

On Benjamin Constant's Adolphe and Romanticism

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This protracted castaway was based on an essay I wrote at university around 1983 concerning the protagonist of Benjamin Constant's Adolphe, in fact, the vast majority of what follows was lifted directly from it.

Constant's novel is in the classic proto-Romantic tradition of Goethe's The Sorrows of the Young Werther (1774), and Chateaubriand's René (1802), in so far as the protagonist is a sufferer from what has been termed Mal du Siècle, a condition producing melancholy, fragility and self-destructiveness among other nihilistic qualities. It was a condition that was to find special favour among the Romantics, and one of its foremost antecedents was the aforesaid Werther, which emerged from the German literary vanguard known as Sturm und Drang, itself an offshoot of Weimar Classicism.

Through the great Romantic movement in the arts, Werther exerted an immeasurable influence on the evolution of the Western Mind, although it was far from alone in this respect. Chateaubriand has already been mentioned, but Rousseau was if anything even more influential, and much has been made of the Swiss polymath's impact on the French Revolution, which so inspired the Romantics.

As to its aftermath the infamous Directoire, it produced such monstrosities as the Incroyables, young aristocrats freshly returned from exile, whose affected attitudes and hideous fopperies provided a foretaste of the entire Romantic decadence which began in the Paris of the 1830s, and which could be said to be with us to some extent to this day. It lingers in the shape of such shadowy subcultures as the Goths and Steampunks.

With such figures as Werther, René and Adolphe as its inspiration, Romanticism openly exalted melancholy as the natural state of sensitive and creative youth. Such a development was hardly novel, for after all, the Bible clearly states that there is nothing new under the sun, but it was surely unprecedented in its intensity. Thence, I should have no hesitation in labelling it tragic.

In terms of my own pre-Christian self, it was almost overwhelmingly powerful; and so since becoming a Christian, I've felt convicted to repeatedly expose it as not only erroneous but potentially lethal. Who knows what harm it did me, to say nothing of the millions of young people it's affected through such scions

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of Romanticism as the Decadent and Symbolist Movements, German Expressionism, Dadaism and Surrealism, the Beat Generation and the Rock and Roll phenomenon.

To mercifully cut a long rant shortâ God never intended for the young to be full of sorrow, which is not to downplay genuine major depression. As a possible sufferer myself, Iâd never do that. However, while old age is all too often a source of deep remorse for follies past, youth sweet precious youth provides a person with almost unlimited opportunities for the elimination of regret, which is one of the saddest conditions known to Man.

In time though, those opportunities endâ so to any young person reading this, I can only urge them to turn to the God of Isaac, Jacob and Israel, who in His Holy Word urged His people to seek â life in all its abundance, in all its fullnessâ Oh to be young again myselfâ and in the first bloom of love for the Lord of Life and Glory.

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Adolphe is an egotist in that he is preoccupied with himself, his thoughts and his feelings in the classic manner of the contemplative, melancholy, faintly yearning, hypersensitive, isolated, perceptive and confused Romantic hero, but he is by no means selfish or arrogant, as so many egotists are.

Perhaps he is more of an egoist, that is, somebody who believes that self-interest is the foundation of all morality, but then, he denies this when he announces:

â While I was only interested in myself, I was but feebly interested for all that.â

Plausibly, egotism is only a weak driving force in Adolpheâs life and by the time of his love for EllÃ©nore, it has all but faded. There is much genuine goodness in Adolphe, but much of it is subconscious, surfacing only at the sight of obvious grief.

The cause of this inability to feel or think spontaneously is very probably the result of the complex interaction between a hypersensitive nature and a brilliant if indecisive mind. By reflecting on his surroundings to an exaggerated degree, Adolphe feels a sort of numbness, a premature world-wearinessâ lucid thoughts and intense emotions irrevocably confused.

One of Adolpheâs weaknesses, masquerading as a virtue, is his misguided and in many respects ruthless tendency towards self-sacrifice. By being consistently swayed by the superficial manifestations of grief, he steels himself to other, quieter, but no less desperate plights.

EllÃ©nore, in her Karenina-like behaviour towards her protector and children is no less guilty of preternatural selfishness than her lover, but the final burden of guilt must rest with Adolphe for an act which he admittedly spends a good many years atoning for: that of, as a fatalistic and irresponsible young man, playing with the lives of mature people who had struggled to achieve a state of moderate stability and respectability and gratuitously tempting the passions of an extremely passionate woman.

We know little of the physical appearance of Adolphe, but in all probability he possesses the youthfully seductive charm of other Romantic heroes, ie., Werther, RenÃ© and Julien Sorel.

EllÃ©nore, like Karenina, initially resists Adolpheâs advances but after a great deal of persuasion which amounted to emotional blackmail, agrees to see him on a regular basis, and soon afterwards, falls in love. Her excessively romantic and passionate nature is her principle failing.

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Adolphe's weaknesses are more serious: he consistently shows an alarming lack of foresight. He convinces himself of his love for Ellenore without envisaging the consequences that soon come tumbling down upon him, leaving him full of doubt and fear. He deceives himself into believing that to remain with Ellenore can atone for his destruction of her without realising the harm caused by a morose, taciturn and patently loveless presence.

Adolphe shows hardly any need to conform socially whereas Ellenore is conservative in feeling and unconventional in action: she has definite standards of morality that, while living openly with a man and his children, she cannot possibly conform to herself.

Adolphe remains a sympathetic character, only too aware of the tragic plight of one who is loved, but who cannot love. After all, can one blame a man for the consequences of youthful irresponsibility and excessive sensitivity for the rest of his life? Adolphe is a weak but attractive character who despite having been created a hundred and fifty years ago is as real to today's restless Fin de Siècle youth as he was to countless heroes of the Nineteenth Century.

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