

Henri Gregoire. *On the Cultural Achievements of Negroes*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996. xlvii + 141 pp. \$13.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-55849-032-1.

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French Abolitionism with an American Accent

Pantheonization has its privileges. Since the enshrining of the abbe Henri Gregoire among the *grands hommes de la patrie* in 1989, the once-neglected revolutionary priest has benefited from a flurry of interest. Numerous popular biographies and reprints of his work have appeared in France, where debates rage about his legacy. In the United States, Gregoire was commemorated last year at an international conference at UCLA's Clark Library.

Who was Gregoire and why is he attracting so much attention? Priest and revolutionary, Gregoire presents a series of apparent paradoxes. The causes he championed during his six decades of public life included, but were hardly limited to, removing legal restrictions on Jews; abolishing slavery and the monarchy; spreading French and eradicating patois; preserving historic buildings and creating public libraries; and convincing non-Western peoples to become Christians. In his later years (he lived until 1831), he became a living symbol of the Revolution, and busied himself with effecting social change from Haiti to Ireland and India. His writings hold interest not only for French historians, but also for scholars of ecclesiastical, Jewish, Caribbean and art history, and of linguistics; they have appealed to intellectuals from Ho Chi Minh to Aime Cesaire.

Until now, however, Anglophone scholars have been unable to use Gregoire in their courses or introduce him to an Anglophone reading public because his books have remained largely untranslated. Although contemporary translations of a handful of his works lie in rare book rooms, only a single one of his major works has been available in a modern English print edition: his 1808 *De la litterature des negres*, originally translated by D. B. Warden in 1810 as *An Enquiry Concerning the Intellectual and Moral Faculties and Literature of Negroes*, and reissued since 1967 by the McGrath Publishing Company.

It might seem surprising, then, that Thomas Cassirer and Jean-Francois Briere have decided to retranslate *De la litterature* instead of any of the other 400-odd works of Gregoire. They argue, however, that the work cries out for a new translation because of its importance in the history of Western racial thought. The previous translation, they contend, was inadequate because it omitted whole sections of the work and included many mis-translations; moreover, many allusions now need explanation (p.

xi). More importantly, the editors insist, *De la litterature* has much to contribute to modern debates: "[Gregoire's] message--a passionate appeal for the unity of mankind--is still as profoundly relevant today as it was two hundred years ago, and it will remain so for as long as racism exists in the world" (p. xlvii).

Attributing the idea for a "new American edition" of *De la litterature* to their late colleague Sidney Kaplan (p. xi), Cassirer and Briere seem unaware of previous attempts to produce a new translation. A call for a new English version of Gregoire's book was made almost eighty years ago in the *Journal of Negro History* by F. Harrison Hough, who also offered his own translation of the main "missing" chapter. Cassirer and Briere also seem to be unaware of Guichard Parris, who was working on a new translation as recently as a decade ago. Parris, a Caribbean-American who studied at Amherst College and Columbia University and later helped lead the National Urban League, worked on the project over the course of several decades, but never found a publisher.[1]

Gregoire's *De la litterature des negres* was a courageous defense of abolitionism in the wake of Napoleon's reimposition of slavery. At a time when many of Gregoire's own friends were increasingly accepting the idea of fixed racial differences, Gregoire insisted on the essential unity of humanity. Human difference, he declared, resulted not from natural racial superiority, but only from climate and historical circumstance. By recounting the biographies of exceptional men and women of African descent, Gregoire aimed to prove that people of color could show great intellectual achievement, if only the world would encourage rather than oppress them. He made clear that his reflections extended not only to blacks, but to other oppressed groups throughout the world, including "the untouchables of the Asiatic continent," "Jews of all colors," and Irish Catholics (p. 39).

De la litterature had a fascinating reception history, as Cassirer and Briere note. Mocked by Napoleonic journalists, the book was applauded by the black and mixed-race leaders of newly-independent Haiti. On these shores, Thomas Jefferson (to whom Gregoire sent a copy, hoping to persuade him to retract the comments he had made about inferior black intelligence in *Notes on the State of Virginia*), complained to a mutual friend that the naive Gregoire had simply "gather[ed] up every story he could find of men of color (without distinguishing whether black, or of what degree of mixture) ..." A popularized American version of the book, the translators found, helped recruit a new generation of American abolitionists in the 1830s (pp. xxxvii-xlvi).

Cassirer's and Briere's introduction is most successful in covering this truly international reception history and in introducing Gregoire to an unfamiliar Anglophone audience. Largely a summary of published and secondary sources on

Gregoire's colonial and abolitionist activities, it offers an overwhelmingly positive (if fairly standard) view of Gregoire as a crusading egalitarian, a "sharp tongued and pugnacious advocate for people oppressed because of their religion or their race" (p. xvii). Aside from some minor errors, its recounting of Gregoire's biography is accurate and concise.

It sometimes seems, though, that the authors are too anxious to cover over aspects of Gregoire's thought which do not seem suitable for 1990s consumption. They depict Gregoire as a man equally comfortable in Enlightenment and in Christian circles (pp. xxxii-xxxv), for example, without discussing Gregoire's delicate balancing act between the two worlds and his frequent attacks on *philosophes*. They take particular pains to absolve Gregoire of "Eurocentrism" in his dealings with peoples of color, saying that Gregoire rejected "the idea that European culture was inherently superior to other cultures and that non-European peoples should take Europeans as models" (pp. xxxv-xxxvii). A closer look at Gregoire's later writings, like his correspondence with Haiti and his various works on the influence of Christianity on oppressed groups, would have complicated such a statement. While the abbe indeed felt that non-western peoples had the potential to "regenerate" themselves and thus join the ranks of "civilized nations", he very much believed that they could reach this potential only by adopting Christian and European values. Finally, the editors portray Gregoire as a lonely voice of abolitionism in a hostile racist climate, without mentioning that many of his "opponents" were actually close friends, and that his opinions on the connections between physiognomy and morality were often close to theirs. Gregoire may have much to teach us today, but we need to see him in all of his complexities.[2]

As for the translation itself, it is indeed largely more idiomatic and accurate than Warden's. Some of Cassirer's and Briere's efforts are also better than Parris', though in other parts his translation reads more naturally than theirs; Parris also uncovered errors in Gregoire's text, which Cassirer and Briere overlooked.[3] Furthermore, like Warden, Cassirer and Briere sometimes bury the explosive quality of Gregoire's call to arms in archaic-sounding prose. The translators in fact specify in their preface that they "did not want to lose the historical context and flavor of the earlier translation" and therefore "preserved Warden's style whenever this could be done while still making the text accessible to the modern reader" (p. xi). Readers might wish, however, that Cassirer and Briere had tried to depart from Warden a little more in order to capture Gregoire's spirit and tone more fully.

All in all, Cassirer and Briere have done undergraduate teachers a service in making a new translation of *De la litterature* available in paperback. The book will be an invaluable tool in helping Anglophone students better understand the history of racial thinking in Europe, and the little-known achievements of various savants of African descent. Moreover, the authors' spirited defense of the book's continued relevance in a

world full of racial tension is highly admirable. Teachers who wish to include Gregoire's views on race in their courses should definitely choose their edition instead of the one published this year by M. E. Sharpe, which simply reprints the Warden translation.[4]

It remains nevertheless unfortunate that Cassirer and Briere did not learn of previous attempts by other scholars to undertake this project. In doing so, they could have not only awarded these men the recognition long denied them, but also improved the quality of their translation. Still, rather than publish yet another translation of *De la litterature*, it is hoped that scholars will make other Gregoire works available in English. The abbe's writings on Jews, language politics, the church, revolutionary cultural policy, colonialism, and many other subjects shed light not only on numerous aspects of the Revolution, but also on fundamental questions in many modern political cultures, from the birth of nationalism to the limitations of universalism.

Notes:

[1]. See F. Harrison Hough, "Gregoire's Sketch of Angelo Solimann," *Journal of Negro History*, IV (1919): pp. 281-9. Parris' notes, which he left to the public at the New York Public Library's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture upon his death in 1990, are conserved as the Guichard Parris Papers. I am extremely grateful to Diana Lachatanere and Andre Elizee of the Schomburg's Rare Books and Manuscripts Division for their assistance in allowing me to consult and discuss these materials.

[2]. For an alternate view, see Francois Manchuelle, "The 'Regeneration of Africa': An Important and Ambiguous Concept in 18th and 19th Century French Thinking about Africa," *Cahiers d'etudes africaines*, 144, no. XXXVI-4 (1996): pp. 559-88; and my "Les Paradoxes de la regeneration revolutionnaire: le cas de l'abbe Gregoire," forthcoming in *Annales historiques de la Revolution francaise*, 1998.

[3]. Parris discovered, for example, that although Gregoire attributed Ottobah Cuogano's emancipation to an Englishman, "Lord Hoth", Cugoano had said only that God, the "Lord of Hosts", had delivered him! See Parris, "Translator's Foreword" in *Looking at Blacks: An Eighteenth Century View. A translation, with a foreword and notes from De la litterature des Negres by Henri Gregoire* (typed manuscript, Parris Papers--Additions," 23).

[4]. *An Enquiry Concerning the Intellectual and Moral Faculties and Literature of Negroes. A new edition with an introduction by Graham Russell Hodges*, trans. David Bailie Warden (Armonk, NY/London, 1997).

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