe Harold* in 1817). This is the pre-professional era of fiction writing in France.

Note the retrospectivity of many of the representations of Constant in the *Cent Jours* (*serment*; Chateaubriand; Philippoteaux) — point to his continued political involvement and the transformations it undergoes as a result of the *Cent Jours*. Standing and identity of liberals post 1815: absence of Napoleon; political actors in a context destabilized by the *Cent Jours* (witness recurrence of repression, *Loi Décaze*); note also the ways in which *Cent Jours* and *Acte additionnel* call the Bourbon regime and the *Charte* into question (popular support; wider scope of the *Acte additionnel*). Thus the identification of Constant with the liberal triumph of 1830. Several decades late, the publications of Constant's diaries would only serve to validate readings like these: they lead him to be portrayed as an instance of the pathologies of the very feature of modern individualism which Constant takes to be distinctive, namely choice (thus William James, *Varieties*, 259, n.1).

Adolphe was first published in London and in Paris in May 1816. As the first mentions of the novel began to appear in the press, Constant despatched a disclaimer to the *Morning Chronicle*, denying that the work had any biographical basis. The statement is convoluted at best, inviting the reader to accept that so negative a judgement on the conduct of the protagonist as the work contains would make any autobiographical intent inconceivable.

The novel originates as a private document and co-exists with a number of other works which were to remain private, in which some of the same concerns were explored. In *Amélie et Germaine*, speaking in a voice poised between his own and that of a fictional narrator, he refers to just how the senses shape affective life more powerfully than any other force:

‘Mon cœur, mon imagination, et surtout mes sens ont besoin d’amour’. The desire for love has several components — very notably, a sexual one. One of the functions of a modern discourse of the senses is to acknowledge just this and also to intimate something of the shift it represents to associate it with love and identity in this way.

Briefly, the narrative tells the story of a young man who seduces Ellénore, a somewhat older woman, out of boredom. All of this is completed in three of ten chapters at the outset of the text. Following a period of rapture, he becomes disaffected, but does not break with her. In the meantime, she abandons the Comte de P***, the man with whom she has been living, and also her children, and sets herself up with Adolphe. They quarrel. The narrative is organized around their travels, prompted by his abortive attempts to fulfil his father’s expectations of him and her efforts to resolve personal and family affairs; all of this spans six central chapters of the work. When, in the closing chapter, she discovers that he has been duplicitous — he has promised others that he will soon abandon her, doing so purely to buy himself time as he seeks to reassure Ellénore of his good intentions — she falls ill and dies, at which point he discovers that, despite his desire for freedom, he did love her, or desperately needed her love. The sense of loss is catastrophic. There follows an exchange of letters, anticipated at the outset of the novel in the supposed publisher’s avis, between a person who had known both Adolphe and Ellénore and the éditeur of the found manuscript.

In *Adolphe*, the adverse psychology of the senses is disclosed by the negativity of love: love results from an object choice governed by a dynamics of resistance. Adolphe’s seduction of Ellénore testifies to this outcome. The medium of this seduction is speech — a letter spanning six pages in the original 1816 edition of the work, and where the dominant tense is the present of a passionate state that extends over every aspect of Adolphe’s consciousness. Then the temporality shifts, presenting first Ellénore’s surrender in an existential perspective. And then in turn, Adolphe states in an ambiguous comment (who speaks? — protagonist or narrator?) that Ellénore’s ambivalence ‘avait exalté toutes mes sensations’.

My claim here is that the literature of the moderns, historically speaking, comes into being at the point where the evaluation of the freedom of the same name becomes an issue. In keeping with the emphasis which Constant places on freedom as freedom of choice, this evaluation is centred first of all on the individual agent. But the highly architectonic framing of the novel means that the impact is more widely felt too, in that it becomes open in turn to appraisal from the series of independent perspectives mediated through the framing device of the found manuscript from the outset. This is a factor that is latent throughout the narrative — witness Adolphe’s reports of the adverse view of him taken by those with whom he comes into contact — and is overt in Ellénore’s parting letter to Adolphe, which closes the narrative, and in turn in the letters exchanged long after the events narrated at the end of the text. It is the work’s literary impact that marks it out as an intervention in how the freedom of the moderns is to be conceptualized and evaluated: a concern with the freedom of the moderns and its impacts defines a literature of an individualism which is to be seen as a force of social rupture, leading in turn to a rupture in the effective value frameworks to which individuals can appeal.

Like Austen’s novels in her lifetime, *Adolphe* should probably be counted a very modest commercial success on publication. At the same time, it was very rapidly to become a literary reference-point, albeit one governed by some fluidity of purpose and some generic ambiguity: see Gustave Planche.

The discourse of the senses is first and foremost characterized by a decisive split where the issue of loss comes notably in play. The first perspective I cite in support of this claim is one which presents itself as historical. So, the writer Vigny says of antiquity in 1835 that it was the 'règne des sens'. What this perception precipitates is a veiled avowal of the split to which I have referred: the senses belong in the historical past. Yet Vigny himself, in a single-sentence observation focused this time on the first person, had also observed in 1833: 'Je me sens puissamment organisé pour la volupté physique'. It is as if the sheer power of the senses discloses a moment of psychological trouble: they make themselves felt under conditions where they are out of place.

There is reason to think that Vigny derives this contrast between the regime of the ancients and that of the moderns from Constant, to whom he refers at a number of important junctures, for instance, in the poem 'Paris', published within months of Constant's death. And Constant too, speaking in a voice poised between his own and that of a fictional narrator, refers to just how the senses shape affective life more powerfully than any other force: 'Mon cœur, mon imagination, et surtout mes sens ont besoin d'amour'. The desire for love has several components — very notably, a sexual one. One of the functions of a modern discourse of the senses is to acknowledge just this and also to intimate something of the shift it represents to associate it with love and identity in this way. Though Vigny's supposed historical judgement is wholly lacking in depth, it does mark a historical juncture, in that it forms some part of a wider view of modernity, and within that of the senses and all that they might imply. Behind the historical judgement concerning the historicity of the senses, there lies a sense of the sweeping impact of historicity per se. The senses feature as a way of acknowledging the striking and pervasive scope of individualism in the contemporary world, together with all of the other transformations with which it can be linked. Through the senses, then, we witness some of the ways in which wider human concerns are brought to bear on the issue of individualism.

l'homme a besoin d'émotions. fermez une porte, elles entrent par une autre.

(May 1804)

je lui dois d'avoir connu dans une femme tout le délire de l'amour physique et moral. (July 1804)

jamais je n'ai du plaisir physique que ma Disposition n'en devienne meilleure. (September 1804)

Je ne suis pas étonnée le moins du monde je m'y attendais. Je ne suis fâchée que d'une chose. C'est que chacune de ces dames n'ait pas aussi trois amans; pourquoi êtes vous l'objet unique de leur affection quand elle n'ont qu'un tiers des vôtres? Cela blesse mes idées d'égalité. [...] Vous voyez que j'arrange votre vie je la partage de la manière la plus agréable, je me trouve toujours la comme vous croyez bien je suis alternativement confidente de vos ouvrages et de vos amours. (Julie Talma to Constant, January 1805)

The organization of *Adolphe* predisposes us from the outset to anticipate a negative outcome. The éditeur presents Adolphe as a sad (A 54) and seemingly fatalistic figure. This presentation, in turn, soon comes to be retrospectively framed by Adolphe's own caustic account, as narrator, of his education, his relation to the society in which he finds himself, his expectations. In other words, from the outset, the sense soon emerges that specific features of the modern world are in conflict with the narrator's own view of himself. Under the social conditions with which it is identified, the expectations about ourselves which modernity induces can become problematic: thus, Adolphe will assert, as he narrates his seduction of Ellénore, that we are not corrupted by our senses, but rather by a socially

induced disposition towards calculated self-interest (A 83). The story of an individual crisis encompasses the wider discontents of the moderns. The identification of literariness with pleasure places a decisive, if implicit, emphasis on the act of reading, so marking the literary out as a distinct space of reflection.

The notoriety of *Adolphe* is, I argue, closely connected to the place of the senses in its genesis and its plot. Thus, in one of the unpublished works related to *Adolphe*, speaking in a voice poised between his own and that of a fictional narrator, Constant acknowledges that they shape affective life more powerfully than any other force: 'Mon cœur, mon imagination, et surtout mes sens ont besoin d'amour'. One issue to be explored is just how the senses can be linked to Constant's exploration of the freedom of the moderns and the altered individualism which defines them. Constant's claims, like those of contemporary writers whom I shall also mention (among them Goethe and Vigny), self-consciously point to a historical juncture: behind sweeping judgements concerning the historicity of the senses, there lies a sense of the sweeping impact of modern history per se. At the same time, *Adolphe* is significant not only because of the highly ambiguous moral outcome of its story: in dealing with this material, Constant must develop a narrative mode that deals with causes, moral and material, which are altogether novel, rather than merely with their effects. Balzac's reception of Constant testifies to this as a defining feature of the literature of the moderns and, to chart its historical destiny, I shall briefly consider the further transformations of scandal and of the senses in two later works, one by Henry James and one by Duras, both of which explicitly rework Constant's tale.

Duras's adaptation of Henry James's *The Beast in the Jungle* is at once a fresh move in the direction of the theatre, being the transposition of a highly stylized narrative to the stage, and a reconceptualization of the legendary symbol that gives James's work its title. But here we will look at Duras's adaptation of 1981 via an occulted source, namely Constant's *Adolphe*.

The work forms part of a microhistory of adaptation that spans the 1970s and 1980s, encompassing also Truffaut's reworking of several of James's tales in *La Chambre verte* and a film for television by Benoît Jacquot for which Duras wrote a screenplay based on her adaptation of James.

In exploring this relationship, I will query Dudley Andrew's influential account of adaptation as a distinct phase in a complex process of textualization.

La Bête dans la jungle also connects with Duras's long-professed commitment to literature as a discourse whose task is to 'représenter l'interdit'. How so? When called upon to speak to this understanding of literature, she appeals to Benjamin Constant — precisely the writer whose *Adolphe* is the source of James's novella. For Duras, then, a literary practice rooted in scandal finds itself shaped by the example of other writers whose own efforts to grapple with material of this sort proves to be sustained by a covert intertextual impetus. To this day, the posterity of Constant's *Adolphe* is prolific, spanning several cultures and media, diverse, being subject in its adaptations to distinct narrative ends and forms, and complex, in that this afterlife has a further afterlife, in which adaptations generate adaptations of their own. The substance of the story — *amour-passion* and its disastrous consequences — account for its spectacular impact: through these versions, it emerges retroactively as a token of one of the few 'robust discursive systems' (to quote Roland Barthes) through which we can apprehend subjectivity. This paper will address, first, the substance, at once elusive and troubling, that can be said to be shared by James and Duras (and in turn by Constant, as we reread him in the light of these later writers); and, second, the ways in which adaptation as practiced by James and Duras generates the sense of an uncanny

recurrence within which the primordial task of literature — that of saying the unsayable — can be reaffirmed.

Henry James's *The Beast in the Jungle* is an explicit reworking of Constant's novel — and was itself to be adapted in turn by Marguerite Duras and then by Benoît Jacquot. The tale plots the recurrence of the kind of torment narrated in *Adolphe*. However known the inherited plot is, its potential to generate torment proves inescapable: such is the burden of the protagonist's catastrophic discovery of misplaced choice. So too James's story brings out an indeterminacy that still lurks in the plot of *Adolphe* — did Adolphe in fact love Ellénore more than he ever knew?

Maurice Blanchot wrote that '*Adolphe* compte toujours beaucoup dans l'idée que nous nous faisons du roman français'. If this is so, it is in part because of the ambiguities of its stance vis-à-vis politics. It reveals literature to have the power to articulate a different perspective on freedom both as an issue of choice for the agent and as an issue to do with values in the world the agent inhabits. Its literariness too represents the explicit assumption of a substantive shift in how we can think about freedom: it takes freedom not just as the matter of a story, but also as a void, precisely as it confronts the reader with the irremediable absence of an explanatory framework. The literature of the moderns gives rise to a modified conception of the agent, one in which the sense of freedom is conditioned by the enduring historical rupture with which the individual is over and over again confronted. This rupture then comes to be reiterated and re-adapted through the adaptations to which *Adolphe* was to give rise. It is through these adaptations that the emergent literariness of the moderns comes to be retransmitted and in turn further transformed, making it one of our main — perhaps ultimately our most potent — means to chart the successive historical ideologies of modernity. Duras's adaptation ends by being more like *Adolphe* than James's tale: the death of Catherine is the pivotal moment and the after effect more reminiscent of Constant's framing device.

Two claims to conclude. The prominence given to reading vindicates freedom as the framework within which the crisis both of freedom and of values is acknowledged: thus the reader is projected not only back into the story — but also into the distinct literary history of which it is the begetter. For all of the issues that emerge in *Adolphe* — scandal, the senses, pain and responsibility for the pain of others, belatedness, the shock of irretrievable separation, the intensification of literary pleasure that pathos generates — are just as prominent in the extended literary and indeed filmic lineage to which it can be connected. *Adolphe* is not an isolated case: the literature of the moderns emerges, just as much as political theorizing, as a route to understanding modernity.

Second, the senses. The plot of *Adolphe*, in pointing to the ways in which the senses have a bearing on freedom as it produces its causal impacts, prompts us to move beyond the model of the freedom of the moderns found in political theory, with its apparent identification of freedom solely with choice as it operates within the private sphere. Even though in *Adolphe* freedom remains the horizon of human meaning, the experience of human finitude originates in the opacity of choice. The limits of freedom, which are all too real, are those of the individual in whom it is vested: though I have only been able to sketch it here, the historical discourse I have posited is distinct in that it does connect the senses to individualism. There is support elsewhere in Constant's writings for a revaluation of the private as the effective sphere of the moderns. Freedom, for Constant, is ultimately a bundle of freedoms, rooted in sometimes competing values. But this framework is not self-sufficient, in that bad choices can put these values in doubt as means of motivation or of evaluation. At the same time, individual freedom is portrayed by Constant as something

virtual, because, however embedded it is in commercial societies, it does not liquidate the problem of power. What Constant terms the private embraces, then, all of the interactions between the public and the private, and all of the values these mobilize and the conflicts to which these give rise. What this perspective shares with the account I have given of Adolphe and, more widely, of the literature of the moderns is a modified conception of the agent, one in which the sense of freedom is ultimately conditioned by the enduring historical rupture with which the individual finds herself confronted.