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BENJAMIN CONSTANT

paying the pioneer's penalty

by Geoffrey H. Buchler



Certain figures have always remained baffling to their biographers but it would be difficult to find any great man, either in politics or in letters, who has been so little understood as has Benjamin Constant. As one reads through the innumerable essays that have been written about him in France and Switzerland one becomes more and more aware of how subjective even the best criticism necessarily is.

Benjamin Constant de Rebecque was born of Protestant parents at Lausanne in 1767. His ancestors on both sides had come to Switzerland as religious refugees, and he was thus able, when necessity arose, to secure French citizenship. His father had him first educated by tutors, and then, still at an early age, he was sent to various foreign universities (the University of Edinburgh among them) where he gained a reputation for brilliant scholarship and reckless living. Like Leopardi and Pope he was an infant prodigy and began his study of the classics at the age of five.

The power of a woman

By far the most important event of Constant's early years was his meeting with Mme. de Charrière, a Dutch woman by birth, but French in tastes and education. Though she was forty-seven and he only twenty when they first met, she still retained much of her beauty and had lost none of her charm. No young man could have fallen into more original or more exciting hands. It was at Colombier, her home near Neuchâtel, that he began his book "De la Religion" (1824) which was inspired by a melancholy awareness that "the race of delight is short". For eight years Mme. de Charrière remained the centre about which his intellectual life revolved, though during this time he married, at twenty-two, Wilhemina von Cramm, one of the ladies-in-waiting at the Court of Brunswick.

It was not until his eventful meeting with Mme. de Staël that Benjamin Constant's intimacy with Mme. de Charrière, this proud and learned lady, came to an end. She had never liked Mme. de Staël, for Mme. de Charrière belonged to the 18th century with its decorum, its distaste for dogma and sentiment and its intellectual restraint; while Mme. de Staël had all the fervour and optimism of the 19th century and an inordinate amount of her own besides. She recognised only two classes of people, those who were capable of enthusiasm and those who were not. An only child, the daughter of Necker, Mme. de Staël was accustomed not only to the best society in Europe, but to dominating that society. Her effect on Benjamin, then twenty-seven, one year her junior, was instantaneous. He was swept irresistibly forward in the train of this regal woman which included statesmen, lovers, friends, children and servants.

Under her tutelage Constant developed his powers of debate and his love of liberty. "There are people", he writes, "who are passionate like princes. Without wishing to do so, one deceives them because one fears an explosion if one speaks frankly to them". Mme. de Staël could never bear to face a truth against herself and if she thought she was being deceived it overwhelmed her. This semi-servitude, though it filled his life with ever-changing interests and gave a centre to his days, was wounding to his pride, exhausting to his nerves and injurious to the deeper levels of his nature. "I deeply love all that I find at Coppet but this perpetual distraction tires and enervates me". As she felt him slipping further out of her reach she became more and more distraught. "Love between a man and a woman", wrote Balzac, "is a duel, and if she loses she dies". Mme. de Staël was not accustomed to losing anything but her temper. In his "Journal Intime" (1895) Constant refers to, "this long bizarre

state of dependence, much more confining than marriage".

Attempt at marriage

It was hardly to be wondered at that Benjamin Constant sought in a wife the opposite qualities from those that had caused him so much unhappiness with Mme. de Staël, where again and again he had returned to her through tenderness, pity and dependence—tossed backwards and forwards on this calamitous love, that seemed either to dash him against the rocks or to leave him high and dry. This wife he was soon to find in the person of Charlotte von Hardenberg, a docile, gracious and forgiving woman. Indeed she was what most men appreciate in a wife, though a little odd; she was thirty-eight. He certainly believed himself in love with her, but even after his marriage Constant returned to stay at Coppet, where the difficulties of his life for a period increased rather than diminished. No sooner was he irretrievably launched in his new life than he wrote in his journal, "There are times when bitter and heartrending expressions of suffering suddenly return to rend my heart and confound my brain": such were the longer-lasting effects of his liaison with Mme. de Staël.

After Napoleon's defeat, Constant returned to Paris to enter once more into politics. He had, in the days when Napoleon was First Consul, already been nominated as a member of the Tribunal where he used all his skill and eloquence against the threat of Bonapartist absolutism, consequently being expelled from office and following Mme. de Staël in her exile. Now, though he favoured the restoration of the monarchy, he fought passionately to salvage all that was possible of constitutional liberty. Then once again his whole life was uprooted from its foundation. At the age of forty-seven he fell frantically in love with Mme.

Récamier. "Cette femme", he wrote in his journal, "me saisit tout à coup et m'inspire un sentiment violent. Le travail, la politique, la littérature, tout est fini. Le règne de Juliette commence".

Mme. Récamier was Mme. de Staël's intimate friend and had been her confidant during all her trouble with Benjamin. Besides being a faithful friend Mme. Récamier was a good Catholic, and though she did not prohibit her lovers to kneel before her, this was apparently as far as they were allowed to go. Benjamin Constant became one of the most disconsolate of all her suitors, and it would certainly be difficult to find any love letters that reveal more movingly the anguish of this dolorous enchantment. As he so admirably expressed himself, "*Il y a en moi un point mystérieux: tant qu'il n'est pas atteint mon âme est immobile: si on le touche, tout est décidé*".

Political gambling

After Napoleon's sensational entrance into Paris at the start of the "Hundred Days", Constant risked his head in coming to see Mme. Récamier, and finished up by accepting a post in the Conseil d'Etat where he helped in

drafting a constitution. In fact, by the time his return to France was complete, Mme. Récamier no longer had any power over him. For Constant threw himself into politics with a frenzy, that, like a red-hot ember in a brazier, always lay at the bottom of his disaffections. As a young man he had been wont to say, "Je me tue, donc je m'amuse"; at any time he would have tossed his life away for a whim. The least claim upon his sympathy was never disregarded, and he would give, without stint or calculation, his time, strength and money to save anyone unjustly condemned.

During his last years, which were invariably plagued by illness, Constant spent his days at the Tribunal, his evenings at private work and his nights at the gaming tables. "In arduis constantans" was the motto he used to uphold his basic principles, and it would be hard to find any French statesman who remained more faithful to the cause of liberty. If he was inconstant in love, so was Lord Nelson, Victor Hugo, George Sand and many others who were not so conscience stricken, so civilised and so understanding. If he caused sorrow, equally he gave joy. Of every woman he had loved he wrote with a delicacy and taste matched by his necessity for excitement, precisely

because it was inseparable for freedom and his horror of oppression.

When he died (8th December, 1830) the students of Paris flocked to do him honour. He was accorded a State funeral and crowds followed his body to the cemetery of Père Lachaise. Here by torchlight his old friend Lafayette, hero of the American Revolution, read the funeral oration. For a long time after this Paris forgot him, then suddenly the moralists woke up and the chase was on. They fell upon his confessions, his letters, his notebooks, his novels; they ferreted out his every love affair. Then the clamour receded and once more dusty oblivion settled over his grave. Only in 1913, more than eighty years after his death, was a monument unveiled at Le Mans in memory of the deputy of the Sarthe. To our own generation his words, in the four slim volumes that contain his most intimate confessions—"Adolphe", "Le Journal Intime", "Le Cahier Rouge" (1907) and "Cécile" (1951)—still speak with a sincerity which only the heart in its moments of ultimate candour is ever able to communicate. Over every page of these discredited books, palpable as dew in a summer garden, is a freshness which time, rather than destroying, has served but to renew and enhance.

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