The Abyss of Freedom: Legitimacy, Unity, and Irony in Constant's *Adolphe*[1]

JOSHUA LANDY

Benjamin Constant's *Adolphe*, written in 1806 and published twelve years later, has often been read as a fictionalized confession, or at the least as an earnest story about the tragic vicissitudes of love, its every pronouncement a pearl of wisdom fully worthy of our pious contemplation.[2] Yet closer scrutiny reveals the novella to be, if anything, a *critique* of confession, an undermining from within of its central premises. Just like Rousseau, Adolphe writes in order to convince himself and others of his integrity, sincerity, and fundamental nobility, in the face, presumably, of competing accounts; just like Rousseau, Adolphe does so in part by offering the image of a man born good, with society to blame for his subsequent corruption; and just like Rousseau, Adolphe ultimately fails in his endeavor, betraying irreparable fissures in his disposition, gaping lacunae in his self-understanding, striking lapses in his forthrightness.[3] But unlike Rousseau, Adolphe is a fictional character, and the difference is crucial. For it means that those contradictions which, in the *Confessions*, can only be cases of unintentional error on the part of their author may well, in *Adolphe*, be a deliberate strategy on the part of a canny literary craftsman. And it turns out, indeed, that Constant's ambition is neither to propound a theory of love – the narrative voice is far too unreliable – nor to disburden himself of guilty recollections but, quite the contrary, to interrogate the very feasibility of the confessional project, to ask whether such a project makes any sense when souls are irremediably divided. It is, accordingly, to question the value of post-Revolutionary liberty, that abyss of freedom whose main outcome, as Constant sees it, is nothing but relentless, comprehensive, paralyzing doubt, as much in the domains of religion and politics as in that of love.

> L'amour à la Werther . . . est un but nouveau dans la vie auquel tout se rapporte, et qui change la face de tout.
> – Stendhal, *De l'amour* (257)

Adolphe's story is a simple one; indeed, Constant claims in one of his prefaces to have written it as a kind of *gageure*, an attempt to "donner une sorte d'intérêt à un roman dont les personnages se réduiraient à deux, et dont la situation serait toujours la même" (30). The narrator-protagonist witnesses a friend falling in love and, deciding to emulate him, lights on an older woman named Ellénore, the Polish mistress of the Comte de P. A love affair of sorts begins, and Ellénore sacrifices what is left of her reputation to Adolphe, but she has by now become a burden to him, and he spends the rest of the novel oscillating between a desire to abandon her and a fear of causing her pain. In the end, worn down by Adolphe's weakness and her own frustrated passion, Ellénore dies, leaving a letter in which she explains the situation more clearly than he himself can possibly see it.

Or so, at least, it appears. Is Ellénore really on the mark when she tells Adolphe, in no uncertain terms, "vous . . . n'aimez pas" (117)? It has become something of a critical commonplace that she is.[4] After all, argues Grahame Jones, if anyone who has loved is incapable of describing the experience, as Adolphe claims at the start of chapter IV ("charme de l'amour, qui vous éprouva ne saurait vous décrire!"), then he himself, who offers just such a description, can clearly not have been in love. All the more so as the way in which he portrays that ideal state ("ce détachement de tous les soins vulgaires") is belied, in the very next paragraph, by the reality of his situation ("les intérêts de la vie commune ne se laissent pas plier arbitrairement à tous nos désirs"). The "charme de l'amour" passage – which is in any case something of an afterthought, only appearing in the printed versions of the text – surely represents no more than a duplicitous attempt on Adolphe's part to convince the reader (and/or himself) that he has ever had feelings for Ellénore. His later admission to a mutual friend, "l'amour n'entrait pour rien dans les devoirs que je m'imposais" (96), is what should really be trusted.[5]

When we look, however, at what Adolphe tells us about his emotions, we find that they actually run through six discrete phases. We start with an ostensible indifference belied by subliminal attraction: "je pensais faire, en observateur froid et impartial, le tour de son caractère et de son esprit," writes Adolphe, "mais chaque mot qu'elle disait me semblait revêtu d'une grâce inexplicable . . . Je ne croyais point aimer Ellénore; mais déjà je n'aurais pu me résigner à ne pas lui plaire" (46–47). Next we hear about mad love (the "charme de l'amour" section we just discussed). This is then followed by a

loss of all feeling, to such an extent that "je n'étais soutenu par aucune impulsion qui partît du cœur" (69), although when Ellénore is absent, "je souffrais même de ne pas la voir, et j'étais étonné de la peine que cette privation me causait" (67). A fourth phase witnesses the return in force of love – "je l'aimais plus que je ne l'avais jamais aimée; tout mon cœur était revenu à elle . . . l'amour était rentré tout entier dans mon âme" (77) – except that, during the very same episode, Ellénore is right to complain "vous croyez avoir de l'amour, et vous n'avez que de la pitié" (78). And in a fifth phase, scandalously, we find a *loss of the very love Adolphe claims not to have had in the first place*. "L'intimité perdit tous ses charmes," he claims, "et l'amour toute sa douceur" (102); but, one wants to ask, *what* intimacy? *what* love, if Ellénore's harsh words were accurate? Finally, in a striking return to our point of departure, we hear once again of an ostensible indifference belied by subliminal attraction, by "un désir secret de retarder le moment funeste" (108), as Adolphe prepares to abandon Ellénore but finds himself, for unfathomable reasons (not, then, those of guilt and pity), unwilling to let go.

It is impossible to account for the six stages, especially those (four and five) that make no logical sense, by repeating Ellénore's assertion that Adolphe is devoid of all feeling. Nor will it do to contend, as does Tzvetan Todorov for example, that Adolphe merely talks himself into it.[6] Basing his position on remarks made by Adolphe to the effect that "les sentiments que nous feignons, nous finissons par les éprouver" (79), Todorov famously views Constant as endowing language with a magical force, the power to render true statements false and false statements true. "All words . . . have an incantatory power," writes Todorov; "to write is to institute reality" ("Speech" 100). According to Todorov's Constant, words do not so much describe psychic states as generate them ("Speech" 96).

This, however, does not prevent Todorov from citing, as though it supported his own argument, Adolphe's anguished rhetorical question "pourquoi me révéla-t-elle un secret que je voulais ignorer?" – a question which clearly presupposes a set of pre-linguistic data, a collection of psychic facts which can be revealed or suppressed, known or unknown, without the suppression or the revelation altering their essential nature.[7] For further confirmation, we need only look to Adolphe's description of his stinging words to the Baron de T –, who has had the gall to suggest that he, Adolphe, could ever leave Ellénore. "Je sortis en achevant ces paroles," writes Adolphe, "mais qui m'expliquera par quelle mobilité le sentiment qui me les dictait s'éteignit avant même que j'eusse fini de les prononcer!" (89) Far from creating emotional reality, words here simply echo a feeling that "dictates" them, and which they are powerless to sustain. So while it may be tempting to accept Adolphe's assertion that "les sentiments que nous feignons, nous finissons par les éprouver" – eager as we are for ideological orientation, our standard reading habits encourage us to

embrace maxims whenever they are offered – we should strenuously resist. If we are to avoid falling into Constant's trap for the unwary, we must test each general statement against the events of the story, against the specifics it purports to explain or from which it purports to derive.

Now it seems reasonable, I think, to see Constant as endorsing claims of personal disunity ("il n'y a point d'unité complète dans l'homme" [47]; "les sentiments de l'homme sont confus et mélangés" [42]). It seems less so to put one's faith in a maxim that implies successive unitary conditions – "les sentiments que nous feignons, nous *finissons* par les éprouver" – a two-state system in which one *starts out* lacking an emotion, and *ends up* experiencing it. When Adolphe begins writing his love letter to Ellénore, we are to believe he is completely indifferent; afterwards, we are to believe he is thoroughly smitten. Yet neither claim is, strictly speaking, true. In reality, Adolphe only manages to imbue himself with "*un peu* de la passion que j'avais cherché à exprimer" (48; my emphasis), and he only manages this because the partial passion is already present, in non-verbalized form, within his mind.[8] "Ce qu'on ne dit pas," as he puts it elsewhere, "n'en existe pas moins" (59). Language, in *Adolphe*, does not create feelings: it merely brings them to consciousness.[9]

But if Adolphe is not the victim of language, and not simply indifferent, how then is it possible to account for the vagaries of his emotional state? Only, I think, by positing a profound and unremitting *ambivalence*. And sure enough, indications of division, far more frequent than sweeping claims of love or indifference, encrust the text at regular intervals.[10] No more an out-and-out libertine (following his father's cynical precepts) than a total romantic (in imitation of his friend), Adolphe is and remains an insuperably conflicted being, forever torn between impulse and *arrière-pensée*, affection and analysis, desire and calculation.[11] He is always "un mélange," as he puts it, "d'enthousiasme et d'ironie" (46), always at once a living, experiencing being and "cette portion de nous qui est, pour ainsi dire, spectatrice de l'autre" (47). (Even after Ellénore's death, notes the anonymous letter-writer, Adolphe continues to be a "mélange d'égoïsme et de sensibilité" [120].) Critics like Jones are right: Adolphe is indeed not in love, *according to his own definition*. But it is the definition which is problematic. If love were indeed the absolute, unconditional, and reservation-free passion he describes, then he would indeed lack it; by more human standards, however, he might aptly be said both to love and not love, to have feelings to which, at the same time, he cannot lend his full assent.[12]

Ellénore has it wrong, then, about Adolphe, and he has it wrong about himself. He is not as much of a rogue as he would have us believe.[13] Adolphe's affliction is not an absence of feeling but a surplus of internal division, one which makes a mockery of his own absolutist theory of love. Yet this in turn raises a serious question, which may indeed be the crux of the novel as a whole.

If Adolphe does indeed possess sentiment, why would he claim to lack it? Why on earth would anyone make himself out to be worse than he is? It is this enigma that the present essay attempts, in two different ways, to explain.

2: BEFORE AND AFTER

> Heine maintains that a true autobiography is almost an impossibility, and that man is bound to lie about himself. He considers that Rousseau certainly told lies about himself in his confessions, and even intentionally lied, out of vanity. I am convinced that Heine is right; I understand very well that sometimes one may, just out of sheer vanity, attribute regular crimes to oneself, and indeed I can very well conceive that kind of vanity.
> – Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground* (35)

Here is a first answer, inspired by Dostoevsky: caddishness is, at least, an identity. In *Notes from Underground*, Dostoevsky presents a character who recognizes on the one hand that he "could not . . . become anything: neither spiteful nor kind, neither a rascal nor an honest man, neither a hero nor an insect" (5) but who is quite happy to open his confession, on the other, by presenting himself as "a spiteful man" (3). Dostoevsky's character is living out his own claim about confession: that memoirists lie not only in their own defense but also, at times, *against* themselves (10, 35), since the burning desire to "be something," to lay claim to a fixed identity, can take precedence over the desire to appear virtuous. The same, I would suggest, is true for Adolphe. He too makes himself out to be worse than he *is in order to be something at all*, in order to be able to characterize his (past) self in a simple, unitary way – rather like those readers of *Adolphe* who, according to Constant, "se calomniaient" in comparing themselves with the hero (32). Adolphe is the man who loves, who cannot love fully, who redefines love to exclude his own case, and who slanders himself, all so as to gain, in retrospect, a stable self-definition.

To the extent that Adolphe is his own primary audience, his narrative may be seen as a desperate attempt to wrest the shadow of unity from the reality of inexorable division. And it does so by flattening out a synchronic schism (on the one hand, on the other) into a diachronic sequence of simple states (before, after). As though joining Saint Paul and Saint Augustine in the claim "once I was all darkness; now I am all daylight,"[14] Adolphe minimizes the role of internal conflict within his life: rather than acknowledging that he has always been and continues to be a creature of contradictions, he prefers to pretend, to others and above all to himself, that he was once a total rascal and is now an honest man.[15] His life, as he chooses to see it, falls into two discrete phases, hermetically separated by a moment of revelation (Ellénore's death has, officially, brought with it a corresponding metaphorical death within himself, the kind

of clean break which would allow him to tell his tale[16]). Before that event lies experience, characterized by total darkness and turpitude; after it sits analysis, involving absolute clarity and contrition.

It is this, I would argue, which best accounts for Adolphe's relentless deployment of *maxims*. For the maxim, in its very structure, implies a type of vision which is utterly detached, which sees individual events only as instances of more absolute rules; to arrogate the right to maxim-making is to style oneself as Schopenhauer's *schauendes Auge*, a "spectateur indifférent" (93), a mere observer without any emotional involvement in life. The meaning of Adolphe's maxims thus resides less in their specific claims than in their general form. They are designed to sustain the fantasy of an existence purged of all contingency, a self transformed into the token of a type, its every detail now part of an overarching system.[17] As Adolphe says – in a maxim which I believe we can trust – this systematization of experience is the only way for the soul to live in harmony with itself: "presque toujours, pour vivre en repos avec nous-mêmes, nous travestissons en calculs et en systèmes nos impuissances et nos faiblesses" (47).[18]

Some of Adolphe's maxims, like the one just cited, may legitimately be taken to be endorsed by Constant. But in most cases, the latter is at pains to intimate his distance from their content. We have already seen that some, such as the famous "les sentiments que nous feignons . . ." do not square with the reality Adolphe himself presents. And we have also already seen that a second set conflict with *one another*: the definition of love as including "ce détachement de tous les soins vulgaires" (60) is, we recall, immediately belied by the equally confident claim, only a handful of lines later, that "les intérêts de la vie commune ne se laissent pas plier arbitrairement à tous nos désirs" (60–61). Now a third set have a way of turning against their *speaker*. When the narrator tells us, rather bitterly, "je voulus réveiller sa générosité, comme si l'amour n'était pas de tous les sentiments le plus égoïste" (83), he is of course accusing Ellénore of selfishness; but if maxims apply universally, then they apply to him too, and he is inadvertently admitting his own guilt. (The same goes, as we just remarked, for "nous travestissons en calculs et en systèmes nos impuissances et nos faiblesses.")

There is, finally, a set of maxims that conflict not with the world, or with each other, or even with the character, but with *themselves*, that is to say with the very form in which they are presented. When Adolphe informs us that he has "une insurmontable aversion pour *toutes* les maximes communes et pour *toutes* les formules dogmatiques" (39), isn't this claim itself, with its emphatically repeated universal quantifier, a bit of a *formule dogmatique*? And then, when he goes on to declare that "je ne sais quel instinct m'avertissait . . . de me défier de ces axiomes généraux si exempts de toute restriction, si purs de toute nuance" and immediately concludes the paragraph with the complaint that "les sots font de leur morale une masse compacte et indivisible, pour qu'elle

se mêle le moins possible avec leurs actions et les laisse libres dans tous les détails" (39–40),[19] is he not guilty of an *axiome général* of his own? One thinks of Alexandre Dumas's famous phrase, "toutes les généralisations sont mauvaises, même celle-ci," except that Dumas is joking and Adolphe, unfortunately for him, is being entirely serious. All in all, Adolphe's maxims tells on him far more than they tell about human life. In conflict with the world, with each other, with the character, and with themselves, they offer the *illusion* of personal unity – just as the claim of caddishness does – but Constant is always there to remind us, through the four layers of suspicion, that they do nothing more than that.

3: CONFESSION AND DIVISION

> Nous n'avouons de petits défauts que pour persuader que nous n'en avons pas de grands.
> – La Rochefoucauld, *Maxime* 327

Adolphe, then, is a the portrait of a divided soul desperately trying – and failing – to appear unified. However much use its protagonist may make of the maxim form, however much he may present himself as worse than he is, and however much he may seek to fit his narrative within the Pauline-Augustinian tradition, he remains, as narrator, no less conflicted than he ever was as character. And the writing of his story, far from resolving the conflict, simply *reduplicates* it, by extending it, in addition, to the level of self-analysis. Just as the character oscillates between passionate involvement and cynical detachment vis-à-vis Ellénore, so the narrator oscillates between passionate involvement and cynical detachment vis-à-vis himself. All that has happened is that the internal schism has been shifted to a higher level, Adolphe's *enthousiasme* now figuring as indulgence for his own past actions, his *ironie* as reproach. Instead of bearing the marks of a unified authorial voice, the narration betrays a continuing dichotomy of vision, detachment and contrition endlessly alternating with indulgence and self-justification.

"Certes, je ne veux point ici m'excuser," Adolphe insists at one point, "je me condamne plus sévèrement qu'un autre peut-être ne le ferait à ma place; mais je puis au moins me rendre ici ce solennel témoignage, que je n'ai jamais agi par calcul, et que j'ai toujours été dirigé par des sentiments vrais et naturels. Comment se fait-il qu'avec ces sentiments je n'aie fait si longtemps que mon malheur et celui des autres?" (101) For Adolphe, the concluding question is rhetorical, deserving at most the answer that fate is to blame.[20] To *us*, however, all kinds of responses are open. For starters, what is the guarantee that acting on "true and natural" feelings will inevitably have beneficial consequences? This conflation of the natural with the good is a dangerously Rousseauist assumption. And why

should we believe, second, that Adolphe *has* acted out of sentiment? The claim to have "jamais agi par calcul" is one of the most flagrantly groundless assertions in the entire novel.[21] Third, even if it were true both that Adolphe acted spontaneously and that spontaneous action guarantees success, can we really accept that Adolphe is making no attempt to excuse himself here, as he claims? It is, on the contrary, quite clear that Adolphe is absolving himself of all responsibility, presenting himself as his own victim ("je n'aie fait . . . que mon malheur"), even as – just like Rousseau in his *Confessions* – he arrogates to himself ("je me condamne plus sévèrement . . .") the status of the world's most scrupulously honest, most meticulously self-critical individual.[22]

But then, in a final and decisive twist, Adolphe is not even supposed to believe in such honesty in the first place. To be sure, he is happy to trumpet his own candor: "il faut être sincère," he sighs at one point, hoping no doubt that the present virtue of honesty will outweigh past vices of deception and cruelty.[23] Yet elsewhere in the narrative – Constant's masterstroke is to make such apparently innocuous statements destroy one another – he complains that "presque jamais personne n'est tout à fait sincère ni tout à fait de mauvaise foi" (47).[24] What we have before us is a character who acknowledges in a general way that there is virtually no such thing as complete sincerity, while attempting, in his own specific case, to have his audience believe that he is telling the whole truth and nothing but the truth.[25] Here as everywhere, we feel Constant's extraordinary agility in giving his character just enough rope with which to hang himself; here as everywhere we sense mistrust at Adolphe's expense; here as everywhere we hear Rousseau's *Confessions* being systematically dismantled, one ploy at a time.[26]

The consequence is a serious challenge to the confessional project, to all three premises on which, whether wittingly or not, every serious autobiography depends. First, there must be a self to be described, which is to say an entity both reasonably coherent and reasonably distinct. Second, the entity in question must be transparent to itself, so that robust knowledge of its secret sentiments and motivations is possible. And third, the entity in question must be susceptible to adequate expression in language.[27] In Constant, however, not one of these demands can be met: first, the soul is never quite at one with itself; second, many of its facets are notoriously effective at evading detection; and third, since its most important states are ultimately individual, language is, by its very nature, not equipped to capture them. It is simply too blunt an instrument for that kind of precision work.

In short, "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." (42) (If any of Adolphe's general pronouncements fits in with his story, it is surely this meta-maxim.[28]) All that language can

do is offer the *illusion* of unified selfhood, the mere *feeling* – not even a sustainable one, in this fictional world – of wholeness. Constant would doubtless say, rather wistfully, that it would be fine indeed if language genuinely had the power to heal the rift in the soul and let us live "en repos avec nous-mêmes"; to make such a claim, however, would be to argue "comme si les rédactions changeaient le fond des choses" (Préface 28), and descriptions do *not* change the essence of things. Forms of writing within the text (typically letters) confirm the sad fact, making statements and resolutions which immediately cease to operate at the next meeting; genuine emotions tend to emerge in silence.[29] It is inevitable, then, that Adolphe fares no better as narrator than he did as character. His abiding desire, to become a unified being, is simply not attainable. Language would have to be magical indeed to overcome the division of the soul.[30]

4: LEGITIMACY

> On a tort de parler en amour de mauvais choix, puisque dès qu'il y a choix, il ne peut être que mauvais.
> – Marcel Proust, *Albertine Disparue* (190)

There is, however, a second reason for Adolphe's resistance towards the painful truth that he neither fully loves Ellénore nor entirely lacks love for her: it is that he cannot survive without a sense of *necessity*. The impression of unique appropriateness, "cette persuasion que nous avons trouvé l'être que la nature avait destiné pour nous" (60), is for him not a luxury but a requirement; he desperately needs to believe that his beloved is secretly destined for him, that there is a single appropriate partner in the world, and that involvements must therefore be either all or nothing, either perfect fusion (with the right person) or absolute indifference (with anyone else).

The idea is of course a very old one, but it gained renewed urgency in the wake of the Revolution, the Terror, and (especially) the *sacre de Napoléon* in 1804, two years before the first draft of *Adolphe*. As Constant saw it, anyone who seized power under such conditions would inevitably expose himself to challenges from a potentially endless series of rivals – "l'usurpation . . . soulève toutes les prétentions: elle met en fermentation tous les amours-propres" – and would, as a result, continually have to "justify his elevation," principally by the waging of unnecessary wars ("un usurpateur n'a de ressource que dans des guerres non interrompues").[31] And *Adolphe* is, according to an unpublished prefatory fragment, a tale in which affective freedom stands, synecdochically, for freedom in love, politics, and religion. "J'ai voulu peindre dans Adolphe," writes Constant,

> une des principales maladies morales de notre siècle, cette fatigue, cette incertitude,

cette absence de force, cette analyse perpétuelle, qui place une arrière-pensée à côté de tous les sentiments, et qui par là les corrompt dès leur naissance. . . . ce n'est pas dans les seules liaisons du cœur que cet affaiblissement moral, cette impuissance d'impressions durables se fait remarquer: tout se tient dans la nature. La *fidelité en amour* est une force comme la *croyance religieuse*, comme *l'enthousiasme de la liberté*. Or nous n'avons plus aucune force. Nous ne savons plus *aimer*, ni *croire*, ni *vouloir*. Chacun doute de la vérité de ce qu'il dit, sourit de la véhémence de ce qu'il affirme, et pressent la fin de ce qu'il éprouve.

J'ai peint une petite partie du tableau, la seule qui fût . . . sans danger pour le peintre. L'histoire dira l'influence de cette disposition d'âme sur d'autres objets. Car encore une fois tout se tient. Ce qui fait qu'on est dur ou léger envers *l'affection*, fait aussi qu'on est indifférent à tout *avenir au delà de ce monde*, et vil envers toutes *les puissances qui se succèdent*, et qu'on nomme légitimes tant qu'elles subsistent.[32]

In all three domains, passionate commitment is undermined by doubt, and doubt, in turn, owes its existence to freedom. (The fictional world of *Adolphe* is one in which characters are very much left to their own devices, whether by peers, parents or princes, and it is precisely this lack of constraint which is so destructive: see Delbouille, "Mauvais usage," *passim*.) For the liberty to choose inevitably gives rise to a perennial suspicion that another ruler, another form of government, another partner, another religion might be better suited to one's purposes than whatever is currently on offer.[33] From here, it is but a short step to an abject embrace of tyranny (figured here as Adolphe's repeated abdication of autonomy) or, at best, conative paralysis (figured here in Adolphe's final state).[34] In such a context, the existence of a domain of choice sanctioned by the nature of things would be positively salvific. And so it is no wonder that Adolphe would like to entertain the notion that Ellénore is the only one for him – that, as he puts it in a letter to her (57), "j'aurais serré dans mes bras la seule créature que la nature ait formée pour mon cœur" – or that, if not, she means absolutely nothing. Adolphe's existence depends upon the romantic illusion of an all-encompassing love, a love which changes everything, providing a purpose and a meaning in a life torn by excessive possibilities.[35]

It is not, then, that Adolphe loves badly; it is simply that he loves at all. It is that he loves a human being, while insisting on applying the label "love" only to inhumanly flawless encounters; it is that he demands perfection, while lacking the capacity to fool himself that perfection is what he has; it is, in short, that he is a modern subject. These days, explains Constant,

nous avons perdu en imagination ce que nous avons gagné en connaissances. Nous sommes par là même incapables d'une exaltation durable. . . . Nous traînons toujours après nous je ne sai[s] quelle arrière-pensée qui naît de l'expérience et qui

défait l'enthousiasme. La première condition pour l'enthousiasme, c'est de ne pas s'observer soi-même avec finesse. Or nous craignons tellement d'être dupes et surtout de le paraître, que nous nous observons sans cesse, dans nos impressions les plus violentes. Les anciens avaient sur toutes choses une conviction entière; nous n'avons presque sur rien qu'une conviction molle et flottante, sur l'incomplet de laquelle nous cherchons en vain à nous étourdir. (*De l'usurpation* §7, 167)

One could barely imagine a more accurate description of Adolphe, a character who, unable to rid himself of his "arrière-pensée," finds himself constitutionally "incapable d'une exaltation durable." In at least one of the counterfactual side-narratives inevitably suggested to the reader's mind[36] there is surely a less ironic couple, a couple able to sustain this necessarily imperfect union, to keep it in a perpetual state of suspension, and thus – by means of a self-fulfilling illusion, a reciprocal pact of deception and self-deception – to achieve the life-long bond of the romantic ideal. But while Ellénore is "avide de se tromper elle-même" (95), and Adolphe equally keen to keep things from himself ("pourquoi me révéla-t-elle un secret *que je voulais ignorer*?" 78), both are still too self-aware to shield themselves from the truth to such an extent; like the good moderns that they are, they "cherch[ent] en vain à [s']étourdir." Always watching himself, even "dans [ses] impressions les plus violentes," torn apart by "cette portion de nous qui est, pour ainsi dire, spectatrice de l'autre" (47), Adolphe is incapable of allowing himself to believe in anything.

At some level, Adolphe knows that his love for Ellénore is neither mystically right nor entirely misplaced but, like any other, compromised and substitutable; he can lend her a certain degree of endorsement, as he could to a ruler or to a religion, but never his full assent. Only later, when she is already dead, can he pretend that his attitude towards her has all along been unitary, in one last attempt to salvage the dream of necessity. And the very same lack of inner unity which made love impossible, and which makes confession impossible, also turns out to have serious consequences in the political domain. If no choice carries sufficient legitimacy, and if we moderns are incapable even of persuading ourselves that it does, what hope is there for any fledgling democracy? However Constant's political views may have evolved subsequent to the drafting of the novella, *Adolphe* leaves this as an unanswered, perhaps unanswerable, question.[37] In the end, the character Adolphe stands not as an exemplar of contrition, confession, humility, and honesty, but instead as an unwitting monument to post-revolutionary vertigo.

Joshua Landy
Department of French and Italian
Stanford University
Stanford, CA 94305-2010

1 I am grateful to Thomas G. Pavel for his extremely helpful suggestions on several versions of this essay.

2 Constant has little time for those who take his novella for a *roman à clef*. "Cette fureur de reconnaître dans les ouvrages d'imagination les individus qu'on rencontre dans le monde," he writes in the preface to the second edition, "est pour ces ouvrages un véritable fléau. Elle . . . détruit leur intérêt et anéantit leur utilité" (26). This of course did not stop Bourget from exclaiming "c'est bien Constant lui-même" (20), or Sainte-Beuve (*passim*), Du Bos (32–33), and many others from agreeing. (Even Maurice Blanchot, while not equating Adolphe with his author, mistakes the *Éditeur* for Constant [232], and Michel Charles appears to do the same [236].) Bourget goes so far (20) as to congratulate Constant/Adolphe – stunningly – on refusing to make any excuses for his sins. Turnell says much the same: Adolphe is Constant (97, 102), makes no excuses (81–82, 96), and thus succeeds where Rousseau failed (102). Most, however, are content to blame Constant for Adolphe's shortcomings. Thus for Weisz, who clearly identifies author and protagonist (159, 187), Adolphe's unreliability is Constant's (184), the novel is a failure (184), and Constant is – he does not mince words – a "salaud" in the Sartrean sense (188n131). Bénichou's approach is more measured. The character of Ellénore, he points out (349–55), is based on three separate sources (M^me^ de Staël for the tempestuousness, Anna Lindsay for the demand of total love, Charlotte de Hardenberg for victimhood), as well as containing strictly imaginary elements in addition (her age, her death). This is also the position of Delbouille "Labyrinthe" 288–89; cf. Verhoeff, *"Adolphe" et Constant* 41.

3 "Ce ne sont pas les sens qui sont corrupteurs; ce sont les calculs auxquels la société nous accoutume" (59). Some critics (e.g. Turnell 97–100) have taken this seriously, viewing the novel as an indictment of society. As for whether Adolphe writes (like Rousseau) to set the story straight, there is at least evidence that, in a general way, he does not relish the idea of others taking charge of his narrative: "il m'était démontré que l'on se racontait mon histoire, et chacun, sans doute, la racontait à sa manière" (105). Still, the question of audience is a vexed one. At times, Adolphe seems to envision a more or less friendly set of readers, eager to learn from, rather than to judge, his mistakes; it is for such people that he occasionally casts his narrative as an exemplary or cautionary tale ("Qui que vous soyez, ne remettez jamais à un autre les intérêts de votre cœur" [95]; "je veux simplement dire, et cela pour d'autres que pour moi . . ., qu'il faut du temps pour s'accoutumer à l'espèce humaine" [40]). Yet elsewhere he anticipates – and attempts to forestall – condemnation on the readers' part ("c'est ici surtout, je le sens, que l'on m'accusera de faiblesse" [101]). And then at last, having finished his récit, he makes no effort to publish it, as though the most important audience were neither the imagined friends nor the imagined enemies but instead (a part of) himself. On the last point, cf. Booker (673) and Genette (*Figures III* 240); by contrast, Charles (221n1),

Woollen (13), and Thomas (488) all take Adolphe to be writing for a real audience.

4 In Delbouille's lapidary formulation (*Genèse* 536), "Adolphe n'aime pas, Adolphe aime peu, Adolphe aime mal: voilà en somme la courbe des opinions de la critique." I might rephrase this, however. It seems to me that the real choices are: (1) Adolphe is never in love; (2) Adolphe is in love at first, but then ceases to be; (3) Adolphe is, at any given stage, neither fully in love nor fully out of it. The first camp includes Weisz (182), Turnell (105, 109), and Verhoeff ("*Adolphe* en parole" 57, 63). In the second I would place Bourget (20–21), Poulet (80–82), Alexander (25–26), Dineen (1 *et passim*), and Niess (20). Jeanine P. Plottel (415) and C.J. Greshoff (32) appear to belong in the third, as do Fairlie ("Structure and Style" 38–40, "Constant Romancier" 164–65), Unwin ("Narrator" 68), Mercken-Spaas (44–46), and myself.

5 See Jones, "Le sens de l'amour" 590, 592, 595, and cf. Weisz 183. It is true that the "charme de l'amour" passage is a late addition, but the "point lumineux" section (p. 56), in which Adolphe has already declared himself in (at least temporary) love, is not.

6 This view has also been defended by Michel Charles ("Celui qui parle dit toujours la 'vérité' pour la simple raison que ce qu'il dit devient la vérité" [243]) and, more recently, by Gérard Froidevaux (82) and Wardy Poelstra (110–11). Todorov himself has reiterated the view in his book-length treatment of Constant (*Benjamin Constant* 135–39).

7 Todorov, "Speech" 97. For reasons I have just mentioned, the "secret" – "vous croyez avoir de l'amour, et vous n'avez que de la pitié" – is only a partial truth. But Adolphe's way of talking about it is enough to confirm that he does not really believe in the omnipotence of language.

8 This becomes explicit in Proust. If feigned detachment brings about genuine detachment, it is in part because "dans ces mensonges, nous sentons bien qu'il y a de la vérité" (*La Prisonnière* 424).

9 For a powerful critique of Todorov, see Unwin ("Narrator" 73–74), who reminds us of Adolphe's claim that "ce qu'on ne dit pas n'en existe pas moins," and Verhoeff ("«Adolphe» en parole" 49–58), who discusses the scene of mid-sentence "mobilité." For reasons spelled out above, however, I cannot endorse Verhoeff's proposed alternative (ibid. 57, 63), namely that Adolphe is entirely lacking in love (the first of three alternatives I presented in footnote 3).

10 A classic example: "un nouveau besoin se fit sentir au fond de mon cœur. 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. Les sentiments de l'homme sont confus et mélangés . . ." (42). But instances may be found throughout (see e.g. 47, 50, 67, 85). Perhaps even the bizarre opening of Chapter IV may be explained this way, with Adolphe's sensibility prudently stopping at a rhetorical question ("charme de l'amour, qui pourra vous peindre!") and his intellect inevitably but foolishly setting out to answer it.

11 The seduction of Ellénore is explicitly cast as an attempt by Adolphe to emulate his father, that "observateur froid et caustique" (26), to become himself an "observateur froid

et impartial" (46). Jones ("Le sens de l'amour" 594) recognizes that Adolphe matches neither of his models, but does not draw what I take to be the necessary conclusion.

12 Cf. Fairlie: "Neither Adolphe nor Ellénore can later admit as love anything less than the total, isolated, self-sufficient ecstasy." ("Stylization of Experience" 40) Love, on Adolphe's definition, is "ce jour subit répandu sur la vie, et qui nous semble en expliquer le mystère" (*Adolphe* 60). Stendhal would call this "L'amour à la Werther."

13 The preface to the third edition offers confirmation for this reading: "on découvre combien sont profondes les racines de l'affection *qu'on croyait inspirer sans la partager*" (31, my emphasis). Adolphe may think, or want to think, that he has no feelings for Ellénore, but this is a serious misconception.

14 This is a paraphrase of Ephesians 5: 8, a verse cited by Augustine at *Confessions* VIII: 10, 173.

15 Cf. Freccero: "There is probably no escape from these conflicts in real life, but in literature there does seem to be a way to transform discontinuous moments into linear trajectory: by taking one moment of contradiction and transforming it into a narrative, from *Augustinus* to *alter Augustinus*, so that alternating atemporal moments are transformed into a single temporal sequence and the observing self is segregated from the observed, with which in real life it is constantly confused. . . . The phenomenon of conversion can be adequately represented as definitive only by extending what may be simply a moment of self-consciousness into a temporal sequence" (19–20).

16 This trope of metaphorical death and rebirth represents, for John Freccero (20), St. Paul's most important contribution to Western patterns of self-description. Indeed the fantasy of rebirth is, he argues, that which enables autobiography in the first place: if an autobiography is to be accurate, its author must on the one hand be identical to its hero, so as to have access to all the relevant material, and on the other hand be distinct from the latter, so as to preserve the necessary objectivity. Adolphe follows Saint Paul in arrogating to himself the status of a different man, no longer subject to nihilistic tendencies ("Je trouvais qu'aucun but ne valait la peine d'aucun effort. Il est assez singulier que cette impression se soit affaiblie précisément à mesure que les années se sont accumulées sur moi" [38]) and no longer tempted to defend his own actions ("Je ne veux point ici me justifier: j'ai renoncé depuis longtemps à cet usage frivole et facile d'un esprit sans expérience" [40]). Yet we know from his rhetoric that he is a persistent self-justifier, and we know from the frame that he is currently a restless, disconsolate nomad to whom nothing matters ("Il m'est égal, me répondit-il, d'être ici ou ailleurs" [33]; cf. Thomas 487–89, Weisz 177–80, Russo 90–91). Nothing has really changed. As the *éditeur* concludes, "c'est en vain qu'on brise avec les objets et les êtres extérieurs; on ne saurait briser avec soi-même" (122).

17 Adolphe's temptation is, in fact, twofold. Although he seems to sense that the human soul is infinitely complex – "Les sentiments de l'homme sont confus et mélangés; ils se composent d'une multitude d'impressions variées qui échappent à l'observation" (42) – he contrives to reduce his former self to a merely dual entity, through the relentless

use of symmetrical and antithetical formulations. (Take, for example, the beautifully alliterative double-binary "plutôt l'indécision que l'indifférence, et des retards que des refus" 100). Having done so, Adolphe proceeds to turn this dichotic psyche into a unified whole: his elegant narration, replete with generous remarks on reality at large, is in itself the construction of a single identity. (On the first point, cf. Thomas 494.)

18 Cf. Coman 195, and Coman 199 for maxims in general. Even the *character* Adolphe uses maxims to strategic, and not just philosophical, ends. In private, both he and Ellénore turn to "general ideas" in order to launch surreptitious strikes upon one another (84, 96; cf. Russo 101) and in society, Adolphe uses misogynistic maxims as a way of convincing the world that he is completely detached, indifferent, a being of pure intellection (71). This does not win him any friends, but it provides him the illusion of singlemindedness.

19 In his article on M^me^ de Staël, Constant expresses much the same sentiment in his own voice – but significantly, I think, in the form of a question rather than that of a maxim. "Et ferait-on ainsi de la morale une masse compacte et indivisible, pour qu'elle se mêlât le moins possible aux intérêts journaliers, et laissât plus de liberté dans les détails?" (*Œuvres* 868, qtd. Fairlie "Stylization of Experience" 45n2) It is of course difficult to attack generalizations without falling into this trap, and Constant does produce some anti-maxims in his theoretical writings (see e.g. *De l'usurpation* §1, 136n; §8, 173; §9, 176; §17, 218; *De l'esprit de conquête* §13, 124); still, Adolphe's performance here is just too extreme, too clumsy for there not to be irony at work. On this point, cf. Unwin "Maxims" 169; Jallat 78, 88; Thomas 492; Russo 100. Scott, who very helpfully explains Constant's resistance to generalizations, strangely misses the irony in *Adolphe* (see esp. 59–61); equally strangely, Fairlie, who notes the conflicts among Adolphe's maxims ("Framework" 14), does not see these as affecting the narrator's reliability (ibid. 9).

20 Both as character and as narrator, Adolphe is happy to displace responsibility onto Ellénore (55, 99, 102), God (90, 107), or a more general "puissance surhumaine" (74). But as Constant remarks in a different context, "il ne suffit pas de se dire contraint pour être excusable . . . ce n'est pas assez de séparer ses opinions de ses actes, de désavouer sa propre conduite" (*De l'esprit de conquête* §14, 128). For fatality as alibi, see Hobson 309 *et passim*, Weisz 176–77, Sullivan 297.

21 Two other striking examples, one from the character, the other from the narrator: "Vous savez fort bien, Ellénore, que ce n'est jamais de moi que je m'occupe le plus" (65); "cette duplicité était fort éloignée de mon caractère naturelle" (104). On the natural and the true, cf. Russo 74, 84–85.

22 Rousseau famously opens his *Confessions* by claiming that their sincerity sets him apart from, and indeed above, all other human beings – "Je forme une entreprise qui n'eut jamais d'exemple et dont l'exécution n'aura point d'imitateur" (5) – and continues to brag, in the *Rêveries*, about his stern self-judgment. "Jamais l'instinct moral ne m'a trompé," he writes here; "il a gardé jusqu'ici sa pureté dans mon cœur assez pour que je puisse m'y confier, et s'il se tait quelquefois devant mes passions dans ma

conduite, il reprend bien son empire sur elle dans mes souvenirs. C'est là que je me juge moi-même avec autant de sévérité peut-être que je serai jugé par le souverain juge après cette vie." (1028) For an analysis of Rousseau's rhetoric, the *locus classicus* is of course de Man, "Excuses" (*passim*).

23 "Je n'imaginais aucun moyen de partir. Je n'en découvrais aucun pour qu'Ellénore pût s'établir dans la même ville que moi. Peut-être, car il faut être sincère, peut-être que je ne le désirais pas." (73) Notice the brilliance of the formulation, which suggests a painful admission ("il faut être sincère") but leaves at the same time ample room for deniability ("peut-être [. . .] peut-être"). This strategy, which John T. Booker terms the "concession-rationalization" (670), offers Adolphe the best of both worlds: while implicitly inviting the reader to admire his forthrightness for confessing sins which all commit but few admit, Adolphe still remains able to stop short of the full, possibly damaging truth. Constant's genius here consists in producing arguments which are plausible, in the sense that they apparently serve Adolphe's apologetic purpose, but which, precisely by doing so too overtly, end up subverting it. On partial sincerity, compare Genette, *Figures II* 282, and cf. also Stendhal (qtd. Blanchot 230–31) and Weisz (193), though these two equate Constant with Adolphe. Paul Bourget, by contrast, is totally taken in; he calls Adolphe's (purported) honesty "une vertu si rare qu'elle tient lieu de beaucoup d'autres" (qtd. Peyre 174).

24 Constant himself is more forthright still, noting in his journal that people do not even tell *themselves* the whole truth: "Quelle singulière chose que les hommes! Comme ils ne se montrent jamais ce qu'ils sont, pas même à eux-mêmes." (1 December 1804, *Journaux intimes* 171)

25 Henri Peyre (173) argues that it is hard to criticize Adolphe, since he himself provides all the ammunition which we would throw at him. This is certainly true for the crimes which he directly confesses; but for those which are committed in the act of narration itself, and which are only visible as it were between the lines, I believe we have Constant to thank and are justified in using them against his character.

Relatedly, it has become something of a critical commonplace (Evans 303, Spencer 183, Charles 232, King 281, Russo 88–92) to say that the addition, in 1815–16, of a concluding "Lettre" and "Réponse" has served to render judgment impossible, whether because there are too many competing perspectives on offer or whether because we would feel somehow embarrassed to take up one of them for ourselves. It seems to me, however, that there is really nothing preventing us from agreeing with at least some of the *Réponse*. (When for example the éditeur complains about "cette vanité qui s'occupe d'elle-même en racontant le mal qu'elle a fait, qui a la prétention de se faire plaindre en se décrivant" [121], he is surely dead on.) The novel does indeed discreetly refrain from forcing a judgment upon us, and that is indeed one of its charms. But this does not mean that it makes judgment impossible; on the contrary, it *demands* that we judge, on pain, perhaps, of showing ourselves to be indecisive modern subjects. While our judgment is by no means the end and goal of our reading, it is still instrumentally necessary.

26 Cf. Thomas 486. This critical impulse is what separates *Adolphe* from one of its more famous predecessors, Goethe's *Werther* (1774), as well as from a host of successors, including for example Sainte-Beuve's *Volupté* (1834). *Adolphe* falls rather in the company of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* (1864), Proust's *Recherche* (1913–27), and Beckett's trilogy (1951–53).

27 For a more detailed discussion, see Landy 110.

28 This receives a measure of confirmation, perhaps, from the fact that Constant says something very similar in his own voice. See Constant, *Œuvres* 1415 and Fairlie, "Structure and Style" 242n22.

29 Examples of genuine emotion emerging in silence may be found at the beginning (52), zenith (60) and end (116) of the affair. On this point, cf. to some extent Jallat (88); for an extremely fine analysis of letters in *Adolphe*, see Baguley.

30 Even Proust's proposed solution, which painstakingly answers each of the objections in the way of unified selfhood, does not simply rely on language to do the necessary work.

31 The two remarks cited are from *De l'usurpation* §2, 140 and §A2, 261. For uninterrupted war ("des guerres sans cesse renouvelées"), see *De l'usurpation* §2, 143; for justified elevation – "un usurpateur est exposé à toutes les comparaisons que suggèrent les regrets, les jalousies ou les espérances; il est obligé de justifier son élévation" – see ibid., 141. On the link to *De l'esprit de conquête et de l'usurpation*, cf. Fairlie ("Constant's *Adolphe* Read by Balzac and Nerval" 223), King (278, 285n26), Bowman (42), and above all Russo (81–83, 98).

32 *Adolphe*, Belles Lettres edition, 246–48 (my emphasis). At one point in his narration, Adolphe explicitly links love with religious faith – "je la considérais comme une créature céleste. Mon amour tenait du culte" (59) – but of course such expressions are also conventional.

33 On the issue of religion, consider Adolphe's comments about deathbed conversions: "Ma surprise n'est pas que l'homme ait besoin d'une religion; ce qui m'étonne, c'est qu'il se croie jamais assez fort, assez à l'abri du malheur pour oser en rejeter une: il devrait, ce me semble, être porté, dans sa faiblesse, à les invoquer toutes; dans la nuit épaisse qui nous entoure, est-il une lueur que nous puissions repousser? Au milieu du torrent qui nous entraîne, est-il une branche à laquelle nous osions refuser de nous retenir?" (115) Too many metaphors, too many religions, too many love objects, too many vocations (89), too many pretenders to the throne: there is no such thing in Constant as a one-to-one relation.

34 On the abdication of autonomy, cf. *De l'usurpation* §A1, 249n: "Epuisés par leurs excès," writes Constant, self-freed slaves "tendent sans cesse à retourner à la servitude." For Adolphe's repeated efforts to avoid making his own decisions, see Weisz (187) and Jones ("Devaluation" 19).

35 "Naguère toutes mes actions avaient un but," he laments after Ellénore's death; "combien elle me pesait, cette liberté que j'avais tant regrettée!" (116).

36 Jones calls these "para-stories" ("Para-Story," *passim*); Morson's term is "sideshadowing" (Morson, *passim*).

37 Norman King (273) also views Constant as proposing an unanswered political question. For King, however, the crucial problem is that of finding a happy medium between excessive rationality (represented by society) and excessive sentiment (represented by Ellénore). Steven Vincent (who, incidentally, appears as fond as I am of the word "vertigo") takes a somewhat similar tack, arguing that Constant is advocating *sensibilité* controlled by reason (379). I am not sure I can quite go along with the idea of Adolphe as a *sensible* crushed by an uncomprehending society (373–74) – Vincent himself points out elsewhere that Adolphe is also excessively vain, egoistical, and self-critical (374, 378) – but the overall argument is extremely compelling.

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