

Benjamin Constant - Unrequited Genius

Mar 3, 2009

Ben Constant was a child prodigy; his character, however, was formed by the twin misfortunes of losing his mother at the age of 1 week and having a cold, distant father. He was born in Lausanne, Switzerland, October 25th 1767. Descendants of French Huguenots, the Constants were a large family scattered throughout Europe. His father, Juste, was a captain in the Dutch army. Some years prior to Benjamin's birth he had taken a liking to a 9 year old village girl who he took home in his carriage, notwithstanding universal protest. He did, however, educate her and set her up in a house when she came of age. This girl was given the task of being Ben's first tutor, before he was five. As an adult he was very upset to discover that she had also given him a step-brother and sister. Soon he had progressed (at age five) to a sadistic teacher who regularly beat him then hugged him until he promised not to tell. He also taught him Greek. By 7 Benjamin was in Brussels under the tutelage of Monsieur de LaGrange, an atheist who tried to rape the daughter of Ben's music master. He escaped the father's wrath by moving to a brothel, taking Benjamin to live there with him. Juste came and collected his son, leaving him with the music master. His idea of tutelage was to leave Benjamin to his own devices in a pornographic library, picking him up late in the day. Ben then boarded at a school with M Gobert who had fled France with his mistress in scandalous circumstances.

Once more removed, his father placed him with a defrocked monk called Duplessis. Oddly, he was friendly and competent. By this time Benjamin was a true prodigy; a fluent linguist and writer, he wrote Latin verse, a Greek tragedy, an opera and five cantos of an historic romance. He was an accomplished musician on the piano and harpsichord and his letters to his far-flung family show him to be witty and erudite. His father then dismissed M. Duplessis, perhaps for his normalcy; the ex-monk disproved this by promptly blowing his brains out over a love affair.

At this point, still not quite thirteen, Benjamin went to Oxford University. It is unclear why he left after only a few months, probably his extreme youth and precociousness unsettled the staid English. Accompanied by Mr. May, yet another tutor, he toured England, Scotland and Holland, finally settling at Erlangen, where he matriculated at the age of fourteen. Much indulged at the court there, he was encouraged by the ruling Margrave to take a mistress, which he did "the bizarre thing was I did not care for the girl, and she never gave herself to me". He was banished from the court by the Margravine, who had a grudge against the girl's mother. From there he went to the University at Edinburgh, where he appears to have blossomed. All this before his 16th birthday. Unfortunately his many later achievements, the books, his service in the Chamber of Deputies with Napoleon, his contributions to political philosophy, were overshadowed by this childhood. He had seen more of the world than most do in a lifetime. Brushing aside his genius, he spent his life searching for passion.

Published by [David Green](#)