

Compte rendu de L'Homme des champs (The Monthly Review)

Présentation du texte

En décembre 1800, la [Monthly Review](#) est le **premier périodique en langue étrangère à rendre compte du poème**¹. L'article, qui suit une recension de *De la littérature* de Staël, est **très élogieux**.

Un maître

Le critique anonyme commence par justifier le nombre élevé des tirages annoncés par un rappel du statut de Delille : la France accorde au poète une gloire méritée et si ce dernier emprunte volontiers à d'autres écrivains, il ne fait que suivre en cela, et avec le même brio, la pratique de Pope. Cette comparaison permet donc d'**écarter d'emblée le débat relatif aux imitations que Delille avait pu faire de certains poets anglais**. Pour l'auteur du compte rendu, la polémique est d'évidence sans intérêt.

The booksellers on the continent had such entire confidence in the reputation of the author of this poem, and in the public eagerness to peruse it, that, as soon as the MS. was procured, fifteen editions were printed at once in Paris, from very high to very low prices, and 30,000 copies were sold in less than a fortnight² ! Though the Abbe **Delille** is an emigrant, a voluntary exile, and has remained a firm friend to the antient religion and government of his country, all parties in France are equally desirous of reading his productions; and they are in few things so unanimous, as in pronouncing that he is the best poet of whom France can at present boast, or perhaps ever possessed, in heroic verse. No poetry in a foreign language approaches the compositions of Mr. Pope so much as that of the Abbe **Delille**, who has confessedly made the English bard his model; and who resembles him in every respect which the different structure of French verse will permit: in smoothness, accuracy, and good taste; we dare not say in force, which perhaps the genius of his language will not admit. Pope never scrupled to borrow a good thought wherever he could meet with it, in prose or in verse: but he borrowed always to polish and to improve. If he found it in base metal, he set it in diamonds. The Abbe's imitations and adoptions of the thoughts of others are at least equally numerous. As the late learned Dr. Warton would not allow Pope even to be a poet, but denied him the gift of *invention*, though he readily granted that he was a fine versifier and an

excellent moralist; he would certainly have had equal reason for disputing the originality of the Abbe **De Lille**: but he must also have been obliged to concede that, in spite of deductions and draw-backs, the verses of the Virgil of France afford the highest gratification to readers of taste and discernment³.

Plan et titre

Le rédacteur anonyme aborde ensuite la préface, qu'il qualifie de "well written"⁴ et dont il glose les indications relatives aux quatre divisions du poème. C'est, écho probable aux attaques déjà essuyées en France sur ce point par Delille, l'occasion de quelques remarques sur les difficultés posées par le titre. Mais là encore, le critique s'applique à éteindre toute polémique. S'il admet sans difficulté que le contenu surprend (en particulier dans le chant 3), pour un texte réclamant le nom de "Géorgiques", et que son contenu véritable est mieux exposé dans les premiers vers du texte, le critique se contente d'exposer cette remarque comme un **simple constat**.

In the opening of the poem, the author explains his plan much better than by the title; which in the original seems to be a misnomer, and to which indeed our language furnishes no equivalent. We imagined, till we had advanced in the perusal of the work, that *l'homme des champs* must imply a husbandman, a farmer, a cultivator of the fields: but no one of those titles stretches to the full extent of the author's design. Nor does the term *Georgic* suit his poem so well as that of Virgil: since the Abbe seems to take up farming just where Virgil had left it. Addison defines γεωργικον to be "the science of husbandry, put into a pleasing dress, and set off with all the beauties and embellishments of *Poetry*:" but the present author extends his descriptions to the wonders of nature, to mechanical discoveries, and to natural history in general, as he declares in his exordium⁵ [...].

Le troisième chant

Le rédacteur aborde successivement les quatre chants, en **traduisant les vers retenus à titre d'illustration**. Toutefois, il met en garde ses lecteurs contre l'altération que crée cette transposition: "Though unable to do justice to the euphony of the author's versification, we cannot but wish to convey his thoughts to our English readers, when they appear remarkably beautiful and striking"⁶. S'avouant incapable de "rendre justice à l'euphonie" de l'original, il tente donc de "relayer ses pensées pour [ses] lecteurs anglais, quand elles semblent remarquablement belles et frappantes", et,

par manque de place, il annonce qu'il ne proposera que de brefs extraits, dont il pense qu'ils deviendront rapidement "**proverbiaux**" en français ("We cannot afford room for long extracts, to give our readers an idea of the regular march of the author: but but we shall detach some illustrative thoughts, which we think are so meritorious in the original, that they will soon become proverbial in the author's own country⁷").

Le **chant 3**, dont l'examen suit une appréciation peu favorable de l'épisode final du chant précédent, est mis en valeur par ce contraste et traité de manière globalement positive. Curieusement, l'auteur juge "quelque peu grotesque" un passage qui n'a guère cette dimension en français, il attribue les notes à Delille et il se méprend sur la nature de Raton, présentée comme le chien du poète.

Nous divisons cette section pour mieux indiquer les vers concernés, l'auteur procédant souvent à des **recombinaisons de passages distincts**.

Canto III – There seems to be more force in the opening of this canto than elsewhere; and indeed this whole section of the work abounds with great beauties of versification and sentiment, as well as manifestations of much reading, observation, and physiological knowlege [*sic*]. The notes occupy more than 50 pages, compiled from Buffon, and other writers on the theory of the earth, and on natural history. – We cannot refrain from extracting a few of the author's sentiments and reflections, which serve as frames to his great pictures.

Speaking of the beauties and deformities of nature being overlooked and ill understood, he says,

'The sage alone, by certain indications seen,
Knows how of fields to taste the joys serene;
Nature exists but for inquirers wise,
Whom arts assist with Argus' hundred eyes.–
The root, the brier, and the uncultur'd moss,
The frightful image of decay and dross,
The good, the bad, the scourge, the eye selects;
The mind interprets causes and effects⁸.'

Vers concernés : [chant 3, vers 18-20](#) et [39-42](#).

On the immensity of the sea, the world of waters, on subterranean plants, and on the circulation of fluids through the globe, we meet with some admirable lines. In speaking of the ocean, he remarks:

*Que de fleuves obscures [sic] y dérobent leur source!
Que de fleuves fameux y terminent leur course!*

'What unknown rivers here conceal their source!

What floods renown'd here terminate their course!'

This idea reminds us of a beautiful couplet on the same subject in Denham's Cooper's Hill;

"As rivers lost in seas, some secret vein
Thence reconveys, there to be lost again⁹."

Vers concernés : [chant 3, vers 243-244](#).

Of the gradual changes in the globe, arising from earthquakes, deluges, and alternate encroachments on each other, the author says:

'In change eternal earth and sea are hurl'd,
Disputing slow the empire of the world¹⁰.'

Vers concernés : [chant 3, vers 263-264](#).

In describing mountains supposed to be coeval with the creation, and weather-beaten rocks, the poetical imagery is somewhat grotesque:

'Sometimes with visage rude, disdaining grace,
Of Chaos old preserving still the trace,—
Here flow'ry valleys, fertile, fresh, and fair,
There naked rocks, the world's old bones, quite bare¹¹.'

Vers concernés : [chant 3, vers 331-332](#) et [339-340](#).

Concerning insects furnished with all

'Those springs and organs which surpass our sense,
Perplex our art and proud intelligence,'

we find an ingenious and fanciful note, with which we shall present our readers:

'It seems (says the author) as if every species of insect were destined to follow some particular profession, and were furnished with the necessary implements. There are some, it may be said, for every art and calling: their first labours are

always perfect; and their industry seems as varied as the diversity of instruments appropriated to the labour peculiar to them. We see architects among them, who form the plan of an edifice capable, of containing many hundred inhabitants; the apartments of which are so well distributed, that not a corner is lost; and each individual is there lodged separately, in a sufficient space¹².'

Vers concernés : [chant 3, vers 573-574](#) et [note 47](#).

The author is very eloquent and poetical when describing the instinctive ingenuity of insects, as well as animals; and among the latter, his favourite Dog is immortalized by an elegiac eulogy, with which he concludes the III^d Canto¹³.

Se passer du récit

En conclusion, le recenseur revient sur la **place des sciences**, pour souligner que le poème parvient à intéresser sans recourir à une narration impliquant des acteurs humains, et il se **refuse à relever les imperfections** de l'œuvre, jugeant que les critiques français se sont assez appliqués à isoler les "taches dans ce soleil".

This poem does not indeed contain any alluring nor any terrible *story*: but it comprehends poetry of the most interesting kind. The author's descriptions of volcanos, lavas, basaltes, coal-mines, springs, the formation of mountains, and domestic animals, (characterising their virtues, vices, passions, and instinctive morality; and reminding us of the honour done to them by the muses of Homer, Lucretius, and Virgil;) are deserving of high praise. Even vegetation, or whatever has life, belongs to poetry, and may be personified. [...]

We perceive that the great poetical merit of this work has led us insensibly to dwell more on its beauties than its defects, for that defects may be found we are not ignorant: but, as all the critics in Europe, particularly those of France, have been and still are employed in seeking for and examining spots in this sun, we shall resign to them the gratification of proving that the magnifying power of their reflectors is superior to our's in these cynical observations. We must, however, observe, in justice to those foreign critics whose remarks we have yet seen, that, with whatever severity they arraign the

want of plan, of episodes, of arrangement, and of originality, they unanimously allow the poetry in general to be exquisite.

The notes, which occupy more than half of the volume, will be curious and instructive to young students in natural history¹⁴.

Liens externes

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

Auteur de la page — [Hugues Marchal](#) 2019/06/01 22:45

¹ Anonyme, "ART. III. L'Homme des champs; ou les Géorgiques françoises: i.e. *The Country Gentleman, of French Georgics*. By James Delille, 8vo, pp.\ 300. Basle. 1800. Imported by Debrett, London", *The Montly Review*, vol. 33, décembre 1800, p.\ 470-482.

² NDA: "Various editions, in 12mo. 8vo. &c. are imported in London."

³ *Id.*, p.\ 470-471.

⁴ *Id.*, p. 471.

⁵ *Id.*, p.\ 473-474.

⁶ *Id.*, p.\ 474. Malgré cette précaution, le journaliste s'attirera une violente attaque dans un autre titre de presse, en raison de la qualité, jugée médiocre, de ses transpositions: voir Scipio, "To the editor", *The Anti-Jacobin Review*, mai 1801, p.\ 88-90.

⁷ *Id.*, p.\ 474-475.

⁸ *Id.*, p.\ 477.

⁹ *Id.*, p.\ 477-478.

¹⁰ *Id.*, p.\ 478.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Id.*, p.\ 481-482.

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