PART ONE

Constant

1

The art of Constant's *Adolphe*: I. The stylization of experience (1967)[1]

Against the rich background of recent discoveries in the papers of Constant and his circle,[2] critics have gradually become aware of the need for a new study of the art of *Adolphe*, that most quietly disruptive of all French novels. Constant himself wrote trenchantly, if disingenuously, of those who read it as a *roman à clefs*: 'chercher des allusions dans un roman, c'est substituer le commérage à l'étude du cœur humain' (p. 5). His own personality, and those of the men and women to whom he wrote, were so particularly endowed with keen sensibility, unusual lucidity, and fluent or epigrammatic powers of expression, that critics for a century and a half have found matter for thoughtful 'études du cœur humain' in relating *Adolphe* to the biographical material which surrounds it. If many valuable studies have, intentionally or less consciously, been concerned primarily with the problems of Constant the man, others have also been interested in the relation between experience and creation, between the raw material of facts and the shaping by the selective imagination of the artist.[3] Now that much new material has been assimilated, there is still a need to look afresh at what this novel does express, and at the skill and subtlety of its means of expression. The purpose of this article is to suggest briefly a number of lines of approach, some of which may touch on familiar points needing perhaps further development, others of which will, it is hoped, be new. It will centre on the fact that Constant's selection and ordering of the raw material of reality is not a mere result of the requirements of personal confession or discreet disguise, but a conscious art, governed by the logic of the creative imagination. I shall hope to show in particular how Constant through his characters probes suggestively into questions of what constitutes authenticity of experience and authenticity of expression, and into the relation between experience and expression.

Constant's 'autobiographical' works, on very different levels, all show him as the conscious artist, sifting events with a particular focus in mind, choosing exactly the tone appropriate to this purpose. The *Journaux intimes* attempt to give as directly as possible the immediate and unsorted product of daily experience with all its contradictions and vacillations. Even here, at his most uninhibited, Constant is aware of the difficulty of direct transposition of the truth, of the temptation to play to the gallery.[4] It is no doubt logical that, combining a sense of the complexity of reality with a need to master it in firm classifications, he should eventually take to the extreme of the 'computer-diary', choosing seventeen figures to represent in a combination of fixed variables the repeated and shifting essentials of his experience.[5] In his letters, he shows even from childhood a brilliant sense of how to select events and adapt tone to the character of the recipient.[6] The analysis of himself or others is worked out in many different modes. The *Cahier Rouge* represents a more developed choice and shaping of memories, and here Constant chooses a unified tone of amused retrospective irony, an incisive comic indulgence. The commemorative articles on Julie Talma and Mme de Staël select in a serious tone and with an elegant critical faculty those intellectual and personal qualities in his subjects which exemplify his own scale of values. *Cécile*, though in so many details close to the facts of biography, yet chooses from the tangled reality a linear narrative of year-long tergiversation between two women only.

Adolphe is obviously at a very different level of stylization from any of these. In characters, events, and expression, the *Journaux* abundantly show how truth is more melodramatic than fiction. The contrast between the submissive, dogged devotion of the patient Charlotte and the clamorous intellectual stimulus of the domineering yet genuinely suffering Mme de Staël, the prolonged vacillation of Constant between countless women, in turn and contemporaneously goad and obstacle to his intellectual and political ambitions, are credible only in the detail of attested fact, and would appear schematized or pathological in any direct transposition into a novel. Mme de Staël's pursuit across the countryside to fling herself, with trailing hair and clothes in disorder, upon the staircase[7] or the frequently brandished threat of suicide by the convenient phial of laudanum, might savour of the *roman noir*. Most important of all is the expression, which in the *Journaux* is often the immediate

throwing on to paper of momentary feeling in its ulcerated rawness, violently absolute or tritely derivative in vocabulary. *Adolphe* will tone down the flamboyant or petulant reality, the ranting and inflation, to a controlled and quiet concentration more adequate to suggestion of feeling. It is in daily life that Constant speaks of the possessive woman in terms that belong to melodrama: 'cette furie qui me poursuit, l'écume à la bouche et le poignard à la main', that his exasperation invents a *bestiaire* of insults: 'serpent', 'harpie', 'vipère', 'sangsue', 'diablesse', 'monstre', 'furie', or a meteorology of images: 'l'ouragan va fondre sur moi', 'tous les volcans sont moins flamboyants qu'elle', 'tempête et océan furieux', 'l'ébranlement de l'univers et le mouvement du chaos', 'ce fléau que l'enfer a vomi . . .'[8] The novel will find its own means of conveying harsh exasperation or deadly weariness without the overworn and exaggerated imagery in which immediate experience so naturally throws off the spume of separate moments. And even in less startling transpositions, concentration and discretion are at work: the cry of Charlotte noted in the *Journal*: 'Cette voix, cette voix, c'est la voix qui fait du mal. Cet homme m'a tuée' becomes simply: 'Quel est ce bruit? c'est la voix qui m'a fait du mal'.[9]

Cécile, in its only faintly disguised treatment of Mme de Staël and Charlotte, is obviously very much nearer to the facts of real life than is *Adolphe*. Yet much of the complexity of events and motives has been left aside: its intelligent and subtle analyses seem almost directed as a 'plaidoyer' to his second wife. If on the one hand it lacks some of the sharp sting of the diaries' sensitive and self-critical cynicism, on the other it seems flat and dilute by the side of the suggestive concentration and meticulous structure of *Adolphe*.[10] This concentration, with its sacrifice of still further elements from reality, was achieved in part because the artist consciously tried experiments on his public before finishing the novel. A variant discovered by Rudler shows how he had wished in *Adolphe* also to show a hero between two women: it is on reading parts of the work aloud that he concludes: 'Cette lecture m'a prouvé que je ne pouvais rien faire de cet ouvrage en y mêlant une autre épisode de femme.'[11] *Adolphe*, then, takes one man and one woman to represent the growth and the disintegration of passion, followed by the persistence of an indestructible bond combining exasperation with tenderness. Through their central dilemma questions may be raised on three levels: are the mobility of the man and the possessiveness of the woman to be

attributed to their individual characters, to the background of their age and a social situation which precludes marriage, or to the basic nature of man and woman?

Where the *Cahier Rouge* flickered with biting gaiety across the early formation of a character,[12] *Adolphe* takes the focus and tone of quiet but penetrating tragedy. Three central things might be noted here. First, tragedy involves the insoluble situation, from which, once the characters are engaged, there can be no 'right' way out. (The satisfaction we derive from the tragic spectacle lies not in any moral solution, but in seeing how the human mind may face, analyse, bear with dignity or express with adequacy what it may neither cure nor solve.) Once Adolphe and Ellénore are fully involved, irreparable hurt will be caused whether he goes or stays: 'Sa position et celle d'Ellénore étaient sans ressource', wrote Constant, 'et c'est précisément ce que j'ai voulu' (p. 8). Secondly, tragedy at its most ironical may involve the destruction of a character not simply by an obvious flaw, but also by the potentially finest qualities:[13] in Adolphe lucidity and pity; in Ellénore devotion ('la noble et dangereuse faculté de vivre dans un autre et pour un autre' (p. 6)) and her own form of sporadic and corrosive lucidity, giving destructive insight into Adolphe's feelings. Finally, the tensest tragedy implies an exact counterpoise between the outer pressures which crush the character (fate, society, heredity) and an ineradicable conviction of inner responsibility. If outer pressure alone is stressed, the result may be mere pathos; concentration on inner guilt alone may become pathological. Two lines from *Phèdre* best represent this razor-edge balance between consciousness of outer pressure and inner responsibility:

> Objet infortuné des vengeances célestes,
> Je m'abhorre encor plus que tu ne me détestes.

Adolphe and Ellénore, products and victims of a given society, are no romantic innocents up against a simply evil outside agency, nor are they instruments for a facile attack on its faults. Social pressures, like the Gods elsewhere,[14] merely intensify what is inherent in the individual: 'la société s'arme de tout ce qu'il y a de mauvais dans le cœur de l'homme' (p. 147). Moreover, the urge to be accepted by society and to contribute to it is presented in double terms: at once a personal ambition and a genuine need for noble activity.[15] *Adolphe*, then, is neither the condemnation nor the self-justification of a central figure, nor, as it is sometimes presented, the

simple indictment of a society or a generation, but the probing presentation of certain tragic dilemmas.

If the serious tone of *Adolphe* differs profoundly from that of the *Cahier Rouge*, yet in the *Cahier Rouge* there is a gaily recounted anecdote which bears on the question central to *Adolphe*'s meaning and art. The young Constant is attempting to seduce an English lady who refuses to admit into their relationship the compromising word Love; he wastes the hour and his opportunity by arguing over her offer of Friendship, ironically unaware that she had obviously not intended a mere matter of the choice of terminology to affect the outcome.

This lightly-treated insinuation on the connexion between vocabulary and experience leads to what is perhaps the most suggestive phrase in *Adolphe*:

> Les sentiments de l'homme sont confus et mélangés; ils se composent d'une multitude d'impressions variées qui échappent à l'observation; et la parole, toujours trop grossière et trop générale, peut bien servir à les désigner, mais ne sert jamais à les définir. (p. 30)

That this problem is central to Constant's experience becomes clear from the repeated and sharp expression it is given in many different works: in *De la Religion* (p. 1415):

> Tous nos sentiments intimes semblent se jouer des efforts du langage: la parole rebelle, par cela seule qu'elle généralise ce qu'elle exprime, sert à désigner, à distinguer, plutôt qu'à définir,

in the *Principes de Politique* (p. 1220):

> je demanderais comment on définit avec précision cette partie vague et profonde de nos sensations morales, qui par sa nature même défie tous les efforts du langage,

in his attack on Schelling's system as 'arrangements de mots pris pour des choses' (*Jnx.*, p. 298), and in many other reflections on words in diaries and letters.[16] This question of the relation between experience and expression has of course become one of the main preoccupations of our century: one thinks ahead to Proust's analysis of how certain mental habits 'amassent au-dessus de nos impressions vraies, pour nous les cacher entièrement, les nomenclatures ... que nous appelons faussement la vie' (III, p. 896 – see the whole passage), to Valéry's pursuit of a 'nettoyage de la situation verbale', or even to the linguistic philosophers' attempt to examine the conditioning of modes of thinking by unrecognized assumptions

inherent in the traditional forms of verbalization. Constant's particular attitude to the way in which words may distort experience has several important results in *Adolphe*.

A complex state of feelings while still unexpressed retains its full and fluid potentialities: words select, simplify, intensify and perpetuate, giving to the subtleties of feeling a false rigidity and a frightening irrevocability. They are dangerous in two ways, and incidents in every chapter bring alive one or other of these. On the one hand, one may hypnotize oneself or another into a feeling through the effect of persuasive expressions:

> Il y a dans la simple habitude d'emprunter le langage de l'amour ... un danger ... L'on ne sait ce qu'on s'expose à éprouver ... (p. 5).

or again:

> échauffé d'ailleurs que j'étais par mon propre style, je ressentais, en finissant d'écrire ... (p. 39)[17]

or:

> nous sommes des créatures tellement mobiles, que, les sentiments que nous feignons, nous finissons par les éprouver, (p. 86).

At intervals, Ellénore, 'avide de se tromper elle-même', consoles herself with Adolphe's words when the substance behind them has disappeared:

> Ces simples paroles, démenties par tant de paroles précédentes, rendirent Ellénore à la vie et à la confiance; elle me les fit répéter plusieurs fois (p. 89)

or even

> peut-être trouvait-elle une sorte de consolation à s'entendre répéter [by others] des expressions d'amour que depuis longtemps je ne prononçais plus. (p. 118)

On the other hand, words may crystallize a dangerous truth, may destroy what might have persisted, or fix irrevocably one side only of a complex of feelings. Once pronounced, they cannot be unsaid, and they stiffen and simplify the conflicting or indefinable elements of reality: 'Nous avions prononcé tous deux des mots irréparables; nous pouvions les taire, mais non les oublier' (p. 65). Ellénore's forcing of a definition at the end of Chapter v is a pivot in the progress towards destruction: 'Pourquoi prononça-t-elle ces mots ...?' Adolphe's one attempt to define his contradictory emotions to a third person in Chapter VIII (pp. 111–12) shows the resulting only half-true interpretation and forms another 'pas irréparable'. It is

fitting that the contrast between words and actions should form the climax of Ellénore's last letter: 'Vos actions sont nobles et dévouées: mais quelles actions effaceraient vos paroles? Ces paroles acérées retentissent autour de moi . . . elles flétrissent tout ce que vous faites' (p. 144).

If words, and in particular general terms – love, vanity, weakness – are useful highest common factors in communication, but crude and blunt instruments by the side of the subtlety and fluidity of individual experience, it follows that to sum up Adolphe, as is sometimes done, as 'a man incapable of loving' or 'a weak procrastinator' is to beg the question which the novel constantly investigates: just what unexpected combinations of feeling may lie beneath these labels? Adolphe's own most trenchant formulae applied to himself: 'un homme faible, reconnaissant et dominé' (p. 71) are constantly set at odds with others: 's'ils veulent dompter *ce que par habitude ils nomment faiblesse* . . . ils froissent ce qu'il y a de généreux, ils brisent ce qu'il y a de fidèle, ils tuent ce qu'il y a de bon' (p. 8), or 'elle vit de la générosité dans ce que j'appelais de la faiblesse' (p. 111). The word 'amour' is not simply used in statements, but is accompanied, on key occasions, by phrases investigating the strange qualities which together may form its presence or its absence. We are moreover given many different layers: what Adolphe felt, how he judged (or misjudged) himself at the time, how he judges himself later, how others in the story judge (or misjudge) him, and the final conflicting reflections of the letters by two outside judges at the end.

The novel, then, brings alive an individual and fluctuating experience which cannot adequately be reduced to conventional categories or conceptual summaries. Verbal generalization and qualitative judgement, whether by others, or even sometimes by the self, are shown, in networks of ironical suggestion, as being constantly beside the point. Individual experience can be understood only if brought alive in the detail of its complexity and strangeness: *bizarre* is a key-word in Constant, underlining a sense of the puzzling and paradoxical.[18]

Yet this is a novel which is constantly directed towards precision and conclusiveness in ideas and expression. Few authors have at the same time so challenged the criteria of abstract judgment and yet exercised judgment so relentlessly, have more mistrusted general terms, yet been more irresistibly drawn to the maxim, the epigram, the precise formula.[19] A *florilège* of maxims from *Adolphe* would provide not only a cautionary handbook for lovers, but a precise and telling distillation of wider human experience. In fact, the

interplay between two urges (each of particular intensity and subtlety) – a startled sense of what is indefinable and illogical in human behaviour; a demand for the intellectual and aesthetic pleasure of firm conceptual definition – this interplay is at the centre of Constant's art.[20]

Constant, then, deliberately decomposes into unexpected components, and suggestively re-defines, such terms as love, vanity, weakness. Again like Proust later, having anatomized the detail of contradiction and flux beneath apparently simple concepts, he will still attempt 'd'en décrire la courbe et d'en dégager la loi'. In looking more closely at his shaping of his material, we may start from the concept of love, with its three stages: the falling in love; the brief period of genuine delight; finally, what Gide was to call 'la lente décristallisation de l'amour'.

Falling in love is no 'coup de foudre': individual experience is shaped by three forces prevalent in any developed society. One remembers of course La Rochefoucauld's: 'Il y a des gens qui n'auraient jamais été amoureux s'ils n'avaient jamais entendu parler de l'amour.' Inherited idealism and inherited cynicism (emulation of a friend in love, 'ses transports et l'excès de sa joie';[21] a previous generation's assumption that women may be enjoyed and left without regret or responsibility),[22] these join with the search for prestige in a relationship 'qui pût flatter mon amour-propre'.

But if the normal process of ruthless analysis is to lay bare beneath the superstructure of feeling the less easily avowable motives of calculation and vanity, Constant has both used this process and gone on to reverse it:

> Il y avait dans ce besoin beaucoup de vanité sans doute, mais il n'y avait pas uniquement de la vanité; il y en avait peut-être moins que je ne le croyais moi-même. (p. 30)

Self-deception, instead of garbing the hero as a man of all virtues, may take the opposite turn, that of a false sophistication, and make him mistakenly pride himself on being the clever seducer:[23]

> Presque toujours, pour vivre en repos avec nous-mêmes, nous travestissons en calculs et en systèmes nos impuissances ou nos faiblesses (p. 38);

this partly distorted vision of himself blinds him to the genuine needs and feelings which are imperceptibly taking hold of him and which, later, even if they change their nature, cannot be wholly uprooted. Where some critics stress Adolphe as imagining feelings in which he is deficient, his own narrative brings out rather the

opposite side: the danger of imagining the cold calculation of a Don Juan or a Valmont while, insidiously, feelings difficult to recognize or define are taking an insinuating hold. This is, of course, the insight of the later Adolphe, in the light of experience to come. At the time, his self-analysis played him false: 'Je portais au fond de mon cœur un besoin de sensibilité dont je ne m'apercevais pas' (p. 22). And not only may self-analysis be mistaken in its findings, but by its very existence it may distort the feelings it sets out to analyse: 'Cette analyse perpétuelle, qui place une arrière-pensée à côté de tous les sentiments, et par là les corrompt dès leur naissance.'[24]

The difficulty of defining the growth of feeling is brought out by the deliberate choice of such words as 'charme', 'magie', 'grâce inexplicable'. They are not used as mere vague, emotional counters: they serve to give a sense at the same time of compulsion and of uncertainty, for they are set in the undertones of a later doubt: '*J'attribuais* à son charme ...', '*me semblait* revêtu d'une grâce inexplicable'. Having suggested in this way the strength and the strangeness of the feelings which underlie apparently cold calculation, Constant looks further into the conflicting components of these feelings.

The central stimulus is one which will be given ironical variations throughout the novel: the galvanizing of potential (or, later, flagging) emotion by the obstacle. Where self-analysis may throw doubts on the genuineness of 'Love', frustration and pain strike home with an immediacy that makes them seem elemental certainties. The need to conquer the obstacle provides an all-absorbing aim, 'un but', doubts recede, and there is temporarily a total involvement in an experience felt at the time as authentic, 'de bonne foi'.[25]

The logic and illogic of pain will form counterpoints in this novel. Logic, because if his own pain is a criterion of authentic experience to Adolphe, so his inability to leave Ellénore later is founded on the impossibility of bearing the sight or thought of her pain, and the final summing-up of the book stands in the phrase: 'La grande question dans la vie, c'est la douleur que l'on cause' (p. 149) (to many others in his age the last phrase would have read 'que l'on éprouve'). Illogic because of the puzzlement of the lucid intellect at the disproportion between cause and effect, and at the startling discontinuity between successive states of mind. If it is Proust one above all thinks of as anatomizing 'les intermittences du cœur', here they are already brought alive in lapidary form: