

**ROMANCE STUDIES:
Readings in Excess and Betrayal, from Modernism to the Present**

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Love Me Tender: Constance Debré on Minimalism and Excess

Constance Debré's *Love Me Tender* (2020) is pared down. Minimalist. Punchy. The book is short and spattered with blank space: its chapters are often a page or less long. It leaps from topic to topic, omitting background or exegesis. The prose is quick-fire and recounts its story through what seem to be a series of diary entries, written in the brief periods of time snatched from a life filled with other pressures and concerns. In part the novel's lack of adornment is a sign and consequence of the fact that this is autofiction: not quite autobiography, although the tale it tells is drawn from Debré's own experience; and not quite literature, in that it avoids the flourishes, or the self-conscious attention to style, that we might expect of a literary text. It is blunt and to the point, and avoids special pleading. What we see is what we get. It is what it is. Debré, we are told, is what she is.

The narrator (she is named only once, as "Madame Constance" [86]) is, much like Constance Debré herself, a lawyer who comes from a distinguished family. Debré's own grandparents include a war hero, awarded the Legion of Honour in World War I, and also the first Prime Minister (under Charles de Gaulle) of the French Fifth Republic. Debré comes, in other words, with plenty of baggage, especially in such a class-conscious country as France. But she has given almost everything up, as part of a transformation whose origins are documented in an earlier book (*Playboy*), the first part of what is an autofictional trilogy, the last volume of which (*Nom*) deals with her family heritage and the pressure of carrying such a famous "name." Here, in *Love Me Tender*, however, the middle book of the three, we are still in the midst of the process by which Constance undoes her former self. She has begun to take things apart, and is now testing the limits of how far she dares to go. Is she willing for instance, to sacrifice her son for her freedom?

The book opens with that possibility: "I don't see why the love between a mother and son should be any different from other kinds of love. Why we shouldn't be allowed to stop loving each other. Why we shouldn't be allowed to break up" (7). Not that this is entirely her choice: the novel documents the way in which her son has become a pawn in the acrimonious battle with her ex, Laurent, who tells the courts that she poses a risk to their child: "He's accusing me of incest and pedophilia, directly or through involvement of a third party. He's written about my homosexual friends 'who may or may not be pedophiles'" (19). The judge handling the case decrees that contact between mother and

son should be limited, and strictly supervised, pending a full investigation and psychiatric reports. A final determination is likely to take a long time: “There won’t be a hearing for two years. Two years might as well be a thousand years. Two years might as well be never” (20). Meanwhile, all the narrator can do is wait. This book is written while she waits, and as she turns over the question of what she needs, and what she can go without. Inevitably it says both too little and also too much about what it means to wait, and what fills that time of waiting. *It approaches a zero degree of literature in its uncompromising directness (which dissolves the line between faithfulness and betrayal, constancy and distraction), but it is also the product of a compulsion to write, an excessive addiction to the written word.*



The Café de Flore, Saint-Germain-des-Prés, Paris

1. *Minimalism as Betrayal*

“My goal is to have as little as possible” (103), the narrator tells us. She has given up her job, her husband, the family home, and many of her possessions, as well as the lifestyle that goes with them. She sells stuff to get by: “I was broke, I didn’t have a credit card, I

was making a bit of cash by selling all my books at Gibert Jeune, rummaging through the bins for macarons at Ladurée on rue Jacob at six in the morning" (25). But she also simply dumps her unwanted possessions, fascinated by the acquisitiveness of others even as she rids herself of all she has: "Each day I'd take more of my books, clothes and furniture outside. I left everything out on the street. I didn't even need to have a removal company come and pick it up, I watched it all disappear from my window, it was amazing, the little ants of the 6th dissecting it all, collecting it all up" (25-26). But what strikes her is the realization of how little she needs: "they're just things. I threw everything out" (26). It is as though she has taken on a vow of voluntary poverty, and indeed as she contemplates the tiny flat that is her new home, she comments that it is "the size of a prison cell or a monk's cell. It's very Ignatius of Loyola, very spiritual retreat. There's a certain joy that comes from doing things you didn't think yourself capable of" (27). She is shedding all her baggage as she constructs a new life for herself.

Some things stay the same: "I still have the same legs, same ears, same arms as I did then" (28). But even physically there is a transformation. The translations of her books into English feature Debré herself on the cover, her hair shaved to a crewcut so you can see her scalp, with no make-up and little other adornment beyond a couple of modest hoop ear-rings. She has a small tattoo on her neck, block capitals spelling out the words "*plutôt crêver*" ("rather die") as though her determination not to return to where she once was were now inscribed on her very body. On the cover of *Love Me Tender*, the photograph is in black and white, bleached of all colour or context. On both covers, she is wearing a plain, white shirt. Her eyes are closed, as if in prayer.

But is all this reinvention or revelation? On the one hand, the narrator tells us that she is "living a different life. I'm a different me" (28). On the other hand, it is as though by dispensing with all the accoutrements of what was surely a typically bourgeois (if not haut bourgeois) Parisian life, from lunches at the famed Flore café to dinner parties and babysitters, she were finally discovering who she really is. As she puts it about her sexuality, in her previous book: "At the age of four I was homosexual. I knew full well and so did my parents. After that it kind of passed. Now it's coming back. It's as simple as that" (*Playboy* 75). Which is it? Is this a new Constance Debré, or the return of the real Constance, long buried under the superficial detritus of social convention? Is she running

away from herself, or finding herself? Think about it, and write down some thoughts. While you do that, I'll have a glass of Pontet-Canet, but I'll be right back.

Drinks Pairing: Pontet-Canet

One of the narrator's friends (they've known each other "for twenty years" [141]) "serves [her] Pontet-Canet, which I drink in the corner by the fire" (142). This is a reminder of a former life: these days, with her new friends and lovers, she is more likely to be having wine "from the box" (41); by contrast, Pontet-Canet is one of the most distinguished and notable of French labels. It is one of just sixty or so wineries included within the Bourdeaux Wine Official Classification of 1855. And although it is "only" *cinquième cru* or "fifth growth" (*premier cru* wines include labels such as Lafite Rothschild, Latour, and Margaux), it is still, for the ordinary consumer, far too expensive: here in Vancouver, a bottle goes for almost \$300 CAD, which is an order of magnitude more than I, at least, am accustomed to spend on a wine. Yet wine writer Hugh Johnson is a little snooty about it: "1961 was the last great vintage Pontet-Canet has made" (*Hugh Johnson's Modern Encyclopedia of Wine* 54). It is possible that Debré is making a small dig at faded glories, or at taste that is just a little bit off.

The name "Constance" means constancy or steadfastness; faithfulness or invariability. Yet it is unclear whether *Love Me Tender* should be taken as a study in consistency or, by contrast, as a declaration of betrayal; it blurs this distinction. We might say that the narrator has decided to be uncompromisingly true to herself, and to cast off all sentimentalism. As she recounts her numerous encounters and affairs with young women, she pours scorn on their neediness and desire for affection: "Sometimes I can't take any more of these girls. Wanting to hold hands, talking about their jobs, asking if we can go away for a weekend, a little holiday, to a nice restaurant. [. . .] Sometimes I hate them. Sometimes I wonder why I even bother sleeping with them. Half the time I'm not even that into them" (104). All that matters for the narrator is desire itself. Hence, she tells us, she "likes first times, one-night stands [. . .] because it doesn't matter, nothing matters the first time. I like first times because I like having sex with no strings attached, no reassurance, no obligations, no talks, no precedent, no familiarity. I like first times because they change your life without changing your life" (114). Change without real

transformation. . . or perhaps change precisely to avoid real transformation. Throughout the book, the narrator is forever mobile, “a nomad without crossing the *périphérique*, always on the run” (136)—moving from place to place, staying over with someone for a night but then heading out quickly in the morning—precisely so that she can stay who she is, so that she can never be pinned down.

For many of those around her, though, the narrator’s behaviour is a betrayal, if not a perverse malady: “Apparently at the school, the school in the 6th district of Paris, there are parents who’ve said I’m sick” (95). Her ex is constructing a quasi-criminal case against her, as part of his suit to deny her custody of their son: “Last summer, Laurent collected several photos that my friends and I had posted online and used them as evidence. [. . .] Anything can be misinterpreted, taken out of context, made to seem more serious than intended” (54). Still, she refuses to conform, to live a lesbian simulacrum of heterosexual normativity: “If I’d have settled for just liking women, it would’ve been fine, I think. Lesbian lawyer, same life, same income, same appearance, same opinions, same ideals, same relationship to work, money, love, family, society, the material world, the body. [. . .] But that wasn’t an option” (33-34). The point is that she is not simply exercising an alternative sexual “preference” (as though lesbianism were but one of many lifestyle options accepted by newly tolerant Western societies), but instead turning against an entire web of social relations, whose hollowness and falsity are, she tells us, an open secret to everyone: “I think that’s what makes them so mad, Laurent, the judges, all the people who don’t speak to me anymore. As if they’d never felt it themselves, the temptation to just chuck it all in.” She wants as few continuities, as little constancy, as possible: “I didn’t go through all this just for more of the same. I did it for a new life, for the adventure” (34). Here it is as though the point were the crafting of an entirely new subjectivity, a new relationship to the world.

But there are times at which the narrator reacts against her surroundings and her past, to define herself more by negation, or by dissatisfaction or boredom, than by some positive project of self-making. She has a strained relationship with her father and with the memory of her (now dead) mother. Both her parents had been addicts, and her relationship to them was mediated by all the upper-class paraphernalia of nannies and other caretakers. Her distance from her father is ironically also a point of convergence—“we both have the same way of loving children, him and I” (60)—but then she remembers

times when “he would sometimes hit my mother [. . .]. It didn’t happen every day, but it happened. It did happen” (60). Later, realizing that “Each time I see my dad, I get dangerously close to believing his bullshit. Poison, I tell you,” she decides “I’m not going to call him any more” (135). She systematically breaks ties so as to immunize herself from her own past. And there is plenty of cynicism, for instance, about the justice system (her former occupation): “The law is the law, but if you look closer, it’s falling apart at the seams” (95); “the law is always on the side of the powerful and [. . .] freedom is nothing but a farce” (55). She is constantly at war, as she suggests in an unsent letter to her son: “I prefer the truth of war to the hypocrisy of peace” (74). The narrator is certainly no hippy drop-out, no fan of peace, love, and understanding. If anything, her affect is a hard-nosed bafflement, which encompasses even a radical uncertainty about herself and who she is. As Debré says in interview: “I don’t know what being yourself is. I don’t know if the self *exists*” (Vojdani, “Constance Debré Started Sleeping With Women”). Or elsewhere, in a slap in the face to identity politics: “The question of identity is not at all something I am interested in” (Connolly, “An Interview with Constance Debré”). Hence similarly Debré’s repeated assertions that none of this is about psychology: “there is nothing psychological in the book [. . .] all we have are facts” (Ebel, “Constance Debré Finds Beauty in Cruelty”). There is no psyche, there are only bodies and affects.

2. *Literature and Excess*

However much the narrator wants to pare things down, to live as frugally and minimalistically as possible, there is always more. In the first place, there are more girls (as she tends to call them) or women, many of whom are literally given a number, rather than a name: “Number one has hairs that go all the way down her thighs and up her stomach [. . .]. Number two is slim, about my age, she has pale skin but you can tell she’ll tan in the summer” (24, 25). But they pile up, and become almost innumerable: “Girls, girls, more girls. [. . .] I check them off, I make lists, I draw up a tally on the wall” (110). The narrator may live in the equivalent of a monk’s cell (though she soon moves out of that, and is at times practically homeless), but she is no hermit. She meets them on the street, at the swimming pool, at cafés and bars. “They must be able to see from a mile off that I’m up for it,” she tells us. “The closer I get, the further away I feel. And the easier it gets. Girls don’t weigh you down” (26). But at times it feels like an addiction—perhaps she is not so far removed from her ex-junkie father: “I’m upping the dose just to feel the

same effect" (110). As she tells a friend, it all gets tiring, as she starts to lose herself in her frenetic activity: "I'm tired of myself, too, of course I am. Tired of falling apart so fast, so soon, tired of people, tired of things. Tired of relapsing every time, like a junkie looking for the next hit [. . .] It can be exhausting, loving this way" (117). She may have left behind the acquisitive, accumulative impulse of her former life (the books, the furniture, the possessions), but as Ricardo García notes, "cumulation encircles accumulation, both presupposing and encircling it" (*Letters of Blood and Fire* 6). If accumulation is the logic of acquisition, that transforms things into profit by accounting for the difference between necessity and surplus, cumulation is pure surplus, the multiplication of bodies and encounters without reference to what is needed and what is not.

And then there is the writing. For Debré, writing and lesbianism go hand in hand: becoming lesbian, she also becomes a writer. As she tells it in an interview: "In the same week, I had sex with a girl and I had the feeling that I could write. It was a complete change" (Kraus, "In Conversation"). And writing, too, soon becomes an addiction: her son tells the court-appointed psychiatrist that "She doesn't look after me when I'm with her. She's on her computer writing her book all day long" (96). The narrator admits that her compulsion to write leaves her "a little distracted. [. . .] You don't have space for anyone when you're writing" (16). Even the narrator, in other words, suggests that her new-found addiction to writing takes her away from her other relationships, making her ever more inconstant in affairs of the heart, let alone her domestic duties. This literary maximalism, her headlong investment in the written word, is the counterpart to her material minimalism. As she divests herself of almost everything else, selling off or dumping the books she has read, the book she is writing takes their place: "I was getting by. I didn't go anywhere, I was writing my book, I didn't give a shit about anything else" (25). And indeed, with four books in four years (from *Playboy* in 2018 to the most recent, *Offenses*, in 2023), Debré has been an extraordinarily productive author.

What is more, though her books are short (*Love Me Tender*, at 192 pages in the original French, is the longest of the four), one might say that they are all too much! They are arguably too much information, in that they are too blunt, too uncompromising, too honest. They hardly help make the case that she is a "good mother," for instance, in the eyes of the law. Indeed, she is warned: "They tell me not to publish the book, they tell me not to talk about girls, they tell me not to talk about fucking, they tell me I mustn't do

anything to hurt Laurent, they tell me I mustn't shock the judges, they tell me to give myself a pen name." She feels these warnings are themselves excessive—"they tell me, they tell me, they tell me" (56)—but they surely have a point. At times it is as though she sets out to be too revealing, about both herself and others. Does her son want to read what she has to say about him, including (apparently) excerpts from his psychiatric reports—"the minor is not speaking for himself here. He is criticizing his mother to avoid upsetting his father" (96)? He cannot speak for himself in this book, either: the narrator constantly speaks for him. Is the narrator not betraying him and (at least some of) his confidences, as well as her ex and her friends? In interviews, Debré is defiant: "I never understand what the problem is with the truth. If we hide things, it's because we think that we could not stand those things" (Kraus, "In Conversation"). But there is something performative about this commitment to honesty, an honesty that is a facet of the narrator's self-invention, if not itself a mask.

Writing is always too much. However pared down and even telegraphic, however much it approaches the "neutral" styness of what French literary theorist Roland Barthes calls "the degree zero of writing" supposedly produced by "a writer without Literature" (*Writing Degree Zero* 5), all writing is in one way or another excessive, surplus to requirements. It may present itself as direct and truthful, but it stands at a distance from the real as its double, its secondary representation. Inevitably, the written word is unfaithful to what it claims to describe or record. Adornment and literariness creep back in, even into the plainest of prose.

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Image:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Café_de_Flore,_Paris_25_September_2019_02.jpg

Song: "Lady Grinning Soul" (David Bowie)