

## **BETWEEN PASSION AND IRONY**

### **BENJAMIN CONSTANT'S LIBERAL BALANCING ACT**

The George R. Havens Memorial Lecture, Ohio State University, May 2004

#### **Introduction (for Ohio State audience).**

It's an honor to have been invited to give the George R. Havens lecture here at Ohio State – and I would like to thank the Department of Romance Languages for inviting me. I'm also immensely grateful for the opportunity to pay tribute, five years after my retirement, to a scholar who – though I never met him – loomed very large indeed at the beginning of my career as a teacher of French literature half a century ago. When I decided, as a graduate student, to write my dissertation on the French Enlightenment, George R. Havens was one of the three or four presiding figures in the field. You were constantly running up against his books and articles. I have, besides, a special link to Havens. He earned his Ph.D. at the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, and it was there, as it happens, that several decades afterwards, in 1958, I had the great good fortune to get my first teaching job in this country.

Even so, that fortuitous Hopkins connection is not my deepest link to Havens. Around the middle of the last century virtually every one who went into French Enlightenment studies had a certain liberality of temper. In Havens' case, it's hard to imagine that shepherding his magisterial *The Age of Ideas: From Reaction to Revolution in 18<sup>th</sup> Century France* through the press at the height of the Cold War and the McCarthy hearings was not in some sense a way of reaffirming the basic values of the tradition he had chosen as his principal field of study. As he put it himself, "We must not allow ourselves to forget that the chief ideas of the eighteenth century are by no means of historical interest only...What [the writers] of this period so boldly began, remains still, to our keen regret 'unfinished business'...It is conceivable that we might even be unfortunate enough to lose in our day what they at least partly won." (New York: Henry Holt, 1955, Introduction, p. x)

In light of that observation, I hope it will be appropriate to celebrate Havens's achievement as an outstanding scholar of the French Enlightenment by recalling that of one of the Enlightenment's later but no less liberal representatives, Benjamin Constant de Rebecque.

## TEXT OF THE LECTURE

"Un des hommes les plus authentiques  
qui ait jamais vécu."

- Charles Du Bos, *Grandeur et Misère de Benjamin  
Constant*, Paris: Corrêa, 1946, p.29

Benjamin Constant is well known to students of French literature as the author of the flawless novella *Adolphe*. As literary scholars, we don't pay much attention, on the whole (things may have been different in Havens' day), to his extensive writings on politics and religion or to his active, even brilliant public career as a political orator, lecturer, and pamphleteer, a prolific journalist and essayist, a member of the *Tribunat* at the time of the First Consulate (1799-1802) and of the *Conseil d'Etat* during the Hundred Days, and a leading liberal member of Parliament under the Restoration, from 1818 until his death in December 1830. His credentials as one of the founders of liberalism in continental Europe may, curiously, have been something of a disadvantage to him, for compared with the Jacobin, Bonapartist and Catholic political traditions -- all of them thoroughly statist -- the liberal tradition has been a relatively minor, underrepresented one in France until fairly recently. It may well be, in fact, to the drastically diminished prestige of the Revolutionary Jacobin tradition -- itself probably a by-product of the collapse of Soviet Communism -- and to the flourishing of capitalist enterprise in France since the end of the Second World War that Constant owes his recent re-emergence, along with Guizot and Tocqueville, long more highly regarded in

the English-speaking world than in their native country, as something of a model for a new breed of post-Marxist liberal French intellectuals. Tzvetan Todorov's *Benjamin Constant: La Passion démocratique* (Paris: Hachette, 1997) seems symptomatic of an important turn of the tide.<sup>1</sup>

In addition, Constant may have suffered some neglect in France because, even more than his famous lover Madame de Stael -- whose *De l'Allemagne* was banned in 1810 on the grounds that, as Napoleon's Minister of Police put it, "Votre dernier ouvrage n'est pas français"<sup>2</sup> -- he is among the most cosmopolitan of the French Enlighteners. Swiss born, though of old French Huguenot stock, he spent much of his childhood and early youth shuttling back and forth between Switzerland and the Low Countries, where his father commanded a Swiss regiment in the service of Holland. His education was entrusted successively to German, French, and English tutors. At the age of thirteen he was taken by his father to Oxford to be enrolled in one of the colleges there. (It is hard to imagine anything similar happening to Voltaire or Diderot!) Though this plan fell through, he spent a year (1782) as a student at the University of Erlangen in Germany and two (1783-1785) -- "the happiest years of my life," as he wrote later in the *Red Notebook* -- at the University of Edinburgh, then a hotbed of Enlightenment

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<sup>1</sup> Another sign of this turn of the tide toward liberalism in high places in France is the recent book on Montesquieu, *Montesquieu le moderne* (Paris, 1999), by Alain Juppé, former centre-right foreign minister (1993-95) and prime minister (1995-1997), and right-hand man of President Jacques Chirac. Juppé, usually considered Chirac's choice to succeed him in the Presidency, was found guilty early in 2004 of corrupt practices while serving as deputy mayor of Paris under Chirac as mayor.

<sup>2</sup> The letter of the Minister, General Savary (he signs himself Duc de Rovigo), is reproduced by Madame de Stael herself in the Preface to *De l'Allemagne*. (*Oeuvres complètes de Mme la Baronne de Staël, publiées par son fils* [Paris: Treutter et Würtz, 1820], vol. 10, p. 7)

ideas. The records show that the sixteen year-old was active in various student debating societies in the Scottish capital and it was probably at this time that he became familiar with the work of Adam Smith, David Hume, and Adam Ferguson.<sup>3</sup> For long periods of his life, he lived in Germany, as well as Switzerland, England, and Scotland, moving from place to place, and settling permanently in France only in 1815. Both his marriages were to German women. Unlike most of the French Enlighteners, moreover, he was tri-lingual – thoroughly at home in German and English as well as French, and as familiar with Hume, Smith, Kant, and Schiller (whose Wallenstein trilogy he translated and adapted for the French stage) as with Montesquieu and Rousseau. In the spring of 1804, he spent time in Weimar visiting Schiller and Goethe (who thought well of him)<sup>4</sup>, and throughout his adult life he maintained friendships with German and British public figures and men of letters.<sup>5</sup> Under the Restoration, when he campaigned

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<sup>3</sup> On the particular character of the Scottish Enlightenment and its relation to the Enlightenment in other countries, see Fania Oz-Salzberger, *Translating the Enlightenment: Scottish Civic Discourse in Eighteenth-Century Germany* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995). In what remains, after almost 100 years, an indispensable work of Constant scholarship, Gustave Rudler held that the two chief influences on Constant were "l'une, celle de la France; l'autre celle de l'Ecosse." France "fournit à Benjamin...ses idées philosophiques et religieuses; l'Ecosse entre au moins pour moitié..dans la formation de ses idées politiques." (*La Jeunesse de Benjamin Constant* [Paris: Armand Colin, 1909], p. 184) More recently, a leading authority on Constant's political writings has again underlined the influence of the Scottish Enlightenment on Constant and, in particular, "the overwhelming presence of the *Wealth of Nations* in the background of Constant's political reflection." (Biancamaria Fontana, "Commerce and civilisation in the writings of Benjamin Constant," *Annales Benjamin Constant*, 5 [1985], pp. 3-15, at p. 4) Likewise Lothar Gall, *Benjamin Constant: seine politische Ideenwelt und der deutsche Vormärz* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1963), pp. 2-3: "Die in unserem Zusammenhang wichtigsten Impulse aber empfing er nicht so sehr in Frankreich als während seines Studiums an der Universität Edinburg..." According to Constant's friend and sometime rival for the favors of Germaine de Stael, the historian Prosper de Barante, the influence of Germany on Constant was also deep and enduring: "il eut toute sa vie quelque chose de l'étudiant allemand, rêveur,...préférant la solitude studieuse, distraite par les plaisirs sensuels ou les émotions du jeu, à la vie du monde et la société des salons." (Quoted by Rudler, p. 161)

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin Constant, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. VI (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2002), vol. VI (*Journaux intimes*), pp. 47-54, 68-70, 76, 87, 88, 114-16 (on meetings with Goethe); 63-64, 76, 86 (on meetings with Schiller).

<sup>5</sup> The European character of Constant's life and work was emphasized recently in Tzvetan Todorov's tribute to him: "Benjamin Constant et la pensée humaniste," *Annales Benjamin Constant*, 22 (1999), pp. 7-13.

for a seat in the French Parliament, he had to reassure the electorate that, along with other descendants of Huguenot refugees, he had been reinstated in his French nationality after the outbreak of the Revolution and was not a foreigner.<sup>6</sup> While Voltaire was admitted to the *Académie française*, Constant was not.

In addition, Constant is hard to classify in literary historical terms. Like Mme de Staël herself, his roots are firmly in Classicism and the Enlightenment but he lived to breathe a different air. He met Hugo and Michelet and was in Paris at the time of the tumultuous first performances of *Hernani*. With one foot in the *ancien régime* and one in the dawning age of popular democracy and industry (the first railways began running in England during his lifetime and "industrie" was a key term in his vocabulary), one in the Enlightenment, but one also in the nineteenth century, he had an unusual perspective on the world.

He remained all his life a champion of the classic values of the Enlightenment and the Revolution -- freedom of religion, freedom of opinion and expression, freedom of trade, transparent government, equality before the law, the inalienable rights of the individual, and so on. At the same time, he had seen enough to have a keen sense of the danger to those values of trying to impose them by decree. His own goal was the realization of as much individual freedom as possible, but he always acknowledged -- with a greater sense of urgency

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<sup>6</sup> Benjamin Constant, *Oeuvres complètes* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1998), vol. I, p. 613 (speech to the electoral assembly of Seine-et-Oise, an VI de la République [1797]). See also an article of 1796, "De la restitution des droits politiques aux descendants des religionnaires fugitifs." (vol. I, pp. 401-411)

perhaps than Smith or even Ferguson; perhaps it was the German influence on him -- that there are other human needs and goods besides individual freedom, such as love, heroism, faith, equality, loyalty, security, and solidarity, and that these are not always compatible with individual freedom.

What I hope to do here is suggest a connection between Constant the political thinker and Constant, the author of the small literary masterpiece with which we are all familiar. I would also like to show that in both the political thinker and the writer the Enlightenment rises to a high degree of sometimes painful self-consciousness and self-criticism without ever betraying its fundamental impulse - - best expressed by Immanuel Kant in the celebrated slogan: *sapere aude* [dare to know].

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As a political theorist, Constant took up and developed an idea found among many eighteenth-century British writers: namely, that the form of freedom appropriate to the modern world is not, in the first instance, **political** liberty – in the sense of the direct participation of the citizen in the exercise of sovereign power – but **civil** liberty, the freedom every individual ought to enjoy to pursue his own happiness and advantage under the protection of the state, but without interference from it, so long as his activities do not entail any infringement of the liberty of others. In its broad lines, this idea of modern liberty had been sketched out by Locke and Montesquieu. To the latter, as you remember, the small, closed citizens' republic of classical antiquity, with its informing principle of "virtue," was

radically different from and probably unviable in the contemporary world of mostly large, increasingly centralized monarchies.<sup>7</sup>

Implicit in the notion that modern societies are significantly, not just superficially different from the city-republics of antiquity and that modern men and women have developed different desires and expectations from those of earlier times and states of civilization is a view of history as substantive, rather than as the succession of different masks worn by essentially the same players that earlier neoclassical and Enlightenment writers took it to be. The customs and institutions of a particular historical time and place, as Constant saw them -- most probably with Montesquieu's concept of the *esprit général* and Ferguson's widely read *Essay on the History of Civil Society* of 1767 in mind -- are not mere accidents superimposed on an unchanging, universal human nature; they truly make people what they are. They are therefore not transferable from one historical environment to another. Institutions or customs **we** consider "abuses", for instance, may have been suited to different circumstances: "Dans le mouvement progressif, tout a servi, et...les abus d'aujourd'hui étaient les besoins d'hier." Our own modernity, Constant adds with characteristic self-reflexiveness, is vulnerable to the same process of historical change: "Peut-être le même sort est-il réservé à quelques-uns des principes qui nous paraissent incontestables." It follows that the effectiveness of laws or institutions at an earlier time and in another place is

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<sup>7</sup> This is already implied by the celebrated story of the Troglodytes in the *Lettres persanes* (1721; letters 11-14).



not a good reason for attempting to resurrect them in changed conditions.<sup>8</sup>

Wisdom dictates not that we discount or, worse still, defy historical change but that we try to understand what any given situation is and how freedom can best be realized in it. "Tout dans la nature a sa marche. Les hommes la suivent, l'accélèrent ou la retardent, mais ne peuvent s'en écarter."<sup>9</sup> For Constant, human nature itself is historical, evolving. The progress of civilization, he declared, "has created for man new relations with his fellows and, as a result, a new nature."<sup>10</sup>

Consistently with this view, Constant rejected the still common custom of looking to antiquity for models for the present. Nothing is to be gained, he held, from weighing up theoretically the relative advantages and disadvantages of Sparta, the austere model preferred by the partisans of the Ancients in the celebrated *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*, and of Athens, the more free and relaxed model of the defenders of the Moderns. In practice, history defines the range of our options, and for virtually every country in Europe at the end of the eighteenth century the political constitution of the ancient city-state, with its limited area and population and its low regard for labor, was simply not one of them. Moreover, Constant claims, historically inappropriate laws and institutions have to be

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<sup>8</sup> "Tant qu'ils sont utiles, ils se conservent d'eux-mêmes. Quand ils s'écroulent, c'est que leur utilité a cessé." ("Fragments d'un essai sur la perfectibilité de l'esprit humain," ed. Paul Delboulle and Etienne Hofmann, *Ecrits littéraires 1800-1813*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. III, I [Tübingen : Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1998], p. 442)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 443.

<sup>10</sup> "The age of commerce has given man a new nature." *Commentaire sur l'ouvrage de Filangieri, Science de la Législation*, 2 vols., 1822-24. Both passages cited by Stephen Holmes in his now classic *Benjamin Constant and the Making of Modern Liberalism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 188.

imposed by force, with the result that attempts to revert to those of an earlier, different time are bound to be accompanied by a great deal of misery -- all to no purpose, since they invariably turn out to be non-viable and have no chance of enduring.

There are things that are possible in one age, but are no longer so in another...It is disastrous when those who hold in their hands the destiny of the world are mistaken about what is actually possible...They read history and see what was done earlier, and do not stop to consider whether it can still be done now...Since their projects are at odds with the moods, interests, and entire moral existence of their contemporaries, these forces react against them. And within a span of time that is extremely short from the point of view of history, but all too long from that of the victims of such projects, nothing remains of them but the crimes committed and the sufferings caused in the futile attempt to carry them out.<sup>11</sup>

Constant's critique is clearly directed at the Jacobins and the reign of terror they unleashed between 1792 and 1795 in what he saw as an ill-advised attempt to impose Roman Republican virtue on a modern society. The principle underlying the critique is equally clear: in failing to recognize and respect what to Constant are the appropriate and practical limits of state power and competence in complex modern societies, the Jacobins had exposed the *anachronism* of their

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<sup>11</sup> *De l'Esprit de conquête et de l'usurpation*, Foreword to 4th ed. Quoted from the English translation, "The Spirit of Conquest and Usurpation," in Benjamin Constant, *Political Writings*, trans. and ed. by Biancamaria Fontana (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 48-49. Hereinafter SC (with occasional slight modifications of the translated text).

program. You cannot resurrect the early Roman republic in the conditions of late eighteenth-century Europe, as Rousseau and Mably -- Constant implies -- would have liked to do. In general, he insists, no government should attempt to legislate a social and cultural order into existence because no government can.

Enlightenment itself is not well served by efforts to impose it, however well-intentioned, as Frederick the Great's plans for literature in Prussia demonstrate. The literature in French that the King encouraged amounted to little, Constant declares, and did virtually nothing to advance the cause of enlightenment, while the German literature the monarch despised flourished without any help from him and won the admiration of the entire enlightened world. "Even when it is the ostensible aim of the authorities to encourage enlightenment," Constant warns, "their underlying desire is to maintain control over it and therefore set limits to it." (So much for what we now term "enlightened despotism" – and perhaps the modern "welfare state." Though Constant had his disagreements with Kant, he clearly shared Kant's insistence that people be treated as "mündig" – that is, not as minors but as adults who have attained majority). In fact, he adds provocatively, "if it were necessary to choose between protection and persecution by the state, the cause of enlightenment would be better served by persecution."<sup>12</sup> Constant was no less dismissive of early Romantic blueprints for

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<sup>12</sup> "Lors même que le but ostensible de l'autorité serait d'encourager les lumières, leur désir secret serait de les tenir dans la dépendance et pour cela de les limiter...Comparez les progrès de la littérature française et de la littérature allemande à Berlin sous Frédéric II. Nul souverain fut de meilleure foi que Frédéric dans son zèle pour le développement de l'esprit humain...La littérature de son pays lui paraissant encore dans l'enfance, il prodigua ses faveurs à tous les lettrés français qui se rendirent auprès de lui. Il les combla de distinctions, de richesses...Cependant les écrits français publiés à sa cour ne furent jamais que des productions subalternes et superficielles. Le génie de Frédéric ne pouvait effacer le caractère indélébile de l'autorité. Ses protégés répétaient, il est vrai, des idées philosophiques, parce que ces idées étaient le mot d'ordre; mais les vérités mêmes sont stériles, quand elles sont commandées. ...Les lettrés allemands dédaignés par Frédéric n'avaient aucune part à ses encouragements ou à ses faveurs. Ils ne travaillaient

reform than of Enlightenment or Jacobin ones. The German poet Novalis's proposal to revive the spirit of medieval Christendom (*Die Christenheit oder Europa*, 1799) or the philosopher Fichte's plan for small, self-contained, self-sufficient communities (*Der geschlossene Handelsstaat*, 1800) struck him as dangerous fantasies. "God bless them," he noted in his Journal in 1804, "with their Spartan ideals in the midst of our modern civilization, in the midst of material needs that have become part of our way of life, in a world of bills of exchange, etc. They are madmen who, if ever they came to power, would begin Robespierre all over again, all with the best intentions in the world."<sup>13</sup>

Constant's critique of Napoleonic militarism and imperialism also targets what he condemned as their anachronism. Militaristic and imperialist designs are unsuited, he claims, to an age in which what people aspire to is no longer glory, or the challenge and exaltation of combat, or plunder, but comfort and well-being, that is to say, not the **virtue** of the Greek or Roman citizen or the **valor and chivalry** of the medieval knight, but that **happiness**, the pursuit of which was one of the rights enshrined in the American Declaration of Independence.

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que pour le public et pour eux-mêmes. C'est à leurs écrits néanmoins que l'Allemagne doit le haut degré de lumières auquel elle est parvenue; et c'est à l'oubli du pouvoir que leurs écrits doivent leur mérite. S'il fallait choisir entre la persécution et la protection, la persécution vaudrait mieux pour les lumières." (*Principes de politique [version de 1806-1810]*, ed. Etienne Hofmann [Paris: Hachette, 1997], XIV, 4, pp. 315-16.

<sup>13</sup> Benjamin Constant, *Journaux intimes*, ed. Alfred Roulin and Charles Roth (Paris: Gallimard, 1952), p. 91. The same entry (for 27 May, 1804) contains a similar comment on August Wilhelm Schlegel (like Constant, a member of Mme de Stael's circle at Coppet): "Schlegel is one of those people who, never having had anything to do with real life, believes that everything can be accomplished by ordinances and laws -- never dreaming of the struggle that vexatious laws provoke between citizens and the authorities or of the ensuing necessity for the laws to become progressively more rigorous." The basis of Constant's critique (1822-24) of Falingieri's widely read and translated *Scienza della Legislazione* (original Italian, 1780) was likewise the skepticism he shared with Montesquieu (*Esprit des Lois*, XIX, 14) concerning the possibility and wisdom of trying to achieve by legislation what could only be achieved, in Constant's view, by profound changes in manners, customs, and ways of thinking. (See Vincenzo Ferrone, *La Società giusta ed equa*:

I have sometimes wondered, Constant writes, what one of these men who wish to repeat the deeds of Cambyses, Alexander or Attila would reply if his people were to say to him: Nature has given **you** a quick eye, boundless energy...and an inexhaustible thirst for confronting and surmounting danger... But why should **we** pay the price for them?...Are **we** here only to build, with **our** dying bodies, **your** road to fame? **You** have a genius for fighting: what good is it to **us**? The leopard too, if it were transported to our populous cities, might complain of not finding the dense forests, the immense plains where it delighted in pursuing, seizing and devouring its prey, where its vigour was displayed in the speed and dash of the chase. Like the leopard, **you** belong to another climate, another land, another species from ours. Learn to be civilized, if you wish to reign in a civilized age. Learn peace, if you wish to rule over peaceful peoples...Man from another world, stop despoiling this one.<sup>14</sup>

Napoleon, Constant observed in 1815, as the Emperor was returning to Paris from Elba, is a throwback to a more primitive stage of human history: "He is Attila, he is Genghis Kahn."<sup>15</sup>

To his critique of war and conquest as anachronistic, historically inappropriate ways of satisfying modern desires, Constant joins a critique of usurpers,

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*republicanesimo e diritti dell'uomo in Gaetano Filangieri* [Rome: Laterza, 2003], pp. 284-314)

<sup>14</sup> *SC*, I, 15, p. 82. See also Constant's *Principes de politique (version de 1806-1810)*, ed. Etienne Hofmann (Paris, 1997), VI, 5, p. 135. (Hachette paperback edition)

<sup>15</sup> *Journal des Débats*, 19 March 1815. See B. Constant, *Mémoires sur les Cent-Jours*, ed. Kurt Kloocke, Intro. by André Cabanis, in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. XIV (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1993.)

dictators, and all arbitrary seizure and exercise of power, and a sustained reflection on the kind of government that **is** appropriate to modern societies -- that is, in the words used by Blackstone in his *Commentaries on the Laws of England* of 1765, to "a polite and commercial people."<sup>16</sup> Around these critiques, Constant develops his vision of politics and society for the nineteenth century.

The argument takes the form of a series of contrasts between ancient and modern life which is generated in turn by the observation -- the source of which could be Montesquieu or Adam Smith or Ferguson -- that in modern times needs are satisfied and well-being enhanced far more effectively by communication, exchange, and industry than by war and plunder. A culture of commerce, in other

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Introduction, p. 12.

<sup>16</sup> William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, Book 3, ch. 22, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1765), vol 3, p. 326. Constant's view that, as a way for communities to enrich themselves, war has become an anachronism and will therefore fade out of history must strike the modern reader as stupendously optimistic and it was in fact challenged by at least one contemporary (François-Guillaume Coëssin, *De l'Espirt de conquête et de l'usurpation dans le système mercantile, en réponse a l'ouvrage de M. B. de Constant Rebecque* [Paris, 1814]). Nevertheless, it was widely held in the nineteenth century. Saint-Simon and Comte, among others, maintained that the spirit of conquest as embodied in military civilization and the spirit of industry as embodied in the civilization of labor were incompatible and that the former would be displaced by the latter. In the early twentieth century, the economists Veblen and Schumpeter -- the latter in 1919, in the aftermath of the Great War -- both considered imperialism and militarism as survivals of feudal civilization, foreign to the spirit and essence of industrial society. (See Raymond Aron, *War and Industrial Society* [London: Oxford University Press, 1958; the third Auguste Comte Memorial Lecture at the London School of Economics, 24 October 1957], pp. 61-63). A variant of this view was also promoted, in the midst of the War, by the well-known German pacifist thinker and writer Alfred H. Fried. See, for instance, his *The Restoration of Europe*, trans. Lewis S. Gannett (New York: Macmillan, 1916): "When [the prophets of eternal war] begin to shape the future according to the moulds of the past, they leave logic behind. Human nature changes, institutions change, even war changes...In the last century the world has completely changed. Something that stands above and between the nations has been evolved...The rapid development of science and industry has begun to weld the states into a complex organism, and to make the formerly independent and self-sufficient units, parts of a higher whole..." (pp. 11-12). As for war itself, it is not "the same as that which was called by the same name in days gone by...Modern war is ...not comparable to the knightly expeditions of past centuries." Even "Clausewitz' definition of war as a continuation of politics, 'but with different instruments,' is no longer applicable. The instruments are too expensive." (pp. 77-78) The incompatibility of the martial and the commercial spirit was also upheld by many who deplored the latter, ardently promoted the former, and did not agree that "progress" would ensure the displacement of the former by the latter; e.g. the economist and philosopher Werner Sombart and the writer Ernst Jünger. In Sombart's *Händler und Helden: patriotische Besinnungen* (Munich and Leipzig, Duncker und Humblot, 1915) England is identified as the commercial society from which virtues such as heroism and self-sacrifice have disappeared and Germany as the martial society in which they continue to flourish.

words, has already replaced the older culture of war.<sup>17</sup> First, Constant claims, though it is true that ancient warfare developed greatness of spirit and heroism, in addition to enriching the victors,<sup>18</sup> modern warfare does neither. “The new way of fighting,” he writes, “the changes in weapons, [the use of] artillery have deprived military life of...that pleasure of the will, of action, of the development of our physical and moral faculties, that made hand-to-hand fighting so attractive to the heroes of antiquity or the knights of the Middle Ages.” Moreover, modern war impoverishes **all** parties – the victors no less than the vanquished. Waged “without passion,” in an age “which values everything according to its utility, war, says Constant, is well on the way to becoming a pointless, cynical and sadistic affair.”<sup>19</sup>

A second contrast between the ancient and the modern worlds concerns political

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<sup>17</sup> SC, I, 2, p. 53. For a modern confirmation of the crucial importance of war in the economy of the Roman Empire, see the recent study by Aldo Schiavone, *Ancient Rome and the Modern West*, trans. Margery J. Schneider (Cambridge, Mass., 2000). The chief inspiration of Constant is doubtless Montesquieu: “L’effet naturel du commerce est de porter à la paix.” (*Esprit des Lois*, XX, 2; see also the contrast between ancient and modern conditions sketched out in Montesquieu’s unpublished *Réflexions sur la monarchie universelle en Europe* [written 1727, not published until 1891]) It is also possible that during his time in Edinburgh Constant became acquainted with the arguments presented by the champions of the Treaty of Union with England in 1707: namely that the warlike, martial past of Scotland (“wars, rapines, robberies, invasions, incursions, murders, exiles, imprisonments”) was incompatible with the peace and prosperity of a modern society and had to be firmly consigned to history. (See John Robertson, *The Scottish Enlightenment and the Militia Issue* [Edinburgh: J. Donald, 1985], pp. 46-47)

<sup>18</sup> This view of war was still defended by Adam Ferguson in his *Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767), which Constant could well have read during his stay in Edinburgh. Ferguson considered war an inevitable expression of man's nature. While acknowledging its evils, he laid great stress on its uplifting and ennobling aspects. The same traditional view was still being defended in the mid-nineteenth century, with fewer qualifications and rather less justification, by the German general to whom Prussia owed its victories over Austria and France. According to Field-Marshal von Moltke, “perpetual peace is a dream, and not even a beautiful dream. War is an element of the divine order of the world. In it are developed the noblest virtues of man: courage and self-denial, fidelity to duty and the spirit of sacrifice...Without war, the world would stagnate and lose itself in materialism.” (Quoted by Chris af Jochnik and Roger Normand, “The Legitimation of Violence: A Critical History of the Laws of War,” *Harvard International Law Journal*, vol. 35, 1994, pp. 49-95, at p. 63, n. 54)

<sup>19</sup> SC, I, 2, p. 51; I, 3, p. 55. See also I, 4, pp. 56-57 and I, 15, p. 81.

organization. Taking his cue from Montesquieu, Ferguson, and Condorcet, Constant sets the ancient *polis* and the medieval city-republics over against the modern state. The ancient *poleis* were small, autonomous, internally homogeneous communities, he argues, in which each citizen (i.e. the minority of the population that was not female, under age, foreign born, or serving as a slave) was entirely absorbed by his public role and identity as a *citizen*, and in which the sphere of private or inner life was without significance. "To the ancient Greek, or the Roman, the individual was nothing, and the public every thing," Ferguson had written in the *Essay on the History of Civil Society*. "To the modern [in contrast]...the individual is every thing and the public nothing."<sup>20</sup> In the ancient world, differences divided not individual citizens but organized communities or *poleis*, Constant explains. In the modern world, in contrast, differences of culture and ethnicity between states are being progressively ironed out by similarity of interests and desires. Peoples are becoming more alike, while individuals

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<sup>20</sup> Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, ed. Duncan Forbes (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1966), I, viii, p. 56. Cf. Montesquieu, *Esprit des Loïs*, IV,5: "La vertu politique est un renoncement à soi-même...une préférence continuelle de l'intérêt public au sien propre." According to Condorcet, "the ancients had no idea of the modern conception of individual liberty of conscience or opinion. They had no understanding of the rights of individuals...Aiming at the complete indoctrination of citizens in the religious, moral, and political virtues conducive to the running of the state, the ancients had produced slaves to an existing doctrine, rather than free and independent citizens. 'For them nature had created mere machines, their operations to be regulated and their actions directed by the law alone.'" (Keith M. Baker, *Condorcet: From Natural Philosophy to Social Mathematics* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975], p. 300, quoting from Condorcet's *Mémoires sur l'instruction publique* of 1791, in *Oeuvres de Condorcet*, ed. A. Condorcet-O'Connor and F. Arago, 12 vols. [Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1847-49], 7:198) Constant refers explicitly to Condorcet on the difference between ancient and modern values in *Principes de politique*, XIV, 6 ("Parmi des peuples qui, comme le dit Condorcet, n'avaient aucune notion de la liberté personnelle et où les hommes n'étaient que des machines dont la loi réglait les ressorts et dirigeait les mouvements, l'action de l'autorité pouvait influer plus efficacement sur l'éducation, parce que cette action uniforme et constante n'était combattue par rien. Mais aujourd'hui la société entière se soulèverait contre la pression de l'autorité") and XVI, 1 ("Toutes les républiques grecques, si nous en exceptons Athènes, soumettaient les individus à une juridiction sociale d'une "etendue presque ullimitée. Il en était de même dans les beaux siècles de la République romaine. L'individu était entièrement soumis à l'ensemble. Les anciens, comme le remarque Condorcet, n'avaient aucune notion des droits individuels. Les hommes n'étaient pour ainsi dire que des machines dont la loi réglait les ressorts et dirigeait tous les mouvements"). See *Principes de politique (version de 1806-1810)*, ed. E. Hofmann, pp. 319, 357.



become more differentiated. A man is no longer fully identifiable as a citizen (of this *polis* as opposed to that one), but is rather a private individual defined by multiple and varied associations. Constant believes this development makes war between states anachronistic and profitless.

While in the ancient world each nation formed an isolated family, the born enemy of other families, a great mass of human beings now exist who, despite the different names under which they live and their different forms of social organization, are essentially homogeneous in their nature. This mass is... sufficiently civilized to find war a burden. Its uniform tendency is toward peace.<sup>21</sup>

The fact that the ancient communities and *poleis* were unified around a shared myth or tradition, whereas modern societies are characterized by interest and rational calculation of gain<sup>22</sup> results in a significant difference between the modern individual's attachment to his country and the ancient citizen's attachment to his *polis*. The patriotism of the Ancients, as Ferguson had already argued, was a kind of family loyalty. In contrast, modern man's attachment to the state, Constant declares, is conditional on the advantages that accrue to him from it. To the Ancients (I quote), "fatherland embodied all that was dearest to a man. To lose one's country was to lose one's wife, children, friends, all

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<sup>21</sup> SC, I, 2, pp. 52-53. See *Mémoires sur les Cent-Jours* (as in note 15 above), p. 128 : "L'esprit de conquête est incompatible avec l'existence du commerce tel qu'il résulte de la civilisation, et tel qu'il est devenu le besoin de tous les peuples. Cosmopolites industriels, les commerçans ont fait, des diverses peuplades européennes, une grande famille, peu dissemblable dans ses mœurs et tout-à-fait identique dans ses intérêts."

affections, and nearly all communication and social enjoyment." But, says Constant -- himself, as we saw, a widely traveled cosmopolitan who had resided in several European countries and moved easily from one to another --

the age of that sort of patriotism is over; what we love now in our country, as in our liberty, is the property of whatever we possess, our security, the possibility of repose, activity, fame, a thousand sorts of happiness... Individual existence today is less submerged in political existence; individuals can take their treasures far away; they can carry with them all the enjoyments of private life. Commerce has brought nations closer together and has given them virtually identical customs and habits; monarchs may still be enemies, but peoples are compatriots. Expatriation, which for the ancients was a punishment, is easy for the moderns; and far from being painful to them, it is quite agreeable.<sup>23</sup>

In short, modern civilization is characterized by the *depoliticizing* of large areas of human activity, not only the money economy but religion, the arts, play, and so

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<sup>22</sup> Constant was alert to the new science of statistics. "Tout se laisse calculer chez les hommes," he observed. ("De la perfectibilité," OC, III, 440)

<sup>23</sup> SC, II, 18, p. 141 and p. 141n. Constant here echoes the concluding paragraphs of Ferguson's *Essay on the History of Civil Society*, Part I, Section iii, ed.cit., p. 19. Needless to say, the antithesis of the "sanguine affection which every Greek bore to his country" or "the devoted patriotism of an early Roman," which Ferguson compares to the affection binding the members of a family, and modern "valuing society on account of its mere external conveniences", in Ferguson's words, corresponds to a number of similar antitheses aimed at founding the identity of the modern that can be found in a variety of other writers and fields. They are seemingly an essential structuring device of a good deal of thinking about history, society, and culture: Schiller's categories of naive and sentimental poetry (and their twentieth century counterpart, Lukacs's epic and novel); Walter Scott's *gules* (scarlet in heraldry) and *sable* or black, evoked in the Introduction to *Kenilworth* to set off the old forms of conflict -- war, courage, heroism -- from the newer forms in which blackrobed lawyers fight court battles; Stendhal's version of this in *The Red and the Black*; Tönnies's *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*; Max Weber's *bezauberte* and *entzauberte Welt*. In their various ways, all these match Constant's distinction between "*impulsion sauvage*" or "*enthousiasme*," on the one hand, and "*calcul civilisé*" and "*ironie*," on the other (SC, I, 2, p. 53 and I, 3, p. 55).

on. Globalization, we can safely surmise, would not have been a big surprise to Constant.

Above all, Constant's distinction of ancient and modern led, in an important public lecture given in 1819 ("De la liberté des anciens comparée à celle des modernes"), to the famous distinction, already referred to, between ancient and modern liberty or between "political" and "civil" liberty, a distinction central to the thought of Hume, Smith, Ferguson and almost all the literati of the Scottish Enlightenment with whose work Constant had become familiar during his two years as a student in Edinburgh.<sup>24</sup> It was a distinction made with similar sharpness also by Constant's friend, compatriot, and fellow-admirer of Mme de Staël, Simonde de Sismondi, in his 19-volume *Histoire des républiques italiennes du moyen âge* (1808-1819). "Until the seventeenth century," Sismondi observes, "the liberty of the citizen was always considered to mean participation in the sovereignty of his country, and it is only the example of the British constitution which taught us to consider liberty as a protection of repose, happiness, and domestic independence." Sismondi goes on to define "civil liberty" as "that passive faculty, claimed by the moderns, that guarantees against the abuse of power in whatever hands it is lodged," while the term "political liberty" should be reserved, he says, for an active faculty, "the participation of all in the power exercised, the association of free men in sovereignty."<sup>25</sup> It was the part of

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<sup>24</sup> See, for instance, Duncan Forbes, *Hume's Philosophical Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 155-66.

<sup>25</sup> The goal of ancient liberty, Sismondi explains, "like that of ancient philosophy, is virtue." In contrast, "the end of modern liberty, like that of modern philosophy, is happiness." Following Swiss tradition, however, (still

Constant's work in which he elaborates this distinction between two concepts of liberty – and at the same time between **direct** and **representative** democracy -- that was later to attract the attention of Isaiah Berlin in the midst of the twentieth-century struggle against "totalitarian" states, helping him to formulate the notions of "positive" (i.e. "political" or "ancient") and "negative" (i.e. "civil" or "modern") liberty that were the topic of his celebrated 1958 inaugural lecture at Oxford University on "Two Concepts of Liberty." I quote at length from the essay *De l'Esprit de conquête et de l'usurpation*, in which Constant first articulated the distinction. Published as a political pamphlet in 1814, this essay was abstracted from a far longer general treatise on Politics that Constant had been working on for years but had refrained, for reasons of prudence, from publishing during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic regimes.

[Ancient] liberty consisted in active participation in collective power rather than in the peaceful enjoyment of individual independence. And to ensure the former, it was necessary for the citizens to sacrifice a good deal of the latter. But it is absurd to ask for this sacrifice and impossible to exact it at the stage people have reached now.

In the republics of antiquity... each citizen had, politically speaking, a great personal importance...The whole people contributed to the making of the laws, pronounced judgments, decided on war and peace...It follows from this that the ancients were prepared, in

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alive in Jacob Burckhardt half a century later), Sismondi holds that, while all the inhabitants of a state should enjoy civil liberty, the name of citizens should be restricted to those who also enjoy political liberty. (Jean-Charles L. Simonde de Sismondi, *Histoire des républiques italiennes du moyen âge* [Paris: Furne, 1840; 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1809-18], 19 vols. Vol. 10, ch. 8, pp. 327-63)

order to conserve their political importance and their share in the administration of the state, to renounce their private independence and to permit [laws and] institutions which maintain equality, prevent the growth of large fortunes...and restrict the influence of wealth and talent...Such [laws and] institutions clearly limit the liberty...of the individual.

Thus what we now call civil liberty was unknown to the majority of the ancient peoples...The citizen had in a way made himself the slave of the nation of which he formed part. He submitted himself entirely to the decisions of the sovereign, of the legislator...But the reason was that he was himself that legislator and that sovereign, and felt with pride all that his suffrage was worth in a nation small enough for each citizen to be a power.

It is quite a different matter in modern states. Because their territory is much larger than that of the ancient republics, the mass of their inhabitants, whatever form of government they adopt, have no active part in it. They are called on at most to exercise sovereignty through representation, that is to say in a fictitious manner...The immediate pleasure [of liberty] is [thus] less vivid among them [since] it does not include any of the enjoyments of power...It would be impossible to exact ...as many sacrifices to win and maintain **this** kind of liberty. Moreover, these sacrifices would [now] be much more painful. The progress of civilization, the commercial tendency of the age, the [vastly increased]

communication among peoples, have infinitely multiplied and varied the means of individual happiness. To be happy, men need [now] only to be left in perfect freedom in all that concerns their occupations, their undertakings, their sphere of activity, their fantasies. (End of quote.)

The relation of liberty to pleasure and sacrifice has thus become the exact reverse of what it was in antiquity. I quote Constant again: "In the past, where there was liberty, people could endure hardship; now, wherever there is hardship, it is necessary to enslave people to get them to put up with it. The people most attached to liberty in modern times...holds to its liberty above all because it is enlightened enough to see in it the guarantee of its pleasures."<sup>26</sup>

In light of those reflections, Constant wants to redefine the terms of political thought. What matters, he holds, is not so much the traditional distinction between different **kinds** of government (monarchy, aristocracy, democracy, etc.) -- i.e. **who** exercises power -- as the **manner** in which government, **any** government, exercises power -- **how** power is exercised. "I do not aim in this work," he writes at the opening of Pt. II of *De l'Esprit de conquête*, "to investigate the different forms of government. I wish to contrast a **regular** government with one that is **not**; I do not propose to compare regular governments among

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<sup>26</sup> SC, II, 6, pp. 102-104, 105. See Tzvetan Todorov's summary of the argument, in his *Benjamin Constant. La passion démocratique* (Paris: Hachette, 1997), p. 40: "The most telling distinction is... that between the liberty of individuals as described [i.e. modern civil liberty, freedom from interference by the state in all areas where one's activity does not threaten others] and a quite different form of social action, which consists of participating in the political life of one's country, but which can also be identified in a different sense of the term by the word 'liberty.' In order to designate this new opposition, Constant speaks sometimes of civil

themselves."<sup>27</sup>

For Constant, then -- as for Wilhelm von Humboldt, the Prussian scholar and reforming statesman, whose classic work *The Limits of State Action*, though not published in full until 1851, was written in 1790 -- the significant distinction is not between the **kinds** of government but **first**, between **legitimate** governments of whatever stripe (i.e. governments that can be said to rest on the will of the people, whether by a long tradition of tacit consent or by constitutional enactment) and **illegitimate** governments (i.e. governments in which power has been usurped and is exercised without popular consent) and, **second**, between governments in which the authority of the state is limited by law and governments in which it is not, i.e. governments that claim absolute authority. Constant subscribes to the modern distinction between the spheres of civil society and of the state; and he holds that in the varied departments of civil society -- private life, culture, religion, economic activity, etc. -- the individual should be completely free, and that no government, of any kind, is entitled to interfere with that freedom, even in the individual's alleged interest. The sway of government should extend, in other words, no further than the protection of each individual from external enemies and from other individuals who might seek to diminish his freedom. ("His" is unfortunately the correct adjective here: the freedom of women, passionately advocated by a few, was not on the agenda of all liberals at

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liberty and political liberty, or of negative liberty and positive liberty, or, again, as in a lecture he gave at the Athénée Royal in 1819, of the liberty of the Moderns and the liberty of the Ancients."

<sup>27</sup> SC, II, 1, p. 85.

the time. Still, it is worth recalling that Constant was the translator into French of the *Inquiry concerning Political Justice* [1793] of William Godwin, the husband of the pioneering champion of women's rights, Mary Wollstonecraft.<sup>28</sup>) Here is Constant's succinct definition of the role of government:

Two things are needed for a society to exist and enjoy happiness. One, it must be protected from internal disorder, and two, it must be protected from foreign invasion. Government's task is to suppress disorders and repel invasions.<sup>29</sup>

In advocating strict limits on the power of government, Constant demands a more reliable defense of individual liberty than Montesquieu's famous separation of powers. "What matters to me," he says, "is not that my personal rights cannot be violated by one source of power without the approval of another, but that my rights may not be violated by any power whatsoever."<sup>30</sup> Just before his death in 1829, he reaffirmed the essential principle of his politics:

For forty years I have defended the same principle -- freedom in all things: in religion, in philosophy, in literature, in industry, and in politics...The majority has the right to oblige the minority to respect

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<sup>28</sup> Constant's translation omitted some sections of Godwin's classic anarchist text, notably Book 8 ("On Property"). He also added notes in which he took issue at times with the author. Though Constant devoted much time and effort to this work and its imminent publication was announced in 1799, it was not in fact published until long after Constant's death and is still rarely mentioned in the literature on Constant. See Benjamin Constant, *De la Justice politique*, ed. Burton R. Pollin (Quebec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 1972), Introduction.

<sup>29</sup> *Principes de politique* (1997 ed.), II, 5, p. 59.

<sup>30</sup> *Principes de politique* (1997 ed.), II, 3, p. 56.



public order, but everything which does not disturb public order, everything which is personal, such as our opinions, everything which, in giving expression to our opinions, does no harm to others, either by provoking physical violence or obstructing contrary opinions, everything which, in industry, does not prevent a rival industry from flourishing freely, all that belongs to the individual and cannot be legitimately surrendered to the power of the state.<sup>31</sup>

"Negative liberty," one might want to conclude, is the essential thing for Constant, as for most early liberals such as Humboldt – that is to say, the kind of liberty *from government* that derives from the jurisprudential, as distinct from the civic humanist or republican tradition. "The axiom of popular sovereignty has been taken as a principle of liberty," Constant wrote. But in a modern society, "unless one has recourse to other principles to determine the extent of...sovereignty, liberty could be lost, despite the principle of popular sovereignty, or even as a result of it."<sup>32</sup> For

when no limit is set to the power of the state, the leaders of the people in a popular government are not defenders of liberty but candidates for the exercise of tyranny...The people that can do anything is as dangerous as -  
- more dangerous than -- any tyrant. It is not the small number of governors that constitutes tyranny or the large number of governors that

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<sup>31</sup> Benjamin Constant, *Oeuvres*, ed. Alfred Roulin (Paris: Editions de la Pleiade, 1957), p. 801.

<sup>32</sup> *Principes de politique* (1997 ed.), I, 3, p. 35.

guarantees liberty. Only the *degree* of state power, whatever the hands in which it is placed, determines whether a constitution is free or a government oppressive.<sup>33</sup>

The emphasis, in sum, is on the protection of the individual **from** state power, not his participation **in** it. This seemingly overriding concern with "negative liberty," inspired as it undoubtedly was by the experience of the Terror and the Napoleonic police state, occasionally led Constant to take a fairly benign view even of regimes that did not enjoy popular support, provided they did not in practice interfere too much in the private sphere. (In the same way, Isaiah Berlin would argue in the 1958 inaugural lecture, delivered at the height of the Cold War, that negative liberty "is not incompatible with...the absence of self-government" -- i.e. with some kinds of authoritarian, non-totalitarian regimes. Salazar's Portugal, for instance?) In the *Red Notebook* (a fragment of autobiographical narrative composed by Constant in 1811), the narrator comments on Bernese rule in his birthplace, the French-speaking *pays de Vaud*. "My father detested this government and had brought me up to do the same...[He] spent his life declaiming against [it] and I used to repeat his declamations. We did not reflect that our very declamations proved their own falsehood by the mere fact that we could utter them without inconvenience to ourselves... If one nowadays [i.e. at the time of writing, 1811] expressed one quarter of the views [we expressed then], one would not be safe for half an

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<sup>33</sup> *Principes de politique* (1997 ed.), I, 6, pp. 47, 44 (in order of citation).

hour.<sup>34</sup>

In fact, however, Constant often acknowledges that something crucial may be missing from "negative" or "modern" liberty -- and from modern ways in general. I'd like to illustrate this point by reading you a couple of passages from two very different works.

The first is from *De l'Esprit de conquête et de l'usurpation*. Constant draws attention here to the isolation and *anomie* of the citizens of large modern states, even when they enjoy a measure of negative freedom. Echoing Ferguson, who was still teaching at Edinburgh when Constant was a student there, and anticipating Tocqueville, he suggests that these modern states, beginning with the increasingly centralized monarchies of the ancien regime, tend to eliminate the local identities and communities that stand in the way of their hegemony, thus alienating, disempowering, and depoliticizing the population and concentrating power in the hands of a political elite in the capital.

In all those states where local life is destroyed, a little state is formed in their center. All interests are concentrated in the capital. There all ambitions make their way to exert themselves; the rest remains inert.

Individuals, lost in an unnatural isolation, strangers in the place of their

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<sup>34</sup> *Adolphe & The Red Notebook*, introduction by Harold Nicolson (New York, 1959), pp.148-49. Cf. a remark by Gibbon, perhaps the most distinguished resident of Lausanne in the 1780s, in which the historian suggests to his friend Catherine de Sévery that at Lausanne, "la tranquillité du gouvernement, dont vous ne sentez pas assez le prix...vaut mieux peut-être que notre orageuse liberté." (*Letters of Edward Gibbon*, ed. G. E. Norton, 3 vols. [London: Cassell, 1956], vol, 3, p. 71 [letter of September 1787])

birth, disconnected from the past and living only in a fast-changing present, cast like atoms upon an immense flat plain, detach themselves from a fatherland that their vision cannot embrace [and that] becomes a matter of indifference to them, since their affection no longer rests on any of its parts...One cannot help regretting those times when the earth was covered with numerous and vigorous peoples and mankind could stir and exert itself in every way in a limited sphere suited to its capacity.<sup>35</sup>

The second passage comes from *De la Religion*, a text on which Constant worked all his life and which he himself valued especially. It describes the somewhat bitter triumph of Enlightenment:

Victorious in the battles he has fought, man looks on a world depopulated of protective powers, and is astonished at his victory...His imagination, idle now and solitary, turns in on itself. He finds himself alone on an earth that may swallow him up. On this earth the generations follow each other, transitory, fortuitous, isolated...No voice of those that are no more is prolonged into the life of those still living, and the voice of the living generations must soon be engulfed in the same eternal silence. What shall man do, without memory and without hope, with no link either to the past, by which he has been abandoned, or to a future from which he feels excluded?<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> SC, I, 13, pp. 76, 78.

<sup>36</sup> *De la Religion*, Preface and notes by Pierre Deguise (Lausanne: Bibliothèque romande, 1971), pp. 65-66; also in *Oeuvres Bibliothèque de la Pleiade*, 1957), p. 1426. Cf. a similar passage,

Modern life, these passages seem to be saying, tends to destroy both the bonds of community and the bonds – the continuity -- of history and tradition, to separate generations, isolate individuals, and decompose time itself into discrete instants. By eroding their sense of themselves as members of a community or parts of a larger whole, the critical spirit, which promotes freedom, also deprives people of an object for the passion, dedication, sense of loyalty, and self-transcendence that, it is implied, are an essential feature of our humanity, be it in the form of love of another individual, love of a larger community or love of God. Continuous self-reflection and the habit of skepticism also destroy spontaneity and conviction and cut the modern individual off from the wellsprings of energy and feeling in himself, from his own affective life. “We have lost in imagination what we have gained in knowledge,” we read in *De l’Esprit de conquête et de l’usurpation*.

As a result, we are even incapable of lasting emotion; the ancients were in the full youth of their moral life, we are in its maturity, perhaps in its old age; we are always dragging behind us some sort of afterthought, which is born of experience, and which defeats enthusiasm...We are so afraid of being dupes, and above all of looking like dupes, that we are always

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emphasizing temporal and generational discontinuity, in the extensive commentary by Constant that accompanied the 1822-24 French translation of Gaetano Filangieri's *Scienza della Legislazione* of 1780: "In the age of our excessive civilization, relations between fathers and children have become extremely difficult.. Fathers live in the past. Their children's domain is the future. The present is nothing but...the theater of a great combat in which some strive ceaselessly to hasten the collapse of what others would like to retain. Each day the torrent of affairs, pleasures, and ambitions separates the generation taking possession of life from the generations that life is abandoning." (Quoted by Holmes, *Benjamin Constant and the Making of Modern Liberalism*, p. 187)

watching ourselves even in our most violent emotions. The ancients had complete conviction in all matters; we have only a weak and fluctuating conviction about almost everything.<sup>37</sup>

As one reads these passages from Constant's political and historical writings, it is hard not to be reminded of the theme of his best-known literary work, the novella *Adolphe* -- a bitter love story about a young man who engages casually in a love affair, partly to satisfy his vanity by detaching a woman from her current protector, soon tires of it and finds it burdensome, but lacks both the will or courage to break decisively with the woman and the capacity to love her passionately, wholeheartedly and without reservation. *Adolphe* was in fact written around the same time (1806-1807) as the unpublished *Principes de politique* from which the long pamphlet *De l'Esprit de conquête et de l'usurpation* was extracted. Moreover, pamphlet and novella were finally published within two years of each other, the pamphlet in 1814, the novella in 1816.

Here are the well known final pages of *Adolphe*. With their evocation of wintry sunshine (light without warmth), frozen grass (lifeless, insensate nature), loneliness, and desolation, they present an image of modern life as a waste land, and of modern man (and I say 'man' advisedly) as emancipated, alienated, and isolated.

It was one of those winter days when the sun seems to cast a dismal light

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<sup>37</sup> SC, II, 6, pp. 104-105. (Translation slightly emended)

over the greyish countryside, as though looking down in pity upon a world it has ceased to warm. Ellenore [who at this point is gravely ill] suggested we might go out. 'It is very cold,' I said. 'Never mind. I should like to walk with you.' She took my arm and we went on for a long time without saying a word, she walking with difficulty and leaning heavily upon me. 'Shall we stop for a moment?' 'No,' she said, 'it is so pleasant to feel your support once again.' We relapsed into silence. The sky was clear, but the trees were bare; there was not a breath of wind and no bird cleaved the still air. Everything was motionless, and the only sound to be heard was of the frozen grass being crunched beneath our feet. 'How calm it all is!' said Ellenore. 'Look how resigned nature is! Shouldn't our hearts learn resignation too?' She sat on a boulder, then dropped to her knees and buried her head in her hands. I heard a few whispered words and realized she was praying...

My grief was dismal and solitary. I knew I would not die with Ellenore, but would live on without her in the wilderness of this world, in which I had so often wanted to be an independent traveller. I had crushed the one who loved me, broken this heart which...had been unfailingly devoted to mine in tireless affection, and already I was overcome by loneliness. Ellenore was still alive but already past sharing my confidences; I was already alone in the world and no longer living in that atmosphere of love with which she had surrounded me. The very air I breathed seemed harsher,

the faces of the men I met more unconcerned...

Finally, with her death, Adolphe relates,

I felt the last link snap and the awful reality come between her and me for ever. How irksome this liberty now was, that I had so desired to retrieve!...Only recently ...I had felt restless and resentful that a benevolent eye was watching over all my movements and that another's happiness depended upon them. There was nobody to watch over my movements now, and they were of no interest to anybody; there was no one to question my comings and goings, no voice to call me back as I was going out. I was free, truly, for I was no longer loved. I was a stranger to the whole world.<sup>38</sup>

Concern about the dimming of enthusiasm and the capacity for commitment as a result of ever increasing rationality, Enlightenment, and individual freedom is a recurrent theme of both Constant's fictional writing and his political writing. "Woe betide...whoever does not feel a commitment, even while recognizing the errors of the friends of humanity, to the principles they have professed from age to age," he protests in the very text in which he criticizes the most radical of the Revolutionaries for their lack of historical realism.<sup>39</sup> A similar observation in the

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<sup>38</sup> *Adolphe*, trans. Leonard W. Tancock (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1964), pp. 116, 117-118, 120-21. All quotations are from this translation in the Penguin Classics series, with occasional slight modifications.

<sup>39</sup> *SC*, II, 7, p. 106. Cf. *Principes de politique*, XVI, 1 (ed. E. Hofmann), pp. 357-58). After noting that classical antiquity did not have our modern notion of individual freedom ("liberté civile"), Constant adds: "Ce



*Principes de politique* focuses on the political effects of modern reflectiveness and critical distance, of the modern incapacity to be wholeheartedly engaged in anything, without any “*idée de derrière la tête.*” “Whatever has been said about the inconsistency of the people in the ancient republics,” Constant writes,

nothing can match the changeableness **we** have witnessed. If...you observe carefully...you will notice that, even as it follows its leaders, the people casts a glance ahead toward the moment when these leaders will fall...People...distrust their own convictions. They try to delude themselves by their acclamations...The truth is that they foresee...the moment when the glory of it all will pass.”<sup>40</sup>

This warning about the absence of political conviction is echoed in almost

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sont néanmoins les anciens qui nous offrent les plus nobles exemples de liberté politique que l'histoire nous transmette. Nous trouvons chez eux le modèle de toutes les vertus que la jouissance de cette liberté produit et qui sont nécessaires pour qu'elle subsiste. L'on ne relit pas, même aujourd'hui, les belles pages de l'Antiquité, l'on ne se retrace point les actions de ses grands hommes, sans ressentir je ne sais quelle émotion d'un genre profond et particulier, que ne fait éprouver rien de ce qui est moderne. Les vieux éléments d'une nature antérieure pour ainsi dire à la nôtre semblent se réveiller en nous à ces souvenirs. Il est difficile de ne pas regretter ces temps, où les facultés de l'homme se développaient dans une direction tracée d'avance, mais dans un champ si vaste, tellement fortes de leurs propres forces et avec un tel sentiment d'énergie et de dignité et, lorsqu'on se livre à ces regrets, il est impossible de ne pas tendre à imiter ce que l'on regrette." Because of this, those who sought to emancipate man from the evils of violence and superstition, looked to the ancients for the maxims, institutions, and customs that would promote liberty. Unfortunately, they did not take cognizance of the many differences that distinguish us from the ancients and make the application of their laws impossible in our day.

<sup>40</sup> *Principes de politique* (1997 ed.), XVI, 7, p. 372. Cf. SC, II, 4, p. 100: “If one could scrutinize the obscure ranks of a people apparently subject to the usurper who is oppressing them, one would see them as by some confused instinct fixing their eyes in advance on the moment when this usurper should fall. Lacking much faith in their own convictions, they seem to be trying at one and the same time to stupefy themselves with acclamations, relieve themselves by raillery, and anticipate the moment when the glory will be past.” Yet another observation in the same vein, inspired in part perhaps by the Schiller of *Über naive und sentimentale Dichtung*, concerns modern poets. They are “always haunted,” Constant declares, “by some sort of *arrière-pensée* that...defeats enthusiasm. It seems that they fear to appear naive and gullible. Rather than surrendering themselves to an irresistible movement, they reflect on their own poetry along with their readers. The first condition for enthusiasm is not to observe oneself with too much wit and cunning. But modern individuals observe themselves even in the midst of their most sensuous and violent passions.” (*Les “Principes de politique” de Benjamin Constant*, ed. Etienne Hofmann [Geneva, 1980], p. 430)

identical terms in *Adolphe* in relation to the capacity for love: "Woe to the man who in the first moments of a love affair does not believe that it will last for ever! Woe to him who even in the arms of the mistress who has just yielded to him maintains an awareness of disenchantment to come and foresees that he may later tear himself away."

Irony, unceasing self-observation, and an inability to be spontaneous in his affective life stamp Constant's character Adolphe as a true child of Enlightenment. Like Constant himself, Adolphe has grown up without a mother. (Constant's mother died within two weeks of giving birth to him.) Like Constant, he has only a father -- a benevolent but mocking, self-mocking father, incapable of communicating affectively with his son. The sole female presence in Adolphe's early life is an "aged woman whose remarkable and highly original mind had begun to influence my own" (a character usually assumed to have been inspired by Constant's friend and confidant, the writer Isabelle de Charrière, the Belle de Zuylen of Boswell's Journals), but by the time she brings her influence to bear on the hero, she too has been "disillusioned," and rendered "joyless" by an artificial, "civilized" society.<sup>41</sup> So, from the outset, inasmuch as woman rather than man traditionally represents the totality and continuity of life, the world of Adolphe is defined by the absence of community or continuity, by reason – always analyzing, distinguishing, isolating – rather than by love, which, in contrast,

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<sup>41</sup> *Adolphe*, Chapter 1.

abolishes boundaries and unites.<sup>42</sup>

If Adolphe frequently refers to the irresistible habit of self-analysis that eats at his capacity for love, faith, and spontaneity, Constant, the first-person narrator of the letters and the *Journaux Intimes*, describes himself in the same terms: "I have some excellent qualities: nobility of mind, generosity, loyalty. But I am not quite a real person. [*Je ne suis pas tout à fait un être réel.*] There are two people in me, one of whom observes the other."<sup>43</sup> Likewise in one of his remarkable letters to his friend, the historian Prosper de Barante (yet another fellow-admirer of Mme de Stael): "One discovers that there is nothing real in the depths of the self" (*On s'aperçoit qu'il n'y a rien de réel au fond des âmes*). It is modern civilization itself that appears to turn men into mechanical creatures of artifice. "Sometimes I touch myself to check whether I am still alive," Constant confides to Barante. "I seem to live out of politeness, as I doff my hat in the street automatically to people who greet me but whom I do not know."<sup>44</sup>

The self-reflective irony of the protagonist is reproduced in the form of Constant's

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<sup>42</sup> A few decades later, a close reader and admirer of Constant, the historian Jules Michelet, will represent woman as the *past* of man, as man *before* Enlightenment, as *la mer (la mère)*, in Michelet's terms, before the rather obviously phallic lighthouses the historian admires so much have been constructed to illuminate *la mer* and bring it under control.

<sup>43</sup> *Journaux intimes*, p. 76 (11 April 1804). The hero of the strongly autobiographical novel *Cécile*, the manuscript of which was rediscovered in the late 1940s and first published in the early 1950s, also shares with Adolphe the same suggestibility, the same incapacity to stick for long with any feeling or engagement.

<sup>44</sup> "Lettres de Benjamin Constant à Prosper de Barante," ed. Baron de Barante, *Revue des Deux Mondes*, 1906, 34: 241-72, 528-67, at p. 534 (letter of 8 August 1810); p. 562 (letter of 23 September 1812): "Je me tâte quelquefois pour savoir si je vis encore. J'ai l'air de vivre par politesse, comme j'ôte mon chapeau dans la rue aux gens qui me saluent et que je ne connais pas."

novel. People and events are not presented directly -- "naively," as Friedrich Schiller might have said -- but reflected in the consciousness of a narrator who is also one of the principal characters of the action. All the characters, Ellenore in particular, are known to us only through him. Likewise, Adolphe is at one and the same time the prosecutor, the accused, and the defense in his own confessional story, constantly reflecting on it and pre-empting the judgments of the reader.

The text itself is no less self-observing and self-judging than its hero. It is framed, at the beginning, by two author's prefaces and by an editor's or publisher's note explaining, according to the conventions of eighteenth century fiction, how Adolphe's manuscript was found; and at the end, by an exchange of letters between the so-called "editor" and an individual who had supposedly known Adolphe and Ellénore, whom the "editor" supposedly encountered by chance in Germany, and to whom he supposedly sent the manuscript for authentication. These multiple textual framings allow the text to read itself and comment on itself, now this way, now that. There seems to be no simple truth of the text, nothing that has not already been reflected on, filtered through a consciousness - that of Adolphe, that of the "editor," that of the latter's "correspondent" in Germany, or that of the author of the Prefaces.

In case we should be impatient with Adolphe, for instance, the text has already pre-empted our impatience: "I hate the vanity of a mind which thinks it excuses what it explains," the "editor" of the manuscript writes to the correspondent in Germany. "I hate the conceit which is concerned only with itself while narrating

the evil it has done, which tries to arouse pity by self-description and which...analyses itself when it should be repenting." In case we should be tempted to agree with the suggestion in Adolphe's narrative and in one of the author's Prefaces that social conventions are the cause of the failure of Adolphe's love affair, we are reminded in another place that "circumstances are quite unimportant; character is everything."<sup>45</sup> In case we should be skeptical of the argument from usefulness as a justification for publishing the story (according to the German correspondent, the story warns of the dangers of flouting social convention and exposes the seductions of the language and literature of love), the editor takes care to indicate in his answer to the correspondent that he is skeptical of such claims of usefulness: "Nobody in the world ever learns except at his own expense."<sup>46</sup> Finally, as if to preempt any serious moral judgment at all, we are told -- this time by the voice of the author of the second Preface -- that the whole work was simply a response to an artistic challenge: how to write a story in which there are only two characters and nothing happens<sup>47</sup> -- as Racine claimed he wrote *Bérénice*. The subject matter, from this perspective, is secondary; the artistry is all. So the reader who, losing his ironical perspective and yielding to sentiment, takes the story too seriously and fails to perceive that it is a work of art -- an illusion, a deception -- will have allowed himself to be taken in, as Ellenore was taken in by Adolphe, and as both perhaps were dupes of the language of

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<sup>45</sup> *Adolphe*, p. 125.

<sup>46</sup> See the prefaces to the 2nd and 3rd editions at the beginning and the letter from the correspondent in Germany at the end of the novel.

<sup>47</sup> *Adolphe*, p. 30 (.Preface to 3rd ed.).

love and their own psychological needs.<sup>48</sup>

There are several accounts of a curious scene at Juliette de Récamier's, where Constant gave a reading of his novel in the Spring of 1815 -- one of many in London and Paris in the years 1814, 1815, and 1816. According to the duc de Broglie, the son-in-law of Mme de Stael,

There were twelve to fifteen of us present. The reading had gone on for almost three hours. The author was tired. As he approached the denouement of the story, his emotion increased visibly, intensified by fatigue. By the end he could no longer contain it and burst into sobs. The entire audience, also deeply moved, joined in. Soon every one was weeping and groaning. Then, suddenly...the heaving and sighing, which had become convulsive, turned into nervous, uncontrollable laughter.<sup>49</sup>

It is as though the audience had been brought up short by the realization that the intense feelings by which they had been moved were no more than the product of an unusually clever fiction, that everything was imaginary and nothing "real," that, sophisticated as they were, they had allowed themselves to be well and truly duped, and now sought nervously to regain control of their responses.

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<sup>48</sup> As if to make sure that the reader will remain in uncertainty about the significance he is to attribute to the work, the Preface to the third edition performs one last pirouette. The author announces here that he attaches almost no importance to "this little work" and would not have "bothered" to republish it, were it not that he had heard a pirated edition was being prepared in Belgium. *Adolphe* (Penguin Classics edition), Preface to 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., p. 30. On the language of love, in addition to many passages in *Adolphe* suggesting that the language of love produces the sentiments it appears to express, see *Amélie et Germaine*, ed. S. Balayé, in Constant, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. III, 1 (as in note 8 above): "Germaine a besoin du langage de l'amour, de ce langage qu'il m'est chaque jour plus impossible de lui parler." (p. 50)

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Paul Delbouille, *Genèse, structure et destin d'Adolphe* (Paris: "Les Belles Lettres," 1971), p. 388. Constant himself noted in his journal for 19 April 1815: "Lu mon roman. Fou rire" (quoted *ibid.*, p. 387).

With their exacerbated intelligence and civilized self-consciousness, both Constant's hero and his text itself produce in the reader a sense of "uncertainty about everything," as Constant himself once put it.<sup>50</sup> It is as though civilized man is living off a dwindling natural capital. Constant has a beautiful, typically understated, almost conventional image for this at the end of chapter 6 of *Adolphe*: "We were living, so to speak, on a sort of memory of the heart, strong enough to make the thought of separation painful, but too weak for us to find satisfaction in being together...I would have liked to give Ellenore tokens of my love that would have made her happy, and indeed I sometimes went back to the language of love, but these emotions and this language resembled the pale and faded leaves which, like remains of funeral wreaths, grow listlessly on the branches of an uprooted tree."

The sense of the second-hand, the worn, the warmed-over is overwhelming in *Adolphe*. And insofar as its anti-heroic hero can be taken to represent modern, enlightened man, the reader may begin to suspect that everything in the modern world is derivative and inauthentic; that nothing is natural or original; that feelings do not come *before* the signs and words that supposedly express them, but are themselves *produced* by the manipulation of signs and words. The stage seems set for the desolate world of Flaubert.

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<sup>50</sup> See Holmes, *Benjamin Constant and the Making of Modern Liberalism*, p.161.

On the one hand, then, an elegiac sense of modern life as diminished, impoverished, alienated, and of modern man as a shadow, "not a real person"; on the other, repeated warnings of the futility and even danger of trying to recreate an enthusiasm (patriotism, love, faith) that can no longer be spontaneous or authentic, and, on the whole, a kind of courageous acceptance of that situation. In the end, Constant claims, bourgeois marriage, in the sense of a partnership entered into after reflection, is preferable to the disorder of passion, especially since the latter can no longer be as authentic as -- presumably -- it was in pre-modern times ("les temps héroïques," as Constant once described them<sup>51</sup>) but in a civilized world must always be informed or **d**eformed by words, images and ideas. "Made...luke-warm by the ease with which it can be pursued, and subject in real life to calculation, what remains of the passion of love," Constant declared toward the end of his life, "no longer determines the entirety of a person's destiny....Love has been put in its place, in France at least, by the younger generation itself. How many young men would sacrifice their convenience and their future in order to marry for love? Yet so far from being inclined to rebuke civilization for the abatement of a once disorderly passion, I am happy to admit that morals have improved because of it." In the absence of passion, he asserts, "habit and, above all, a common, shared interest sometimes produce an affection of minds."<sup>52</sup> One could even argue perhaps that there is some merit in Adolphe's unwillingness or incapacity to break completely with

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<sup>51</sup> In the title of his translation of Chapter 2 of John Gillies' *History of Ancient Greece, its Colonies and Conquests* (1787), which appeared as *Essai sur les tems héroïques de la Grèce, tiré de l'Histoire Grecque de M. Gillies, par A.S.M. Cantwell* (1787).

<sup>52</sup> "Réflexions sur la tragédie" (1829), *Oeuvres*, ed. Roulin, pp. 939-40.



Ellenore, in his refusal to renounce the past, even though its emotions can no longer be **lived**. If continuity with the past and therefore responsibility for it can no longer be maintained spontaneously by the fickle, facile, and easily manipulated heart but only consciously and deliberately by the reflective mind, maintaining it in Adolphe's admittedly imperfect way may not be the worst or least honorable option.

For there is no way back to the ages of community, unreflecting conviction, and spontaneity. "These times are no more and it is pointless to regret them."<sup>53</sup>

Still, as I have been suggesting, Constant does not conceal his dismay at the diminution of important features of our humanity that he sees as having been brought about by emancipation, enlightenment, and the habit of reflecting on everything. While he regards the attempts of the French Jacobins to reinstate the ancient republic as misguided and dangerous, he repeatedly acknowledges that interest alone is not a sufficient motivation for defending freedom. The greatest danger to civilized society, he warned in 1826, is "a kind of resignation based on calculating and weighing against each other the inconveniences of resistance and those of compromise." Such calculations are "harmful both to the defence of liberty against despotism within and to the defence of national independence against foreign invasion."<sup>54</sup> In his *Principes de politique* he criticizes Bentham's

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<sup>53</sup> SC, I, 13, p. 78.

<sup>54</sup> Review in *Revue encyclopédique* (1 February, 1826) of Charles-Barthélémi Dunoyer, *L'Industrie et la*

utilitarianism. "For men to unite together in face of their destiny, they need something more than mere self-interest; they need real beliefs."<sup>55</sup> When he wanted to truly insult Napoleon, he described him as "le calcul personnifié."

There is, after all, in short, a need for something to replace the active, wholehearted participation associated with the old "political liberty." Otherwise "civil liberty" itself might be lost while those who enjoy it are busy pursuing their private interests and pleasures.<sup>56</sup> "While in this work we have considered only

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*morale considérées dans leur rapport à la liberté* (1825), in *Benjamin Constant publiciste 1825-1830*, ed. Ephraïm Harpaz ([Paris and Geneva: Champion-Slatkine, 1987], p. 89.

<sup>55</sup> SC, I, 4, p. 58. On the critique of Bentham's utilitarianism, see *Principes de politique* (1997 ed.), II, 7, pp. 61-64. See also *Mémoires sur les Cent Jours* (as in note 15 above), where Constant defends not those who gave the King the bad and cowardly advice to leave, as Napoleon advanced on Paris, but those who followed the monarch out of loyalty, even though Constant's own decision was different: "Tous les genres d'enthousiasme ont droit à l'estime, et tous les sacrifices que les hommes font à leurs affections ont quelque chose de noble et d'honorable." (p. 149)

<sup>56</sup> "Si, tout en profitant de ses bienfaits [i.e. of civilized society], nous nous laissons amollir par elle, nous ne saurons pas la défendre au besoin, et sa cause sera trahie ou abandonnée par les sybarites qu'elle aura formés." (Review of Dunoyer, *L'Industrie et la morale considérées dans leur rapport à la liberté* [1825], in *Benjamin Constant publiciste 1825-1830*, ed. Ephraïm Harpaz [Paris and Geneva: Champion-Slatkine, 1987], p. 93). In similar vein, *De la Religion*: "If the religious impulse is folly, because it is unaccompanied by rational demonstration, love is folly, enthusiasm is delirium, sympathy is a form of weakness, dedication an act of madness. If we have to stamp out the religious impulse because it distracts us from acting according to our interest, we will also have to stifle pity, for it too has its dangers and often causes discomfort. We will have to repress that boiling up of our blood that makes us fly to the assistance of the oppressed, for it is not in our interest to bring down on our own heads blows that were not intended for us. Above all, think hard about it, you [who preach the doctrine of self-interest], you will have to give up that freedom that you so enjoy, for, from one end of the earth to the other, the soil is strewn with the corpses of those who have loved and defended freedom. The altars that have been erected to that divinity of faithful and noble souls were not raised by enlightened self-interest (*l'intérêt bien entendu*). The latter prefers to wait until others have built these altars and provided a solid and secure refuge. And should these altars be battered by storms and high winds, you will see how interest, faithless and timid, quickly deserts a cult that officialdom has prohibited and makes a virtue of -- at best -- a shamefaced neutrality." (ed. cit., p. 19) Has we not observed calculation and interest at work everywhere in recent history, Constant continues, referring to his own times. "The endlessly calculating indifference and servility, the versatility in self-justification" manifested by our age, "what else were they, if not *l'intérêt bien entendu*? It is true that that principle maintained order during a time of disasters, and order is necessary to our wellbeing. But the principle of interest sacrificed to order every powerful feeling, the expression of which might have been hazardous. Order and force are always, it would seem, on the same side. Thus interest sided with force, if not by assisting it directly, then at least by removing the

matters pertaining to civil liberty," Constant explains toward the end of his *Principes de politique*, "we have in no way intended to imply that political liberty is something superfluous. Those who would sacrifice political liberty in order to enjoy civil liberty in greater peace are no less absurd than those who would sacrifice civil liberty in the hope of ensuring and expanding political liberty. Provided the people is happy, it is sometimes said, it is not important that it be free politically...But to declare political freedom useless is to declare that the edifice in which we live has no need of a foundation." In a prophetic passage of the Preface to *De la Religion* Constant explained his anxiety: "Quand chacun est son propre centre, tous sont isolés. Quand tous sont isolés, il n'y a que de la poussière. Quand l'orage arrive, la poussière est de la fange." ["When every one is his own center, all are isolated. When all are isolated, there is only dust. When the storm comes, the dust turns to mire."] It is from anomic individuals, Constant seems to be warning us, that the "mass" arises.<sup>57</sup>

Constant repeatedly points out the dangers of a-politeia or political indifference in his *Principes de politique*. He warns against turning away in the face of blatant abuses in the hope that one will not be personally affected; he defends freedom of the press on the grounds that it permits and encourages active engagement in public affairs and a watchful concern for civil rights similar to that with which the

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obstacles in its path and smoothing the way for it. Interest had pity for the victims, but when they were being dragged to the place of execution, it took care that order would be maintained. It allowed heads to roll but saw to it that property was secured. It prevented pillaging while facilitating legal murder." (ed, Deguise, p. 21)

<sup>57</sup> *De la Religion* (ed. Deguise), p. 23.

old, highly independent noblemen jealously defended their privileges against the encroachments of royal authority; he justifies love, religion, the pursuit of glory -- "toutes les passions nobles, délicates et profondes" -- as well as the joy we experience in "le dévouement" (the term used to describe Ellenore's love for Adolphe), a joy that is "contraire à l'instinct habituel de notre égoïsme."<sup>58</sup>

"Gentlemen," he declared in a passage of the lecture on "Ancient and Modern Liberty," "I call to witness this better part of our nature, the noble restlessness that pursues and torments us, the eagerness to extend our understanding and develop our faculties. Our destiny does not call us to happiness alone, but to self-perfection, and political liberty is the most powerful and the most energetic means of self-perfection granted by heaven...By submitting to all citizens, without exception, the care and assessment of their most sacred interests, [it] enlarges their spirit, ennobles their thought, and establishes among them a kind of intellectual equality which forms the glory and power of a people." Political liberty, "positive liberty," active participation in politics turns out to be what will save individuals from becoming the look-alike puppets that a highly developed civilization threatens to turn them into. "There are no more individuals," Constant once lamented to Prosper de Barante, "but only battalions in uniform."<sup>59</sup> Political

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<sup>58</sup> *Principes de politique* (1997 ed.), V, 3, p. 92 and VIII, 1, p. 141. "Honorons et encourageons cette puissance de sacrifice, cette faculté de dévouement, objets des moqueries de quelques esprits subalternes, qui se croient justes parce qu'ils sont abjects, et piquans parce qu'ils poursuivent de plaisanteries...tout ce qui s'élève au-dessus de leur nature ignoble et de leurs conceptions rétrécies." (Review of Dunoyer, *L'Industrie et la morale considérées dans leur rapport à la liberté* [1825], in *Benjamin Constant publiciste 1825-1830*, ed. Ephraïm Harpaz [Paris and Geneva: Champion-Slatkine, 1987], p. 93)

<sup>59</sup> Passage from lecture on Ancient and Modern Liberty in *Cours de politique constitutionnelle*, ed. Laboulaye, vol. 2, p. 559. Passage on individuals and battalions in "Lettres de Benjamin Constant à Prosper de Barante," ed. Baron de Barante, *Revue des Deux Mondes*, vol. 34, 1906, pp. 241-72, 528-67, letter of 25 February 1808, p. 250. See in the same vein the review of Dunoyer, *L'Industrie et la morale considérées*

liberty, he believed, would save society from turning into another China, i.e. in the metaphoric language of the time, a lifeless, stagnant, uniform mass.<sup>60</sup>

What is going on here, it seems to me, is not so much, or at least not only, an incipient Romantic critique of Enlightenment as it is Constant's attempt to work through a tension we find in a number of eighteenth and early nineteenth-century writers between the humanist and republican ideal of passionate and heroic exercise of political liberty and the liberal ideal of the personal happiness promised by civil liberty, between "virtue" and "commerce" in the language of the time.<sup>61</sup> Adam Smith himself had noted ruefully that while "commerce" encourages certain qualities like – I quote -- "probity and punctuality," "there are certain inconveniences arising from a commercial spirit...The minds of men are contracted and rendered incapable of elevation, education is despised or at least neglected, and heroic spirit is almost utterly extinguished." Smith made his peace

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*dans leur rapport à la liberté* (1825): "Nous ne faisons point un crime à la civilisation de procurer à l'homme beaucoup de jouissances et de lui en rendre l'acquisition plus facile; mais, comme ces jouissances et la facilité que nous trouvons à les obtenir attachent chacun de nous à la position qui les lui assure, il est évident que nous éprouvons plus de répugnance à risquer cette position, même quand le devoir nous y invite. En conséquence cet état de civilisation tend à la stabilité, et, si l'on veut, au bon ordre plus qu'à la vertu morale. Or, le bon ordre, chose utile, chose indispensable au progrès et à la prospérité des sociétés, est plutôt un moyen qu'un but. Si, pour le maintenir, on sacrifie toutes les émotions généreuses, on réduit les hommes à un état peu différent de celui de certains animaux industriels, dont les ruches bien ordonnées et les cases artistement construites ne sauraient pourtant être le beau idéal de l'espèce humaine. Il est donc important de contrebalancer cet effet de la civilisation, en réveillant et entretenant le plus qu'il est possible les sentimens nobles et désintéressés. Cela est important, afin de préserver la civilisation elle-même des dangers qui résultent pour elle de sa propre tendance." (*Benjamin Constant publiciste 1825-1830*, ed. Ephraïm Harpaz [Paris and Geneva: Champion-Slatkine, 1987], p. 88-89)

<sup>60</sup>. References to China ("La Chine! La Chine! Nous y tendons, nous y marchons à grands pas") in "Lettres de Benjamin Constant à Prosper de Barante," ed. Baron de Barante, *Revue des Deux Mondes*, vol. 34, 1906, p. 251; also letter of 21 October 1808, p. 268 ("La France est une Chine européenne"), and letter of 1810, p. 537. Cf. the famous passage on China in John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, Ch. 3 (Everyman's Library ed., pp. 128-31).

<sup>61</sup> See the now classic study of J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine political thought and the Atlantic republican tradition* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1975).

with these “defects,” but suggested that “to remedy [them] would be an object worthy of serious attention.”<sup>62</sup>

Others were less sanguine – most famously Rousseau, but also relatively moderate figures, such as Ferguson. Though it purports to outline a pattern of social evolution, of which commercial society is the latest and most advanced stage, Ferguson’s *Essay on the History of Civil Society* nevertheless contained -- to the dismay of Hume and Smith -- many passages praising Sparta and other austere and decidedly uncommercial societies. In general, Ferguson -- who hailed from Perthshire, on the fault line between the Highlands and Lowlands of Scotland, the ancient world of the clans and the modern world of commerce, and who must have been the only professor at Edinburgh who could speak Gaelic! -- extolled the “sentiments of generosity and self-denial” of warlike primitive

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<sup>62</sup> *Lectures on Jurisprudence* (based on lectures given in the late 1750s), ed. R.L. Meek, D.D. Raphael and P.G. Stein (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1978; The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith, vol 5), pp. 538-41. The theme was developed by Smith in relation to the division of labor required by modern factory work in a passage of *The Wealth of Nations* (1776; Book 5, ch. 1, pt. 3, art. 2) that was quoted at length by Marx in *Capital*: “In the progress of the division of labour, the employment of the far greater part of those who live by labour, that is, of the great body of the people, comes to be confined to a very few simple operations, frequently to one or two. But the understandings of the greater part of men are necessarily formed by their ordinary employments. The man whose whole life is spent in performing a few simple operations...has no occasion to exert his understanding, or to exercise his invention in finding out expedients for removing difficulties which never occur. He naturally loses, therefore, the habit of such exertion, and generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become. The torpor of his mind renders him, not only incapable of relishing or bearing a part in any rational conversation, but of conceiving any generous, noble, or tender sentiment, and consequently of forming any just judgment concerning many even of the ordinary duties of private life. Of the great and extensive interests of his country he is altogether incapable of judging; and unless very particular pains have been taken to render him otherwise, he is equally incapable of defending his country in war. The uniformity of his stationary life naturally corrupts the courage of his mind...It corrupts even the activity of his body, and renders him incapable of exerting his strength with vigour and perseverance, in any employment other than that to which he has been bred. His dexterity at his own particular trade seems, in this manner, to be acquired at the expence of his intellectual, social, and martial virtues. But in every improved and civilized society this is the state into which the labouring poor, that is, the great body of the people, must necessarily fall, unless government takes some pains to prevent it.” The tension between “virtue” and “commerce” is already found in Montesquieu, *Esprit des Lois*, IV, 1: “Les lois du commerce perfectionnent les mœurs, par la même raison que ces mêmes lois perdent les mœurs. Le commerce corrompt les mœurs pures;...il polit et adoucit les mœurs barbares, comme nous le voyons tous les jours.” In addition, it underlies the popular eighteenth-century rhetorical parallel of Sparta and Athens.

peoples: their valor, their loyalty to family and friends, their patriotism. Whereas to some, political liberty was primarily a means of securing civil liberty, regarded as the ultimate good, Ferguson saw political liberty as a good in itself, more closely associated than civil liberty with "the happier and more respectable qualities of human nature," such as "affection and courage."<sup>63</sup>

Constant's dilemma has not, it seems to me, become obsolete or irrelevant. The massive criticism of the West from modern religious fundamentalists – Christian and especially Islamic – appears to be, at least in some measure, a critique of a society that has placed all value on "commerce" and that allegedly no longer understands the "virtue" of self-sacrifice and dedication to larger communal causes. Constant himself saw a connection between politics and religion, as he saw a connection between politics and love. "It is not only in the ties of the heart that we can observe moral enfeeblement and an incapacity to develop durable feelings," he wrote in a passage originally intended for the Preface to the 2nd edition of *Adolphe*. "Everything in nature is interconnected. Faithfulness in love is an energy similar to religious faith or the passion for freedom. Well, we have no

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<sup>63</sup> Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society, 1767*, pp. 24, 13. Another likely source of inspiration for these reflections on the limitations of reason and interest could well be Schiller, who was also read attentively -- and translated -- by Constant. See, for instance, his *Philosophische Briefe in Sämtliche Werke, Sekulär-Ausgabe* (Stuttgart and Berlin, n.d.), vol. 11, p. 119: "Many of our thinking minds have taken it upon themselves to use mockery to drive the heavenly impulse [to love, friendship, and loving recognition of the unity of all nature] out of the human soul, to erase the impression of the Divine in us, and to dissolve that energy, that noble enthusiasm in the cold, killing breath of a mean-spirited indifference. The slavish sentiment that has resulted from their own debasement has led them to make common cause with the most dangerous enemy of benevolence, i.e. self-interest, in order to explain away a phenomenon that was too divine for their narrow, shrunken hearts. They have spun their joyless doctrines out of a miserable egoism and made their own limitation the measure of the Creator...I confess it freely: I believe in the reality of disinterested love..."

energy now. We no longer know how to love, or believe, or will. Everyone doubts the truth of what he says, smiles at the passion he professes, and anticipates the waning of the emotions he feels."<sup>64</sup>

The *Principes de Politique* was to have been complemented by an ambitious study of religion that Constant worked on all his life and left unfinished at the time of his death, but always thought of as his most important undertaking. For, as the passage that I quoted earlier from this uncompleted work indicates, he was much concerned with what he perceived as the plight of man thrust or *geworfen* into a world in whose cohesiveness and meaning he no longer has reason to believe. In his superb book on Constant, Stephen Holmes refers to an Italian anecdote, much appreciated by Constant, according to which the Newtonian watchmaker-God of the eighteenth century died half way through his creation of the world leaving his work unfinished and humanity stranded. "We are like watches that have no dial," the story runs, as Constant recounted it to Isabelle de Charrière in 1790, "and whose wheels, endowed with intelligence, turn until they wear out, without knowing why but constantly telling themselves: I turn, therefore

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<sup>64</sup> Quoted in *Adolphe*, ed. Gustave Rudler (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1919), pp. xii-xiii. The terms "now" and "no longer" imply comparison with an earlier, pre-modern culture. Such a comparison had already been spelled out, as far as personal life is concerned, in a passage of the *Principes de politique* (p. 368) that also clearly anticipates the exacerbated yet somehow nerveless sensibility of the modern hero of *Adolphe*: "Nothing in nature is completely separate from anything else. Literature always bears the mark of the general character of an age. Less worn down by civilization, the Ancients had greater vivacity of expression. Their bellicose way of life filled them with love of action, firm confidence in their own strength, fearlessness before death, and indifference to pain; whence greater dedication, energy, nobility of spirit. We Moderns, wearied by experience, have a sadder and for that reason more delicate sensibility; we are more susceptible to emotions and more often moved. The egoism that accompanies that capacity for feeling may corrupt it, but cannot eliminate it. To resist the power that suffering has over us, we have to avoid the sight of it. The Ancients, in contrast, faced up to it without fear and bore it without pity."



I must have a purpose."<sup>65</sup>

Man thus remains for Constant “un être double et énigmatique,” and human nature, as viewed by this son of the Huguenot diaspora, includes a seemingly ineradicable “tendency,” as he put it in *De la Religion*, “to reach beyond ourselves toward ends that have nothing to do with rationally calculated utility or advantage and that transport us in the direction of an unknown, invisible centre, unrelated to our day-to-day lives and mundane interests.”<sup>66</sup> It is the dim memory of and longing for such a center -- the ghost, one is tempted to say, of the Augustinian hidden God -- that sustains, against all reason, Constant maintains, even among the most skeptical denizens of a desacralized world, a residual

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<sup>65</sup> See Holmes, *Benjamin Constant and the Making of Modern Liberalism*, p. 163. The story of the watchmaker is from a letter to Mme de Charrière of 4 June, 1790, first cited by Gustave Rudler in his *La Jeunesse de Benjamin Constant 1767-1794* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1909), pp. 376-77: “Je sens plus que jamais le néant de tout, combien tout promet et rien ne tient, combien nos forces sont au-dessus de notre destination, et combien cette disproportion doit nous rendre malheureux... Un Piémontais, homme d'esprit dont j'ai fait la connaissance à La Haye, un chevalier de Revel, envoyée de Sardaigne... prétend que Dieu, c'est-à-dire l'auteur de nous et de nos alentours, est mort avant d'avoir fini son ouvrage; qu'il avait les plus beaux et vastes projets du monde et les plus grands moyens; qu'il avait déjà mis en oeuvre plusieurs des moyens, comme on élève des échafauds pour bâtir, et qu'au milieu de son travail il est mort; que tout à present se trouve fait dans un but qui n'existe plus, et que nous en particulier, nous sentons destinés à quelque chose dont nous ne nous faisons aucune idée; nous sommes comme des montres où il n'y aurait point de cadran, et dont les rouages, doués d'intelligence, tourneraient jusqu'à ce qu'ils fussent usés, sans savoir pourquoi et se disant toujours: Puisque je tourne, j'ai donc un but. Cette idée me paraît la plus profonde et la plus spirituelle que j'ai ouïe.” (“I feel more and more the nothingness of everything, how much is promised and how little fulfilled, how much higher we are able to think than our actual destination, and how unhappy that disproportion is bound to make us... A witty Piedmontese whom I got to know at The Hague, the envoy of Sardinia, a chevalier Revel, argues that God -- that is to say the author of us and of the environment we live in -- died before finishing his work; that he had the most beautiful and the grandest plans as well as the greatest means of executing them; that he had already begun to use some of those means, like scaffolding that is put up in order to raise a building, and that in the midst of his work, he died; that everything presently existing was thus made for a purpose that is no more, and that we, in particular, feel we were destined for something of which we have no idea; we are like watches which have no dial and whose wheels, endowed with intelligence, turn until they wear out, without knowing why and constantly telling themselves: I turn, therefore I must have a purpose. This conceit seems to me the wittiest and most profound extravagance I have ever heard.”)

<sup>66</sup> *De la Religion*, in *Oeuvres*, ed. Alfred Roulet, p. 1414. Cf. p. 1413: “The sight of a virtuous action, a glorious sacrifice, an act of courage in the face of danger, a suffering individual being assisted and consoled, superiority to the impulses of vice, devotion to the unfortunate, resistance to tyranny -- all those things awaken and nourish in the soul of man the mysterious disposition [to rise above all individual and particular thoughts].”

capacity for faith, love, dedication, and self-sacrifice, as well as a desire for fame and reputation.

If it cannot be entirely destroyed, this pre-rational tendency may, however, be corrupted by skepticism and calculation, resulting in a monstrous mixture of fanaticism and rationality. "We have proclaimed the empire of reason," Constant warned, "and the world is unhinged by madness. All our systems of philosophy are founded on calculation and appeal to our interest, yet our acts of waywardness have never been more shameful or our passions more unruly."<sup>67</sup> I should like to conclude this tribute to a writer of sharp intelligence and insight, unflinching honesty, compassionate humanity, cosmopolitan openness of mind and wonderfully sober style (it is like a glass of the purest water) by quoting an observation that must strike us today as uncannily prophetic. It is Constant's version of Goya's *Sleep of Reason*. "I have seen men who believe in nothing rush into magic," he wrote to Prosper de Barante. "I have known men who, though weary of their incredulity, have become incapable of putting anything in its place but ecstasies, unbridled enthusiasms, and excesses that are the more incurable for having sprung from reasoning and being systematically deranged."<sup>68</sup> In a passage such as this, the Enlightenment looks anxiously but courageously into its own abysses.

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 1425. Cf. the description on pp. 1423-24 of the disorders and excesses of the Romans at a time of widespread incredulity and religious skepticism.

<sup>68</sup> Letter of 2 December 1811, in "Lettres de Benjamin Constant à Prosper de Barante," p. 549.

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