
Introduction

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1 Benjamin Constant: Life and Work

A year before his death, Benjamin Constant confided to his readers in the preface to the *Mélanges de littérature et de politique* (1829):

For forty years I have defended the same principle: freedom in all things, in religion, philosophy, literature, industry and politics. And by freedom I mean the triumph of the individual both over an authority that would wish to govern by despotic means and over the masses who claim the right to make a minority subservient to a majority.¹

In this often-quoted statement lies the key to Constant's literary and political success in his own age and his continuing relevance for our own. The period in which he lived – the end of the *ancien régime*, the Revolution and Terror, the Napoleonic Empire, and the Restoration – had frequently been inimical to personal freedom in France and elsewhere. It was Constant's good fortune to have precisely the character, intellect, and pugnacity to be able to challenge this state of affairs untiringly, as well as to discern its source and potential for future misery. Reading Constant's elegant prose, with its irony, pointed epigrams, and concision, one is often reminded of the Roman historian Tacitus. The parallel indeed does not end there, for in both writers there is an awareness of the opposing extremes of *libertas* and *dominatio*. Events in the world since Constant's death in 1830 have only emphasized how perceptive Constant was to fear the growth of the omniscient and omnicompetent state and to champion the individual's right to privacy. Even in genuinely democratic states, the inner

¹ Reproduced in *Œuvres*, 833. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

sanctum of a citizen's private thoughts and beliefs can sometimes appear to be under siege, especially in our modern age of increasing electronic sophistication. In many countries, however, citizens risk a great deal if they speak their mind, and they may even be obliged to demonstrate publicly their admiration for what they hold privately to be an abhorrent regime. Constant himself was familiar with a state apparatus of secret police and informers – that of Napoleon. “Nothing is gained by submission, except that heavier burdens are laid on those who appear to have willing shoulders,”² wrote Tacitus, lending his voice to barbarian Britons chafing under the yoke of imperial Rome. Such independence of mind takes courage – something that Constant had in good measure – as well as a degree of foolhardiness, but it also has its price, which in the case of Constant was long years of exclusion from French political life and the inability to publish.

What were the circumstances that formed such a lifelong attachment to the notion of personal liberty in Constant? He was not himself born under a tyranny; indeed, his background was one of affluence and security. His father, Louis-Arnold-Juste de Constant de Rebecque (1726–1812), came from a Swiss Protestant aristocratic family of French Huguenot origin and was a well-read and intelligent army officer in the service of Holland.³ Benjamin-Henri Constant de Rebecque was born in Lausanne on October 25, 1767. The family boasted at least one writer, Juste de Constant's brother Samuel de Constant, who was a novelist. The political circumstances of Lausanne and the Pays de Vaud were, however, not ideal. Since the sixteenth century Lausanne had been ruled by the German-speaking oligarchy of Berne, whose representative in Lausanne was the Bailli or Bailiff resident in the castle. In his unfinished autobiography *Ma vie*, Constant remarks ruefully apropos of a young Bernese aristocrat with whom he had once shared a coach journey: “My father loathed that government and had brought me up to feel the same way. Neither he nor I knew then that all old governments are gentle because they are old and all new governments are harsh because they

² Cornelius Tacitus, *De Vita Iulii Agricolae* [*The Life of Julius Agricola*], chapter XV (“Nihil profici patientia nisi ut graviora tamquam ex facili tolerantibus imperentur”), ed. H. Furneaux, rev. J. G. C. Anderson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939), 12.

³ On the facts of Constant's life, see Dennis Wood, *Benjamin Constant: A Biography* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993).

are new.”⁴ From his earliest years Constant had a mildly despotic government close at hand that he could detest, in the form of the Bernese nobility.

However, there was a more pressing and immediate form of servitude – that of his father Juste de Constant – against which Benjamin was to struggle with limited success for more than forty years. Benjamin’s mother, Henriette-Pauline *née* de Chandieu-Villars (1742–67), died on November 10, 1767, sixteen days after his birth. As Juste was frequently away in Holland, where he served in a Bernese regiment, Benjamin was brought up largely by others. To the loss of his mother can be added the further misfortune of having a capricious, irascible, and generally impossible father who now conceived the extraordinary notion of having his only child Benjamin brought up by a peasant girl, Marianne Magnin, by whom he was eventually to have two other children and whom he married in secret – a fact of which Benjamin was unaware until his mature years. Benjamin disliked the woman who was to become his stepmother. As if this were not bad enough – an absent father and a detested governess – he was then put in the care of a series of violent or incompetent male tutors. All of these episodes are described with comic relish in *Ma vie*: the brutal German who beat him, the tutor who left his charge alone in a Brussels brothel while he took his pleasures, and the earnest English clergyman Nathaniel May whom Benjamin and his father secretly mocked. And yet Benjamin somehow acquired a solid foundation in Latin and Greek, to which German and English were subsequently added. In 1782 he was enrolled as a student at Erlangen University in southern Germany, where all courses were taught in Latin. After becoming involved in a duel – the first of several in his life – it seems, over a woman at the Court of the Margrave of Ansbach-Bayreuth, Benjamin was obliged to return home, whereupon his father had the good sense to send him to the University of Edinburgh.

The education that Constant received in Scotland between 1783 and 1785 and the friendship of companions who were later to distinguish themselves in different fields – James, later Sir James Mackintosh (1765–1832), historian and philosopher; Malcolm Laing (1762–1818), historian; and John Wilde, later professor of civil law at Edinburgh – were undoubtedly a decisive factor in his life. It was at

⁴ *Ma vie* (*Le cahier rouge*), in *OCBC/Œuvres*, III, 1, 353–54.

the Edinburgh Speculative Society that Constant first participated in debates on political and historical subjects, and it was at the university that he attended lectures on the religion and myth in the ancient world. After eighteen months Constant left for Brussels, where he began to write a book about the history of religions, an intellectual interest that would occupy him on and off for the rest of his life. In Brussels he also had an affair with a married woman, Marie-Charlotte Johannot, the first of very many relationships with women. Taken to Paris by his father in the winter of 1786–87, Constant frequented the literary salon of the writer Jean-Baptiste Suard (1733–1817) and met a woman, Isabelle de Charrière (1740–1805), a novelist of some note, who was to become not only a loyal – if critical – friend but also an inspiration to pursue work worthy of his intellect. At the same time Constant's behavior in Paris became so wayward that, fearing his father's rebukes, the young man took the extreme course of running away to England, where he spent the months of June to September 1787 living off his father's banker and off friends while he wandered around the kingdom on horseback, meandering from London to Edinburgh and back.

Constant's father now intervened decisively and, having concluded that Benjamin needed some form of employment, sent him to the court of the Duke of Brunswick in 1788, where he was assigned the largely ceremonial post of Gentleman of the Bedchamber. The six years of tedium and frustration that Constant experienced in north Germany (March 2, 1788–August 8, 1794) were relieved by the brilliant and often very witty correspondence he maintained with Isabelle de Charrière, which reflects both the young man's enthusiasm for the Revolution in France and her skepticism about it. These Brunswick years were also made bearable by Constant's friendship with Jakob Mauvillon (1743–94), a bilingual polymath of French Huguenot descent and a Freemason whose interest in politics and religion matched Constant's own. On May 8, 1789, perhaps out of boredom or pity, Constant made a disastrous marriage to a lady-in-waiting at the ducal court, *Wilhelmine* Luise Johanne von Cramm (1758–1823), known as Minna von Cramm. Her public infidelity to him later with a Russian prince was matched by his own friendship with Georgine *Charlotte* Auguste *née* von Hardenberg (1769–1845), wife of Baron Wilhelm von Marenholtz (1752–1808). In the end it was the very public dispute between Constant and Minna preceding their

divorce that led to Constant's withdrawal from the Brunswick court and return to Switzerland in August 1794. In September that year, he met Anne-Louise-Germaine de Staël (1766–1817), daughter of Louis XVI's director-general of finances, Jacques Necker (1732–1804), and became entirely captivated by her personality, intellect, and conversation. At the end of the year they became lovers. Madame de Staël was politically a moderate with royalist leanings; Constant's own enthusiasm for the new regime in France, the Directory, and his wish to be involved in political life now took him to Paris, where Germaine de Staël's influence and the connections he made at her Paris salon proved invaluable. In late June 1795 he published the first of many political texts in Jean-Baptiste Suard's journal *Nouvelles politiques, Lettres à un député de la Convention*, attacking the convention and defending his republican ideal. He worked with a member of the convention, the novelist Jean-Baptiste Louvet, known as Louvet de Couvray (1760–97), and in April 1796 produced a pamphlet, entitled *De la force du gouvernement actuel et de la nécessité de s'y rallier*, defending the status quo in France. By now, Constant saw clearly that his future lay in that country and in June 1796 applied to become a French citizen by virtue of his distant French Huguenot ancestry. Although his relationship with Isabelle de Charrière had become tense on account of his liaison with Madame de Staël, in Paris he found a new friend in the staunchly republican Julie Talma (1756–1805), estranged wife of the great actor Talma (1763–1826).

Constant's support for the Directory was based on his desire to hold on to the positive things that the Revolution had achieved while avoiding a return to either Jacobin Terror or the *ancien régime* monarchy. In the years 1795–99 this moderate position involved some personal risk. In 1797 he was involved in the setting up of a political society, the Club de Salm, and on March 30, 1797, took on his first political role as chairman of the municipality of Luzarches, near Chantilly, on the northern outskirts of Paris. Yet despite his efforts to establish his position clearly, Constant was frequently criticized on the one hand for being a Swiss aristocrat who was too close to the Necker family of Madame de Staël and on the other for lending his support to a government that had been set up by the regicides of 1793. When in 1797 he defended the Directory's *coup d'état* of 18 Fructidor (September 4, 1797) against moderates and royalists, which was reminiscent of the Terror and resulted in many deaths

and deportations, Constant's position was seen as decisively on the Left. But two years later he both supported the decisive *coup d'état* of 18 Brumaire (November 9, 1799) that brought Napoleon Bonaparte to power *and* wrote, the following day, to Emmanuel-Joseph Siéyès (1748–1836), whom he greatly admired, expressing his concern that liberty would perhaps need to be defended against the successful general.⁵ As so often, Constant found himself on both sides of an argument at once, a situation that rarely made for clear and decisive action, not least in his troubled relationships with women. And so he sought a position in Bonaparte's Tribune from which he could oppose the First Consul's new legislative program. On December 24, 1799, Constant was elected as a member of the Tribune and on January 5, 1800, he made a speech stressing the need for the Tribune to be independent of the government, as if the tribunes were members of His Majesty's Loyal Opposition in England and not expected to offer only the very minimum of opposition to the First Consul's plans. Bonaparte's anger at what he saw as Constant's perfidy lasted many years. He felt that Constant not only was ungrateful to him for having been made a tribune at all, but was also being encouraged in his obstinate behavior by Germaine de Staël.⁶

During Constant's period in the Tribune, when he attempted – unsuccessfully – to impose some legal limits on Bonaparte's exercise of power, there was an important and dramatic episode in his emotional life: his passionate affair with Anna Lindsay *née* O'Dwyer (1764–1820), the daughter of an Irish innkeeper at Calais. In late November 1800 Constant was introduced to Anna by their mutual friend Julie Talma and within a short time they became lovers. The intensity of their feelings is reflected in their letters, written in both English and French. For a while Constant believed that their relationship would last a lifetime, but by January 1801 his letters betrayed the first signs of impatience. Anna resented his continuing friendship with Germaine de Staël; Constant for his part was always suspicious of a relationship in which Anna might become possessive. The affair continued for several more months, with Anna being obliged reluctantly to return to her resentful aristocratic “protector,” Auguste, marquis de Lamoignon (1765–1845). There can be little doubt that

⁵ Letter of November 10, 1799, in *OCBC/CG*, III (1795–1799), 455.

⁶ *OCBC/CG*, IV (1800–1802), 42, notes 1 and 2.

Anna was to serve, in part at least, as a model for Ellénore in *Adolphe*, and there are strong parallels between the celebrated description of Ellénore in Chapter 2 of that novel and the passionate, impetuous, and possessive nature of Anna. Throughout the affair Constant continued to work tirelessly, criticizing draft laws in his speeches at the Tribune, with the result that by January 1802 he was viewed by Bonaparte as an unwelcome troublemaker and found himself on the list of tribunes excluded from office. As long as the consular regime lasted he could play no further role in French politics. He wrote to Napoleon Bonaparte on April 15, 1803, to defend his actions and those of Madame de Staël and stated that “henceforth literary work will be my occupation. I will try to achieve some success in the career which remains open to me.”⁷

During the 1790s, under the Directory, Constant’s pamphlets had already attracted attention and interest. Under the First Consul’s rule, however, all publications were closely controlled and the official French government newspaper, *Le Moniteur*, had its drafts read and corrected by Napoleon Bonaparte himself. France was rapidly evolving toward a new form of monarchy, and there was little likelihood that Constant would be able to publish political works in such circumstances. He continued to divide his time between Paris and Madame de Staël’s chateau at Coppet, on Lake Geneva, and to meditate on constitutional theory, work which was to culminate in *Principes de politique applicables à tous les gouvernements*.⁸ Constant’s lifelong interest in religion and religious feeling which had its origins in the 1780s, was given considerable stimulus when in October 1803 Bonaparte ordered Germaine de Staël to leave France, and Constant chose to accompany her into exile. The couple made their way across Germany to Weimar, reaching the city on December 14, 1803. Amid the literary activity, philosophical speculation, and scholarly research that characterized Weimar at this period, Constant’s investigations into religious sentiment throughout the world and throughout history were to intensify, although many years would pass and endless redrafting would take place before it became

⁷ OCBC/CG], V (1800–1805, 92.

⁸ See Étienne Hofmann, *Les ‘Principes de Politique’ de Benjamin Constant (1806)*, 2 vols, vol. 1, *La Genèse d’une œuvre et l’évolution de la pensée de leur auteur 1789–1806* (Geneva: Droz, 1980).

De la religion (1824–31). After three months of unremitting intellectual activity and meetings with Goethe and Schiller, all of which are noted in his journal, Constant returned alone to Switzerland, only to discover shortly after his arrival on April 7, 1804, that Germaine de Staël's father Jacques Necker had died. Although his relationship with Madame de Staël had since long lost its passion, Constant felt deep affection for her and, knowing the extent of her grief and despair when she learned of the death of a father whom she had always venerated, he set off back to Weimar to tell her the news himself. Constant's sympathy for Germaine did not diminish his wish to be free and to end his relationship with her. Such feelings alternated with their very opposite, a desire to settle the matter once and for all by, of all things, marrying Germaine. Indeed if a possible model for Ellénore in *Adolphe* was the tempestuous Anna Lindsay, it is equally clear that the changing emotions and shifting allegiances of Constant himself are not dissimilar to those of the chronically indecisive Adolphe. Intensive research and writing about ancient religions offered Constant a distraction from such emotional concerns, and inspiration came too in his friendship with Charles de Villers (1765–1815), a friend of Madame de Staël and a bilingual scholar somewhat in the mold of Jakob Mauvillon, who was a specialist in German philosophy and religious thought.⁹

Thus Constant's life continued, alternating between long hours spent on his study of religion and frustration with the ties that bound him to Germaine de Staël, until in October 1806 there came a radical change in his emotional life. During his time at the court of the Duke of Brunswick in the 1790s, Constant had formed a close friendship with Charlotte *née* von Hardenberg, wife of Baron Wilhelm von Marenholtz at that time. He had last seen Charlotte in May 1793, and they had not corresponded since the end of 1795. Charlotte and her husband had divorced in 1794, and in 1798 she had remarried, to a penniless French royalist, the Vicomte Alexandre Du Tertre. After moving to Paris in 1803, Charlotte had heard that Constant was lonely and in a precarious financial situation. She had written to him and offered him half of what she possessed – and this even though she was still married to Du Tertre. Constant, touched by her

⁹ On this friendship, see Kurt Klooke et al., eds., *Madame de Staël, Charles de Villers, Benjamin Constant: Correspondance* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1993).

generosity, went to Paris to find her, but she had in the meantime left for Geneva with her husband. They corresponded once again somewhat sporadically. Charlotte was aware of her own intellectual inferiority to Constant and believed Madame de Staël to be far better suited to him in that respect. Constant himself, however, had tired of Germaine, and Charlotte's kind, affectionate, if rather dull, nature now appealed to him more. On October 19, 1806, they finally met in Paris, and the following day they became lovers for the first time.¹⁰ This event released in Constant a new stream of artistic creativity. He noted in his journal on October 30: "Began a novel which will be our story. Any other work would be impossible for me."¹¹ This novel would retrace the events of the preceding twenty years. Although the original manuscript has never been found, the unfinished autobiographical *Cécile* probably originated in this first account of the vicissitudes of Constant's relationship with Charlotte from their first meeting in Brunswick. Also, from this story grew, it would seem, an "episode about Ellénore" written around November 10, 1806, out of which the novel *Adolphe* may have developed.¹²

The course of Constant's relationship with Charlotte was to be no smoother than that of his relationships with other women. He felt protective toward her and grateful for her devotion to him, but greatly missed the wit and brilliance of Germaine de Staël. Even as the process of annulling Charlotte's marriage to Du Tertre went ahead in the archbishopric of Paris, Constant was unable to commit himself entirely to either woman, and when Madame de Staël was exiled by Napoleon in April 1807, Constant followed her to Coppet. There were frequent occasions during that summer when Germaine's anger at the relationship with Charlotte overflowed, and Constant's despair and bewilderment led him briefly to turn for consolation to a mystical Pietistic sect in Lausanne, the *Mystiques* or *Ames intérieures*, as *Cécile* records, which was led by his first cousin Charles, Chevalier de Langalerie (1751–1835).¹³ Madame de Staël's

¹⁰ *Journaux intimes (1804–1807)* in *OCBC/Œuvres*, VI, journal entries for October 19 and 20, 1806, 466–7.

¹¹ *Journaux intimes*, 471, 473.

¹² Both of these texts are in *OCBC/Œuvres*, III, 2.

¹³ See Frank Bowman, "L'épisode quiétiste dans *Cécile*," in *Benjamin Constant: Actes du Congrès Benjamin Constant (Lausanne, octobre 1967)* (Geneva: Droz, 1968), 97–108.