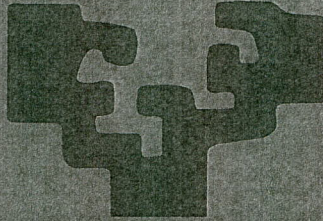


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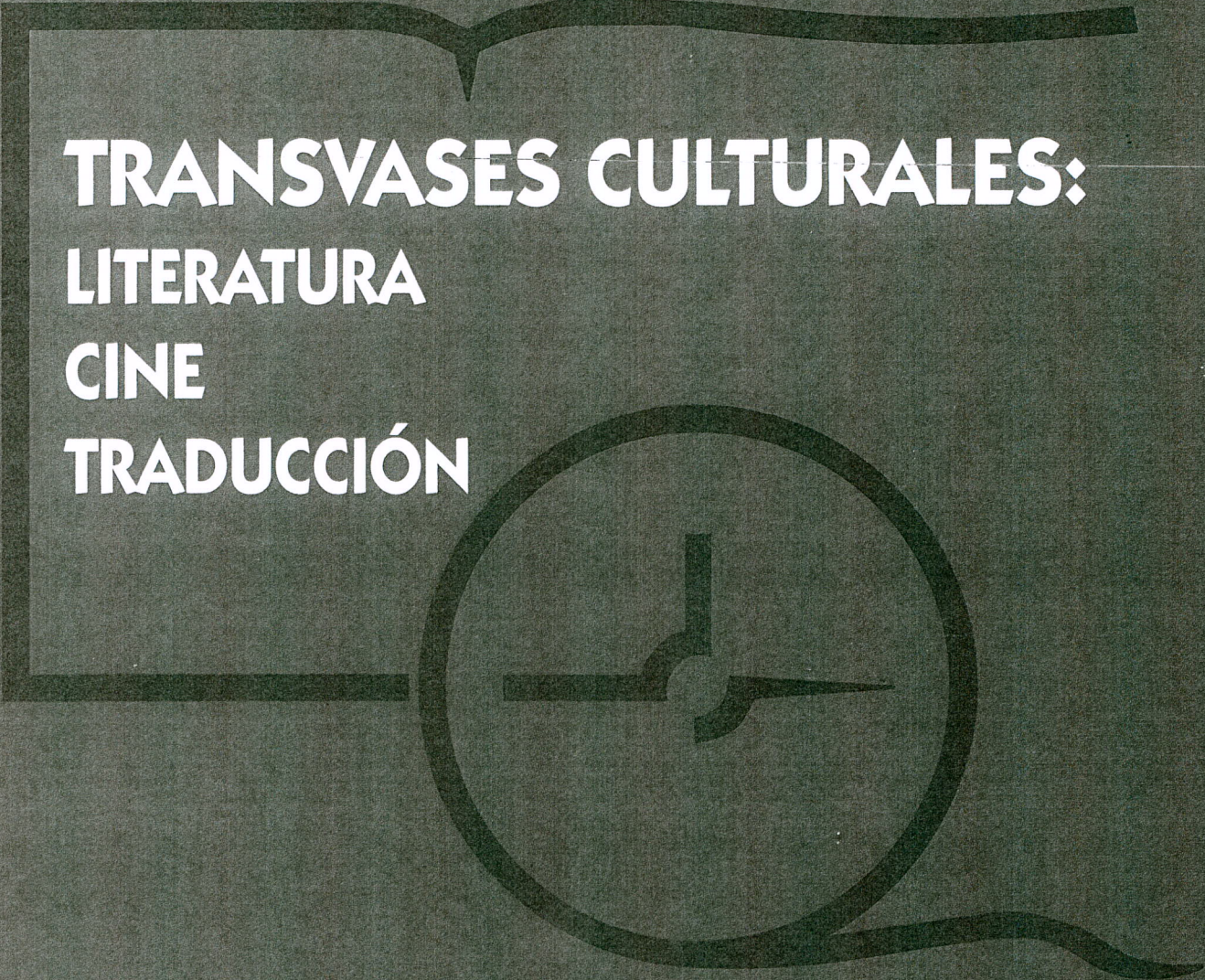


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THE WANDERINGS OF A SOCIAL TYPE IN
EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND AND FRANCE

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In his letter of October 18, 1728 to Dom Thibault, superior of the order of the Benedictines, Antoine François Prévost says about himself: “Mon caractère est naturellement plein d’honneur. . . . J’ai d’ailleurs les manières honnêtes et l’humeur assez douce” (529).¹ Similarly, Oliver Goldsmith, in the essays of the monthly periodical *The Bee*, introduces himself as “a good-natured sort of a gentleman” (445). The two different words — “honnête homme” and “good-natured man”— selected by both authors as source of self-identification, translate into the same social concept of a well-known social type of the European eighteenth century: a specific well-educated, well-mannered, and socially and morally acceptable individual, and adopt a concrete fictional replica in Prévost’s *Mémoires d’un honnête homme* (1745) and in Goldsmith’s *The Good-Natured Man* (1768) and *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766). Yet, comparing the behavior of Prévost’s “honnête-homme” and Goldsmith’s “good-natured man” indicates that although both authors converge in the same concept, the approach that each one takes offers two different translations of this social type. Whereas Prévost provides the psychological account of the “honnête homme,” whose personality is revealed through an individual, rational analysis of his past experiences, Goldsmith’s external account of his “good-natured men” concentrates on their personalities as perceived through open social interaction with other characters. In this study I compare Prévost’s interior, analytical approach with Goldsmith’s exterior, expositional one by examining their use of technical devices, and suggest that this difference can be explained as Prévost and Goldsmith’s response to their respective national backgrounds.

Tracing the tradition in which both terms are embedded is essential for examining the concrete contributions of the two authors to the configuration of their characters. French literature had a long tradition of the “honnête homme.” Since the fifteenth century the French reading public had been familiar with the term. Magendie in his study of “honnêteté” in France finds in Greek and Roman authors the first precursors of this tradition that has its results in 1630, in the French treatise by Nicolas Faret *L’Honneste Homme ou L’Art de Plaire à la Court* (sic), a clear adaptation of Castiglione’s *Il Cortegiano* (1528). The eleven editions of the book, printed between 1630 and 1681, suggest that the type had a definite impact on popular manuals of behavior at the time. In a code of clearly defined characteristics spelled out in indexes, chapters and rules Faret presents a pru-

dent, polite and good-natured man with qualities that arise from the practice of religion which did not appear in Castiglione. This concept developed into the seventeenth century as the bourgeois concept of “honnêteté”, concerned with religious, human and cultural values, and presented obvious differences with the aristocratic concept that only stressed social appearances. This difference came as a result of the different modes of life that each social group lead, as Magendie points out:

. . . la bourgeoisie faisait plus de place à la culture intellectuelle, à la pratique des devoirs, à la vertu, à la foi. Brillante et légère, l'aristocratie était plus sensible aux qualités purement mondaines, aux bienséances, qui négligent la valeur intrinsèque des actes, et jugent seulement la manière dont ils ont été accomplis (18).²

This difference in the attitudes towards life gives rise to a different concept of the “honnête homme”, depending on the authors describing him. Faret as a bourgeois implies the same didactic purpose as Pascal, who announces the excellent discussions that in this vein are found in the theoretical writings of Antoine Gombaud, chevalier de la Méré (*De la vraie honnêteté*) and Damien Mitton (*Pensées sur l'honnêteté* and *Description de l'Honnête Homme*). The other approach, the aristocratic one, is represented by authors such as La Rochefoucauld, who describes the type from a “mondaine” angle: it is more important to rely on appearances than on internal virtues in a society which amounts to a contract, a “commerce entre les hommes honnêtes” (187)³. La Bruyère extends this idea, focusing on the public image of the “honnête homme” in the examples of *Les Caractères*.

Prévost sums up this complex heritage in the protagonist of *Mémoires d'un honnête homme*. His contribution to the term is important because he translates all the virtues that tradition offered (taste, discretion, tact, modesty, indulgence, education and erudition) into the shape of a fictional character, who provides insights into the type through a rational and retrospective account of the events in his life in Paris.

On the other hand, the origins of the term “good-natured man” cannot be clearly defined. The interest in the term could arise from the preoccupation on the part of the English philosophers and literary authors with the question of individual human nature. Beginning with Ben Jonson's theory of humors, the Cambridge Platonists in the second half of the seventeenth century and the third Earl of Shaftesbury, the bases for the origin of the term “good-natured man” could be found in their concern with moral motivations and their interest in the use of terms such as virtue, good/ill affections, and good/bad nature. Later, these terms became excellent tools in literary works of the eighteenth century for the characterization of some individuals in works such as those by Frances Burney, Tobias Smollett or Henry Fielding among others.

Goldsmith, like Prévost, chooses an existent type which had already been incorporated into literary works, described in terms of benevolence, prudence, and innocence. However, his contribution follows Fielding's line of the "good-natured man", with a lighter treatment of moral and social aspects of man's nature, often using his characters to ridicule the exaggerated virtues of individuals in some sentimental comedies of the period, as Robert Hopkins suggests.

Although Goldsmith uses the term in works such as *The Bee* or *The Citizen of the World*, I will concentrate on two other works that were written consecutively: the novel *The Vicar of Wakefield* and the comedy *The Good-Natur'd Man*, where he repeats the pattern to depict the "good-natured man": Burchell and Honeywood display ironically the bad consequences of a naive "good-natured man", as they are cheated for their innocence and good character.

Tracing back the terms in the tradition and assessing Prévost and Goldsmith's contributions helps to understand the emergence of two different characters from the same social type, which becomes evident in the analysis of the authors' technical narrative sources. Prévost's "honnête homme" recalling his life in Paris could be compared to those comments by Rica and Usbek, Montesquieu's mouthpieces in *Lettres persanes* (1721), who as Persian visitors evaluate French society in the letters they sent home. However, the process of describing experiences becomes more sophisticated in Prévost's work. The "honnête homme" describes the society where he belongs analyzing it with the same distance that a foreigner would, feeling isolated and marginalized:

Comme des excès de retenue m'auraient donné un ridicule, je ne laissai pas de badiner, de rire, de danser et de me prêter à toutes les folies de la société (222).⁴

His account does not introduce concrete interlocutors, as Rica and Usbek's letters do; on the contrary, he is the interlocutor of his own thoughts, and tries to justify his actions. Goldsmith's characters, however, never offer this kind of internal insight, as their personalities are revealed through external actions and in the way that those actions are perceived by other characters. Goldsmith develops the type as part of a social pattern, whereas Prévost reveals him as an individual member of society.

This difference arises from the genre that the authors choose. The memoir selected by Prévost's narrator provides a personal, and close relation between protagonist and readers in the apparently sincere tone of this autobiographical narration. The retrospective vision of his life engenders a process of self-definition in which the character acknowledges his past in order to support what he believes are his innate virtues. This analytical act is justified by his need to recuperate his experiences by writing in captivity:

J'ai pensé au contraire que si quelque chose était capable de remplir le vide de tant de moments et de soulager tout à la fois mon coeur et mon ima-

gination, c'était de rappeler plus vivement que jamais toutes les circonstances de ma vie. Il dépendait même de moi de les écrire. C'était une autre manière de m'y attacher (212).⁵

This process, linked to the eagerness of the character to show himself as model of moral behavior, reveals the clear didactic purpose of the type, also noticeable in Goldsmith's characters. However the English type is described with a technique that avoids the tone of privacy of Prévost's narrator. Goldsmith chooses novel and comedy as a way to make his characters talk, act and develop in public. They do not internalize experiences; instead of revealing their thoughts and feelings, they are portrayed through acts that can be evaluated by other characters and the reader. Goldsmith is not interested in the internal moral dilemmas of his characters, he is only concerned with briefly depicting characters, with an open didactic intention: Honeywood's and Burchell's misguided acts are presented to the audience as examples of what a "good-natured man" should not be.

Relationships among characters accuse this different approach between Prévost's and Goldsmith's characters. The "honnête homme" is the only individual in his text. His feelings are the protagonists with whom he can interact, and this source of the development of the narration presents all events filtered through his perspective. He recalls a personal life almost devoid of communication with a clear tendency for introverted examination and follows the pattern of other protagonists created by the French author, who is fond of exploring the individualism, anguish and rationality of human nature.

On the other hand, "good-natured men" in the works of Goldsmith, do not necessarily attract the attention of the reader as being the main protagonists. The narration often goes along without them. In *The Vicar of Wakefield*, Burchell is merely presented as one part of the story of the adventures of the Vicar and his family. He plays the role of a secondary character and his actions are clearly aimed at presenting an example of social behavior.

In the selection of the names of the characters, the distinction between the psychological approach and the social one of each author is manifest. Whereas Prévost chooses abstract and generic terms to name his protagonists ("honnête homme," or "homme de qualité") in the attempt to elevate one individual as example of the universal human condition, Goldsmith avoids the representation of generalizations and assigns his characters proper names, labeling each one of them as one concrete aspect of human nature that they represent in the social web where they interact. In *The Vicar of Wakefield*, the vicar devotes an important part of a chapter to explain the names of his daughters, with symbolic connotations that predict their fates in the story. In *The Good-Natur'd Man* he follows the same technique, this time with ironic connotations, Honeywood represents a sweet and gentle man, Lofty is a mundane villain interested in climbing the social ladder and achieving the wealth represented by Miss Richland.

The use of different styles in the narration is another sign of the difference between Prévost's and Goldsmith's characterizations of the type. The "honnête-homme" retells his experiences in the monologue recorded in his memoirs. His aim to carefully reorder his experiences classifies him as a narrator fond of details, a meticulous analyst of others' appearances. He is in control of the feelings that his narration provokes and selects what to tell to justify many of his actions evaluating them according to his ethical code. The reader of the "honnête homme" receives direct impressions and feelings, whereas characters in Goldsmith are presented through the point of view of a narrator in the novel, or through dialogues in the play. Goldsmith's characters are placed in a strong dynamic atmosphere, whereas Prévost's figures tend to inactivity and reflection. The structure of the plot in *The Good-Natur'd Man*, for example, contains repeated exits and entrances that continuously force the reader to change point of view and consider Honeywood from different perspectives.

These distinctive methods of portraying character emphasize the internal focus of Prévost's narrative and the external focus of Goldsmith's, which establishes the divergence in the direction when dealing with a similar type. In both cases, the contribution of each author clearly reveals the heritage of his own tradition. The French tradition sustains the taste for the introspective vision of personal feelings, a rational analysis of passions, and the gap between social and individual attitudes in society. Prévost's elaboration provides a character who confronts external corruption as well as internal struggles in an internalized process, on his own. The English tradition, represented in this case by the Irish-born Goldsmith, sustains a character who is part of a socially biased pattern of manners. The individual depends on his public actions, as they are regarded and evaluated by the rest of society. Goldsmith uses his "good-natured man" within this tradition as an external, didactic model.

Some critics explain Prévost's interest in the portrayal of individual anguish as an example of early romanticism, while others find irony in the simplicity and goodness of Goldsmith's characters, possibly in response to the sentimental comedies of the period. Whatever their respective directions may be, it is important to see that both authors are selecting one aspect of a character—internal or external. In doing so, they approach the same didactic and moral purpose from two directions, covering two essential aspects of the human being in two characters who illustrate their respective traditions and their personal styles. The appreciation of those important differences in the treatment of the character in both traditions provides a complete picture of the type and reveals the need to consider the two terms in light of these differences and similarities for a valid and complete translation.

NOTAS

¹ “My character is honorable by nature. Moreover, my ways are honest and I am of a rather pleasant disposition.” All translations are mine.

² “The bourgeoisie was more concerned with intellectual culture, the fulfillment of responsibilities, virtuous actions, and faith. The ostentatious, superficial aristocracy was more sensitive to purely worldly concerns and maintaining appearances; they ignored the intrinsic value of actions and judged them only on how they were carried out.”

³ “A transaction between honest men.”

⁴ “Since the excesses of shyness would have me made look ridiculous, I kept on acting the fool, laughing, dancing and giving myself over to all follies of society.”

⁵ “I thought, on the contrary, that if anything were able to fill the emptiness of so many moments and to comfort my heart and imagination at the same time, it would be to remember more vividly than ever all of the circumstances of my life. It was only up to me to write them down. It was another way of becoming attached to them.”

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