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

Présentation du texte

Publié en avril 1801 dans la Critical Review, ce **compte rendu du poème** apporte **la plus tardive des trois recensions anglophones** de *L'Homme des champs*. Le critique anonyme y formule un avis mitigé, reflété par le nombre assez réduit de citations auxquelles il procède (**aucune ne concerne le troisième chant**).

Le titre de l'article propose de traduire celui du poème de manière littérale, par *The Man of the Fields*[1], choix que la revue reprochera plus tard à Maunde de n'avoir pas adopté.

Éloges et réserves

En cette période de tensions politiques, l'auteur insiste d'emblée sur la **pauvreté de la poésie française**. Delille n'est, au mieux, que le meilleur auteur d'une nation peu douée en la matière...

> Our readers are already acquainted with the name and talents of the elegant poet before us—a poet who would do honour to any people, and who is certainly laying the foundation for a new sera in the history of polite letters in France. The muses in this country have indeed, hitherto, exhibited a very sorry appearance, excepting when adorned with the sock or the buskin. The Henriad of Voltaire is passable when perused by itself but, notwithstanding the vanity of the author upon this favourite production of his pen, it must not be compared with the epics of any other European nation whatever. The satires of Boileau have great merit; they equally abound in ease and animation; they are superior to those of Ariosto in the Italian, and perhaps only yield in English to the severe numbers of Churchill. They form an isolated exception to our general anathema of all French poetry hitherto composed upon other subjects than dramatic, and, instead of confuting, establish the dogma we have advanced. But didactic poetry, and more especially upon subjects of agriculture or picturesque gardening, has been attempted with less success than any other species, and, to the present day, has been universally disregarded, and too generally despised. It remained for the abbe Delille to become the advocate of this exquisite branch of the poetic art, and to prove, both by precept and example, that it is not only highly worthy of cultivation, and capable of exhibiting ornaments of the first class; but that the French

> language, uncultivated as it has hitherto been upon this subject, is still competent to catch those ornaments as they arise, and paint them as they deserve[2].

Son choix de persévérer dans cette voie est donc louable, d'autant que le nouveau texte est d'une **ambition supérieure** aux *Jardins*.

> The success of The Gardens (a most elegant poem upon a similar topic, by the same author, and which has been translated into German, Polish, and Italian, as well as twice into English,) has induced him to persevere in this novel path of the Muses, novel, we mean, with respect to his own countrymen,—and to exert himself upon a work which demanded the greatest degree of skill to prevent him from becoming the mere echo of his former labours. This skill, however, in our opinion, he has sufficiently evinced. The subject of The Gardens is confined almost exclusively to picturesque plantation, interspersed with moral reflexions, and two or three beautiful episodes or digressions, particularly one upon the death of our own much-lamented countryman the late captain Cook. The present poem takes a wider range; it only generally alludes to picturesque gardening; and is principally devoted to the amusements of rural retirement, and the means by which such retirement may be rendered equally productive of public utility and individual happiness[3].

À ce stade, le critique s'appuie sur la préface pour présenter le plan de l'ouvrage, et c'est seulement dans ce cadre qu'il évoque le **chant 3**. Il ne fera pas l'objet d'autres mentions.

> The third book is consecrated to the toils of the attentive naturalist, who, surrounded by the works and wonders of nature, penetrates into their causes and effects, giving hereby a greater degree of interest to his walks, a higher charm to his home, and more pleasant occupations to all his leisure hours[4].

Cette présentation générale permet au recenseur de formuler plusieurs reproches. Il déplore la **place trop grande des imitations**, en particulier les emprunts aux poètes anglais, car elles témoignent d'une **incapacité à tirer de la contemplation de la nature une parole propre**.

> The style of the abbe Delille is now so well known that we

> need not dwell very largely upon its merits or its imperfections. Every production of his pen shows him to be zealously attached to English poets, and that much of his taste has been imbibed from this rich, and, for the most part, classical source. It is not to be wondered at therefore, that, in a didactic poem like the present, he should be liberal in his imitations of Milton, Pope, Goldsmith, and Thomson; though he has also applied with no small degree of frequency to Lucretius and Virgil, and has occasionally copied from poets of his own country, particularly from the very elegant Seasons of M. Saint Lambert, and the stiff and unpolished Latin effusions of Rapin and Vaniere. This perpetual recurrence of imitations is, in our opinion, one of the most prominent defects of the poem—it exhibits a great want of originality and poverty of conception. Nature in herself is inexhaustible in every department, and as bountiful in her treasures to the poet as to the painter. The man of real genius will seldom be a copyist; he examines the universe with his own eyes, and he perceives for ever something new and captivating through every winding he traverses[5].

Toutefois, le censeur reconnaîtra, un peu plus bas, que Delille sait à l'occasion reformuler ses sources pour en tirer des effets neufs, par exemple dans la variation qu'il propose, au chant 1, sur le portrait du maître d'école par Goldsmith, qu'il cite avec éloge[6]. Il signalera également la présence de passages entièrement originaux, convoquant cette fois un extrait du chant 2[7].

La **versification** adoptée par Delille fait ensuite l'objet d'un passage non moins ambivalent. Le poète français est loué pour ses innovations, mais accusé de recourir trop souvent à des tournures identiques.

> M. Delille, nevertheless, has a very considerable portion of merit, and the cadence and fluency of French versification will, in future ages, be deemed highly indebted to his efforts. In reviewing his version of the Georgics[8] we objected to the introduction of hemistichs: every artificial end which they can be designed to answer may be far better promoted by a dextrous variation of the pause; and we are glad to find that, in the poem before us, the author seems at length to have embraced the same opinion: in consequence we do not meet with an individual instance of this defect. The figure in which he most indulges is verbal iteration; and in this we think he occasionally indulges to excess. The perfection of all art is to conceal the art itself by which we are regulated[9].

Après avoir donné deux exemples de ces “itérations” dans le chant\ 2, le critique stigmatise la fréquence des antithèses[10].

Puis il conseille de réduire l'épisode final de la même section, mais cite avec enthousiasme la “prière” qui conclut le poème[11]

Enfin, il conclut par ces informations :

> The abbe Delille is a rapid writer: since composing the poem now before us he has been engaged on another of considerably greater extent, and which is devoted to the subject of *Imagination*: he is also translating into French verse Milton's Paradise Lost, a task which, we understand, he has nearly completed.
> Of the Georgics before us we are informed that an English version is now in the press[12], and will speedily make its appearance[13].

Liens externes

- Accès à la numérisation du texte : HathiTrust.

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[1] Anonyme, “Art. IV. – *L'Homme des Champs, ou les Georgiques Françoises, Par Jacques Delille*. Basle. 1800. *The Man of the Fields; or, French Georgics. By James Delille*. 12*mo*. Imported by De Boffe.”, *The Critical Review*, avril 1801, p. 510-517.
[2] *Id.*, p. 510-511.
[3] *Id.*, p. 511.
[4] *Id.*, p. 512.
[5] *Id.*, p. 513.
[6] *Id.*, p. 514.
[7] *Id.*, p. 515.
[8] Allusion à un compte rendu de la tradition des *Géorgiques* de Virgile, par Delille.
[9] *Id.*, p. 513-514.
[10] *Id.*, p. 514.
[11] *Id.*, p. 515-516.
[12] Allusion probable à la traduction de Maunde.
[13] *Id.*, p. 516-517.

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