

Parole, personnage et sujet dans les récits littéraires de Benjamin Constant (review)

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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Parole, personnage et sujet dans les récits littéraires de Benjamin Constant.
By Anne Boutin. (Travaux et recherches de l'Institut Benjamin Constant, 10). Geneva: Slatkine, 2008. 590 pp. Hb €90.00.

This new addition to the series of Benjamin Constant studies is a perceptive analysis of *parole* and its effects on *personnage* and *sujet* in *Adolphe*, *Amélie et Germaine*, *Cécile*, and *Ma vie*, the last three posthumously published. Beautifully written, jargon-free, perfectly structured and signposted, the volume benefits from an extensive bibliography and an index of (non-fictional) proper names. Boutin conveys Constant's astonishingly modern language (easily accessible to secondary students), its *conte*-like simplicity, its abstraction from social convention, its universality. She studies such oppositions as solitude and society, private thought and public speech, introspection and objectivity, indecision and resolve, dejection and enthusiasm, independent judgement and third-party advice, suppression and outbursts — all through the perspective of the powerlessness and the power of language. Previous critics have emphasized the failure of *constantien* communication, each of the four works focusing on a crisis of the spoken word. But Boutin analyses such linguistic features as voice, style, person, point of view, and narratology in general, and hence underlines, following in part John Searle and J. L. Austin, the considerable resources available, among them recourse to silence and to the writing of letters. Reflecting its origin as a doctoral dissertation, the book is rarely ludic or even amused and would have profited from much pruning, the citations from fellow critics and from Constant being invariably too long. Quotations are sometimes repeated within a short space, although it would be a curmudgeonly reader who objected to rereading such aphorisms as 'Cursed be he who, in the first instants of a love affair, does not believe that the relationship will last for ever!' The methodology is essentially 'intrinsic' — multiple extended close readings concentrating on form rather than content, with little reference to the genesis of the four texts or, for [End Page 355] instance, to the questions of linguistic norms in writing non-French French or of specifically Swiss perspectives and attitudes. Biographical insights emerge principally in the eternal question of the degree of autobiography in *Adolphe*. As shown by the perfect readability and the seamless transition from primary discourse to universal maxims, Boutin adopts some of Constant's stylistic features. Her conclusion, ostensibly referring to the novelist, thus argues for the difficulty of synthesis, also reflecting her own approach, little suited to an easily summarizable thesis.

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