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Rori Bloom, *Man of Quality, Man of Letters: The Abbé Prévost between Novel and Newspaper*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2009. 205 pp. Notes, bibliography and index. \$47.50 U.S. (hb). ISBN-978-0-8387-5724-6.

Review by Suzanne R. Pucci, University of Kentucky.

It is somewhat unusual for a book of literary criticism to be devoted to the works of a single author these days. Rori Bloom engages a convincing, incisive discussion of the early eighteenth-century writer, the Abbé Prévost, which is organized around his cultural as well as literary role as a transitional figure. Prévost's fictional writing on the one hand and periodical work on the other position him in between and as partaking of both the ancien régime paradigm of author and gentleman and that of the growing Enlightenment notion of public author and marketplace. Though it is not new to understand Prévost's fiction as belonging to both these worlds, Bloom maps this dichotomy onto his journal writing and further, onto a broad spectrum of eighteenth-century society, culture and literary practice.

Since the nineteenth century, Prévost has garnered critical examination primarily as a fictional writer of voluminous first-person memoirs. Bloom insists on the crucial importance of Prévost's other ambitious works, in particular his prolific journalistic writing which spans seven years (1733-1740) and more than twenty volumes in *Le Pour et le contre*.<sup>[1]</sup> Her reading and analysis of these texts brings to light a new highly paradoxical portrait of protagonists, narrators and author. Both *homme de qualité* and *homme de lettres*, the author is an amateur and a professional, exhibiting aristocratic ideals as well as a bourgeois mentality promoting Enlightenment reason and espousing the realities of the public marketplace. In effect, this book shifts in its emphasis between differences that both sharply contrast and complement his fictional memoirists, protagonists and narrators, bringing a new dimension to Prévost's writing, to the man himself, and to his ambivalent position in a period of significant social, economic and cultural transformation.

In six chapters, plus the introduction and conclusion, Bloom lays out a tightly woven, cohesive set of arguments that begin with her stated attempt to complicate the critics' fascination with reading Prévost's own biography into his novels, translating the often scandalous events of his life into the personal and confessional character of his fiction. Indeed, this book attempts to change the course of a trajectory that since the nineteenth century and even among such influential and more contemporary critics as Jean Sgard, tend to interpret this first-person memoir fiction as "expressive of the author's inner life(23)," in which Prévost's writing becomes primarily indicative of personal obsessions and fantasies and thus ultimately represents his production "as confession and not as construction(22)."<sup>[2]</sup> It is precisely by admitting into an examination of his fiction the third-person more distant and impersonal writing of his journalistic endeavors in *Le Pour et le contre* that a complex and more "constructed" notion of text, narrator and author emerges.

In her introduction, Bloom reviews the critical tendencies associated with the Abbé Prévost, situating her own viewpoint with respect to narratological analyses that, as in the case of the

work of René Desmoris and Jean-Paul Sermain, examine closely the rhetorical structures of Prévost's novels.[3] Bloom brings broad issues to bear on the Abbé de Prévost's writing, particularly from the critical viewpoint of *mentalités* and from the significant contributions to the notion of the author in social context exemplified in the work of Roger Chartier and Michel Foucault. Indeed, Bloom's critical analysis has benefited from the perspective of the public sphere in the Jürgen Habermas tradition, as well as from sociological criticism, such as Alain Viala's *Naissance de l'écrivain*. [4] From these perspectives comes the impetus for re-examining Prévost in relation to transformations taking place in the eighteenth century—the shift in relations between an author and a reading public from a system of patronage to the marketplace where the bourgeois sense of ownership and private property had begun to prevail. Bloom's close and often subtle reading of texts is coupled with an ability to connect textual analysis to these emerging social, economic and cultural trends.

Beginning with the major division as stated in her study's subtitle: "Man of Quality, Man of Letters," Professor Bloom examines authorship in Prévost's novels. We move through Prévost's fiction that, in Bloom's analysis, insists on the aristocratic traits of the Man of Quality as presented in *Mémoires d'un homme de qualité*. These contending attributes dominate the portrait of the Prévostian hero and these protagonists' narrative function as well. In particular, *Mémoires d'un honnête homme*, a later novel in Prévost's production, serves here to point out those attributes of nobility and *honnêteté* prevalent throughout and according to Bloom, reminiscent of Molière's misanthrope, Alceste (pp. 34-35). [5] These heroes pursue the aristocratic credo of high-minded morality, rejecting established social niceties, as did Molière's Alceste, most particularly in terms of their relation to their memoirs, and to their lack of venal interest in profiting from a personal story. Anything relating to the bourgeois attitude toward money is rejected and thus "when Prévost's heroes eventually engage in the work of memoir writing, they do so outside the bourgeois logic of professional authorship which equates textual production with potential profit"(p. 39). In effect, those protagonists who recount their memoirs avoid not only the professional and social role of author, they often avoid society altogether and in their melancholy stories consistently evoke solitude and retirement from the marketplace of the publishing world, as well as from any ambition.

And yet, as is the case in all chapters of Bloom's book, this high-minded aristocratic ideology morphs into its opposite. The subheadings of this first chapter present "degradation of the heroic ideal and the end of the Honnête Homme," which parallels the other subtitle, "degradation of the authorial ideal: the author is no Honnête Homme." Analogy between hero, narrator and author is also a major theme of this study. From efficient and skilled liars such as the most well-known protagonist of them all, the Chevalier Des Grieux in the novel *Manon Lescaut*, to the scandalous and often mercenary adventurers and adventures of certain later Prévostian protagonists (*La Jeunesse du Commandeur*, *Voyages du capitaine Robert Lade*), to these heroes as memoir writers, we follow Bloom's analysis of a shift to literary production as a marketable commodity. Mirroring his protagonists, Prévost moves from lyricism to the pragmatics of his own economic self-interest (p. 51). An unauthorized publication of his correspondence with his publisher unmistakably displays Prévost's anxieties and concern for profit at the same time that, as Bloom maintains, he articulates this economic concern in the rhetoric of *honnêteté*.

In particular, chapter two, shows Prévost, in the pages of his lengthy journal, *Le Pour et le contre*, joining the ranks of Grubb Street and the model of English journals, where he comes to define the literary field as "a violent struggle for survival"(p. 57). The publisher is handed a role as prime enemy of the noble art of the author even as he becomes necessary. Prévost's comments reveal a much earlier dichotomy than that usually associated with nineteenth, even late nineteenth-century tensions between art and its commodification, a dichotomy not usually credited to pre-Revolutionary conventions. "Even in the eighteenth century, the rise of

journalism was seen to mark the downfall of literature, since newspapers were seen not as artistic outlets but rather as economic endeavors" (p. 61).

And yet, within the highly diverse articles of the journal, Prévost takes on certain aristocratic characteristics prevalent as well in his fiction, for example, his use of the signature "A Man of Quality," applied already to his *Mémoires d'un homme de qualité*. Bloom points to the identical aristocratic signature used by Prévost in his journal writing that everyone had already recognized as a pseudonym for Prévost, as an attempt to "create a continuity" between his fiction and journal (p. 71). And this continuity serves paradoxically to promote his market worth as "a sort of quality seal and serves as a brand name for Prévost in the business of authorship" (p. 72).

The notion of "*Le Pour et le contre*" ("For and Against"), the title of Prévost's journal, in effect outlines the major structure of paradox that organizes Rori Bloom's own study. In each chapter, we follow a development that outlines an aristocratic ideology which insists on a rejection of the marketplace and its attendant self-interest. At the same time, Prévost's embrace or at the least seemingly contradictory assimilation into a new social dynamic negates those high-minded personas, narrators and author. The very diversity and frequently changing itinerary in his journal is a consequence "not [of] his own inconstancy but rather an attempt to augment his readership," to please everyone (p. 92). From the dichotomy of novel and newspaper and the tensions that embody first-person vs. third-person viewpoints, the "Man of Quality vs. Man of Letters," amateur vs. professional author, aristocrat vs. bourgeois, Bloom's reading locates these paradoxical perspectives within both genres, thus mirroring and informing the larger cultural contradictions.

Thus, Bloom reinterprets Prévost's first-person memoir-novels based on her analysis of Prévost's third-person journalistic writing, the prefaces to his fiction, and the "Contes singulières: Between Novel and Newspaper," short stories recounted in the third person and woven into the varied subjects of his journal. [6] These function to subvert the romanesque extremes and excesses of his own long novels. In their shortened form, these *Contes* encourage the reader to question the very claims of quality, *honnêteté*, and intimate sentiment that dominate the novels and are throughout Prévost's writing, thus contributing to the persistent paradoxical status of all his texts.

The role of the reader in chapter four is crucial to the development of this central paradox, for the reader constitutes in effect an extension of the narratee figures, those who listen and those who hear, who sympathize with the story being recounted by the memoirist. And the narratee functions in a manner similar to the reader. The writing of "the man of quality," of the memoirist of Cleveland, "functions as a mirror, reflecting back to the writer the image of his past sorrows. The narrator and narratee mirror each other. And the writer and reader are one and the same, and no outside audience is needed" (p. 103). At least, this is the adopted rhetoric and disguise that preserves the supposedly exclusive nature of the relation between protagonist and his experience, recounted only to one who is like himself. Yet, the general reader is constructed precisely through those supposedly exclusive models suggested by diverse narratees.

Nowhere is this process more visible than in the case of Des Grieux in *Manon Lescaut*. Indeed, this protagonist relates his sorrows and tragic situation as different from that of all others, as unique and thus to be imparted only to those able to understand, those like himself, such as his narratee, Renoncour, the "Man of Quality." Nevertheless, the novel is generated from a series of narrations in which Des Grieux repeatedly recounts his adventures and mishaps to other characters, as well as to his principal narratee in order that they might understand him to be an

exclusive sufferer and tragic hero, in order to gain their sympathy and more. The narratee/listener, staged as sympathetic judge or mirror image in effect constitutes the very weave of the story since the Chevalier Des Grieux obtains crucial financial, logistical, as well as emotional support by recounting his story to countless persons—his father, his best friend and even new acquaintances encountered by chance—all of whom help further Des Grieux's obsessive passion and criminal tactics. They become an allegory of the reader.

In other words, we the readers are being prepared through the model of various narratees situated within the text. Ultimately, we are being shaped into the right kind of reader, one who sympathizes, who must bend to the rhetorical excellence of the narrative even as such skill raises suspicions about the sincerity and true worth of the protagonist-memoirist. Bloom's analysis certainly implies this preparation, this contagion of the reader by the mirror imaging of a narratee's reaction, and vice versa, the contagion of certain characters who respond to the model of sympathetic reader. It could be rewarding to pursue further this notion of schooling and shaping the ideal reader within the broader eighteenth-century cultural context.

Bloom offers her readers a full appreciation of Prévost's *oeuvre* as being ultimately about the power of language to construct identities, to maintain a dialogic rapport with the narrator's listener as well as with the novel's and newspaper's reader. Finally, she positions Prévost's varied texts as indicative of the new literary professional, even postmodern, writer.

In effect, critical analysis here moves in a direction that in every chapter reveals the mechanisms of a conversion from private, exclusive sentiments of a personal if tragic life and story to the paradoxical ends of convincing the public—the reader, the market—of the value of the protagonist/narrator/writer. There seems to be a recurring evacuation, an emptying out, of the intimate emotions and personal life stories of narrators and protagonists in favor of relocating their significance in market and rhetorical literary strategies. Yet in this conversion and critical shift, one could ask what remains of those other conversions, those “confessions,” both personal and religious? Do we recognize them exclusively as performance? Bloom might well have returned to the starting point of her study so as to reinscribe the defrocked priest Prévost's obsessive, repetitious need of confession within the new critical framework that this book so very forcefully extends to its own readers.

## NOTES

[1] Abbé Prévost, *Le Pour et le contre, ouvrage périodique d'un goût nouveau* (Paris: Didot, 1733-1740).

[2] Jean Sgard, *L'Abbé Prévost: Labyrinthes de la mémoire* (Paris: PUF, 1986); Jean Sgard, *Prévost Romancier* (Paris: José Corti, 1986).

[3] René Démoris, *Le Roman à la première personne* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1975); Jean- Paul Sermain, *Rhétorique et roman au dix-huitième siècle: L'Exemple de Prévost et de Marivaux (1728-1742)* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1985).

[4] Roger Chartier, « Figures de l'auteur, in *L'Ordre des livres* (Aix en Provence: Alinéa, 1992); Michel Foucault, « Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur ? » in *Dits et écrits (1954-1988)*, vol.1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1994). Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989). Alain Viala, *La Naissance de l'écrivain: Sociologie de la littérature à l'âge classique* (Paris: Minit, 1985).

[5] Jean Sgard et al (eds.), *Œuvres de Prévost* (Grenoble: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 1977-1986).

[6] Prévost, *Contes singuliers* (Paris: Veuve Duchesne, 1767).

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