

[James Mackintosh], "The Abbé Delille's Homme des Champs"

Présentation de l'œuvre

Le deuxième article du volume 17 du *British Critic* est une recension de l'entièreté de *l'Homme des champs*. Malgré l'absence d'indication d'auteur dans la revue, une lettre de 1800 de [Sir James Mackintosh](#) publiée ensuite dans ses [Memoirs](#) nous indique que Sir James est bien l'auteur de ce compte rendu. De longs bouts de traduction du chant 4 sont ajoutés à la critique du poème. L'article est composé pendant le séjour de Delille en Angleterre et c'est cela qui motive la critique sur une pièce de littérature non anglaise. Mackintosh constate, après avoir expliqué les contraintes de versification que rencontrent les poètes français ainsi que ses propres difficultés à juger d'un texte d'une langue étrangère : « an estimate, in some degree, the merit of foreign writers. But in the art of style, we must in a great measure leave them to the jurisdiction of their natural judges, the scholars and critics of their own country. Yet the laws of literary hospitality seem to require, that we should not pass unnoticed **the work of the most illustrious poet in Europe**, who has taken refuge in England from the iron tyranny under which his country groans; who, equally superior to interest and danger, has never tarnished his fame, or prostituted his genius, by singing the praise of tyrants, and who still prefers conscientious poverty and honourable exile, to all the disgraceful distinctions and ignominious rewards of those who "dwell in the tents of iniquity." Under such circumstances, we should have thought it unpardonable, not to have gratified our readers by some specimens of the beautiful Poem before us, though we shall not presume to indulge in the same liberty of criticism that would be allowed and expected in reviewing an English poem¹.»

Citation

The third Canto exhibits one of the greatest victories of the genius of the poet, over the difficulty of his subject, that Poetry has to boast. Mineralogy and Botany are sciences that seem to us to have no kindred with Poetry ; and the greater part of modern attempts to clothe them with the ornaments of Poetry, have only served to confirm our opinion. The authors of such attempts have generally been compelled to hide the natural dryness of their subject under extravagant fictions and inflated style. As an example of the power of taste to surmount these obstacles, this Canto of the French Georgics will always be an object of admiration. But we must be excused if we confess our doubts, whether the pleasure conveyed beat all proportioned to the difficulties conquered, or the skill exerted. The majority of readers to whom poetry must be addressed, will always derive pleasure from descriptions which recal to their fancy Nature, as they themselves have observed it. But they will never receive the same delight from the most ingenious description of Nature,

as it is analyzed and dissected by the naturalist. Such a description may indeed be admired for its skill, but it will generally excite more wonder than pleasure. It awakens no recollections, it retraces no images formerly impressed, it is connected with no feelings, it rouses no powerful sympathies, it appears only to the comparatively cold and languid passion of curiosity, it touches none of those springs of the human heart by which warm interest is excited, or exquisite pleasure is conveyed. The nature of the unlearned (we may speak) connected with the scenes of youth, with the sports of fancy, with all our most delightful feelings and recollections. But the nature of the learned, an inhabitant of the colder world of science, has no alliance with the feelings or pursuits of ordinary men. She borrows no gaiety from the remembrance of youth she does not present to us the theatre on which our powers and affections were first unfolded. No tender recollection makes her interesting, no terrific images render her grand. Nature, as she is viewed by the chemist and the mineralogist, too minute for sublimity, and too regular for beauty. She imposes on the observer an investigation too toilsome for the indolent pleasures of imagination. Whoever doubts the justness of these observations, has only to compare those passages of the French Georgics, which paint the common scenery of nature, with those perhaps still more highly finished passages, which describe the appearances discovered to us physical science. We shall be much deceived, that comparison alone be not sufficient to satisfy him, that the passion for scientific poetry one of the symptoms of that peculiar species of corrupted taste which characterizes a speculative age. Many passages of this third Canto are of the highest beauty. The discovery of Herculaneum, and the invocation to the sea, are admirable. The panegyric on Buffon magnificent, though we are convinced that geologists will not agree with the author, in the commendation which he lavishes on the sublime chimeras of that eloquent writer. The great revolutions of which our globe bears the marks, suggest grand ideas of antiquity to the mind, which are most happily expressed in the following couplet:

Vers l'antique chaos notre ame est repouflee,
Et des siècles sans fin pesent sur pensée.

Whoever does not immediately feel the power of the second line, incapable and unworthy of having its excellence shown to him by criticism. The Abbé Delille is not one of those observers of nature, who admire every thing in the universe but the Eternal Wisdom which formed it.

Et vous, vous y venez d'un œil observateur.
Admirer dans ses plans l'éternel createur

In this Canto, he again pathetically alludes to the fad fate of his country.

Ainsi quand des excès, suivis d'excès nouveaux,
D'un état par degrés ont préparés les maux,
De malheur en malheur sa chute se consomme ;
Tyr n'est plus, Thèbes meurt, et les yeux cherchent Rome !

O France ! O ma patrie ! O séjour de douleurs ! Mes yeux à ces pensers se sont mouillés de pleurs!²

Vers concernés : [chant 3, vers 199-200](#); [chant 3, vers 313-314](#); [chant 3, vers 373-378](#)

Liens externes

- Accès à la numérisation du texte\ : [Hathi Trust](#).

Auteur de la page — [Laila Dell'Anno](#) 2017/04/18 15:26

¹ Sir James Mackintosh, *The British Critic* Vol 17, London, 1801, p. 9.

² *Ibid.* p.12-14.

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