

THE ABBOT PREVOST AND HIS CLEVELAND

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Part 1 – Presentation of the Abbot Prevost

One of the most important 18th century Memoir-Novel, in terms of influence over its contemporaries, is paradoxically a work of which we hear relatively little of today. *The English Philosopher or History of Mr. Cleveland* is an extensive novel sequence published by the Abbot Prevost between 1731 and 1739. We will try to better understand Memoir-Novels through this example. Let's begin with discovering its author. Antoine François Prevost, whom we usually know under his title of abbot even if he defrocked, that is to say, broke his vows twice to travel across Europe, wrote this novel. Widely known for *Manon Lescaut*, which has marked generations of readers, Prevost is actually the author of nine Memoir-Novels, his favourite genre.

But we must not confine his career to only that. In addition to historical novels, Prevost was also the main author of a periodical publication, *Le Pour et Contre*, in which he presents and comments on intellectual debates of his time. He has also published an encyclopaedia, *The General History of Voyages*, which includes all travel tales published since the 15th century. Finally, he is also a great translator who has helped to get Richardson known in France. His second Memoir-Novel, *The English Philosopher*, testifies to the immense culture that he both smuggles and criticises. How could we summarise a colossal work including up to fifteen books?

Part 2 – Presentation of the novel

The English Philosopher is a novel whose plot is based on a coup. Prevost chooses for narrator a hero named Cleveland who claims to be the natural son of Cromwell. If the position of bastard is unenviable in the Ancient Regime society, that of son of Cromwell is even worse because Cromwell is a regicide hated throughout Europe. Because of this problematic filiation, the hero lives an extraordinary childhood. His mother, who decided to retreat from the world after her affair with Cromwell, raises him in autarchy. She controls his education from beginning to end. She feeds him philosophical readings, which will allow him to later take the title of "English philosopher" indicated in the title of the novel.

Furthermore, to escape his father's persecutions - as Cromwell wants to eliminate all traces of his past antics - Cleveland and his mother are forced to take refuge in a cave cut off from the world. Cleveland spends most of his childhood and adolescence there, alone. The first book ends when the hero, after the death of his mother, ventures out of the cave, driven by the desire to find civilisation. But he doesn't know anything of the real world.

The whole novel relates the narrator's discoveries and experiences at a time when Cleveland must put his naivety, prejudices and perceptions to the test of reality. It is therefore a great coming-of-age novel revolving around a tireless quest for identity. Who is this "English philosopher"?

Part 3 – A quest for identity

Is he the bastard son of a monstrous man, as he is constantly reminded when he mentions his origins? Or a child of nature, untouched by harmful influences since he grew up apart from society? Cleveland is haunted by this question as he progresses in his journey. After his exit from the cave, he gets involved in a series of adventures leading him all around the world, especially in search of Fanny, the woman he loves.

His life is a long succession of uprooting, at the end of which he ends up returning to England, back to his starting point. In the form of Bildungsroman, deepened by the critical analysis offered by memoirs, *The English Philosopher* thus raises the question of the influence of parentage on our destiny and the importance left to experiment in the constitution of our identity.

Part 4 – A philosophical quest

In answer to this, Cleveland has a weapon: philosophy, as he claims. Because Cleveland has read everything: Stoic philosophers and Cartesian metaphysics. He has read everything, but he knows nothing. Whenever he suffers a stroke of fate, such as his wife's departure, the death of his brother, and even the temptation of suicide and infanticide, he feverishly returns to his precepts. It is clear that they are not of a great help to him. The final blow comes when Cleveland meets Cecile, a young woman he falls in love with before realising, through a very novelistic reversal of situation, that she is in fact the daughter he thought to have lost, devoured by cannibals during his stay in America.

What can great philosophical lessons do against existential despair or the temptation of incest? The answer given by the novel, which ends with Cleveland's religious conversion, is rather pessimistic: they can't do much. We must therefore inscribe these vast Memoir-Novels in the Enlightenment's reflection on the role granted to philosophy. Behind Cleveland's quest for identity, there is also a philosophical quest.