The Relation of *Le Philosophe anglais*

by

the Abbé Prévost

to

the Religious Controversies in France and England
during the
Early Eighteenth Century

BERENICE COOPER

State Teachers College
Superior, Wisconsin

The novel *Le Philosophe anglais* by the Abbé Prévost merits consideration as a part of the history of thought in France and in England from 1730 to 1740 both because of its theme and because of its bibliographical history. It is the purpose of this paper to discuss the relation of the theme of the novel to the philosophical and religious controversies of the early eighteenth century.

*Le Philosophe anglais*, which Prévost represented to be the memoirs of Mr. Cleveland,1 natural son of Oliver Cromwell, relates the search of the hero for a philosophy of life which will enable him to bear sorrow with equanimity and which can reconcile the apparent conflicts and oppositions of existence. The story begins with the presentation of views resembling neo-Stoicism and Deism; then Cleveland, disillusioned with philosophy and natural religion because they fail him completely in time of sorrow, examines critically both Catholic and Protestant

---

1 The writer wishes to make grateful acknowledgement to the American Association for the Advancement of Science and the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts, and Letters for the assistance of the Grant-in-Aid for Research for 1937-38.

2 The book was apparently accepted at first as the genuine memoirs of Cleveland, for it was so reviewed in a magazine devoted exclusively to nonfiction, *Historia Litteraria*, II, No. IX (March, 1731), 285-92. Professor George Sherburn, in reviewing Mysie Robertson's edition of Prévost's *Mémoires et aventures d'un homme de qualité*, gives evidence for Prévost's publishing an English translation before the French edition in order to substantiate his claims, made in the preface to the book, that he was translating a manuscript received in London from Cleveland's son. See *Modern Philology*, XXV (1927), 246-8, for discussion of this evidence.
dogma. After failing to find peace of mind in either faith and experiencing no satisfaction through a period of association with a group of French philosophes, he is finally converted to a religion which the author does not identify with any church.

A brief summary of the philosophy in which Cleveland was educated by his mother and which he accepted as a guide in his early life will show some of its resemblances to the neo-Stoicism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

This philosophy is described as moral philosophy which has as its aims truth and happiness attained through the subjugation of the passions by the reason. The story of the genesis of this philosophy through the experiences of Elizabeth Cleveland is told in terms of the conflict between reason and the passions which destroy peace of mind. Ambition, Elizabeth's dominant passion, leads her to become the mistress of Charles I. Her wounded pride, when her royal lover discards her, makes her the victim of Cromwell, who recognizes the political usefulness to him of Charles' former mistress. When Cromwell's selfish interests are served, he, too, discards Elizabeth, who renounces slavery to love and ambition for a life of solitude and the study of ancient and modern philosophers.\textsuperscript{3} From her reading, she formulates a set of maxims which become the foundation of her peace of mind and a textbook for her son. As he studies science and history, he evaluates what he reads in the light of these maxims compiled by his mother.\textsuperscript{4}

News of Cromwell's rise to power upsets the composure of Elizabeth by reawakening some of her former worldly ambition. She tells her son about his father and urges the boy to seek the recognition and preferment which is his right as Cromwell's son. Young Cleveland, judging his father by the principles of honor and virtue, detests Cromwell; yet the lad recognizes in himself a natural feeling of filial affection and a desire to see his father which oppose the dictates of reason.\textsuperscript{5} After several years, the mother's worldly wisdom prevails,\textsuperscript{6} but the result of the interview is that the two must flee from Cromwell's vengeance to hide for years in Romney Caverns. They agree in preferring this solitude to the hatred and malice of mankind.\textsuperscript{7}

\textsuperscript{3} Le Philosophes anglais (Rouen: Racine, 1785), I, i, 6.
\textsuperscript{4} Ibid., pp. 8-9.
\textsuperscript{5} Ibid., pp. 9-11.
\textsuperscript{6} Ibid., p. 12.
\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., pp. 42-3.
Cleveland concludes that men voluntarily bring misery upon themselves, for nature intended them to be happy, but their passions destroy their peace of mind. Elizabeth tells her son that she can never attain the philosophic calm which is possible for him, because the passions of which she was a victim in early life have introduced desires which are in opposition to those natural and right inclinations that in his case are unspoiled by violent passions and have been fortified by education in the right principles.  

This resumé of the philosophy of Cleveland’s early life will serve to indicate that it is based upon the conflict in man’s nature between reason and good inclinations on the one side and weak and selfish passions on the other. In Cleveland’s case there has been introduced a conflict between the maxims dictated by reason and filial affection springing from the good inclinations. But at the revelation of the full extent of Cromwell’s villany, reason approves hatred and the conflict is temporarily resolved.

After his mother’s death, Cleveland’s many adventures take him to America where he becomes absolute ruler of a tribe of Indians to whom he teaches a religion which inspires the savages with respect for his authority.  

This religion strongly resembles Deism in its principles: (1) belief in a Supreme Being, (2) submission to his will, (3) punishment for sin, (4) no religious ceremonies except a brief prayer repeated in general assembly twice a week and in the homes daily.  

Cleveland states later in the narrative that such beliefs with emphasis upon just and virtuous conduct formed the essence of his religion at this period of his life.  

Although he seldom uses the word religion when speaking of his earlier views, but refers to them as his former principles or as his philosophy, his conversations with Minister C. and with Lord Clarendon make clear that he has always accepted the principles of natural religion.

This combination of moral philosophy and natural religion has met Cleveland’s need until he becomes convinced that his wife, Fanny, has eloped with his good friend, Gelin. Up to this time he has prided himself on his ability to control his passions

---

8 Ibid., pp. 43-4.
9 Ibid., p. 15.
10 Ibid., III, iv, 158.
11 Ibid., pp. 159-65.
12 Ibid., V, vii, 4-7.
13 Ibid., IV, vii, 145-6, 162.
14 Ibid., V, vii, 4; VIII, xv, 201.
by his reason,\textsuperscript{15} but this tragedy makes him a helpless victim of his wounded affections.\textsuperscript{16}

It is out of his despair following this sorrow that Cleveland denounces philosophy as a weak and impotent phantom and finds that his reason approves suicide, but natural affection for his little sons frustrates the intent he had thought reasonable, to kill them as well as himself.\textsuperscript{17} To please his anxious friends, he consents to listen to the arguments for revealed religion as presented first by the Protestant, Minister C.; then by the Jansenist, Father le Bane; and finally by the Jesuit, Father Ruel.\textsuperscript{18}

The views of the first two he characterizes as sad and repulsive.\textsuperscript{19} The casuistry of the Jesuit, although it diverts him, brings neither intellectual nor spiritual satisfaction.\textsuperscript{20} The narrow dogmatism of each group, their attempts at coercion, their persecution of those of dissenting faith offend his standards of justice and tolerance. Their arguments are unconvincing.\textsuperscript{21} In fact a very weak case for revealed religion is presented in the narrative of Cleveland’s conversations with Minister C., Father le Bane, and Father Ruel.\textsuperscript{22} The greatest defects in all three religions are emphasized in the characterization of these representatives: dogmatism, intolerance, narrow sectarianism, overzeal for making converts, interference with personal liberty, and lack of logical support for arguments. The Jesuits are presented as they are characterized by their enemies: sly; crafty, ambitious, and even unscrupulous casuists; but neither Protestants nor Jansenists are placed in a more favorable light.

The fourth volume leaves Cleveland disillusioned both with his former principles and with orthodox religion, Protestant and Catholic.

In the continuation volumes, which were not published until 1738-39.\textsuperscript{23} the chief interest lies in the steps leading to the con-
version of Cleveland and in the principles of the religion which he finally accepts.

His happiness is almost completely restored by the discovery of Fanny's innocence and by a perfect reconciliation with her, but even yet something is lacking for intellectual and spiritual satisfaction. Companionship with a group of French philosophes fails to advance him further in his quest for peace of mind. He realizes that another disaster to his loved ones would destroy a happiness attained by reunion with his wife. He has observed upon the death of his daughter that his wife finds in the Roman Catholic faith a strength to meet sorrow. He notes Lord Clarendon's remarkable self-control when grief comes to him, and so it is to this friend he turns for help. According to his appeal to Lord Clarendon, Cleveland makes two principal demands from a system of thought which can bring him peace of mind: that it enable him to conquer grief, or at least bring consolation for it, and that it provide a philosophy which reconciles the inconsistencies and cruelties of life.

How, then, do Cleveland's new views meet these two demands? The desire for a consolation which balances, if it does not remedy, the effects of sorrow is satisfied by making celestial things the objects of one's desires, by viewing the objects of one's affections in this world as temporal goods relating to and leading to the celestial and the eternal, and by a faith in a happy future state which compensates for the losses and sorrows of this world. Reconciliation of the inconsistencies and cruelties of life is effected by their relation to ultimate perfection.

Cleveland now ranks spiritual and worldly desires and his duties in an order resembling that of the neo-Platonic scale of

---

Prévost's letters during the period 1721-27 show a conflict between a desire for the world and a desire for the cloister. In 1728 he left the Benedictine Order before receiving Papal permission and as a result became Prévost d'Exile, living in England and Holland from 1728-34, until a pardon from the Pope allowed him to re-enter the Benedictine Order. The year 1734 divides a period of turmoil and spiritual conflict from one of apparent peace of mind. It is significant that the first volumes of Le Philosophe anglais were published at the climax of the conflict and that the concluding volumes were published after the adjustment to ecclesiastical life had been made. The evidence presented to this time by biographers of Prévost (See Henry Harles, L'Abbé Prévost, Paris: Levey, 1896, and V. Schroeder, L'Abbé Prévost, Paris: Hachette, 1898) shows that the years 1734-63 were spent in performing the duties of ecclesiastical life, principally as aménier to Prince Conti, and in the scholarly pursuits of study, translating, and creative writing. There is one slight exception to this statement: in 1741 there was some difficulty about an article in a Gazette a la main which resulted in Prévost's being an exile in Brussels for about a year.
Being: (1) love of God and desire for celestial things, (2) the duties of religion, (3) love for his wife, (4) the duties of society, (5) the study of the Bible and of nature, (6) the moderate use of pleasure.\textsuperscript{31}

As a result he is able to bring order out of the confusion which has tortured him. Philosophy is no longer opposed to religion for it merely anticipates the ideal of the tranquil mind which it could not attain without the inner grace which only religion gives.\textsuperscript{32} Natural religion is no longer opposed to revealed, for to the enlightened mind the order of nature is related to God as is the order of grace,\textsuperscript{33} and the study of nature is ranked with the study of the Bible as a means of growth. There is no opposition between the life of the senses and the life of the spirit: natural desires for the temporal goods of this world, for harmless amusements, for the society of fellow-creatures, and for the pleasures of love are not in conflict with the love of God and of spiritual goods. The relation is of a lower order to a higher in the same system.\textsuperscript{34}

Such a system of thought opposes asceticism as well as excessive indulgence. Cleveland condemns withdrawal from society as a cowardly running away from combat.\textsuperscript{35} The view found in many of the books of piety that love of creatures draws man away from God he censures as a fanaticism that wounds religion as well as nature.\textsuperscript{36} Those who ignore the manner in which the laws of nature and of religion are related will not approve, he says, but his view is that all lawful desires are ennobled by their contribution to a higher objective. Christianity sanctifies innocent passion and by teaching the temporal character of the life of the senses intensifies the desire for eternal happiness.\textsuperscript{37}

In spite of the evidences of Jansenistic influences in Prévost's novels which have been presented in studies by Harrisse, Hazard, Pauli and others,\textsuperscript{38} it is obvious that these views in \textit{Le Philosophe anglais} are diametrically opposed to those of Port Royal. They have much more in common with the point of view of the seventeenth century Cambridge Platonists and the lati-
tudinarism of the Anglican divines in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Perhaps Prévost’s exile in England may have been responsible for some influence of the theology of the Anglican church upon the religious views expressed in *Le Philosophe anglais*.

Although there is an unauthenticated story that Chancellor d’Aguesseau refused to allow the printing of *Le Philosophe anglais* in France unless Cleveland were made a Catholic in the concluding volume, there is no mention of the Catholic doctrine or of the Catholic church in connection with his conversion. Furthermore, he is converted by Lord Clarendon, whose name could not be very pleasant to Catholic ears and whose Protestantism is emphasized in the narrative. Prévost is definite enough about the religion of other characters: Cécile is converted to Catholicism on her deathbed; Fanny adopts the Catholic faith; the repentant Gelin becomes a Jesuit. But in the summary of Cleveland’s religious ideas there is no mention of entering into communion with any church.

Throughout the story Prévost has satirized narrow sectarianism in both Protestants and Catholics. One of the stumbling blocks in the way of Cleveland’s conversion was the hatred and the intolerance among the religious sects with whom he came in contact. In a passage omitted in a number of editions after 1750 he laments that religion should be confined within the narrow limits of creeds. Wherever matters of religious controversy enter the narrative, they are presented with an objective appraisal of the weaknesses of each group. Dogmatism, narrow sectarianism, and persecution are satirized without favor to Protestants, Jansenists, or Jesuits. No sect is presented as showing the moderation, justice, tolerance, and respect for reason which are Cleveland’s standards for true religion. The conver-

---


40 Ibid., VII, xii, 165.
41 Ibid., VIII, xv, 226-7.
sion of Cleveland to a religion unidentified with any church or sect is consistent, therefore, with the point of view throughout the narrative.

Religion of any particular sect or dogma, as it has been presented to Cleveland, satisfies neither his need for a philosophy that explains the frightful contradictions of existence nor for a faith that brings comfort, if not a remedy, for grief.

True religion, Cleveland seems to conclude, must recognize man both as a creature of reason and as a creature of strong affections, or desires toward God and toward fellow-creatures. Philosophy failed because it tried to subordinate all desires to reason. Grief caused by loss of loved ones can not be cured through reason but through meeting the need for love. Dogmatic and sectarian religion failed to satisfy both reason and love, but true religion recognizes both love and reason. Love is of many degrees from the highest, that of love of God and of celestial things, to the lowest order, that of love of sensual pleasures; between these two extremes fall love of wife and love of friends. Reason is satisfied because the system corresponds with the facts learned through experience, that true peace of mind comes only through meeting both needs of human nature.

Thus, the religion which Cleveland finally accepts resolves for him the conflicts arising from a philosophy which failed to take into account love as well as reason.