



Translation of the article «Arthur Young et les La Rochefoucauld», originally published in a shortened version in the journal Plaisir(s), v. 10, Spring 2010.

## ARTHUR YOUNG AND THE LA ROCHEFOUCAULD:

For those unfamiliar with Young's work, his travel journals are widely considered by historians and amateurs alike to be the most lucid and readable portrait of life in England, France, Italy and Ireland in the last quarter of the XVIIIth century. Young was a scientist and a farmer, and his observations and analysis on the economy and agriculture of the places he visits are unmatched for their precision and candour. But Young also had a remarkable ability to describe the places through which he is travelling with such an immediacy that we, as readers, are transported to his side. We see the King at Versailles and marvel at the arcane rituals of court, we dine and make small talk with French travellers at roadside inns and we bemoan the shifty stable-lads whose unheated stables gave Young's beloved mare a cold.

Reading Young's journals also gives us quite an intimate portrait of the La Rochefoucauld, a family who were in many ways his hosts in this curious world of pre-Revolutionary France. Throughout Young's narrative, the homes of the La Rochefoucauld, be it their hôtel in Paris, or the châteaux at La Roche-Guyon, Verteuil, or Liancourt, serve as welcome refuges after long days of riding and observing. Through Young's pen, we have some beautiful descriptions of the daily lives of the La Rochefoucauld. There are lively political discussions at the dinner table of the duchesse d'Enville and her distinguished company in Paris, geological and botanical expeditions with the duc de La Rochefoucauld in the environs of Luchon, and long days of hunting and visiting farms and tenantry with the duc de Liancourt.

Seventeen-years before Young's first voyage to France he met the young La Rochefoucauld, Louis-Alexandre, duc de La Rochecoucauld (1743 – 1792) and his cousin, François de La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt, (1747-1827) then comte de La Rochefoucauld, and later duc de La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt. The two were travelling through England in the company of their former tutor, Maximilien Lazowski in 1779, and stayed with Young at his farm in Bradfield. Lazowski was a close friend of Young's and it was his invitation to travel with him and the duc de La Rochefoucauld to the Pyrénées that occasioned Young's first voyage in France. Young at this point was a well-known author who

had recently gained public recognition as an author for his descriptions of agriculture in England A Six Weeks tour through the Southern Counties of England (London, W. Strahan, 1769). Le duc de Liancourt would return to visit Young again in 1785-6, and relied heavily upon Young's counsel in his efforts to improve the productivity on his own estates.

The La Rochefoucauld and Arthur Young shared a passion for the science of Agricultural improvement. For Young was not simply a commentator on the state of French agriculture and industry, he was a veritable missionary for the application of scientific principles to the practice of agriculture. His foremost desire was to bring the same dramatic improvement of agricultural practice in France as had happened in England for the last few decades. Young's journal bemoaned the state of French agriculture and was perhaps meant to nudge French landowners towards a more scientific, and more profitable management of their lands.

The La Rochefoucauld were passionate « improvers » and reformers, especially of agriculture. The duchesse d'Enville, a passionate physiocrate, used her parc, potager and woodlands at La Roche-Guyon as a place of agricultural and forestry experimentation. Her correspondance with leading scientists, botanists and farmers demonstrates the depth of her personal involvement with these efforts. Her son, the duc de La Rochefoucauld was a passionate explorer and collector of natural history specimens and strongly invested as well in the scientific vocation of their estate.

Young's descriptions of La Roche-Guyon, and the château of Vertheuil, another seat of the La Rochefoucauld are aglow with a great affection for their châtelaine and his hostesse, the duchesse d'Enville : « Mme d'Enville et le duc de La Rochefoucauld me reçurent d'une façon qui m'aurait rendu agréable cet endroit, même si il avait été situé au milieu d'un marais. » (p.262)

He contrasts the hospitality and good repair of these great houses with the sorry state of abandonment of many historic châteaux owned by absentee nobles. At La Roche-Guyon Young is struck by the extraordinary nature of the château : « C'est un des endroits le plus singuliers où j'aie été. » He admires its great kitchens, the commodious Pavillon d'Enville, « Le principal appartement donne sur une terrasse, menant à des allées qui serpentent sur la montagne. » His English sensibilities are offended by the great potager at the château's feet « with walls enough for a fortress » : « Il y a un village et un grand potager qu'il faudrait supprimer, si l'on voulait se conformer aux idées anglaises. » (p.263, village only mentioned in English edition) While the English nobility lived in a rather splendid isolation from their tenants and neighbors, for the French nobility of this time, there was an entirely different rapport with their feudal subjects. Another intriguing aspect of Young's description is that promenades of the duchesse d'Enville, what we now call the jardin anglais are described simply as des allées sur la montagne, and not as an enclosed parc d'agrément. This gives us an important indication as how this place was seen by its original users. Young is a fairly adept critic of French gardens « à l'anglaise », and also of civic promenades, and his description here makes this garden sound far more like a promenade rather than a refined and decorated park environment. Sadly, Young makes no mention of the other more extraordinary landmarks of the domaine, the donjon, the grottoes, the subterranean théâtre, the riverside walks. Perhaps, for the ever practical Young, these amenities seemed a little extravagant.

Sadly, neither does he mention the duchesse's experiments with the propagation of new cultures and exotic plants.

It was the duchesse d'Enville's cousin, the duc de Liancourt, who was the most actively involved in the effort to improve French agriculture. Immediately upon inheriting the fortune and estates of his father the duc de Liancourt began transforming his estates into a model of productivity and efficiency. He created a model farm at a hamlet called Louveaucour and imported an entire family of Suffolk farmers to run it. The lands in surrounding his domaine were known as the Vallée dorée due to the hitherto unknown levels of wheat production taking place there. He also converted part of his father's beloved parc anglais into workshops and factories. In this sense, La Roche-Guyon and

Liancourt were two estates linked by their scientific vocation, and their proprietors love of innovation.

Liancourt's model farm at Louveaucourt is the subject of an entire chapter in the 1792 édition of Young's Travels. Young describes Liancourt's admiration for English agriculture, and his desire to develop a farm to instruct his countrymen. With a thoroughness that we can only admire, Liancourt set aside a farm at Louveaucourt for this project and populated it with farmers, tools and livestock brought directly from England :

« he accordingly engaged an English farmer to come over from Suffolk, with his family, and a common labourer; this English colony carried with it every kind of farming implement; they had with them likewise five oxen, a bull, and five cows, from Sussex, to perpetuate that breed, if the country into which they were transported would admit of it; to these were added a Suffolk polled bull and five cows.. » (p.141)

Young also assisted in placing two French laborers with his neighbors to ensure that his experiment would yield enduring results.

But Liancourt's activities went beyond agriculture. Soon the environs and even the park of his country seat had been given over to industry!

« he had likewise began to establish the spinning of cotton, a manufactory of linen, a stocking manufactory, and the fabrication of cards ; he had engaged the different artisans in each branch from England, constructed buildings, and sacrificed his gardens to these various establishments ; which, in 1792, already employed more than a thousand people in the district of Liancourt; and, although yet far from having attained to perfection, they were productive of the most salutary effects to the lower ranks of people. » (p.142)

1789 was an inauspicious moment to start such a venture, and this experiment's productivity not to last long. But Liancourt, the duchesse d'Enville and the duc de La Rochefoucauld were all active and enthusiastic participants in the first stages of the Revolution. Young was a witness to scene that illustrates something of Liancourt openness to the changes that were over taking France at that time:

A une petite distance du château de Liancourt, il y a une piece de terre inculte, contiguë à la route et appartenant au duc. Je vis des hommes très occupés à la diverser en petites portions en y établissant des haies ; ils la nicelaient et bêchaient ; c'était beaucoup de travail pour un si pauvre endroit. Je me demandait à l'intendant s'il pensait que cette terre valût une telle dépense. Il me dit que les pauvres gens du village, lorsque la révolution éclata, déclarèrent que les pauvres étaient de la nation, que les terres incultes appartenaient à la nation, et passant de la théorie à la pratique, en prirent possession, sans demander aucune autorisation ; le duc, voyant leur activité n'y fit aucune opposition.

Despite some misgivings, Young also found sympathy for this development in French agriculture : « je ne peux que louer l'acte ; car s'il est quelque chose de vraiment nuisible au public, c'est qu'un homme conserve la possession d'une terre inculte qu'il ne veut ni cultiver lui-même, ni louer à des autres pour la cultiver. Les pauvres gens meurent faute de pain, à la vue des terres incultes qui en nourriraient des milliers. J'estime qu'ils sont sages, qu'ils agissent conformément à la raison et à la philosophie en s'emparant de terres semblables » p.464

In 1792, following the brutal slaying of his cousin, the duc de La Rochefoucauld, Liancourt fled into exile in England, his hopes to participate in a new France dashed. In England, he was Young's guest for some months before decamping to America. Much inspired by Young's writing, Liancourt penned an extensive description of his visits there. (A work which is at present being prepared for re-publication by the historian Daniel Vaugelade and the Bibliothèque fantôme)

Upon his return to France, the now penniless duc de Liancourt was happy to finally be working his own land, with his own hands : a vegetable plot which he grew in the midst of his once great parc d'agrément. The duc later founded an agricultural school that would become the École des Arts et Métiers.

Young never returned to France after the Revolution, and was disillusioned by the violence it had wreaked upon his friends. His writings and his suggestions on the improvement of French agriculture, however, were well received by the Revolutionary government, under whose auspices a complete translation of his works was published in 1792. He and Lianourt kept up a detailed correspondence for the rest of their lives.





