CHAPTER 5

SAINT-AMANT AND THE COMMUNICATION OF EMOTION: *MOYSE SAUVÉ*

In Chapter 2 it was stated that Saint-Amant, wishing to give expression to the great joy experienced by the sister of Moses on seeing the baby safely delivered from a dangerous predicament, 'calls to the rescue' the famous French painter Poussin—a fact which, it was suggested, implies a tendency to think of emotion in visual terms. Several crucial questions arise from this statement. To begin with, one must ask whether Saint-Amant always attempts to express emotion *visually*. Or does he, on the other hand, ever turn to the other resources of poetry in order to communicate 'il di dentro'? To what degree, indeed, does he succeed in portraying emotion at all? In approaching these problems we must think not only of the emotions of the various characters described within the story of Moses but also, and this is perhaps of more importance, of the emotion to be engendered in the reader, and of the poet's skill in doing this. Does he ever manage to move *us*? Clearly the tone of the poem will be an important factor here — to what extent does Saint-Amant's descriptive, visually evocative verse lend itself to the tone one would expect of a work which the poet calls an 'idyle heroïque'?

In one sense Saint-Amant's attempts to portray the emotions of his characters are more often than not both visual and poetic. By this it is meant that he relies, to a very great extent, on comparisons in order to express fear, joy, anguish and so forth, these comparisons themselves usually being of a picturesque nature and frequently containing an indirect means of appealing to the mind's eye such as 'tel qu'on void'. For example, wishing to describe how very loath Jocabel is to leave her baby Moses amongst the rushes, Saint-Amant introduces the following comparison:

> Telle que dans l'horreur d'une forest espesse
> Une biche craintive, et que la soif oppresse,
> Quitte à regret son fan, depuis peu mis au jour,
> Quand pour chercher à boire aux fosses d'alentour,
> Ayant au moindre bruit les oreilles tendues,
> *On la voit* s'avancer à jambes suspendues,
> Faire un pas, et puis deux, et soudain revenir,
> Et de l'objet aymé montrant le souvenir,
> Montrer en mesme temps, par ses timides gestes,

Le soupçon et l'effroy des images funestes
Qui semblent l'agiter pour autruy seulement:
Telle fut Jocabel en son esloignement.

(II, 163–4)

This is surely a poignant little picture, complete in itself but at the same time ably illustrating Jocabel's anxiety. It is, in fact, one of Saint-Amant's more successful attempts at conveying the emotions of his characters. However, the poet is not content to stop here and further pursues the description of Jocabel's state of mind:

Ses blessures, qu'Amram avoit consolidées,
Se r'ouvrent à l'aspect de ses tristes idées,
Et son debile espoir privé d'un tel appuy,
Trebuche sous la peur et succombe à l'ennuy.
Ainsi, quand d'une poutre on oste quelque estaye
Qui se vit autresfois l'honneur d'une futaye,
Et qui des vents esmûs soustint tous les debas,
On voit au mesme instant tout le plancher à bas.
Tantost elle regarde, et tantost elle escoute;
Tantost jusqu'à la rive elle reprend sa route;
Puis ayant veu la nef où flotte son tresor
Le sentier domestique elle refoule encor.
Mais à chaque moment elle tourne la teste;
Dessus la moindre butte elle monte et s'arreste,
Sur les pieds se sousleve, et par l'œil du desir
Figure à l'œil du corps une ombre de plaisir.

(II, 164–5)

A number of remarks need to be made concerning these two passages. The initial comparison is, as we have said, effective. It is quite obvious, however, that it loses much of its appeal by being submerged in the spate of explanatory details which follow. The little description of how Jocabel stops and starts, although fairly vivid and pleasing in itself — it is in many ways reminiscent of that exquisite picture of people returning home from the port in 'L'Arion' — does not add to the general effect but rather, being quite unnecessary, actually detracts from it. As for the second comparison, it is patently a *tour d'adresse* and introduced for its own sake. It does, however, shed light on Saint-Amant's methods: he chooses to illustrate Jocabel's troubled state of mind and the way her bolstered-up hopes disintegrate with an image that is concrete and visual and, as a result, somehow disconcerting. All too often, in fact, we sense that Saint-Amant has followed in Marino's steps too closely for, as with the Italian, his comparisons, frequently unbelievably far-fetched, are intended to *amaze* the reader — the logical conclusion of the Renaissance goal of *ammirazione* which Marino himself expressed in the verse 'E' del poeta il fin la meraviglia'.[1] An example of just such a comparison is to be found when a storm

springs up on the Nile. Here is how Saint-Amant suggests the distress felt by the sister of Moses:

> Et, telle que *l'on void* sur un bord aquatique
> Se tourmenter en vain la mere domestique
> Quand le fils adoptif sous sa chaleur esclos,
> Comme d'une autre espece, entrecouppe les flots,
> Passe de vague en vague, et sur la plaine esmeue
> S'esleve, disparoist, se redonne à sa veue,
> Tandis qu'elle s'agite, et que d'un son peureux,
> Elle se plaint aux vents du sort cru dangereux,
> Telle, pendant l'orage estrange en sa furie,
> Parut la triste sœur, au bord de la prairie,
> Pour le destin du frere, agité sur les eaux
> Plus que leurs propres joncs, et leurs propres roseaux.
>
> (II, 233–4)

There is admittedly something remarkable about the ingenuity of such a comparison, but in this context it is finally nothing but comical, especially as the phrasing is clumsy and the wording stilted. To compare a young woman who is appalled at what might happen to her baby brother — a baby who is destined to become the saviour of a whole nation — with a hen afraid for a duckling she has hatched and mothered, is indeed to go from the sublime to the ridiculous. Leaving aside the propriety of such comparisons, however, it is perfectly obvious that Saint-Amant is tending, in these passages, to describe the outward signs of the emotions. Both Jocabel and her daughter are seen reacting to a situation, and even when the poet does try to convey an idea of how Jocabel gives way to despair in her mind he does so by means of a visual image.

However, elsewhere in *Moyse Sauvé*, Saint-Amant makes use of comparisons which, because they introduce images dealing with human beings and their predicaments rather than animals and inanimate objects, seem much more appropriate and allow him to suggest emotion more convincingly. Apart from the main narrative dealing with the hiding and finding of Moses, the poet also develops other stories drawn from the Old Testament, stories which fill in more of the history of the Israelites. One of these concerns Jacob and his love for Rachel. Rachel's sister, Lya, falls in love with Jacob too, and after much mental turmoil tells her father who resolves to help his unhappy daughter. In order to express how overcome with relief Lya is Saint-Amant resorts to the following comparison:

> Quiconque, au sein d'un bois affreux et solitaire,
> Après s'estre engagé d'un pas involontaire
> A suivre triste et seul l'erreur qui le conduit,
> Sous le morne silence et sous l'aveugle nuit;
> Après cent tours, cent maux, cent peines incroyables
> Parmy les hurlements des bestes effroyables,

Qui l'auroyent fait trembler, qui l'auroyent fait gemir,
Après se voir enfin contraint de s'endormir,
Après l'horreur d'un songe où son ame en tenebres
Auroit feint à ses yeux mille images funebres,
Viendroit à s'eveiller, et d'un bien sans pareil
Entendroit tout à coup, au lever du soleil,
Mille divers oyseaux faire dessus sa teste
De mille aymables tons une douce tempeste,
Seroit moins consolé, moins gay, moins en repos
Que ne le fut Lya d'entendre ces propos.

(II, 267–8)

This particular comparison depends less on the reader witnessing the outward signs of Lya's new-found joy than being made to share it in some sort. The gloomy, oppressive forest becomes for each reader the labyrinth out of which Lya suddenly finds a means of escape. It must be admitted that the image is a little unwieldy but, on the other hand, it does contain one or two very fine lines — 'Sous le morne silence et sous l'aveugle nuit', for example. Yet another comparison, although lacking what we might call the immediate appeal of the last one, nevertheless gives us a good idea of the astonishment felt by Lya's father, Laban, on learning of her dilemma:

Tel qu'*on verroit* surpris des couleurs et des choses
L'homme qui seroit né les deux lumieres closes,
S'il venoit, par fortune ou par grace des cieux,
A jouir des objets dont jouissent les yeux,
Tel fut surpris Laban au discours de sa fille . . .

(II, 266)

Here, the introductory 'tel qu'on verroit' more or less precludes any sharing of the emotion felt by the blind man and hence Laban. Astonishment, here, is something to be seen. In point of fact, Saint-Amant has missed the opportunity to make us really feel Laban's amazement. He could just as easily, and much more effectively, have asked us to imagine we had been born blind, and then made to see, rather than proceeding by the rather round-about way of asking us to imagine it happening to somebody else. For all that, the actual comparison is interesting, especially so when we consider the poet's own delight in vision and the visual bias to his poetry.

It would seem, then, that those comparisons which involve human experiences and which require us to share emotion rather than merely witness it have most impact on our sensibility. However, there are exceptions and the following example must be deemed reasonably successful. Jocabel is relieved to find that her elder son has not been harmed by the Egyptian soldiery:

Non, la brebis du nord ne sent pas tant de joye
Lors que du loup-cervier bruyant après la proye,
Ou de quelque grand ours pour la queste sorty,
Elle voit à ses flancs son agneau garanty,

Qu'en ressent et qu'en montre au depart agreable
La mere qui du fils prend un soin incroyable,
Qui le tient, qui le baise, et qui doit benir Dieu
De voir, bien qu'à regret, l'orage en autre lieu.

(II, 166)

Homer, of course, made much use of this sort of comparison. However, although he frequently develops his for their own sake, and now and then produces one which startles rather than illustrates, his choice of imagery is more often than not particularly apt and effective. When expressing emotion he turns to human experiences for his images, as in the following passage from *The Odyssey*:

Ὣς φάτο, τῷ δ' ἔτι μᾶλλον ὑφ' ἵμερον ὦρσε γόοιο·
κλαῖε δ' ἔχων ἄλοχον θυμαρέα, κεδνὰ ἰδυῖαν.
ὡς δ' ὅτ' ἂν ἀσπάσιος γῆ νηχομένοισι φανήῃ,
ὧν τε Ποσειδάων εὐεργέα νῆ' ἐνὶ πόντῳ
ῥαίσῃ, ἐπειγομένην ἀνέμῳ καὶ κύματι πηγῷ·
παῦροι δ' ἐξέφυγον πολιῆς ἁλὸς ἤπειρόνδε
νηχόμενοι, πολλὴ δὲ περὶ χροΐ τέτροφεν ἅλμη,
ἀσπάσιοι δ' ἐπέβαν γαίης, κακότητα φυγόντες.[2]

Obviously, such a comparison, within the context of Odysseus's journeying, is appropriate and compelling even though embroidered on for its own sake. Whilst Saint-Amant clearly delights in his comparisons and enjoys developing little scenes, his choice of imagery seldom has quite the same thematic or tonal link with the main story as is evident, for example, in the Homeric comparison which follows:

Ταῦτ' ἄρ' ἀοιδὸς ἄειδε περικλυτός· αὐτὰρ 'Οδυσσεὺς
τήκετο, δάκρυ δ' ἔδευεν ὑπὸ βλεφάροισι παρειάς.
ὡς δὲ γυνὴ κλαίῃσι φίλον πόσιν ἀμφιπεσοῦσα,
ἅς τε ἓῆς πρόσθεν πόλιος λαῶν τε πέσῃσιν,
ἄστεϊ καὶ τεκέεσσιν ἀμύνων νηλεὲς ἦμαρ·
ἡ μὲν τὸν θνήσκοντα καὶ ἀσπαίροντα ἰδοῦσα
ἀμφ' αὐτῷ χυμένη λίγα κωκύει· οἱ δέ τ' ὄπισθε
κόπτοντες δούρεσσι μετάφρενον ἠδὲ καὶ ὤμους
εἴρερον εἰσανάγουσι, πόνον τ' ἐχέμεν καὶ ὀιζύν·
τῆς δ' ἐλεεινοτάτῳ ἄχεϊ φθινύθουσι παρειαί·
ὣς 'Οδυσεὺς ἐλεεινὸν ὑπ' ὀφρύσι δάκρυον εἶβεν.[3]

Certainly, on one occasion Saint-Amant compares Jacob's family scattering in fear of Laban to fish fleeing and hiding from 'monstres' (crocodiles?) in the river Nile (II, 276), the geographical link contributing towards the association of ideas, but this is hardly as significant as the above comparison from the *Odyssey*.

Saint-Amant does not, however, rely entirely upon comparisons in order to evoke the feelings and emotions of his characters. A sort of verbal sleight-of-

hand used on occasion by the poet is perhaps so obviously a device that it lacks any depth. Nevertheless it is a step in the right direction. Here, for example, is how he describes Rebecca's fears for the safety of her son Jacob:

> Si l'air se noircissoit dessous le moindre orage
> Lors que son cher Jacob estoit au pasturage,
> Il tonnoit dans son ame, et l'obscure vapeur
> Un spectre du deluge y formoit à sa peur;
> Si de la moindre épine il avoit quelque atteinte,
> Son cœur estoit percé du couteau de la crainte;
> Et, si la fievre au lit le tenoit un moment,
> Elle estoit dejà morte et dans le monument.
>
> (II, 171)

Unfortunately, the device appears too contrived to be really convincing and the effect is clearly overdone. The same criticism must be made of a similar passage in which Saint-Amant attempts to communicate Jocabel's terror when the storm on the Nile endangers her son:

> Ce bruit impetueux, cette noire tempeste,
> En excite soudain une autre dans sa teste
> Qui prouve son tonnerre, et ses vents et ses flots,
> Par les cris, les souspirs, les pleurs et les sanglots.
>
> (II, 231–2)

A good deal of *Moyse Sauvé* is given over to dialogue enabling the various characters to voice their feelings. Sad to say their speeches are, on the whole, too forced, stilted even, ever to grip the reader. Chapelain, who, in a letter to Balzac, faulted the work for not depicting 'les mœurs et les passions',[4] in yet another letter criticized Saint-Amant's inability to create convincing, *moving* dialogue. Having commended the descriptions in the 'idyle heroïque' he goes on to say that '[Saint-Amant] tombe lorsqu'il faut faire parler, si bien qu'*il entretient l'imagination et ne remue point les entrailles*'.[5] Chapelain's judgement is only too justified. Here, for example, is the Queen of Egypt, distraught at the death of her son, railing against her husband for not having allowed the Israelites to leave, an obstinacy which brings down the various plagues upon the Egyptians:

> Tien, luy dit-elle enfin, regarde, miserable!
> Regarde où nous reduit ton cœur inexorable!
> Et bien! es-tu content? Cette punition
> Pourra-t'elle fleschir ton obstination?
> En veux-tu de plus grande? et le sort homicide,
> Qui du ciel et de toy la querelle decide,
> Pour delivrer Jacob de tes injustes fers,
> Doit-il rendre l'Egipte un tableau des enfers?
> Las! tu commets le crime, et j'en porte la peine!
> Mon fils, mon seul espoir, n'est plus qu'une ombre vaine!

O tragique pitié! vien, vien me secourir,
Et fay que sur son corps je puisse au moins mourir.
(II, 210)

There is no real pathos, no real anguish in this rather pedestrian speech. A flurry of exclamations and rhetorical questions are not enough to convey an impression of deep grief and despair. How much more effective it might have been had the bereaved mother described the poor, lifeless body of her son, recalling how those sightless eyes once smiled and laughed at her, how those still, livid lips once asked for her, and so forth, instead of uttering taunts which, in any case, have no venom or bitterness to them. How banal 'mon fils, mon seul espoir' sounds — surely he was more than that, surely he was all her happiness, all her joy, a source of constant bliss and worry on whom she lavished all her love and affection? How trite the last line sounds. We do not really feel she means it: it is no more than a concession to convention. Nor is Rebecca's grief at being obliged to bid farewell to Jacob when he is sent away to avoid his brother's anger any more heart-rending:

Quoy! dit-elle en soy-mesme, il faut donc que je voye
S'eclipser à mes yeux mon bien, ma seule joye,
Ou que je sois reduite au miserable estat
De craindre à tous momens quelque horrible attentat!
Il faut donc que je vive, ou plustost que je meure,
Dans l'apprehension de le perdre à toute heure,
Ce fils, ce doux sujet de mon cruel ennuy,
Ou que je me resolve à languir loin de luy!
(II, 176)

The passage seems forced: one notices, for example, how Saint-Amant has tried, unsuccessfully, to heighten the pathos of Rebecca's dilemma by multiplying the number of adjectives — '*seule* joye', '*miserable* estat', '*horrible* attentat', '*doux* sujet', '*cruel* ennuy'. 'Que je vive, ou plustost que je meure, / Dans l'apprehension de le perdre' is striving for the right effect, but it somehow seems rather glib and is certainly devoid of the chilling poignancy one might have expected.

Whilst they do not exactly express emotion it is perhaps significant that the speeches made by Jehovah in *Moyse Sauvé* frequently fail to give an impression of his grandeur and majesty. At times he speaks in an almost familiar fashion, although once or twice Saint-Amant does succeed in raising what he is saying to a more elevated and hence more appropriate level. The poet manages to endow the following speech with a certain awesome solemnity, for instance:

Avant que ma parole, en merveilles feconde,
Eust posé sur un rien les fondements du monde,
Eust construit la rondeur des globes éclatans,
Eust creé la nature et fait naistre le temps,
Je te predestinay pour estre mon oracle,

Pour faire aux bords du Nil miracle sur miracle,
Et pour tirer enfin ce peuple malheureux
De la calamité d'un joug si rigoureux.

(II, 201)

It is evident that the tone of any work plays a dominant role in determining our emotional reactions to the sentiments it contains. Consequently, it will be necessary for us to study the degree to which Saint-Amant's liking for highly detailed, descriptive verse is suited to the tone of a poem which has for its subject an ostensibly serious theme. *Moyse Sauvé* is, as we have seen, called an 'idyle heroïque' by its author, a poem of which he wrote 'le luth y eclatte plus que la trompette' (II, 140), meaning that the lyrical, idyllic elements are more prominent than the heroic or epic elements. From this definition it would seem that the work will not possess a sustained tenor of feeling, but will fluctuate between the lyrical and the heroic. As a result it must be borne in mind that, although *Moyse Sauvé* is purporting to tell a serious story, there will be moments when an intensity of feeling will neither be required nor, indeed, sought after — although the question of whether this might be detrimental to the poem as a whole will have to be given consideration.

Let us, to begin with, examine those elements which make up the idyllic parts of the work. As R. A. Sayce has pointed out, the main story concerning the hiding and the saving of Moses is idyllic, as is the subsidiary story of Jacob and his love for Rachel, although the former is given an epic character by the allegorical battles which are waged over the baby.[6] Strangely, it is often the idyllic descriptions which are the most memorable, even if they do seem out of place within the work as a whole. One such description relates how Moses's guardians while away the time whilst watching over the cradle by catching fish. Extremely detailed and colourful, it is patently obvious that the poet has brought it in because it afforded him the opportunity to paint a scene he knew well:

Mais dans l'onde dejà cette guerre s'allume,
Dejà le crin retors que le plomb et la plume
Tire au fond et retient, à l'œil est desrobé,
Et dejà sous l'appast le piege recourbé
Offre au poisson beant, mu d'une brusque envie,
Sa veritable mort sous une ombre de vie;
Dejà la canne ploye, et, dejà haut en l'air,
Le nageur estant pris vole comme un eclair.
Il s'y secoue en vain, de sa cheute on s'approche,
On y court, on le prend, du fer on le descroche;
Il s'echappe des doigts, tombe, sautelle, fuit,
Fait voir mille soleils en l'escaille qui luit,
Bat l'herbe de sa queue, et, sur la plaine verte,
D'une bouche sans cry, de temps en temps ouverte,
Baille sans respirer, comme né sans poumon,
Et laisse à qui l'estraint un reste de limon.

(II, 251)

The rapid succession of verbs which has been remarked upon in Chapter 4 is once again in evidence and is partly responsible for the description's vivacity. Another passage tells how little birds are caught and then released in a cage made of reeds. Although pleasant enough it lacks the sharpness of the fishing-scene. Moreover, in spite of what he says in the preface to *Moyse Sauvé* about using 'mots propres, justes et significatifs' when describing, Saint-Amant cannot resist the temptation to introduce some incredibly verbose periphrasis at times and this passage is, unfortunately, a case in point:

> Cependant les mauvais, si-tost qu'on les veut prendre,
> Du bec sauvage et dur taschent à se deffendre;
> Leur plume se herisse, et, tout noirs de la pois,
> Leurs ongles depitez egratignent les doigts.
> Marie en choisit un aux ailes emaillées
> Qui n'estoyent en la glus ni prises ni souillées,
> Et, r'enfermant son vol dans le creux de sa main,
> Sur son dos passe l'autre et le rend plus humain.
> Sa douceur caressante est mesme si hardie
> Que de *l'endroit aigu d'où sort la melodie*
> Son coral cherche l'or, et, pour l'apprivoiser,
> Ose offrir à ses yeux la gloire d'un baiser.
> Enfin, dans la prison dès le matin construite,
> La liberté de tous est noblement reduite;
> Ils tentent le passage entre les beaux treillis,
> Et r'enceints des roseaux regrettent leurs taillis.
>
> (II, 287)

Happily, this particular example of periphrasis is rarely bettered, if at all, although 'l'animal barbu qui de cornes est brave' (II, 170) comes near it. One cannot help thinking that such pretentious frivolities, although no doubt intended to amaze the reader, were also meant to lend a certain nobility to the descriptions in which they occur. In many ways it is a pity that Saint-Amant was so unaware on such occasions of the advantages of simplicity. A more critical approach would have benefited his descriptions generally, and certainly prevented the idyllic atmosphere from being weakened by such pomposity.

The account of how Jacob would carve his loved one's name on marble or on trees belongs to the idyllic tradition too:

> Tantost d'un fer pudique il gravoit sur les marbres,
> Ou sur la tendre peau dont se vestent les arbres,
> Le nom de sa bergere enlacé dans le sien,
> Et l'honoroit tousjours d'un loyal entretien.
>
> (II, 262)

Unhappily, such behaviour has become so hackneyed that the modern reader finds it most disconcerting within the context of a Biblical epic. More acceptable, although still in the same vein, is the description of how Jacob would carve shepherds' crooks:

Tantost, ayant tiré des forests verdoyantes
Quelque bois jeune et rare aux veines ondoyantes,
Qui fust sans nœus et droit, et de juste hauteur,
Et dont au bel eclat respondist la senteur,
Il s'asseyoit soudain sur l'humble violette,
Changeoit ce beau baston en gentille houlette,
L'enrichissoit du chiffre et traçoit tout autour
Quelque chaste progrès de son ardente amour,
Puis sous le toit aymé, quand la nuit, revenue,
Renfermoit tous les airs dans une seule nue,
Et que de tout travail le monde estoit exent,
En faisoit à Rachel un gracieux present.

(II, 262–3)

Idyllic, too, are the frequent descriptions of family life, especially of mothers and their children, which occur in *Moyse Sauvé*. One of the most charming and best observed concerns the young Aaron:

Le simple et jeune Aaron, tournant à l'entour d'elles,
Semble prendre sa part de ces douces nouvelles;
Il regarde, il se hausse, et, beant et ravy,
Tant plus en est repu, moins en est assouvy.
Quelquesfois l'innocent, d'une petite bouche,
Selon que le propos sa connoissance touche,
Parle, s'exclame, rit, le propos interront,
Et met à Jocabel un chagrin sur le front;
Mais aussi-tost, d'un signe entre affable et severe,
Estant reprimandé par la main de la mere,
Aussi-tost il se taist, et d'un geste craintif
Se montre non moins qu'elle au discours attentif.

(II, 246–7)

The comparisons used by Saint-Amant to evoke the emotions of his characters are also employed, as in Homer, to illustrate or complement scenes and actions described. As far as those occurring in the idyllic sections are concerned they can at times, in spite of their element of surprise, add a certain charm, tenderness even, to the passage in question:

Comme *on voit* aux beaux jours la gentille hyrondelle
Vers son nid merveilleux voler à tire d'aile,
En atteindre les bords, sur les bords tremousser,
De gestes et d'accents ses petits caresser,
Puis de l'œil, puis du bec, tousjours pront à repaistre
Leur innocente faim, qui comme eux vient de naistre,
Flatter l'un, flatter l'autre, et leur faire sentir
De son tardif retour l'aymable repentir,
Telle *vit-on* alors la soigneuse bergere
Courre vers le berceau d'une plante legere,
Flatter le tendre objet de cent mots enfantins,
Sousrire à ses appas, benir ses beaux destins . . .

(II, 249)

Coming just after amorous avowals between the shepherd Elisaph and his shepherdess and just before the vivid fishing-scene, such a comparison surely fits in well with the idyllic, pastoral atmosphere. No intense emotions are being evoked here, as they are in the comparison involving the frantic hen, and we enjoy the picture of the swallows and the ingenuity of the simile without feeling too uneasy.

When we turn our attention to the heroic elements in *Moyse Sauvé* it is, however, immediately apparent that, whereas detailed observation is not out of place in the more lyrical passages, it does tend to be so when a more elevated tone is required. Boileau's dismissal of Saint-Amant's account of the Crossing of the Red Sea has assured that particular description of a derisive immortality at the expense of a number of really worthwhile scenes, but one would not be justified in rejecting his criticism.[7] As Françoise Gourier puts it:

> Saint-Amant semble éprouver une certaine difficulté pour s'élever à la grandeur épique quand elle serait requise pour présenter sur le ton convenable certains épisodes bibliques. Cette insuffisance apparaît surtout dans les épisodes qui évoquent l'action divine se manifestant sur un plan très vaste, dans le tableau du Déluge, par exemple, ou dans celui du passage de la Mer Rouge. Dans ces passages Saint-Amant ne semble pas pouvoir s'élever suffisamment au-dessus de la réalité familière des événements dépeints.[8]

Here is the now notorious description of the Crossing:

> Là des chameaux chargés la troupe lente et forte
> Foule plus de tresors encor qu'elle n'en porte:
> On y peut en passant de perles s'enrichir,
> Et de la pauvreté pour jamais s'affranchir;
> Là le noble cheval bondit et prend haleine
> Où venoit de souffler une lourde baleine;
> Là passent à pié sec les bœufs et les moutons,
> Où nagueres flottoyent les dauphins et les thons;
> Là l'enfant esveillé, courant sous la licence
> Que permet à son âge une libre innocence,
> Va, revient, tourne, saute, et par maint cri joyeux
> Temoignant le plaisir que reçoivent ses yeux,
> D'un estrange caillou, qu'à ses pieds il rencontre,
> Fait au premier venu la precieuse montre,
> Ramasse une cocquille, et, d'aise transporté,
> La presente à sa mere avec naïveté;
> Là, quelque juste effroy qui ses pas sollicite,
> S'oublie à chaque objet le fidelle exercite,
> Et là, près des rempars que l'œil peut transpercer,
> Les poissons esbahis le regardent passer.
>
> (II, 214)

Just as Saint-Amant chose to depict the sea-monster in 'L'Andromede' in detail rather than suggest all its horror through the use of a less explicit

vocabulary, so here his bias towards the concrete and visual induces him to do the same, preventing him from achieving a moving, compelling vision of a supernatural event. The little scenes he paints are charming in the same way that so many Sunday-school tracts and pictures are charming. They are 'nice' but they do not grip us, they do not seize our imagination, they do not move us.

It should perhaps be pointed out that the description of the Israelites crossing the Red Sea, like that of the Last Judgement, is not only visual in nature but also pictorial. R. A. Sayce, in fact, draws our attention to the way 'Saint-Amant's visual imagination analyses the conception of the Israelite army into a series of groups' — in much the same manner as Poussin in his painting depicting the Crossing.[9]

Saint-Amant's preoccupation with detail does not always concern itself with visual phenomena however. When portraying angels leaving Heaven in order to do Jehovah's bidding he introduces the following little touch:

> A ces commandemens, les ministres fidelles,
> Montrans leur vive ardeur en leur dos pourveu d'ailes,
> Ouvrent *du saint portail le bronze radieux,*
> *Qui fait sur de beaux gonds un bruit melodieux.*
>
> (II, 236)

Once again, the importance given to detail renders the scene trivial when it should have been majestic and grandiose. A kind of logic which leads Saint-Amant through a process of thought — Heaven has gates, gates have hinge-pins, hinge-pins tend to groan but this is Heaven so, instead of groaning, they will be musical — which cannot free itself from the familiar causes him to define something which would have been best left undefined.

Of those Homeric comparisons which appear in the epic passages a number are sufficiently stirring to prevent them being too incongruous, although it is questionable whether they are always well timed or even necessary. Amongst the more successful is the following description of a battle:

> Tels que, sur l'Ocean, *on voit* deux noirs orages,
> Deux puissans tourbillons, gros de mille naufrages
> Et fiers de mille pins sur la terre abbatus,
> L'un à l'autre opposer leurs tonnantes vertus,
> En vagabonds côtaux changer l'humide plaine,
> Et foudre contre foudre, haleine contre haleine,
> S'entre-heurter, se rompre, et de bruits et d'esclairs
> Estourdir et trancher les ondes et les airs,
> Tels *voit-on* ces deux camps, en suitte d'une gresle
> Et de traits et de dars eslancez pesle-mesle,
> En suitte des cailloux qui de bras denouez
> Sont avec force et bruit dans les frondes rouez,
> En suitte des longs cris, s'entre-choquer, se fendre,
> Se rejoindre aussi-tost, se charger, se deffendre,

Fleschir, faire eclater leurs glaives inhumains,
Et teste contre teste en revenir aux mains.

(II, 221)

The very same battle contains yet another comparison which immediately strikes one as being both dramatic and in keeping with the tone required:

Et comme un pilier seul, quand tout un pont se rend
A la rapidité d'un superbe torrent,
Soutient parfois le chocq des ondes courroucées,
Quoy qu'il voye à ses flancs les forests renversées
Passer de bord et d'autre, et que tous les sillons
Soyent vastement couverts d'impetueux bouillons;
Ainsy ce fier payen, cet homme espouventable,
Seul resiste à Jacob, et d'un cœur indontable
Voit cent morts l'assaillir et de loin et de près,
Voit son pesant bouclier tout herissé de trêts,
Voit son party deffait, ses estendars en fuite,
Et sa vaine esperance au dernier point reduite,
Sans qu'un glaçon de crainte ait pu par sa froideur
Amortir tant soit peu sa furieuse ardeur.

(II, 223)

It will be recalled that, whilst watching over the baby Moses concealed by the Nile's edge, Merary and Elisaph have to fight off a giant crocodile. During the struggle Elisaph lands a blow on the beast but fails to pierce its scales. Saint-Amant gives his description of this incident an extra vigour by the introduction of a forceful, succinct comparison:

Mais, comme en une forge où la terre s'allume
On voit le dur marteau rebondir sur l'enclume,
Dans le poin qui l'estraint en bruyant retourner
Et du cyclope noir le bras mesme estonner,
Ainsi revient l'espieu frustré de son attente,
Ainsi resonne-t-il en la main mécontente,

(II, 181–2)

In these two passages one feels that the poet has allied his keen observation — the almost Wagnerian smithy-scene is particularly striking — to a more critical sense of what is required by his subject. Whilst they still do not satisfy as completely as certain of those of Homer there is no doubt that they help lend the descriptions in question an epic tone. On the other hand, however, Saint-Amant was just as capable of extremely poor examples. Before managing at last to kill the crocodile Elisaph is wounded by the reptile and is close to death. Merary, his comrade in arms, hastens to gather certain herbs with which to heal him. Unfortunately, the poet kills all suspense and transforms what could have been a fairly dramatic scene into one which verges on the ludicrous by inserting a well observed but hopelessly out of place comparison:

Cependant Merary, songeant qu'en ces rivages
Il avoit remarqué certains simples sauvages
Dont la vertu secrette et le suc merveilleux
Serviroient au berger dans l'estat perilleux,
Y va tout aussi-tost, d'herbe en herbe chemine,
Se baisse, arreste l'œil, les fueilles examine,
Sent une fleur, sent l'autre, et passe, et tourne court,
De ses regars cherchans tout l'environ parcourt,
Et represente ainsy, sur la rive champestre,
Le fidelle animal qui, pour trouver son maistre,
Flaire à droit, flaire à gauche, et, confus en ses pas,
Va tousjours d'homme en homme, et le sien n'attaint pas.
(II, 186–7)

In addition to the quaintness of the comparison it is quite obvious that Saint-Amant is guilty here, as he was in the other descriptions of movement we examined in Chapter 4, of causing a loss of urgency and momentum by the introduction of gratuitous material.

It has become apparent that it is not merely Saint-Amant's preoccupation with detail that is his undoing, but his preoccupation with detail of a certain kind in the wrong place. Clearly some descriptions call for a broad and suggestive, rather than a detailed, treatment. And yet, on the other hand, one could conceivably think of details which might have actually enhanced the description of the Crossing of the Red Sea, for example. The poet could perhaps have seized upon a mother's fearful glance over her shoulder at the still sleeping Egyptians. He could have seized upon some detail of the Israelites' frantic scramble to safety — parents hurrying their children on, people stumbling, the young helping the old and infirm, and so on. In other words, Saint-Amant could have allied a few details more suited to the subject to a more general approach and, in so doing, rendered the whole far more satisfactory both artistically and logically.

As for the wider question of whether one can mingle heroic and idyllic elements without losing one's grip on the reader, it would seem that, as long as these elements do not contradict each other nor overlap too readily, they may, in fact, be complementary. That is to say the lack of tension in passages of an idyllic nature can act as a foil to the more emotionally charged heroic passages. This is not a question to be studied at length here as it is really outside the scope of this particular chapter. However, it must be said that the way Saint-Amant jumps erratically from one to the other, the way he frequently fails to distinguish between them when he should, negates any positive effect their combined presence might have had. Moreover the reader often feels cheated. For example, at the beginning of the work Saint-Amant sets the scene for the story to come with an admirable description of the city of Memphis, a fine, visually evocative

picture, followed by an account of the pitiful plight of the Israelites where the poet again uses the pictorial principle of analysis into groups:

> Mais, helas! un dur prince, un tygre espouventable,
> Diffamant par son regne un lieu si delectable,
> La rendoit aux Hebreux, lors esclaves sous luy,
> Un triste et sombre enfer plein d'horreur et d'ennuy.
> Et, bien que sur ces bords, depuis que dans les chaisnes
> Ils souffroyent la rigueur des plus sanglantes gesnes,
> Par plus de trois cens fois le ravage annuel
> Eust couvert tous les champs d'un bien-fait ponctuel,
> Toutesfois le long cours de cette servitude,
> Pour cette nation n'avoit eu rien de rude,
> Au prix de l'aspre joug dont cet homme inhumain
> Luy surchargeoit le col de sa terrible main.
> Tantost il la forçoit à creuser des abîmes;
> Tantost, pour eslever les fastueuses cimes
> Des prodiges de marbre erigez vainement,
> Il l'envoyoit gemir proche du firmament.
> Là l'un s'usoit les bras après une chaussée;
> L'autre mettoit au feu mainte brique entassée;
> L'autre tailloit un roc, l'autre fendoit un pin,
> Et jamais de leur tasche ils ne voyoient la fin;
> Car, une œuvre estant faite, un monstre sanguinaire
> Qui sur leurs actions controloit d'ordinaire,
> En commandoit une autre, et d'un bois en courrous,
> Pour tout loyer, après, les accabloit de coups.
>
> (II, 153–4)

This sad, distressing picture is hardly borne out by the idyllic life led by Elisaph, Merary and Moses's sister. They do not seem to be under any duress as they happily fish, catch birds, and tell stories, and it is only now and then that we are reminded of their situation and of the threat to Moses. In other words, the idyllic elements do not fit in with what we know of the captivity of the Israelites nor with what Saint-Amant leads us to expect. Whilst such elements are not out of place in the minor story of Jacob, and may be seen as having a justifiable role to play there, they do seem disconcertingly ill-suited to the main narrative.

Broadly speaking, Saint-Amant is not successful in his attempts to portray emotion nor does he manage to move the reader. His talent for detailed, visually biased descriptions becomes a barrier which, time and time again, prevents him from working up to a pitch of emotion or even achieving a sense of danger, anxiety, hope, pity or despair which could, in turn, be transmitted to his audience. *Moyse Sauvé*, in the final analysis, really deserves no better fate than that which it has suffered — that is to be forgotten except for a few colourful excerpts which have found their way into various anthologies.