

PART 1
THE LIFE

CHAPTER I

THE FORMATIVE YEARS

Like much else in La Harpe's life, even his origins were for his contemporaries a subject of controversy. More interested in possible scandal than in fact, they took delight in reproducing various ill-founded tales. Bachaumont proclaimed La Harpe to be the son of a 'porteur d'eau et d'une ravaudeuse';¹ according to Métra and G. Imbert, he owed his existence to the 'accouplement clandestin d'une cuisinière et d'un soldat invalide . . . On assure même que lorsque [La Harpe] vit le jour, sa mère était si pauvre que pressée par les douleurs de l'enfantement, elle le mit au monde au milieu de la rue dont il porte le nom'.² It was this last version which enjoyed most success among the salacious-minded literary public of the time. It was adopted by Sabatier de Castres,³ and later used by Royou in the *Année littéraire*.⁴ La Harpe's reply to Royou,⁵ in which he claimed to be a member of the notable Swiss family from Rolle on the lake of Geneva, was simply not believed by his contemporaries.

Yet, we now know beyond any doubt that he was born on 20 November 1739, the son of 'Jean-François de la Harpe, ancien capitaine d'artillerie, et de Marie-Louise Devienne, demeurants rue Saint-Victor'.⁶ La Harpe's father was indeed a member of the Swiss family of that name and was the son of one Isaac Loys Delharpe.⁷ Unfortunately, beyond this link, little is known about him. The Conseil de Rolle granted his mother, Claudine Bouquet, a proof of consanguinity on 30 July 1704, following the death of her husband. When he became the godfather of another member of the family on 16 February 1720, he was referred to as being a 'lieutenant en France'. His last recorded connexion with the Pays de Vaud dates from 10 August 1726 when he paid off part of an annuity bond of 3,000 florins which he had introduced in Rolle on 16 September 1724. He appears to have married Marie-Louise Devienne about 1730 as before the destruction of records during the Commune of 1871 there existed the death certificate of a daughter who died on 3 November 1741 at the age of ten.⁸

Equally little is known about the military career of the writer's father, although the son was to insist that he had been a 'chevalier de l'ordre de Saint-Louis'.⁹ In any case, whatever his background, by 1739 he was reduced to living humbly. The boy had as godparents a spinster and a 'loueur de carrosses'.¹⁰ It has been suggested that this poverty was due to the couple's having a multitude of children.¹¹ Be that as it may, only one sister of the writer, Thérèse, seems to have survived.¹²

The family was to remain united only for the first nine and a half years of La Harpe's life. The father died on 6 May 1749, plunging his wife and children from poverty into complete destitution.¹³ The young boy was taken in and cared for for six months by the Sœurs de la Charité of the Parish of Saint-André-des-Arts.¹⁴ Then, in October or November 1749, the parish priest, Father Claude Léger, presented him to the headmaster of the Collège d'Harcourt, Gilles-Thomas Asselin, who was so impressed by him that he gave him a scholarship.¹⁵

Asselin's faith in the boy was soon to be justified. The latter took his studies seriously and plunged wholeheartedly into an education based almost entirely on the study of the Classical languages.¹⁶ At first, he found it so difficult to master the subtleties of grammar that many years later he could still remember the almost physical pain caused by his inability to understand it.¹⁷ Yet, the fruits of his hard work began to be seen when he entered his first *concours général*.¹⁸ On 6 August 1753, he was awarded two honourable mentions, one for translation into Latin, and one for Latin verse.¹⁹ Although he won no prizes in 1754, on 4 August 1755 he received an honourable mention for Latin verse and the first prize for translation from Latin into French.²⁰ His first year in *rhétorique* ended with his receiving the first prize of the University from the hands of Maupeou on 7 August 1756. For the same session, he carried off two first prizes, one for *amplification* in Latin and one for translation from Latin into French, a second prize for Latin verse, and an honourable mention for *amplification* in French.²¹ On 12 August 1757, when La Harpe was a *vétéran* in his second year in *rhétorique*, Maupeou again handed him the first prize for the University. He also received from the hands of the Rector, Le Bel, two first prizes for *amplification*, one for Latin and one for French, and a second prize for Latin verse.²²

To modern eyes, these competitions appear a little sterile, but La Harpe himself was always deeply aware of the debt that he owed to his education and, in particular, to the exercises that he practised in these competitions. Whereas Voltaire, for instance, dismissed *amplification* as the art of being longwinded,²³ La Harpe remained convinced that it taught the rudiments of oratory.²⁴ In the same way, it was only through composing Latin verse that one learned to appreciate fully the beauties of Virgil and Horace.²⁵ Above all, he was grateful to his school for showing him these beauties. By introducing him to the Classical languages — to Latin rather more than to Greek — his masters had given him 'des inépuisables jouissances préparées pour le reste de la vie',²⁶ without which it was impossible to succeed in any intellectual activity.²⁷ This education had taught him the fundamental principles of good taste and of 'la saine littérature'.²⁸

This earnest pupil, nevertheless, also enjoyed the pleasures of other boys of his age. He joined his school-fellows in jumping over the ditch that surrounded the courtyard.²⁹ As mischievous as any other schoolboy, he took delight in

forbidden and rumbustious escapades. He slid down the handrail of the banisters.³⁰ When there was snow on the ground, he threw snowballs at passers-by.³¹

These moments of boisterous recreation brought relief from the rather solemn atmosphere of school life. The routine was Spartan, if not as rigorous as in earlier times. The pupils rose at six in the morning on weekdays, and at seven on Sundays. Their day was filled with classes and study sessions, and what little time remained was largely taken up with prayers both in the morning and at night, and by mass following the morning classes. On Wednesdays, the afternoon was free, but after morning mass the pupils had religious instruction. They had greater freedom on Sundays and feast days, but as well as mass in the morning they then also had to attend vespers in the afternoon.³² It is not surprising that the future *philosophe* was to say that being at school at this time was akin to living in a monastery,³³ nor is it surprising that the young man should have wished to taste the delights of the city that lay just beyond the school's walls.

This desire was heightened by the fact that most of La Harpe's school-fellows came from rich families. Following the death of his mother in the Hôtel-Dieu on 16 February 1756,³⁴ he kept few links with his own past.³⁵ He preferred to start cultivating those valuable social connexions that could replace the background of a well-provided family. His closest school-friend, for instance, was a noted social climber, the Marquis de Pezay. Together, they discovered the joys and tribulations of adolescence,³⁶ and, if Pezay's own ruthless ambition led finally to a certain coolness between the young men,³⁷ the lesson of this ambition was not lost on La Harpe. He too came to compare the rigours of study unfavourably with the joys of social success. He adopted the manners of mondain society and he then took on its way of thinking. He was to become a *philosophe* more out of respect for fashion than through deep conviction. He merely followed the example of many of his companions who took to this new creed as a symbol of their emancipation:

A peine hors des classes, toutes ces leçons, un peu sévères pour la légèreté de cet âge, se confondant bientôt, dans l'opinion et dans le discours, avec toute cette discipline de collège, qu'on ne traitait plus que de pédantisme dès qu'on n'y était plus assujéti, tout cela ne paraissait plus qu'une routine d'école qu'on oubliait bientôt comme le latin . . . Trois ou quatre sophismes usés, trois ou quatre plaisanteries triviales, mais qui étaient des nouveautés pour la jeunesse, leur semblaient des lumières d'homme, faites pour remplacer la crédulité de l'enfance, comme la liberté du monde pour remplacer la ferule.³⁸

Perhaps through the influence of Asselin, who had been a friend of Voltaire's,³⁹ La Harpe cultivated an admiration for the latter even before leaving school. This admiration soon developed into a form of 'ivresse impétueuse' which

nothing could moderate.⁴⁰ While still in *rhétorique*, he learned by heart Voltaire's *Épître à Uranie* and took as a motto its scepticism and call to hedonism:

Laissez donc là tous les systèmes,
Sources d'erreurs et de débats;
Et, choisissant l'Amour pour maître
Jouissez au lieu de connaître.⁴¹

Armed with this philosophy, he entered society during his last year at school from 1757 to 1758, when he was free to go into town whenever he pleased.⁴² Although he was extremely small in stature,⁴³ his face was well-formed and attractive.⁴⁴ From the outset, he showed considerable charm.⁴⁵ Seeing much promise in the young man, the poet Dorat took an interest in him and introduced him to many of the more important literary figures of the time.⁴⁶ It was not long before he knew influential personalities in this close-knit society,⁴⁷ Duclos,⁴⁸ d'Alembert,⁴⁹ Thomas,⁵⁰ Saint-Lambert.⁵¹ Along with Chamfort, he was to become a protégé of the Marquis de Ximenès.⁵²

In his choice of friends and protectors, he again showed his desire to enter the Voltairian fold. Apart from having a certain affection for Helvétius,⁵³ to whom he was introduced by Saint-Lambert,⁵⁴ he avoided the society of other atheists such as d'Holbach,⁵⁵ although he was introduced to Diderot as early as September or October 1757.⁵⁶ He had been spending the summer holidays in the country, where a friend of Diderot's had entrusted La Harpe with a letter for him. La Harpe was, above all, struck by Diderot's 'jeu d'énergumène'.⁵⁷ For four hours, the latter performed while the youth calmly watched him. Although he continued to see Diderot fairly frequently for some time, he was to claim — perhaps a little too vehemently for it to be thoroughly credible — that he had always found the man ridiculous.⁵⁸ What is certain is that La Harpe found it difficult to like a man who always held the floor in every conversation.⁵⁹

On the whole, he was to prefer the company of those more ready to flatter a 'jeune tête, folle de poésie et de vanité'.⁶⁰ For this reason, he avoided those circles that went in for political discussion and favoured those where, under the influence of women, the main interest was literary gossip. He became a frequent guest at the house of Pezay's sister, Mme. de Cassini,⁶¹ whose gatherings were renowned for their love of petty intrigue.⁶² He came to know Mme. Du Deffand⁶³ and Mme. Geoffrin.⁶⁴ Through d'Alembert, he was to have access to the *salon* of Mlle. de Lespinasse.⁶⁵ He was admitted to the societies of Mme. d'Houdetot⁶⁶ and of the Maréchale de Luxembourg.⁶⁷ He dined frequently at the home of Mme. de Marchais.⁶⁸ Until the quarrel over the rival merits of Gluck and Piccini that divided Parisian society in 1777, his closest friends were to be found in the circles ruled over by Mme. Suard and Mme. Saurin.⁶⁹

He further identified himself as a Voltairian by quarrelling with Voltaire's enemies. Although he made much of remaining on speaking terms with a noted

anti-Voltairian, La Beaumelle,⁷⁰ he was to claim that he had fallen out with Fréron as early as 1757. He had met Fréron some time before when he had brought him an ode which he wanted to see published in the *Année littéraire*.⁷¹ Fréron had politely shown him the door, and La Harpe had thrown his poem on the fire and thought no more about it. His enmity for Fréron began at a dinner-party given by Dorat for La Harpe, Colardeau, Dudoyer de Gastels and Fréron.⁷² When, at the dinner-table, the conversation came on to the subject of Corneille, and La Harpe felt that Fréron was attacking Voltaire, the young man could not hold his tongue, nor hide his disapproval. This, according to La Harpe, deeply wounded Fréron. He came to see in the harsh criticism of reviews by Fréron the expression of a personal grudge. Yet, after La Harpe's somewhat stormy departure from the dinner table, Fréron and his friends merely wondered 'quelle était cette *bamboche* . . . qui parlait au lieu d'écouter, qui avait le ton si affirmatif, [qui] régénait depuis deux heures, et se pavanait à table en Empereur de Rhétorique'.⁷³ The schoolboy already showed some of the intolerance in questions of taste that was to be the mark of the man.

After leaving school, La Harpe moved on to the Sorbonne to study law,⁷⁴ but, having discovered the delights of society, he found this irksome and boring.⁷⁵ He was more interested in literature and the prizes that it offered. He quite possibly collaborated in a defence of the *philosophes* against Fréron and others with an anonymous brochure which appeared in January 1758, entitled *L'Aléthophile*.⁷⁶ In October 1759, he published his first verse, some *héroïdes*, along with an essay on this then fashionable form of heroic poetry in the manner of Pope.⁷⁷ The poems were well received and compared favourably to similar productions by Colardeau.⁷⁸ La Harpe was beginning to make some headway on the Parisian scene.

In 1760, however, this activity was interrupted when he was accused of writing satirical and even scabrous verse against his former teachers at the Collège d'Harcourt.⁷⁹ It was even said that he had attacked his benefactor, the headmaster.⁸⁰ On 29 February 1760, the lieutenant général de police, de Sartine, wrote to a police inspector, P. J. de La Villegaudin, sending him the lines which had been handed to him by Asselin.⁸¹ The police already knew that the lines were in the handwriting of Jean-Baptiste de Lafitte, the sixteen-year-old son of a surgeon living in the rue Serpente and a pupil in *philosophie* at the Collège de Beauvais.⁸² The boy was to maintain that he had merely copied the lines from a manuscript given him by La Harpe. In his reply to Sartine on 1 March, La Villegaudin reported that he had spent the whole of the previous day looking for La Harpe without success.⁸³ Was the latter avoiding him?⁸⁴ At any rate, he soon realized that the police were on his tail. On 9 March, he wrote to Lafitte's father in a tone of outraged innocence, demanding the chance to justify himself, giving vent to veiled threats, but also asking that the letter should be for his eyes alone.⁸⁵ Monsieur Lafitte sent it on to La Villegaudin.

At ten in the morning on Sunday 16 March La Harpe was arrested and interrogated by the police. He maintained that he was innocent to the bitter end, only admitting that he had heard two of the stanzas recited at the Café de Dubuisson, better known as the *Caveau*,⁸⁶ and that about fifteen days before he had talked with Lafitte ‘chez la demoiselle Fleuri, demeurant vis-à-vis le collège d’Harcourt’. In spite of his protests, he was led off to the tiny prison reserved for minor offenders, the Fort-L’Evêque.

Lafitte was not arrested and interrogated until 2.30 in the afternoon of the next day. He stated that La Harpe had given him the verse to copy about three weeks before in the Luxembourg gardens⁸⁷ and had at that time admitted to being the author. La Harpe, according to Lafitte, had wanted copies of the poem to be distributed in the courtyard of the Collège d’Harcourt. However, when asked to produce the original in La Harpe’s handwriting, he replied that he had burned it ‘chez Monsieur de Casaubon, ancien écolier du Collège d’Harcourt et y demeurant, en présence dudit Casaubon’. He also claimed to have shown it to a certain Simon.

Sitting alone in his prison, La Harpe became the prey of despair.⁸⁸ He wrote to a patroness, the Marquise Rebé du Bourg, on 27 March, begging her to intercede on his behalf with Sartine.⁸⁹ His letter had no immediate effect. Meanwhile, the elder Lafitte had gone to see Sartine on the day after his son’s arrest with a letter of recommendation from an Avocat au Parlement, Lherminier,⁹⁰ and on 30 March the boy was freed. Still in prison, La Harpe wrote to Sartine on 1 April, insisting that evidence be brought against him:

Le seul visiblement coupable et intéressé à se disculper a été dispensé (chose étrange) de prouver ce qu’il avançait; et à voir de quelle manière on le traite, on dirait qu’il ne s’est délivré du péril qu’en se rendant l’organe de mes ennemis.⁹¹

Again Sartine was unmoved, and La Harpe remained where he was. On 19 April, a Commissaire au Châtelet, Laumonier, wrote to the minister of justice, the Comte de Saint-Florentin, on La Harpe’s behalf.⁹² Saint-Florentin’s reply on 21 April was the sinister permission that ‘le st. de La Harpe soit puni seulement par la prison, et qu’il reste dans celle où il est’. He stayed there until 18 May.⁹³

At this distance in time it is difficult to judge the extent of La Harpe’s guilt, although he did later admit to writing at least some of the verse:

Il est bien vrai qu’à l’âge de dix-neuf ans, je fis très imprudemment quelques couplets contre des particuliers du collège d’Harcourt et que quelques-uns de mes camarades les recueillirent et y en ajoutèrent d’autres. Mais, dans ces couplets, il n’est nullement question d’aucun homme envers qui j’eusse le moindre devoir à remplir.⁹⁴

Boissy d’Anglas, perhaps over-anxious to defend La Harpe, will go so far as to say that:

cette plaisanterie était l'ouvrage de plusieurs jeunes gens, et m. de La Harpe fut le seul puni, parce qu'il était pauvre, sans appui, sans état, sans protecteurs, et parce qu'il eut le courage de garder à ses compagnons le secret le plus inviolable.⁹⁵

We have seen that he was not entirely without friends, but he was certainly dealt with by the police in an arbitrary and summary fashion. He was put in prison before the interrogation of the chief witness and was not given the opportunity of confronting him. To judge from extant documents, Casaubon, who was said to have seen the original manuscript being destroyed, was never formally questioned on this extremely important point. As a school-fellow of La Harpe's, his evidence would have been capital. The evidence of the only other person supposed to have seen the verse written in La Harpe's hand, Simon, amounts to little more than a police report in the third person, where it is admitted that Simon hardly knew La Harpe.⁹⁶

The only evidence, therefore, really worthy of study is the verse itself, which must be reproduced in its entirety:⁹⁷

Toi dont fut inspiré Rousseau,
O noir et terrible génie,
Viens, et sur le plus vil troupeau
Verse le fiel et l'infamie.

Il faut que par toi je commence,
Louvel,⁹⁸ le plus sot des docteurs,
Tu sais bien être en récompense
Le plus effronté des voleurs.

Crains pourtant la haine publique,
Elle a déjà flétri ton nom;
Elle rendra ta fin tragique
Par le gibet ou le bâton.

Toi Douët, hideux sodomite,
Ne crains point d'aller en enfer;
Dieu sait qu'en ta rage maudite
Tu voudras foutre Lucifer.

Quel est ce Cyclope tout neuf?
C'est toi, Vauleg[e]lard⁹⁹ qui m'appelle;
Ta tête et tes yeux sont d'un bœuf,
Et tu n'as pas plus de cervelle.

Et toi lourd et pesant Gardin¹⁰⁰
Qui pour prier Dieu fais mes veilles,
De peur d'écorder mes oreilles,
Songe à le prier en latin.

Alais¹⁰¹ escroc à bénéfice,
Le plus dégoûtant des coquins,
Aux femmes de tes paroissiens
Vas-tu donner la chaude pisse?

Dagoumer,¹⁰² bête à large panse,
 Qui brailles et bois en tout temps,
 Bois, mon ami, l'on te dispense
 D'avoir un instant de bon sens.
 Toi, Mortlieux, âne à tonsure,
 Qui fais le petit érudit,
 Au lieu de laver ta figure
 Songe à décrasser ton esprit.
 De Luedelberg, chantre si doux,
 A toi, scholastique pécore,
 Tes maîtresses sont à six sols
 Et tes vers valent moins encore.
 Quoi! ma liste est si tôt finie!
 Viens, Renard, viens goûter du plat;
 Demeure sot toute ta vie,
 Tu n'as pas l'espoir d'être fat.

It is not possible to identify all those mentioned, but apart from Louvel, Allais and Dagomer, none seems to have had much dealings with La Harpe. Only Dagomer figures on the list of his teachers that he drew up in his defence:¹⁰³ 'MM. l'Hermitte, en sixième; Brenet¹⁰⁴ en cinquième; Chéron, en quatrième; Dagomer, en troisième; Viel,¹⁰⁵ en seconde; Wallée, en rhétorique, Basset, en philosophie'.

In his self-justification, La Harpe is surely worthier of belief than some of his commentators have liked to make out. That he was mixed up in the composition of this verse is beyond doubt, but that he was not alone would appear more than probable. The verse, obscene and written in a style that would be easy to imitate,¹⁰⁶ strikes one immediately as a silly prank, certainly not reason enough to send a twenty-year-old to prison for over two months, nor to brand him for the rest of his life as having been ungrateful to those who had succoured him.

His youth ended on this rather sour note. Having risen from poverty to the rather sheltered life of the lionized brilliant pupil whose early promise as a man of letters had begun to open many a door, he was reminded by his imprisonment that he had only just set out on the road to fortune, and that many a pitfall awaited the unwary. His ambition for recognition and glory became, through this harsh treatment, all the more entrenched and seemed to override all other feelings and thoughts. He already saw himself as a genius whom the envious wished to destroy:

Tu vois ma jeunesse incertaine
 Livrée aux plus affreux combats;
 Tu vois les pièges de la haine
 Se multiplier sous mes pas,
 Et l'Envie au regard farouche,
 Qui contre moi s'armant toujours,
 Veut du souffle impur de sa bouche
 Sécher la fleur de mes beaux jours.¹⁰⁷

CHAPTER II

LITERARY DÉBUT

Although embittered, La Harpe was by no means crushed. Towards the end of 1760, he published his *Homme de lettres, épître à M.****,¹ in which he once more raised his head, proclaimed his belief in his talent and dedicated his work to Voltaire, thus showing, in case there should be any doubt, to which literary camp he henceforth belonged. This allegiance, however, did not as yet procure him any proper source of income, and he seems to have been plagued by continuous poverty.² According to his enemies, he was supported by Dorat and earned a meagre living by lending his pen to anonymous libels.³ In 1761, he was accused of being the author of two unsigned attacks on Fréron. On learning from Dorat that Fréron believed him to be the author of *La Wasprie ou l'ami Wasp*,⁴ La Harpe wrote to Fréron and to the real author of this brochure, P. D. Ecouchard Le Brun,⁵ denying any connexion with the work, demanding equity in all criticism and, while not agreeing with Fréron's views, recognizing his qualities.⁶ This offended Le Brun.⁷ He could not understand why, when he had defended La Harpe against Fréron, the former should now praise the latter, especially as La Harpe had been accused by no less an authority than Voltaire⁸ of having written some *Anecdotes sur Fréron*.⁹ It was neither the first nor the last time that La Harpe was to disclaim the authorship of anonymous work. He had to fight to clear his name from such charges, and it was not without suffering much personal abuse.¹⁰ For the rest of his life he bore the scars of wounds inflicted by so early an entry into literary polemics.

These controversies did not make him neglect more serious literary pursuits. He published some more *héroïdes*¹¹ and composed some odes,¹² one of which, *Le Philosophe des Alpes*, had an honourable mention from the Académie française in 1762. Yet, it was with his first tragedy, *Le Comte de Warwick*,¹³ that he at last really tasted true success. The work had been meticulously composed. Aware of the difficulty of getting a play staged in Paris, he worked on *Warwick* for over two years, polishing it 'avec soin et avec défiance'.¹⁴ It was rehearsed at the Comédie française in August 1763 and originally promised for the beginning of September.¹⁵ On 30 August, La Harpe was invited to dinner by A. L. Thomas, along with Delille and Sélis. He read them his play. They were impressed, and, although he thought that the fifth act rather lacked substance, Thomas saw the work as heralding the arrival of a 'beau talent, une âme forte, un cœur éloquent et sensible'.¹⁶

The play was performed on 7 November 1763, and was an immediate success. It was repeated sixteen times, an honour which equalled, in the words of Grimm, 'le plus haut degré de gloire auquel un poète puisse prétendre'.¹⁷ The last performance had been scheduled for 10 December, but so great was public acclaim that the play was repeated on 28 of the month.¹⁸ By the express command of Louis XV, it was performed at court, and the young author presented to the king.¹⁹ With this success, La Harpe's place in Parisian society was secure. It is true that stories about his origins and his imprisonment now began to circulate even more widely as his success brought him fame,²⁰ but he himself had little time to listen to idle chatter. His financial position was improved,²¹ and, apart from friendship with Lekain who had played Warwick, the play brought him an asset which he had strived to attain ever since leaving school — association with Voltaire. Although the work was dedicated in name to the Prince de Condé, La Harpe sent the manuscript to Voltaire, and once again insisted that the latter was his spiritual leader:

Quoique éloigné du centre de notre littérature, vous en êtes toujours l'âme et l'honneur. Tous ceux qui font quelques pas dans cette carrière, où vous avez tant de fois triomphé, vous offrent en tribut les essais de leur jeunesse. En soumettant cet ouvrage à vos lumières, je ne fais que suivre la foule; et si je puis m'en distinguer, ce n'est que par la sensibilité particulière qui m'a toujours attaché à vos écrits, et dont j'ai osé déjà vous donner des témoignages.²²

The play was well received, and Voltaire now began to correspond with his new disciple, praising his 'bons principes' and his 'esprit juste et vrai'.²³ In June 1764, La Harpe appears to have paid a fleeting visit to Ferney in the company of the Marquis de Ximènes.²⁴ He was to return there for longer periods in the following years.

However, as this new relationship developed, so La Harpe grew away from some of his former friends. He finally broke off close relations with Diderot in February or March 1764, when he discovered that the latter talked about *Warwick* without having read it.²⁵ He was now on only distant terms with Pezay and had already quarrelled with his first benefactor, Dorat. Since being seen with Madame Fréron at a performance of Voltaire's *Ecossaise* in 1760, Dorat had, in La Harpe's view, taken on the 'ton et pour ainsi dire la livrée' of the Fréron family.²⁶ Their friendship finally ended when it was rumoured²⁷ that Dorat had written the harsh review of *Warwick* that appeared in the *Année littéraire* in December 1763.²⁸ They were to become bitter enemies when La Harpe wrote an epigram against Dorat which circulated widely in Paris in 1767.²⁹ For the casual observer, this change in loyalties seemed typical of a heartless social climber, ready to abandon all those who no longer served his purpose,³⁰ but the allegiance to rival camps made such a break inevitable.

Now assured of Voltairian support, La Harpe tried to repeat his theatrical success with a play on a classical subject, *Timoléon*.³¹ Unfortunately, Lekain —

who had a major rôle — sprained his knee, and the play was held up after its opening performance on 1 August 1764.³² After a number of changes had been made in acts four and five, the play was given a further three performances in December 1764, but without arousing a great deal of interest.³³ In spite of the rather mixed reception of the play on the stage, its author printed it, and in the preface and other notes defended himself against the various attacks that had been made on his good name.

Indeed, another event in his life had just become a source of even more gossip. On 22 November 1764, he married Marie-Marthe Monmayeux, the daughter of a café proprietor in the rue de Condé.³⁴ The girl was only twenty, and La Harpe only just twenty-five. All the scandal-sheets insisted that this was a forced marriage, and that he had had to be coerced by one of the girl's brothers.³⁵ Certainly, the failure of *Timoléon* had not left him in a good financial position for marriage, but, whatever the reasons for this union, Mademoiselle Monmayeux was not lacking in charm or accomplishments.³⁶ She was to leave a lasting impression on Voltaire. Boissy d'Anglas found her 'douée de beaucoup d'esprit et d'une sorte d'amabilité qui n'était pas sans agrément'.³⁷ Yet, married life for the La Harpes was not to be a particularly happy one, and one could detect a brittle hardening in the sensitivity of the young woman as the years went by. Nevertheless, she was to provide the writer with useful companionship in the social round of Parisian life, and remained his wife for nearly twenty-nine years.

As we have seen, marriage had not protected La Harpe from gossip. In December 1764, he was again accused of being the author of anonymous verse — some lines written against a decree on financial legislation and its sponsor, Laverdy.³⁸ As before, La Harpe seemed the best person to blame and he was even threatened with imprisonment.³⁹ It was with this threat still hanging over his head that he brought out his *Mélanges littéraires*, a collection of verse and miscellaneous prose pieces.⁴⁰ It aroused particular interest through the remarks on Lucan,⁴¹ where, as in his earlier essay on the *héroïdes*, he showed already that he was a stickler for correctness, and that he possessed a highly developed incisive critical sense.

At the beginning of June 1765, La Harpe left for Ferney without his wife, in order to work on a new play on a national subject, *Pharamond*.⁴² He found the subject difficult and, to Voltaire's dismay, he worked slowly.⁴³ In Ferney, there were other distractions to occupy his mind. He wrote verse⁴⁴ and played the parts of Zamore in *Alzire* and Genghis Khan in *L'Orphelin de la Chine*.⁴⁵

He returned to Paris on 6 or 7 August⁴⁶ and learned that he had won a prize of two hundred *écus* from the Académie de Rouen⁴⁷ for a poem on *La Délivrance de Salerne et la Fondation du Royaume des Deux-Siciles*.⁴⁸ His new play was performed at the Comédie française on 14 August. It was presented anonymously, but soon seen to be by La Harpe.⁴⁹ It was only performed twice. The

first act had been listened to in silence, some fine lines in the second had been applauded, but apart from a slight renewal of interest in the fourth act, the rest of the play struck the public as interminably long and dull.⁵⁰ The early promise that had been seen in the author of *Warwick* appeared to have come to nothing. Piron's prophecy that 'ce jeune homme n'a que cette pièce dans le ventre' seemed to be justified.⁵¹

He was not, however, going to abandon the stage easily. On 17 December 1765, he read another play on a national subject, *Gustave*,⁵² at the house of the Elie de Beaumonts.⁵³ The Comédie française staged it on 3 March 1766. It was to be the play's only performance. The first three acts were received enthusiastically, but interest died during the remainder. The author himself condemned the work.⁵⁴ His success with *Warwick* had opened wide the doors of the Comédie française and made it too easy for him to have plays produced there. The three unfortunate works that followed *Warwick* were conceived in haste 'et devaient se sentir de cette précipitation qui est l'abus de la facilité, et la suite d'une confiance téméraire'.⁵⁵

It was as a respite from the theatre, and turning to what he considered to be 'des travaux moins difficiles et moins dangereux',⁵⁶ that he won six hundred *livres* from the Académie française on 26 July 1766⁵⁷ for a poem called *Le Poète*,⁵⁸ thus beginning the long list of successes that he was to have in its competitions. The young rhetorician was safely back with the intellectual exercises learned so faithfully at school. It was a haven from his first disappointments in the outer world.

This outer world now seemed particularly unfriendly to a young man whose financial situation was worse than ever. Apart from his prize money and the scanty remuneration from his plays,⁵⁹ La Harpe's only regular source of income at this time was the annuity of a hundred and fifty *livres* settled on his wife at the time of their marriage.⁶⁰ It was to protect his protégé from the rigours of poverty that Voltaire invited him to come and stay in Ferney while working on yet another play.⁶¹ For nearly a year, the latter was to live peacefully in Ferney, working quietly 'loin de toute cabale'.⁶²

Before going there, however, he first left Paris in July 1766 to go and stay with the Florian family at Hornoy between Beauvais and Abbeville.⁶³ He spent the rest of the summer there, before he and his wife set out for Ferney, where they arrived on 4 November 1766.⁶⁴

Work on the new play was not easy, even though he slaved at it for ten hours a day.⁶⁵ During the first three months of his stay, Voltaire still expected him to be setting out for Paris with the new play ready just after Easter 1767.⁶⁶ No play appeared,⁶⁷ and in June 1767 he shelved his first subject when it was only half written⁶⁸ and began on another, *Les Barmécides*.⁶⁹ Even then, he made slow progress,⁷⁰ although he talked about his work with enthusiasm.⁷¹ At the same time, he did not neglect other genres. While refusing Panckoucke's offer of

support for a translation of Tassoni's *Secchia Rapita* in February 1767,⁷² he continued to enter for Academic competitions. Towards the end of December 1766, he learned that he had won a prize from the Académie française⁷³ for having successfully dealt with the rather laboured theme of *Des Malheurs de la Guerre et des Avantages de la Paix*.⁷⁴ Under Voltaire's guidance,⁷⁵ he composed a *philosophe's* reply to Barthe's *Lettre de l'Abbé de Rancé*.⁷⁶ In the summer of 1767 — with help from Voltaire who revealed to d'Alembert his identifying motto⁷⁷ — the young man carried off the annual prize for oratory at the Académie française with an *Eloge de Charles V*.⁷⁸ Voltaire was already beginning to talk of him as a suitable future member of that august body.⁷⁹

There were, however, disappointments. La Harpe sent two works to the Académie de Marseille and, although he won the poetry prize with an *héroïde* entitled *Servilie à Brutus après la mort de César*,⁸⁰ his prose piece, *Combien le génie des grands écrivains influe sur l'esprit de leur siècle*,⁸¹ was beaten by a work from Chamfort, who was still ostensibly a friend.⁸²

Social life in Ferney for La Harpe and his wife revolved around short excursions, to visit, for instance, the French resident in Geneva, P. M. Hennin,⁸³ meeting various visitors to Ferney, such as a distant cousin of La Harpe's,⁸⁴ playing chess⁸⁵ and acting in Voltaire's plays. The couple earned considerable praise from Voltaire as actors. Although small, La Harpe was elegant and graceful and he could recite well. Voltaire exaggerated when he said of him that he was the best actor then living; that in some respects he outclassed Lekain,⁸⁶ but certainly he was at home in rôles from Voltaire's theatre.⁸⁷ As for Madame de La Harpe, Voltaire's praise for her knew no bounds:

Nous avons trouvé dans Mme. de La Harpe un talent bien singulier. Il ne lui a fallu que deux ou trois répétitions pour acquérir ce que Mlle. Clairon a longtemps cherché. Sa déclamation pleine de tendresse et de force est soutenue par la figure la plus noble et la plus théâtrale, par de beaux yeux noirs qui disent tout ce qu'ils veulent dire, par un geste naturel, par la démarche la plus libre, et par les attitudes les plus tragiques.⁸⁸

He especially admired her as Obéide in *Les Scythes*⁸⁹ and based his stage instructions on her reactions to the rôle.⁹⁰

Now safely installed as Voltaire's spiritual heir, La Harpe treated his mentor with familiarity. During his visit to Ferney in 1765 he had already tricked Voltaire into expressing admiration for some verse by Lefranc de Pompignan,⁹¹ he now changed some lines in *Adélaïde du Guesclin* and in *Les Scythes* and, what is more, won Voltaire's approval.⁹² It appears that he did not take criticism from Voltaire with such good humour.⁹³

La Harpe's stay in Ferney also provided him with the opportunity for mild flirtation. While Madame de La Harpe was impressing Voltaire with her ability as an actress and with her outstanding integrity both as a woman and as a wife,⁹⁴ her husband became enamoured of a certain Madame Rilliet, who had

been separated from her husband and given shelter by Voltaire.⁹⁵ La Harpe sent her amorous notes to which she replied graciously.⁹⁶ His vanity was not confined to literature alone. Innocent enough, this incident reflects well his general weakness for gallantry, which must have exasperated his wife.

La Harpe left Ferney for Paris towards the end of October 1767.⁹⁷ It is difficult to say why he returned there at this time,⁹⁸ although he seems to have been very busy.⁹⁹ With the seal of approval from Voltaire, he was now a fully-fledged *philosophe*, and spent a great deal of time seeing d'Alembert, the go-between for all the various factions.¹⁰⁰ It has been suggested that through Voltaire's help, La Harpe began working as the private secretary of one of the finance administrators, Boutin, by January 1768, but it was a position that he was not to keep for very long.¹⁰¹

He returned to Ferney at the beginning of February after three months in Paris,¹⁰² but he did not have a very welcome reception. During his absence, Voltaire had learned that someone had stolen some manuscripts from him, and he strongly suspected La Harpe of being the culprit. By the end of the month, the latter was back in Paris in disgrace.¹⁰³ He was accused of having stolen and distributed in Paris various works which Voltaire did not want published, notably the second canto of *La Guerre de Genève*,¹⁰⁴ which appeared there at the beginning of December 1767.¹⁰⁵ There is no doubt that La Harpe gave copies of the poem to d'Alembert, Rochefort, Dupuits, and an unidentified lady at the beginning of November;¹⁰⁶ it was Dupuits who informed Voltaire.¹⁰⁷

However, when La Harpe returned to Ferney in February, he tried at first to make Voltaire believe that the poem had already been circulating in Paris before his arrival there, and that he had only distributed the poem himself 'parce qu'il en courait des copies infidèles'.¹⁰⁸ Voltaire then asked him how he came into possession of a perfect copy, especially as Dupuits had said that he had seen him leaving the library in Ferney with some papers.¹⁰⁹ For some time, La Harpe talked vaguely of having got a perfect copy from a friend whom he named — only after a week's hesitation — as the sculptor, Jean-Denis Antoine. Voltaire sent Damilaville to see Antoine and check on La Harpe's statement.¹¹⁰ Antoine was furious and replied that on the contrary La Harpe had corrected his copy.

1 March seems to have been a day of crisis for Voltaire. He wrote letters throughout the day, gradually getting rid of his anger in words:

[La Harpe] ne m'a jamais parlé de cette affaire qu'en baissant les yeux, et son visage prenait un air de pâleur qui n'est pas celui de l'innocence. Son procès est instruit. Il s'en faut beaucoup que je l'aie condamné rigoureusement, je suis trop partisan de la proportion entre les délits et les peines, et je sais qu'il faut pardonner.¹¹¹

The young man had particularly hurt Voltaire by refusing to confess correctly. Instead of admitting his crime to Voltaire's face, he merely sent him a note from his room.¹¹² At the same time, Voltaire did not think that he was alone in his

guilt. On 3 March, he sent the Dupuits and Madame Denis packing as well.¹¹³ He was convinced that his niece was an accomplice if not the main inspiration behind the affair.¹¹⁴

By now, news of the matter had reached Paris, and an anonymous public accusation against La Harpe was published in the *Gazette d'Utrecht* on 18 March. Madame de La Harpe wrote to Voltaire, imploring him to speak out in her husband's defence.¹¹⁵ Voltaire then wrote an open letter on 31 March for publication in various papers, and this seemed to clear La Harpe completely.¹¹⁶ In his private letters, however, Voltaire continued to complain about him and felt that he deserved the trouble that he had brought upon himself 'par son infidélité et par cet orgueil mêlé d'impolitesse et de dureté qu'on lui reproche avec tant de raison'.¹¹⁷

La Harpe's own public reply to the *Gazette d'Utrecht* certainly made him sound impenitent and was, in any case, unconvincing, as he attempted to refute the imputation made against him with mere scorn.¹¹⁸ Elsewhere, he tried to pass the affair off as an indiscretion rather than a serious fault.¹¹⁹ In private, however, he was a little ashamed of what he had done, and d'Alembert, for one, never missed the chance of lecturing him on the subject.¹²⁰ La Harpe's greatest worry seems to have been the possible permanent loss of Voltaire's goodwill. During the following weeks, he was most anxious to have news of Voltaire,¹²¹ and his solitary existence with a man whom La Harpe personally disliked, Father Adam.¹²²

CHAPTER III

ADULTHOOD

La Harpe's anxiety over the matter of the manuscripts was not to endure. Voltaire was not going to abandon to destitution a young man so obviously in need of help, and whose talents could be so useful to his cause. By the end of May their quarrel was over,¹ and La Harpe was again writing to Voltaire for advice.² Again thanks to Voltaire, his financial situation had been improved with a state gratuity 'sur le fonds destiné aux gens de lettres',³ and within a few months of returning to Paris he started his first regular job as an editor on the *Mercur de France*.⁴ Apart from bringing in a steady income,⁵ this meant that henceforth he was to be a key figure in the Voltairian cause.

Indeed, his work as a journalist rapidly made him an important figure on the Parisian scene. Soon, young men arriving in Paris or setting out on their literary careers sought his advice.⁶ One such beginner was Saint-Ange, who managed to get an audience with La Harpe through Chabanon in 1771.⁷ Somewhat intimidated by 'la morgue et la raideur' of the now-established critic,⁸ he was overjoyed when his verse pleased La Harpe,⁹ and the latter acquired a faithful disciple ready to defend him and his good name in times of stress.¹⁰

At times, La Harpe certainly needed defending. Journalism was — more than ever before — at the centre of literary polemics. His enemies were delighted when one of those whom he had criticized,¹¹ Blin de Sainmore, retaliated physically. Waiting until he was on his way to a bright gathering, 'bien poudré et paré de son habit de velours noir, sa veste dorée et ses manchettes de filet brodé', Blin de Sainmore attacked him and rolled him in the gutter.¹² For many — especially those whom he had criticized — his belief in his own powers badly needed to be thus disturbed. Many found him distinctly unpleasant, and according to these: 'C'était alors un petit personnage rogue et arrogant, qui, jusque dans la rue, se donnait des airs de monseigneur échappé d'un ministère, parce qu'il sortait du *Mercur*, singe manqué de Voltaire'.¹³

In society, too, even the impartial observer was struck by La Harpe's pride and, above all, by his desire for popularity, especially among women.¹⁴ His enemies insisted on his shallowness and love of intrigue:

rempli de confiance et d'orgueil, [il] parlait avec assurance, écoutait avec distraction; il avait la tête vive et le cœur froid. Ses idées, souvent brillantes, manquaient presque toujours de justesse et de solidité; n'ayant nulle sensibilité, aucune élévation dans l'âme, également incapable de réfléchir

et de méditer, il ne regardait l'héroïsme, en tout genre, que comme l'effet d'un calcul intéressé, ou comme le fruit d'une folie plus faite pour exciter la pitié d'un *philosophe*, que pour mériter son admiration. Quoiqu'il eût un amour-propre excessif, sa société n'était pas dépourvue d'agréments; il avait une souplesse extrême, et savait prendre sans peine mille formes différentes. Sans principes, et sans caractère, il changeait facilement d'opinion; son excessive légèreté le préservait de l'entêtement qu'inspire ordinairement l'orgueil. Inconséquent autant qu'indiscret, ces défauts donnaient souvent à ses discours et à sa conduite une apparence piquante de franchise et d'originalité. Enfin, on pouvait prendre en lui, pour de la gaieté, une certaine malignité naturelle qui ne se manifestait jamais que sous les traits de la plaisanterie.¹⁵

This picture must, however, be compared with the views of La Harpe's friends. Madame Suard, for instance, always kept affectionate memories of the man. While expressing her dislike for Chamfort, she was to say:

M. de La Harpe, au contraire, sentait et aimait le mérite, même de ceux qui surpassaient ses talents, pourvu que les hommes qui avaient cet avantage ne fussent pas injustes envers lui. Malgré l'amour-propre qu'on lui reprochait et dont son injuste sévérité lui laissait quelquefois trahir les mouvements, je n'ai point connu d'auteur plus docile à la critique. Il écoutait tous les bons juges et réformait ou corrigeait tout ce qu'on désapprouvait.¹⁶

Garat, too, was struck by the contrast between La Harpe's gentleness in society and his severity as a critic.¹⁷

Among his friends, he found a haven from the polemics of journalism and soon built up a routine that was to remain basically unaltered for nearly ten years. Often, sometimes as much as three times a week, after the end of the evening performances at the theatre or the opera, he would have dinner at the house of Monsieur and Madame Saurin, where he would read his verse and allow it to be criticized.¹⁸ Twice a week, he would call on Monsieur and Madame Suard,¹⁹ and gossip had it that for the mistress of the house he was more than a friend.²⁰ Close acquaintances were Marin,²¹ Rouillé de l'Etang,²² Schomberg²³ and the Elie de Beaumonts²⁴ to name only a few. He was proud to know Turgot as well as Necker.²⁵ He was a friend of the noted barrister, Target.²⁶ He was to owe a great deal in these years to the devotion of Condorcet.²⁷ He knew Voisenon,²⁸ and he renewed acquaintance with a man who appears to have been a fellow protégé of Father Léger and who was to be a faithful companion in later years, the Abbé Bourlet de Vauxcelles.²⁹

Along with the Abbé Delille and Condorcet, La Harpe dined with Turgot's secretary, Jean Devaines, on Tuesday evenings.³⁰ On the first Sunday of every month, he used to join his friends at the house of the Abbé Morellet.³¹ It was not long before he was admitted to the highest society. In the company of Boufflers, Delille, Rulhière, Saint-Lambert, Chamfort, Marmontel, Raynal and others he would call on the future French Ambassador in Turkey, Choiseul-Gouffier.³² He was a frequent guest of the Duc de Choiseul³³ and of the Duchesse

de Grammont.³⁴ On occasions, he met the Prince de Conti in the home of the Comtesse de Boufflers in the Temple.³⁵ At any glittering reunion, he was almost certain to be present. Carrying on with his love for acting, he took part in a great deal of amateur dramatics, either at the house of Madame de Cassini in the presence of the Prince de Condé,³⁶ or at that of the Demoiselles Verrières, who were renowned for their private stage.³⁷

In addition, the social round in Paris was accompanied by frequent excursions to the countryside, to see Watelet in his Moulin-Joli, Saint-Lambert in Eaubonne, or the Neckers at Saint-Ouen.³⁸ There, while Mlle. Clairon recited passages from famous tragedies over the dinner-table, La Harpe and Marmontel would read accompanying rôles.³⁹ Visiting the Maréchale de Luxembourg at L'Isle-Adam, La Harpe would walk with her as she held his arm.⁴⁰ Observing a habit that he had developed while still at school,⁴¹ he made a point of spending at least part of every summer in the country.⁴² Admittedly, this contact with nature was often reduced to the pleasures of a 'bal de village' or a fête in the grounds of some fine country house,⁴³ but in his old age he still remembered, for instance, the impression made on him in his youth by the countryside around Yerres, near Corbeil.⁴⁴

Yet, however interesting or brilliant this social round might be, he could not afford to neglect financial questions, the more so as he no longer enjoyed the advantages of living at Ferney. He began again to take part in literary competitions, but, at first, met with failure. His first entry, *Le Philosophe ou sur les Avantages de la Philosophie*,⁴⁵ was only given an honourable mention from the Académie française in 1768, although it appears that this was due to his bragging about winning the prize before it was officially announced.⁴⁶ D'Alembert, among others, wanted the prize to be held over until the following year,⁴⁷ but to the anger of, notably, Chamfort,⁴⁸ the *philosophes* were beaten and the rival faction in the academy got the prize awarded to the young Abbé de Langeac. Said to be highly confident of winning,⁴⁹ he fared even less well with an *Eloge de Henri IV*⁵⁰ which he then sent to the Académie de La Rochelle. The prize was given to Gaillard, and La Harpe got nothing, although the academy was sorry that it had not provided for an *accessit*, which would certainly have been given to him.⁵¹

The following year was for La Harpe largely a time of preparation. In April, he began a translation of Suetonius,⁵² but was quick to shelve it.⁵³ In May and June, he went to stay in various country houses and in Meudon⁵⁴ and worked on his first *drame*, *Mélanie*.⁵⁵ In September, he accompanied a troupe of actors led by d'Argental to Ris-Orangis and, among other parts, played Cézène in Voltaire's *Les Guèbres*.⁵⁶ Apart from beginning an abortive *Eloge de Molière* for the Académie française,⁵⁷ he entered only one competition that year. In June, he won a gold amarant from the Académie des Jeux Floraux in Toulouse for a poem called *Le Portrait du Sage*.⁵⁸

Towards the end of 1769, La Harpe finished *Mélanie*, but the subject, in which a young novice hangs herself rather than take her vows, was hardly one to please the authorities. The only way round was to get the play known in society, and so its author started giving readings during February and March 1770.⁶⁹ These enjoyed an immense success, and, for six weeks, the work was the 'engouement de Paris'.⁶⁰ La Harpe read *Mélanie* so often that in the end he knew it by heart.⁶¹ When it was read at the house of the Duchesse de Grammont in the middle of February, one of those present was the Duc de Choiseul, who was to gratify the author with a present of 3,000 *livres* when the latter complained that he could not get his play printed.⁶² With such ministerial protection, he could now risk publishing the work, and, according to Grimm, received 4,000 *livres* from the edition in under a fortnight.⁶³

Choiseul's patronage did not stop with the play. He suggested that La Harpe return to his translation of Suetonius, and promised him government support.⁶⁴ The work was finished by June.⁶⁵ La Harpe's many activities, however, did not give him time to take up Panckoucke's offer of employment on preparation, under Marmontel, of the supplement to the *Encyclopédie*.⁶⁶ In any case, at heart, he was more interested in works of imagination which could be used to pave the way to the Académie française.⁶⁷ Inspired by the success of *Mélanie*, he wrote another *drame*, *Barneveldt*,⁶⁸ which he had finished by the end of the year. He read it in the *salon* of Mlle. de Lespinasse on 12 December 1770.⁶⁹ By the end of January 1771, he had begun work on a so-called translation from Sophocles — *Philoctète*⁷⁰ —, although he soon went back to *Les Barmécides* and had practically finished the latter by September.⁷¹

His academic ambitions were, nevertheless, to receive a number of setbacks. Already in October 1770, following the death of Moncrif, he was fairly confident of election, since he had powerful allies in Thomas, d'Alembert and Duclos.⁷² These hopes were, however, soon dashed, as once again he was accused of being the author of some anonymous verse, some mysterious lines against the Maréchal de Richelieu which had begun to circulate in Paris.⁷³ La Harpe was said to have written them to please d'Alembert, and, not for the first time, the Academy was split in two.⁷⁴ Séguier and the Maréchal de Richelieu said publicly that if ever La Harpe were elected, they would resign.⁷⁵ By 12 December, it was obvious that he must abandon all hope.⁷⁶

Indeed, he was again the cause of discord in the Academy only a few months later. In August 1771, he carried off both the poetry prize and the prize for oratory with a poem called *Des Talents dans leur rapport avec la société et le bonheur*⁷⁷ and with an *Eloge de Fénelon*.⁷⁸ His triumph with the latter work, however, soon turned sour. Objecting to his interpretation of Fénelon as a kind of early *philosophe*, the clergy demanded that the work be suppressed, and on 21 September La Harpe's work and that of the runner-up, the Abbé Maury, were both banned.⁷⁹ Not only were all the unsold copies of the *Eloge de Fénelon*

withdrawn, but La Harpe himself had to submit to interrogation and revision of the text by three theologians from the Sorbonne. At first, he spoke of refusing to comply,⁸⁰ but his better judgement soon made him realize that enough harm had already been done.⁸¹ The ill-wind between the two rival factions in the Academy had become even more fiercely inflamed⁸² and there was now even less hope of getting him elected to a vacant seat.⁸³

His final misfortune in 1771 was illness. The three weeks that he had to spend in bed, not only left him feeling rather weak, but delayed his completion of *Les Barmécides*.⁸⁴ This he nevertheless managed to finish by the middle of February 1772.⁸⁵ His social life was to be particularly active in the following months, and he wrote much of his lighter verse at this time.⁸⁶ The year was marked by a momentary reconciliation with Dorat, brought about by Madame de Cassini, who made the enemies embrace.⁸⁷

His desire to participate in the joys of Parisian life meant, however, that his financial situation was as precarious as ever. In the middle of 1772, he had the added expense of moving house,⁸⁸ and the frivolities of society and gallant verse did not supplement an income that was adequate only for a man of moderate taste. It was perhaps in order to make some more money that he agreed to work for a *Galerie universelle*, containing portraits of various famous men, accompanied by short biographical notes.⁸⁹ It was probably for the same reason that he published an *Eloge de Racine* that had been intended for a competition organized by the Académie de Marseille.⁹⁰ He also took on some more hack work in the autumn of the following year, when d'Alembert entrusted him and Lacombe⁹¹ with the manuscript of letters from Madame de Sévigné to the président Moulceau.⁹² As before, Voltaire was also there to try and help. Although his efforts came to nothing, when Frederick the Great's correspondent in Paris, Thieriot, died in October 1772, Voltaire proposed La Harpe as his successor.⁹³ As late as December 1773, we find Voltaire appealing to d'Argental for financial help for La Harpe.⁹⁴

His financial situation was not helped by his failure to get *Les Barmécides* performed. When he presented it to the Comédie française on 26 February 1773, the list of plays waiting to be performed was already long.⁹⁵ Seeing that there was little chance of having the work staged in the immediate future, he began another series of readings, although he attempted to limit these to circles of friends or people of influence.⁹⁶ On 20 January 1773, he read four acts of the tragedy to Thomas.⁹⁷ In the middle of the same month, he read three acts at the house of the Maréchale de Luxembourg and he read the whole work there on 28 February.⁹⁸ By June, he was reading it to personages such as Madame du Barry.⁹⁹

The year was, however, to hold promise of better things to come. At the beginning of August, he learned that he had won a further prize from the Académie française with an *Ode sur la Navigation*.¹⁰⁰ His enemies had wanted

the prize to be withheld, but the Voltairians in the Academy now enjoyed greater influence than before and had their way.¹⁰¹ With this support, La Harpe's position as the *dauphin* of literature now seemed once more assured. The *Mercure de France* had become a depository of praise for him from both the great and small;¹⁰² even his unsuccessful rival for the poetry prize that year, André-Murville, dedicated his work to the victor.¹⁰³

Then, at last, Voltaire succeeded in getting material help for his disciple. Through Andrei Shuvalov, chamberlain to Catherine the Great, he obtained for La Harpe the post of correspondent in Paris for the heir to the Russian throne, Paul.¹⁰⁴ La Harpe had started to send letters by the end of February 1774, and this new appointment brought with it a very welcome increase in income.¹⁰⁵

It was, indeed, a time for optimism. On 10 May 1774, Louis XV died and with the new reign the whole of France found fresh hope. Turgot was expected to solve her financial problems. Louis XVI was young and his queen beautiful and attentive to the arts. La Harpe was among the many to celebrate. He praised the new king's liberality;¹⁰⁶ he worshipped the queen's beauty and grace.¹⁰⁷ From now on, he was admitted to court.

In his literary activities, he was not quite so fortunate. He sent to the Académie de Marseille an *Eloge de La Fontaine*¹⁰⁸ which his friends were convinced was bound to win the prize. It was probably in order to help La Harpe that Shuvalov added 2,000 *livres* to the prize money.¹⁰⁹ To the former's dismay, it all went to Chamfort. He also failed to win the poetry prize at the Académie française with a poem entitled *Conseils à un jeune poète*.¹¹⁰ However, his friends in the Academy were now powerful enough to have the prize withheld until the following year.¹¹¹ With such allies on his side, these disappointments were now minor setbacks rather than failures of importance.

In the same way, his inability to get *Les Barmécides* produced did not stop him writing plays. He had begun the year by helping to correct Voltaire's *Sophonisbe*,¹¹² but he was soon working on a new production of his own, *Les Brames*.¹¹³ Escaping from the bustle of town life, he was probably working on this when he spent the summer of 1774 in a cottage in the grounds of the château de Montgeron on the edge of the forest of Sénart.¹¹⁴ By the end of the year, he had written enough of the play to read it to d'Alembert and Condorcet.¹¹⁵ His new post as literary correspondent of Paul of Russia then led him to begin a play on a Russian theme — *Menzicoff ou les Exilés*.¹¹⁶ This work was ready by March 1775.¹¹⁷ On 14 March he read it at the house of the Neckers,¹¹⁸ and on 22 he read it to the queen.¹¹⁹ It was on her command that he sent it to the Comédie française on 1 July for inclusion in the list of plays for the season at Fontainebleau that autumn.¹²⁰ It was performed there on 10 November, but was not given a run in Paris, both because of the long list of plays still waiting to be performed and because the Russian ambassador feared that it would displease Catherine and her *entourage* in Saint Petersburg.¹²¹

However frustrating this might be, La Harpe was by now in an even better financial situation. Thanks to his favour at court, at the beginning of March 1775 he was given a royal pension of 1,000 *livres* which was to last until the end of January 1779.¹²² In addition, on 6 April 1775, he signed a contract with Panckoucke to edit and revise the Abbé Prévost's *Histoire générale des voyages*.¹²³ He was to be paid 20,000 *livres* for this work.¹²⁴

1775 was also to be a year of crowning glory at the Académie française. He won the prize for oratory with an *Eloge de Catinat*,¹²⁵ and thus earned the eternal enmity of his unsuccessful rival, the Comte de Guibert.¹²⁶ For the poetry contest, he shortened his *Conseils à un jeune poète*¹²⁷ and, with the never-failing help of d'Alembert,¹²⁸ won the first prize. In addition, he won the honourable mention with an *Épître au Tasse*.¹²⁹ He was beside himself for joy:

A toutes les proclamations réitérées du prix de vers, du prix de poésie, de l'*accessit*, des prix d'éloquence et de poésie remportés chacun pour la quatrième fois, et remportés deux fois ensemble; ce qui est sans exemple, le nom de l'auteur a été suivi des plus grands applaudissements; c'était une mauvaise journée pour mes ennemis, et notre ami commun de Ferney m'écrivit: *Fréron en mourra de rage, s'il ne meurt d'indigestion au cabaret*.¹³⁰

The doors of the Academy now seemed wide open.

However, the *philosophes* and their protégé were not going to win so easily. In the August issue of the *Mercur*, La Harpe had reviewed Voltaire's *Diatribes à l'auteur des Ephémérides* and the question of the 'guerre des farines'.¹³¹ On the demand of the clergy, both Voltaire's brochure and La Harpe's article were suppressed, first by a Conseil d'Etat on 19 August,¹³² and then by the Parlement de Paris on 7 September.¹³³ Voltaire was furious that Turgot should not have used his influence to deflect this blow,¹³⁴ and a blow it was, as even the King was heard to say: 'ce n'est pas le moyen d'entrer à l'Académie'.¹³⁵

La Harpe himself soon had other things to think about. On 23 December 1775, his father-in-law died and, apart from treating a bad cold at the beginning of February 1776,¹³⁶ when he fell a victim to the epidemic that was sweeping Paris,¹³⁷ La Harpe spent the next two or three months dealing with his wife's inheritance.¹³⁸

While he was dealing with this matter, his friends still endeavoured to have him elected to the Académie française. They even approached personalities such as Malesherbes, hoping that they would intercede on La Harpe's behalf and win the consent of the King,¹³⁹ who was said to be still ill-disposed towards him following the suppression of his article.¹⁴⁰ Although these moves failed to get him elected to replace the Duc de Saint-Aignan, the man who was successful at that election, Colardeau, died before he could take his seat. A new election had to be held, and on 13 May 1776, with twenty-four members present, Jean-François de La Harpe became one of the *immortels*, by being elected to seat number thirty-six.¹⁴¹ The King approved the choice two days later.¹⁴²

La Harpe's reception took place on 20 June. Led in by Suard and the Abbé Arnaud, he gave the usual address in which he praised his predecessors, Voltaire and the masters of literature and society.¹⁴³ However, what the public wanted to hear was Marmontel's reply, and this was interpreted as an attack on La Harpe's overweening pride.¹⁴⁴ Having described the altogether gentler nature of Colardeau, Marmontel pointed out that La Harpe had been less reticent about his ambition and his hopes;¹⁴⁵ that in his work as a critic, one could have wished for more moderation.¹⁴⁶ Yet, the truth is that La Harpe's enemies read into this speech an intention that was not there, and when there was general applause at these remarks, La Harpe and Marmontel were equally embarrassed.¹⁴⁷ Marmontel had tried to be just and, if he touched on certain faults in La Harpe which no one could hide, it was to show that the Academy had not made its choice blindly.¹⁴⁸ These faults had won the new member so many enemies and made him the object of so much unjust criticism that his very real qualities were in danger of going unnoticed.¹⁴⁹ The Academy had not failed to appreciate his talents as a playwright,¹⁵⁰ as an orator and, above all, as a sincere defender of good taste, whose criticism was severe, but free from personal abuse.¹⁵¹ If his reception was not a complete triumph, La Harpe had at least satisfied one of his dearest ambitions, and it must have been with pride in his heart that he accompanied Marmontel to Versailles on 23 of the month and presented his speech to the King and the Queen.¹⁵²

The disturbances at his reception were due, not only to public dislike of the man, but also to the widely-held view that his election was a victory for the intrigues of the *philosophes* and not the result of real merit. The opposition was quick to react. Many were the attacks and epigrams against La Harpe at this time.¹⁵³ Among those to disapprove of his election was Linguet who did not mince his words when discussing the reception in the *Journal de Politique et de Littérature* of which he had been editor and author since its foundation in 1774. He wondered why the really great writers never belonged to the institution and then explained this phenomenon by saying that they could not bow to the system:

C'est de la complaisance, c'est un noviciat qui les prépare à l'initiation. C'est la promesse d'un dévouement aveugle, le courage de se tenir fermement attachés aux *Maîtres* qui ont fait de cette partie du *Louvre*, une école où se prodigue leur doctrine, la soumission sans réserve aux Saints *Pierres* qui disposent de ce petit paradis.¹⁵⁴

In other words, one was elected, not on one's worth, but according to one's allegiance to certain *salons*. These home truths were not appreciated by the authorities; Linguet was dismissed.¹⁵⁵

The owner of the paper, Panckoucke, then offered the post of editor and author of the literary section to the indirect cause of Linguet's disgrace, La Harpe himself. The latter could not resist such a tempting offer¹⁵⁶ and, beginning

with the issue of 5 August 1776, the paper was his work.¹⁵⁷ When this was discovered, the public outcry against him was widespread. He was accused of growing rich on the 'dépouilles de M. Linguet'.¹⁵⁸ He went completely out of favour at court where Marie-Antoinette preached Linguet's cause.¹⁵⁹ The whole affair was seen as a plot to rob the latter of his job. Panckoucke was said to have wanted to get rid of him after quarrelling with him during a trip to Switzerland.¹⁶⁰ The paper lost money, and Panckoucke was reported to be regretting that he had taken on La Harpe whom he now wanted to replace by Marmontel and Suard.¹⁶¹

La Harpe's friends came to his support. There were contributions from d'Alembert¹⁶² and Condorcet.¹⁶³ Voltaire himself regularly sent articles.¹⁶⁴ However, this did not stop the attacks. Condorcet wrote to Voltaire on La Harpe's behalf asking him for an open letter in the latter's defence.¹⁶⁵ Voltaire's reply¹⁶⁶ was hardly satisfactory as it also praised Chamfort, whose rivalry with La Harpe had by now destroyed their former friendship.¹⁶⁷ Where La Harpe's work for the *Mercur*e had been sporadic in nature and had led him to only occasional quarrels with his enemies, he now faced a never ending succession of squabbles. Probably indulging in overt wishful-thinking, the scandal-mongers liked to make out that he had his ears boxed by Rutledge;¹⁶⁸ that Dorat had drubbed him with a stick.¹⁶⁹ In the thick of such polemics, it was not long before he was drawn into an argument which was going to split the literary world in two — the quarrel over the rival merits of Gluck and Piccini.

While even the opponents of Gluck agreed that he had improved on his predecessors in the dramatic settings of his operas, they insisted that he was wrong to have replaced the rich songs of Italian opera with simple melodies which to them seemed more declamatory than musical.¹⁷⁰ La Harpe had privately expressed his disappointment with Gluck's *Alceste* as early as May 1776,¹⁷¹ but was careful, at first, not to commit himself in public. In December 1776, he published the views of Gluck's critics without actually associating himself with them.¹⁷² However, on 5 March 1777, when reviewing Gluck's *Iphigénie en Aulide*, he plunged into the quarrel on the side of Marmontel and the Piccinists and declared his faith in the Italian tradition.¹⁷³ Three days later, there came an anonymous reply in the new daily *Journal de Paris*.¹⁷⁴ It was to be the first of many similar letters, accusing La Harpe of ignorance on the subject. Three weeks later, battle was joined by Suard and the Abbé Arnaud who attacked him in the same paper, signing their letters the *Anonyme de Vaugirard*.¹⁷⁵

In the meantime, La Harpe had other preoccupations. The Académie française now took much of his time, and the assiduous new member only missed two of the remaining thrice-weekly meetings of 1776.¹⁷⁶ The following year, he missed in all only nine meetings.¹⁷⁷ On 12 August 1776, he presented to the Academy his version of Luis de Camões' *Os Lusíadas*¹⁷⁸ and, at the prize-giving on 25 of

the month, he read the two prize-winning entries by Gruet and André-Murville.¹⁷⁹ When Joseph of Austria visited the Academy on 17 May 1777,¹⁸⁰ he read his translation of the first canto of Lucan's *Pharsalia*.¹⁸¹ He read the same passage again at the prize-giving on 25 August 1777.¹⁸²

Although in 1777 much of his time was taken up with journalism, he did manage to move house,¹⁸³ and spent most of September in the country with Marmontel and Grétry.¹⁸⁴ He was also preparing two different editions of his collected works and in this displayed considerable skill as a financial manipulator. As early as May 1775, he had started negotiations with J. F. Lex, the founder of the Société littéraire et typographique in Yverdon, whose unbusiness-like enthusiasm rather horrified his associates.¹⁸⁵ La Harpe sent him the corrected manuscripts of all his works at the beginning of February 1776,¹⁸⁶ and, having agreed with La Harpe not to publish his translation of Suetonius, Lex decided to bring out some of the works separately. In February 1776, he printed an edition of *Warwick*¹⁸⁷ and in June, at the same time as the edition published in Paris by Nyon, the translation of *Os Lusíadas*.¹⁸⁸ Lex's edition of this work sold well. However, La Harpe was not satisfied with the prospects of the collected works, although three volumes in octavo were ready by the beginning of November 1776.¹⁸⁹ Lex had to stop production at that time on learning from Paris that the author had arranged with the Parisian publisher, Pissot, to bring out an enlarged edition in six volumes octavo.¹⁹⁰ Whatever La Harpe's reasons for dissatisfaction with Lex, when it came to money, his aesthetics were replaced by hard sense. As Lex's friends had warned him: 'On dit assez haut à Paris que plusieurs gens de lettres sont passablement Juifs et Arabes'.¹⁹¹

In the months to come, La Harpe was to have more troubling preoccupations than mere sharp business practice, as 1778 was going to be for him — as for other Voltairians — a year of violent upheaval. On 10 February, Voltaire arrived in Paris — an event which, in La Harpe's view, was to be of significance for the whole of France.¹⁹² On the following day, along with a deputation from the Académie française¹⁹³ and many other prominent figures in Parisian society, La Harpe went to visit him. Physically, he found him just as he had last seen him ten years before.¹⁹⁴ However, the adulation of the town, various visits and other crowded events soon tired Voltaire. On 25 February, he had a haemorrhage in the lung. The following day, the Academy learned of his illness and appointed Marmontel and La Harpe to go and enquire about his condition.¹⁹⁵ They reported back on 28, saying that Voltaire had been too ill to see them. A fresh deputation, made up of Saint-Lambert and La Harpe, was then sent on 2 March; it was agreed that this deputation should go regularly and report on Voltaire's health at every meeting.¹⁹⁶

La Harpe was to be a constant caller until Voltaire's death.¹⁹⁷ Having already read his translation of the *Pharsalia*, he was said to have further tired the old man when he read him *Les Barmécides* on 1 March.¹⁹⁸ He was present when

Diderot called on Voltaire¹⁹⁹ and witnessed the latter's crying out for a confessor.²⁰⁰ He even composed verse to ladies visiting the sick man in his bedroom.²⁰¹ When Voltaire was a little better and could once more venture out, he talked with him when he went to the Academy and attended his triumph at the Comédie française.²⁰² After a respite in April, Voltaire became ill again and, after taking an overdose of opium, became weaker from day to day. It was soon evident that he was dying. La Harpe remained faithfully in attendance up to the very end.²⁰³

At the same time, La Harpe did not neglect other interests. He was proof-reading his collected works²⁰⁴ and carrying on an argument with the Comédie française. *Les Barmécides* — which he had read on 25 January at the house of Madame Le Coulteulx de Molay, the wife of a rich banker²⁰⁵ — had now reached the top of the waiting-list at the theatre. It would have been performed in May, had Voltaire's *Irène* not been given pride of place to honour the old man's visit. To his dismay, La Harpe now saw that *Les Barmécides* would be performed in the middle of summer with Paris half-empty. He tried to arrange a postponement, but to no avail.²⁰⁶

The tragedy was staged on 11 July, during a heat-wave. It was not a great success, although it did manage to last for eleven performances.²⁰⁷ The quarrel over Gluck and Piccini, rather than the merits or faults of the play, seemed to decide the attitude of the audience which was divided into two rival cliques.²⁰⁸ Shuvalov, who was said to have given financial support to the production, was seen to be the most enthusiastic spectator.²⁰⁹ Part of the failure of the play was attributed to the success of two satires, both called *La Complainte des Barmécides* — one a poem and the other a pantomime farce. The poem was first printed in the *Journal de Paris* on 17 July 1778²¹⁰ and was soon attributed to the actor, Boutet de Monvel,²¹¹ who was supposed to be angry with La Harpe over a review by the latter of his *Amant Bourru*.²¹² It was, however, then claimed by a certain Maurine,²¹³ and La Harpe publicly defended Monvel against the charge.²¹⁴ The play — by Arnould²¹⁵ — was staged at the Ambigu comique from 29 July to 7 November, where it was often performed as many as three times a day. The climax of this work consisted of the ceremonial burying of a harp — a pun that delighted the less subtly-minded members of café society.²¹⁶ To add force to the derision of the audience, there was even a craze for coloured rock with whistles on the end called 'des cannes à la Barmécide'.²¹⁷

The success of this mockery owed much to the general unpopularity of La Harpe at this time. In June 1778, Panckouckè bought the privilege of the *Mercure de France* and combined the paper with the *Journal de Politique et de Littérature*. La Harpe continued as literary editor and author²¹⁸ and it was in this capacity that he now committed one of the greatest of his sins or, at least, showed a lack of tact that was to bring out the whole of Paris against him. After the death of Voltaire, the police had imposed silence on the whole periodical

press, lest comments and literary post-mortems should lead to bitter arguments. It was La Harpe who broke this silence. In the second issue of the new *Mercure*, he strongly criticized the weakness in style and plot of Voltaire's *Zulime*, saying that it was a feeble imitation of an already imperfect play, *Bajazet*: 'C'est donc une terrible entreprise que de refaire une pièce de Racine, même quand Racine n'a pas très bien fait!'²¹⁹ The critic had got the better of the man. What he said was true enough, but it was misplaced coming so soon after Voltaire's death, and coming from a man who obviously owed Voltaire so much.

On 9 July, the Marquis de Villeveille replied ironically in an open letter addressed to Panckoucke and printed in the *Journal de Paris*:

Votre rédacteur, monsieur, n'a pas sans doute les mêmes raisons de regretter ce grand homme, il n'a pas été reçu avec la même bonté dans le château de Ferney, il n'y a point passé des années entières: M. de Voltaire lui est indifférent, et il ne doit rien à sa mémoire; mais du moins personne n'est dispensé d'être juste et votre rédacteur ne l'a point été.²²⁰

The shot went home, and for the first time after many a literary squabble, La Harpe was really hurt.²²¹ He replied publicly in the *Mercure* and the *Journal de Paris*.²²² He could not believe that his antagonist was a man whom he had met at Ferney, who had been a friend for over ten years, and with whom he had dined at the house of Madame de Villette two days after the publication of the fatal article.²²³ He admitted that he had been imprudent, if not unjust, and denied any personal reason for attacking Voltaire.²²⁴ Then, however, he made matters worse by comparing himself to Racine's noble and upright Hippolyte.²²⁵

Admirers of Voltaire, who had been the firmest of La Harpe's defenders in the past, already shocked by his having gone to the Opera on the day Voltaire died,²²⁶ now joined in the chorus of detractors. Despite his protests of innocence, he was accused of having attacked Voltaire out of spite, because the latter had left him out of his will and had not appreciated *Les Barmécides* or his translation of Lucan;²²⁷ because Voltaire was annoyed with him and others for having meddled with the manuscript of *Irène*.²²⁸ The imagination of the scandal-mongers could find no end to the possibilities for such stories.

La Harpe now felt alone in Paris and was convinced that no man had had to suffer so much persecution from his enemies.²²⁹ It was rumoured that his marriage was breaking up and that he was thinking of leaving the country.²³⁰ Yet, such was his nature, he could not suffer these attacks in silence. When the *Journal de Paris* published a review of *Les Barmécides* which contained a parody of La Harpe's ill-fated article on *Zulime*, with the words 'c'est une terrible entreprise que de refaire une pièce de Corneille, surtout quand Corneille a très bien fait',²³¹ he wrote a rude letter to the editors of the paper, in which he said that the name of one of them, d'Ussieux, was only known 'au carcan'.²³² He only escaped criminal proceedings for libel and possible exclusion from the

Académie française by apologizing and insisting that his secretary had misread *carcan* for *caveau*.²³³

Moreover, his unpopularity was beginning to be reflected in the sales of the *Mercur*. As the time for renewing subscriptions drew near, it became obvious that many intended to stop taking the paper.²³⁴ By 15 October, Panckoucke was already thinking of replacing La Harpe as main editor.²³⁵ On 16, the latter brought matters to a head by writing to the *Courrier de l'Europe*²³⁶ and complaining about an attack on him in that paper.²³⁷ A more measured man would have let things be. His few remaining friends were in despair:

C'est une sottise inexcusable, mais il ne veut consulter personne, et s'il écrit une seule ligne contre ses ennemis, il est perdu sans ressource. Le déchaînement du public est tel, qu'il n'est plus permis à La Harpe d'avoir raison . . . on le bafouera, on lui crachera au visage, on le chassera de l'Académie et de Paris, s'il ne renonce pas absolument au pugilat qui lui a si mal réussi. Je ne lui connais plus à présent qu'un seul ennemi, c'est le public en corps qui se réunit en ce seul point, et qui ne veut ni écouter ses apologies ni lire ses ouvrages.²³⁸

At the beginning of November, he lost the editorship of the *Mercur*, was reduced to writing theatre reviews and occasional signed articles²³⁹ and had his salary cut from 6,000 to 3,000 *livres*.²⁴⁰ With Voltaire's support, he had risen to a position of authority, but the events following the death of his master had revealed that he could not yet stand alone.

CHAPTER IV

MATURITY

It was now essential for La Harpe to find his way back into the circle of Voltaire's admirers. Encouraged by continuing friendship and moral support from d'Alembert,¹ in September 1778, he asked Madame Vestris to give d'Argental a one-act play in Voltaire's honour, *Les Muses rivales*.² This d'Argental then sent to the Comédie française.³ The writer showed wisdom in presenting his play in this round about way. Performed in February 1779, it was a minor success,⁴ which the uncovering of the identity of the author in no way diminished.⁵ La Harpe was back in the fold.

It was as if to destroy further any lingering doubts as to his fidelity to the Voltairian cause that in the summer of 1779 he took part in what was obviously a plot arranged by the Voltairians in the Academy to ensure that the competition for a poem in praise of their hero should be won by one of their number. There were sixty entries when the contest closed.⁶ A dithyramb with an inscription from Ovid — *Nec quisquam Ajacem possit superare, nisi Ajax* —, read by La Harpe at one of the deliberating meetings,⁷ had been chosen to be crowned, when, on 12 August, the Academy received a letter from d'Argental, written the previous day and in which it was stated that the author of the dithyramb wished to decline the prize as he did not care to reveal his identity.⁸ Marmontel, Delille and a few other academicians who were not initiated into the secret, nevertheless suspected that the whole matter was a plot and insisted that the prize-money be adjudged to the winner of the honourable mention, André-Murville.⁹ This was agreed unanimously.¹⁰

It was not long before La Harpe's name was associated with the mysterious dithyramb, although at first it was suggested that he had written the verse for Shuvalov, so that the latter could then claim the honour of the prize.¹¹ Shuvalov, however, then denied any connexion with the work,¹² and by the time of the crowning on 25 August all Paris knew that La Harpe was its real author.¹³ This did not stop him reading the two prize-winning entries at the ceremony,¹⁴ although his enemies found another line of attack, by suggesting that the whole poem had been lifted out of another entry by Guérineau de Saint-Peravi.¹⁵ These attacks mattered little, and even the scandal provoked by the spectacle of an Academician entering a contest of which he was himself a judge had little effect on him. Within the Academy, the *philosophes* were all-powerful, and La Harpe had praised his master to the satisfaction of his friends.

Yet, despite his general return to favour in Voltairian circles, the polemics of 1778 and the music quarrel meant that henceforth he saw less of the Suard family,¹⁶ had lost friends such as the Abbé Arnaud and now had to cultivate new ones. As always, he looked for them in the same rather fashionable sections of society. He continued to be a habitual member of the gatherings organized by the various branches of the La Live family, although he does not appear to have ever had any close connexion with Madame d'Épinay, and was on rather cool terms with Madame d'Houdetot, following a quarrel in 1777, when she accused him of publishing some of her verse without her permission.¹⁷ He now chose to visit her sister-in-law, Madame de La Briche, in her château du Marais near Arpajon.¹⁸ He knew other members of the family, such as the financier Joseph de La Borde¹⁹ and the Marquis de Montesquiou-Fezensac.²⁰ He remained the friend of important noblemen such as the Comte de Montmorin de Saint-Hérem.²¹ As before, both younger and older men of letters were pleased to be in his company. Through Madame de La Briche and her inseparable companion, Madame Damas d'Anligny,²² he became a close friend of Florian, for whom he considered himself to be a kind of father-figure.²³ Even before the Revolution, he was on intimate terms with a man of whom he was going to see a great deal in his old age — Fontanes.²⁴ He was again on speaking terms — if not fully reconciled — with Dorat a short time before the latter's death, when he returned to him unopened some compromising manuscripts that had been stolen by a faithless secretary.²⁵ For a time, La Harpe was on good terms with Rivarol,²⁶ but this friendship did not last very long.²⁷ Other friends and acquaintances of note in these years were Tressan,²⁸ Sedaine,²⁹ Beaumarchais,³⁰ Boissy d'Anglas,³¹ Ducis,³² Parny,³³ and — continuing his links with the Comédie française following the death of Lekain — Madame Vestris.³⁴

As vain as ever when it came to dealing with the fair sex, he shocked and delighted Parisian society in 1782, when he formed a liaison with a lady of easy virtue, a dancer called Cléophile, who was perhaps better known as the former mistress of the Comte d'Aranda.³⁵ Her beauty was not what it had been in former times. As a result of a venereal disease, she had lost part of her palate and talked through her nose.³⁶ Nevertheless, La Harpe was proud to be seen with her, walked with her in the streets, accompanied her to the theatre, and even had her sit among the guests of honour at the Académie française.³⁷

He had by this time ended a stormy relationship with Madame de Genlis, which began in March 1779³⁸ and which soon developed, for La Harpe at least, into a passion in the grand manner.³⁹ If we can believe Madame de Genlis, whose own vanity was not slight, she was above all struck by the fatuity of the man and soon managed to cool his ardour.⁴⁰ They remained close friends, and La Harpe was a frequent visitor — first in her rooms at the Palais-Royal, and later at the couvent des Dames de Bellechasse — along with other men of letters such as Gaillard, Rulhière and the Abbé Bourlet de Vauxcelles.⁴¹ He

accompanied her to Bercy⁴² and dedicated verse to her.⁴³ As a devoted friend, he wrote flattering articles on her works.⁴⁴

It was this last activity that was to be the indirect cause of the end of their friendship. Accustomed to complimentary articles from La Harpe, she expected him to review *Adèle et Théodore* when it appeared at the beginning of 1782.⁴⁵ He, however, soon showed himself to be unwilling to review a work which stirred up considerable controversy through its religious tone, and because it contained five or six satirical portraits of well-known personalities⁴⁶ such as Madame de Montessan, the Comtesse de Boufflers and other ladies of fashion.⁴⁷ He handed the review over to the Abbé Rémy and promised Madame de Genlis that she would be equally satisfied with the result.⁴⁸ The article was highly critical,⁴⁹ and she was furious. She saw the whole affair as a concerted attack by the *philosophes* and maintained that the real author was none other than d'Alembert.⁵⁰ Although she continued to see La Harpe, they were no longer friends. He was soon disgusted by the open way in which she solicited the Academy's *prix d'utilité*.⁵¹ In 1784, she published a bitter attack on him in her *Veillées du Château*.⁵²

His wish to avoid unnecessary controversy by not reviewing *Adèle et Théodore* reflected a general desire for a quieter existence that he had developed after his experiences in 1778. He had grown tired of the never-ending war between the *philosophes* and their opponents and especially of the polemics of journalism.⁵³ Already writing fewer articles than in previous years, he finally abandoned his position as a regular contributor to the *Mercur*e at the beginning of September 1779.⁵⁴ This was to give him greater freedom of movement, and in both 1779 and 1780 he left Paris at Easter as well as during the summer vacation.⁵⁵ He also journeyed further afield. In late September or early October 1779, he left for Lyons, where he was to stay for over two months.⁵⁶ The reasons for this journey are not altogether clear, although it was in part to cure himself of his unhappy passion for Madame de Genlis.⁵⁷ Rumour had it that it was in connexion with a projected publication of a life of — or rather a collection of anecdotes against — Linguet, organized by Panckoucke, under the patronage of d'Argental, Choiseul and Madame de Boufflers.⁵⁸

In 1781, he again travelled quite far. At the end of June, he went away for six weeks when he accompanied Shuvalov to Montbéliard and stayed with the Duke of Würtemberg, Karl Eugen.⁵⁹ By this time, he had achieved the quieter life that he desired. He was a protagonist in fewer quarrels. He had almost begun to have a reputation for gentleness.⁶⁰ He appears to have been back in favour at court, for, if we can believe Madame Campan, it was he who was chosen to compose the compliments read by the *Dames de la Halle* when they went to Versailles after the birth of the Dauphin.⁶¹

Yet, despite his new mellowness, he could still fight to defend his interests. At the beginning of 1781, he had a quarrel with Panckoucke over some letters

which he had handed over for inclusion in the first posthumous edition of Voltaire's works.⁶² La Harpe claimed that he had merely lent the letters in expectation of three copies of the works.⁶³ This Panckoucke denied, and he accused him of showing a lack of tact.⁶⁴

These changes in La Harpe's habits were accompanied by parallel changes in his literary activities. Freed from the daily demands of journalism, he returned to editing the *Abrégé de l'histoire générale des voyages* which had not progressed very far since he signed the contract for it in 1775.⁶⁵ On 20 January 1780, he read part of an *Eloge de Voltaire* on which he had been working for some months. He managed to work in praise for the financial policies of Necker, and for this was widely applauded.⁶⁶ The next three months were probably taken up with proof-reading. Within the space of nineteen days, at the end of March and the beginning of April, he brought out his *Eloge de Voltaire*,⁶⁷ the first volumes of the *Abrégé de l'histoire générale des voyages*⁶⁸ and an oriental tale in four cantos called *Tangu et Félimé*.⁶⁹

At the same time, he returned to work on his version of Sophocles' *Philoctète*. He had completed it by 21 May 1780, when he wrote to the Comédie française and asked for a reading.⁷⁰ He read the work at the house of Madame du Deffand on 7 July.⁷¹ On 25 August, he read the first two acts at the prize-giving of the Académie française, and they were well received.⁷² However, as the result of an argument with Molé who considered the rôle of Pyrrhus to be unworthy of his *emploi*,⁷³ and because in any case La Harpe preferred to wait for the completion of a new theatre with a seated and thus more attentive audience,⁷⁴ the play was not performed immediately, and in 1781 he published it⁷⁵ together with *Menzicoff*.⁷⁶

Nevertheless, while it is true that he again failed to get *Philoctète* staged later that year,⁷⁷ this and another five plays by him were performed during the next six years. The Comédie française was now beginning to clear its back-log of waiting plays, and writers could expect reasonably early performances for their works. Although La Harpe continued to write verse, and in 1781 even started on large-scale poem in praise of women,⁷⁸ he now returned to the theatre with joy. On 13 August 1781, he sent to the actors *Les Brame*,⁷⁹ which, according to some, had by now been thoroughly re-written since its initial conception in 1774.⁸⁰ It reached the top of the waiting list within six weeks.⁸¹ However, on 24 September, the author was told that Brizard — on whom he was counting for an important rôle in the play — was not available, and he therefore sent a new work, *Jeanne de Naples*.⁸² He read it to the actors on 1 October,⁸³ and they prepared for a lavish production, in which the costume of the queen alone was said to have cost 1,500 *livres*.⁸⁴

This production was, however, to run into trouble. For a start, La Harpe was not satisfied with one of the actors, Grammont de Roselly, and wanted to have him replaced.⁸⁵ On 27 November, Larive, who had an important part in the play,

cut his hand during rehearsals.⁸⁶ In addition, the subject of the tragedy in which a queen is seen to be an accomplice to murder was disapproved of by various authorities.⁸⁷ On 10 December, permission to stage the work was withdrawn,⁸⁸ and it was only after two visits to Versailles that its author managed to get this ban lifted.⁸⁹ Even after the first performance on 12 December, the troubles were not over. The fifth performance, promised for 26 December, had to be held back until 3 January 1782, because of the illness of Madame Vestris.⁹⁰ Then the actors announced their intention of performing the work on the slack days of the week, and in disgust La Harpe withdrew it on 15 January.⁹¹ This was to be the cause of the first of several serious quarrels between him and the Comédie française.⁹²

At the same time, he was among the first to appreciate the importance of various changes made during this period within this institution. On 9 April 1782, the new Théâtre du Faubourg Saint-Germain was finally opened, and for the first time the whole of the audience was seated. This reform was welcomed by La Harpe, who for a long time had been among the fiercest critics of the old theatre and its noisy groundlings.⁹³ He could now once more seriously consider having *Philoctète* performed and readings of the play were again arranged in June 1782.⁹⁴ To celebrate the opening of the new theatre, he wrote a one-act comedy entitled *Molière à la nouvelle salle*⁹⁵ and sent it to the actors anonymously. Apparently, he had been asked to produce this work by the governing body of the Comédie française,⁹⁶ and he was slightly irritated when it was not chosen for the inauguration.⁹⁷ At least, he was satisfied with the play's fair reception when it was performed four days later on 12 April.⁹⁸

In May 1782, his assiduousness as correspondent for the Russian Crown Prince was rewarded when Paul and his wife arrived in Paris. The day they arrived, the Russian ambassador invited La Harpe to meet them, and he talked with Paul for an hour.⁹⁹ He was to call on the Prince practically every day.¹⁰⁰ Together with d'Alembert, he was invited to dinner.¹⁰¹ His marks of attention to the Prince during the latter's visit were to be rewarded by the gift of a diamond-studded snuff-box valued at 6,000 *livres*.¹⁰² On 27 May, Paul and his wife went to the Académie française, and there La Harpe read a poem composed in their honour,¹⁰³ and an *épître* on descriptive poetry, written during his stay in Lyons in 1779.¹⁰⁴ The assembly was amused by the somewhat comic repetition of the word *Petrowitz* in the poem addressed to Paul, and La Harpe later cut this out when he printed the work. It was embarrassed by his attack on German poetry in the *épître*, since Paul's wife was a princess of Württemberg.¹⁰⁵ Nor was he thoroughly successful in his other attempts to please his patron. He wanted to have a performance of *Warwick* put on in Paul's honour,¹⁰⁶ but it was given on 24 June, five days after Paul's departure, and his hopes of having a fresh run for *Jeanne de Naples*¹⁰⁷ — due to begin on 8 June¹⁰⁸ — were dashed, when the play was stopped by a new ban by the authorities who still thought that the work was open to dangerous interpretation.¹⁰⁹

Yet, despite these difficulties, he was by now a man of considerable influence. He was an important member of the Académie française, and it was said to be because of this that Suard, acting as censor, refused to allow a parody of *Jeanne de Naples*, called *Jeannette*, to be performed at the Comédie italienne.¹¹⁰ La Harpe's friends failed to stop the staging of Cailhava's *Les Journalistes anglais*¹¹¹ — a play in which he was very prominently attacked — but the censor who had allowed this performance, de Sancy, then found himself in trouble with the authorities.¹¹²

Within the Académie française, La Harpe continued to be active, although in January 1782, he annoyed d'Alembert and other colleagues by siding with Buffon and voting for Bailly rather than Condorcet, when the latter was successfully elected by only one vote.¹¹³ La Harpe was no longer a close friend of Condorcet and, in any case, he felt that the latter's talents were better suited to the Académie des Sciences.¹¹⁴ In both 1781 and 1782, La Harpe was elected for three-monthly terms as an officer of the Académie française.¹¹⁵ As chancellor in 1781, he annoyed Garat, who had won the first prize for oratory, by putting greater feeling into his reading of Lacrosette's *Eloge de Montausier* that had won the *accessit*.¹¹⁶ As director in 1782, he gave a speech at the prize-giving on the purpose of the institution as a 'barrière contre le mauvais goût'.¹¹⁷ Indeed, in this and following years, he came to be regarded more and more as one of the Academy's most ardent purists, whose main interest in the Academy was a defence of the French language and fine style.¹¹⁸ It was as a purist that he later opposed the awarding of a prize to Roucher,¹¹⁹ and, although he was to claim that he had helped Sedaine to become a member in 1786,¹²⁰ it was widely known that the latter had been unsuccessful in previous years largely because of La Harpe¹²¹ who considered his style to be unworthy of that of an Academician.¹²² Those who wanted to become members of this body soon knew how important it was to have him on their side.¹²³

For some, his power within this institution seemed an unhealthy one. When Pierre Chabrit committed suicide in 1785 after failing to win a prize at the Académie française, he was said to have lost it because of the influence of La Harpe.¹²⁴ This influence did not, however, destroy in the latter a sometimes almost pathological feeling of persecution. When a former friend, the Abbé Maury, presented himself for election to the Academy on 16 December 1784, La Harpe — although unwell — dragged himself out of bed and went and voted for Maury's unsuccessful rival, Target.¹²⁵ He was convinced that Maury had encouraged Shuvalov to write a satire against him during the Russian's stay in Paris. To settle the matter, the new secretary of the Academy, Marmontel, invited Maury and La Harpe to dinner, along with Thomas and Gaillard, who were to act as judges. Point by point, Maury disproved La Harpe's accusation, and the latter was forced to make a somewhat ungracious show of apologizing.¹²⁶ At the age of forty-five, he could still behave with quite childish peevishness.

Moreover, after the relative calm and freedom from argument in the early 1780s, in the following years he quarrelled more and more frequently with the actors, even if at first he still showed himself to be reluctant to do so. In May 1783, *Jeanne de Naples* had three more performances, and again the production could scarcely be said to have gone off smoothly. The second performance was held up by the illness of an actor and, although a fourth performance had been promised, it had to be called off because of the pregnancy of an actress.¹²⁷ In June, *Philoctète* was finally staged, even if held back for a week through illness. Performed, the play had as much success as when it was printed.¹²⁸ It was to be the first work since *Warwick* to win a regular place in the repertory of the Comédie française. However, the first run took place during a heat-wave,¹²⁹ with the result that the takings fell away sharply.¹³⁰ The actors were thus able to claim the work as their property. The author did not complain at the time, but he was to remember this as merely one of many examples of ill-treatment received from them.¹³¹

He may have preferred to say nothing because he was working on another play. He spent most of the autumn of 1783 preparing *Les Brames* for the Comédie française. He had wanted the play to be included in the programme for Fontainebleau and was furious to learn that the actors had placed Marmon-
tel's *Numitor*¹³² before it on the waiting-list.¹³³ He realized that his chances of seeing his tragedy performed at Fontainebleau were extremely slight, especially since he had already allowed Ducis' *Macbeth*¹³⁴ to take precedence over his own work.¹³⁵ His hopes were raised when he was told that because of the illness of Larive, *Macbeth* could not be included,¹³⁶ but they faded again when it became obvious that Brizard, who had an important rôle in his own play, was not in the best of health either.¹³⁷ *Les Brames* was not ready before the end of the court's stay in Fontainebleau and the first performance was finally given on 4 December at Versailles. It was performed in Paris on 15, and was not a success. The takings at the second performance on 17 December came to less than half those at the first.¹³⁸ A third performance had been promised for Monday 22 December, but, seeing that the play was in danger of becoming the property of the actors, La Harpe withdrew it on 18.¹³⁹ He attributed this failure to Brizard's illness and resultant weakness.¹⁴⁰

Another reason for discontent, in his opinion, was the influence on public opinion of daily and twice-weekly papers such as the *Journal de Paris* and the *Petites Affiches*. Earlier in the year, he had had an argument with the *Journal de Paris* over its review of *Philoctète*¹⁴¹ and, along with Ducis, Marmontel and others, he now sent a petition to the Maréchal de Duras on 22 December 1783, in which he demanded that the *Journal de Paris* and the *Petites Affiches* be forbidden to bring out reviews until the public should have time to go and see each new work for itself.¹⁴² The *Journal de Paris* did not take long to reply; with a satire in which La Harpe was likened to a king elephant, it nipped this project

in the bud.¹⁴³ Although by now a writer of importance, he was not the master of the literary world.¹⁴⁴

At this time, he had yet another play on the waiting-list, a new tragedy called *Coriolan*.¹⁴⁵ With the recovery of Larive, it was now possible to go ahead with Ducis' *Macbeth* on 12 January 1784, but La Harpe, who wanted his play to be performed in the middle of February,¹⁴⁶ soon realized that — since at the Comédie française it was customary for a comedy to follow a tragedy — *Coriolan* was not likely to be staged before the spring recess.¹⁴⁷ When the Comédie française decided to organize a benefit performance on behalf of the poor, suffering from the particularly long hard winter, and asked if any author were willing to allow his work to be used for this purpose, La Harpe grasped at the opportunity of thus jumping the queue. Beaumarchais, too, had wanted to do the same for his *Mariage de Figaro*, but by the time he contacted the actors, La Harpe had already agreed to abandon his rights for the charity performance, and preparations for *Coriolan* were under way.¹⁴⁸ This first performance on 3 March 1784 saw the whole of fashionable Paris at the theatre. The musicians had their benches removed, and there were members of the audience standing in the wings and even at the back of the stage.¹⁴⁹ The author was even forced to appear on the stage at the end of the performance, something that he had not done since the performance of his first play in 1763.¹⁵⁰ The success of *Coriolan* continued in the following performances,¹⁵¹ and the writer was fêted as a model of charity.¹⁵²

However, his generosity had its limits when it came to dealing with the actors. When they refused to pay his royalties on some of the performances, on the grounds that they were covered by a rule that excluded payment for performances taking place during the last week before and the first week after the spring recess,¹⁵³ he went to see the celebrated lawyer, Gerbier, who had mediated in many quarrels between the actors and the authors. He induced him to write a stern letter to the Comédie française.¹⁵⁴ This letter had the desired effect, but from now on, relations between La Harpe and the actors were always strained.

These difficulties, however, were nothing when compared to a more general misfortune that had begun to afflict him. He was now troubled by the ill-health that was to remain with him for the rest of his life. His health appears to have first broken down during the latter part of 1782.¹⁵⁵ In 1783, he tried to escape from the dangers of an unhealthy summer in Paris, by staying with the La Borde family at La Ferté-Vidame,¹⁵⁶ but in spite of all his precautions he was in bed there with a fever for three weeks.¹⁵⁷ The following year, together with most of fashionable society, he tried the cures extolled by the exponents of animal magnetism, but a week at the baths of Mesmer's disciple, Deslon, was enough to convince him that the whole thing was a hoax.¹⁵⁸ For the last three months of 1784, he was kept at home with a skin complaint¹⁵⁹ which scandal was quick to

attribute to syphilis,¹⁶⁰ especially when he turned up at Target's reception to the Academy in March 1785, his face covered with pustules.¹⁶¹ Although he was able to lead a slightly more active life in 1785, he still did not feel very sure of his health.¹⁶² It was a hard blow for a man who was known to be fond of the pleasures of life, especially of those of the table.¹⁶³

His illness also restricted his activities as a member of the Académie française. He was again elected director in the spring of 1783,¹⁶⁴ but was not active during his term of office.¹⁶⁵ Nevertheless, in February 1784, he was chosen to compose the Academy's condolences to the Marquis de Chastellux on the death of his brother¹⁶⁶ and, on 15 June 1784, he celebrated the visit of the King of Sweden, by reading the second canto of his poem on women, *Les Talents des Femmes*.¹⁶⁷ When he came to the passage on Madame Vigée Le Brun, he turned to where she was sitting in the audience, and everyone, including the Duc de Chartres and the King of Sweden, rose to look at her.¹⁶⁸ However, not all the poem was so well received. To begin with, the audience was surprised to find La Harpe reciting praise for Madame de Genlis, now that everyone knew them to be sworn enemies.¹⁶⁹ Then, the listeners were slightly embarrassed by the political implications of some of the lines. Probably in order to please his patron, Paul of Russia, La Harpe had included praise of Catherine and of her policies. He showed how Russia ruled the Baltic and at the same time how she crushed the Turks, those 'tyrans dégénérés'.¹⁷⁰ It was felt that it was hardly tactful to read such lines before a rival northern monarch, or even before another prominent person present, the Marquis de Choiseul-Gouffier, the newly-appointed French ambassador in Turkey.¹⁷¹ Throughout his career, La Harpe seems to have remained blissfully unaware of the dangers of giving offence.

His blind vanity, however, never seriously impeded his undoubted skill at intrigue. His deviousness emerges in all its strength in his last dealings before the Revolution with the now hostile Comédie française. In the autumn of 1785, the actors were reported to have placed a ban on his work¹⁷² and, in March 1786, they were to refuse his request for a fresh run for *Jeanne de Naples*.¹⁷³ However, with the complicity of Molé,¹⁷⁴ he had, in the late summer of 1785, managed to present anonymously to the actors a new play, called *Virginie*,¹⁷⁵ which they started preparing for the season at Fontainebleau. He was particularly anxious to remain anonymous because of the personal animosity of Mademoiselle Raucourt, whom he wanted to see in one of the major rôles. According to La Harpe, she had sworn not to take part in any of his works, as she had been slighted in her desire for a rôle in one of his earlier plays,¹⁷⁶ but others said that her refusal was to honour a promise to the Prince de Hénin.¹⁷⁷ One can imagine, therefore, the author's anger when he saw his name attached to *Virginie* on the list of plays being prepared for Fontainebleau, published in the *Mercure de France* on 12 November 1785.¹⁷⁸ He replied with a public denial in the *Journal de Paris* and showed, incidentally, that when it came to defending his interests, he

could be a blatant liar. He wrote: 'La vérité m'oblige de déclarer que je ne suis point l'auteur de *Virginie*'.¹⁷⁹

As it happened, the play was finally not staged at Fontainebleau,¹⁸⁰ but the actors went ahead with preparations for staging it in Paris, where it was performed on 11 July 1786. It was then only a fair success, and the public was quick to name La Harpe as the author. One wit caused uproar in the audience, by shouting 'J'ai reconnu un vers de *Pharamond*'.¹⁸¹ In society, too, La Harpe was forced to admit that he was the author when challenged, notably, by Sedaine and Madame de Staël.¹⁸²

In any case, this was to be the last play that he ever wrote, and from now on most of his time was to be taken up by his lectures at the newly-established Lycée. This institution arose out of the ruins of the Musée in the Palais-Royal run by Pilatre de Rozier, and which went into decline following the latter's death in a ballooning accident at Boulogne on 15 June 1785.¹⁸³ In July, the shareholders were each asked to contribute twelve *livres* and the founders twenty-four,¹⁸⁴ but it was not enough to save the establishment from liquidation. However, through a connexion with the Orleanist masonic lodge of the Neuf Sœurs,¹⁸⁵ it had powerful friends. Among its founders, for instance, there was the famous admiral, the Comte d'Estaing.¹⁸⁶ It had been under the protection of the Comte de Provence,¹⁸⁷ and it was he who finally agreed to pay off all the outstanding debts.¹⁸⁸ The institution also enjoyed the patronage of the Comte d'Artois.¹⁸⁹ Armed with this support, the Marquis de Montesquiou-Fezensac, the Duc de Villequier, the Comte de Montmorin de Saint-Hérem, the Duc de Luynes, the Comte d'Averny and General J. E. M. de Chabillant provided new funds and rented a large building on the corner of the rue de Valois.¹⁹⁰ They called their foundation the *Lycée* in memory of the Athenian academy of further learning, an idea that was not particularly new,¹⁹¹ and published a programme on 13 December 1785, which was then widely distributed.¹⁹² This new academy of learning was frankly intended for the fashionable rather than the erudite. While providing classes in scientific matters, its main purpose was seen to be that of preserving good taste. Thus, the most important class of all was that dealing with literature.¹⁹³ La Harpe was a known defender of good taste in the Académie française, he had called publicly for the setting-up of a 'lycée pour les assemblées de la littérature',¹⁹⁴ and was an associate of a similar institution in the provinces, the Musée de Bordeaux.¹⁹⁵ He was therefore the obvious choice for the teacher of this subject. In addition, although he himself was not a freemason,¹⁹⁶ his appointment undoubtedly had the support of his many close friends among the freemasons to whom the Lycée, as we have seen, owed much.

The court and the town flocked to the new establishment. Ladies abandoned their *salons*. By the time of the opening on 13 January 1786, there were already well over six hundred subscribers.¹⁹⁷ La Harpe prepared his lectures carefully. The public was so pleased with his opening speech that he was made to repeat

it.¹⁹⁸ During the first session, he dealt with classical literature,¹⁹⁹ and, although this can now be seen to be the weakest and most superficial part of his literature course, it was presented with polish. The elegance of his style, his good looks and his fine voice won the hearts of the women and the admiration of the men-about-town,²⁰⁰ even if the contents of his lectures did not necessarily educate them. They appreciated the way in which he managed to present a complete picture of an author in a single lesson.²⁰¹ He began to taste the joys of real authority, although, to some, this was unbearable:

Le bouffi, vermeil et suffisant La Harpe, promu à la charge de grand homme par substitution . . . Que de fatuité chez ce petit grand homme! En sortant de son cours, il promenait son front cramoisi et ses joues luisantes, recueillant avec une bénignité superbe les applaudissements de son auditoire.²⁰²

His enemies might still criticize, but the little man had triumphed, and even in the throes of the Revolution many contemporaries were to remember how, in these years at the end of the Ancien Régime, he had become the symbol of good taste, and how his voice had charmed these ‘nombreuses et brillantes assemblées’.²⁰³

CHAPTER V

THE REVOLUTION

For the next four years, La Harpe's life was to be regulated by his twice-weekly lectures at the Lycée.¹ The sessions ran from the beginning of December to 1 September, with a fifteen days' break at Christmas and at Easter, with a further eight days at Whitsun.² Having set himself a high standard in his lectures, he soon found that their preparation left him little time for other interests.³ On one occasion, he was so tired that he fell asleep at the Lycée while waiting to deliver a lecture that he had prepared late the previous night.⁴

While others were already caught up in political discussion, at first he continued to lecture purely on literature and questions of good taste. From December 1786 to September 1787, he dealt with the authors of the seventeenth century.⁵ In December 1787, he lectured on *La Henriade*⁶ and on 23 January 1788 he began his long analysis of Voltaire's theatre.⁷ However, he could not ignore the movement for change that was sweeping France. He had grown to prominence as a *philosophe*. As such, his work had reflected the *philosophe's* spirit of reform and had brought him more than one encounter with the authorities. His hopes that the reign of Louis XVI would bring reform had been soon destroyed. In 1784, he had been horrified to learn of the plight of La Tude in the Bastille, and was to claim that he had then started to collect material 'pour servir à une histoire des iniquités ministérielles'.⁸ In his eyes, although the government was more tolerant than during the previous reign,⁹ its ministers still showed a lack of concern for the real problems confronting France,¹⁰ and the Court still behaved with thoughtlessness and in a way that shocked the common people.¹¹ As a friend and declared admirer of Necker, La Harpe was one of those to welcome his return to power,¹² and it was probably through his friendship for Necker that he was not slow to express his disapproval of Necker's declared enemy, Mirabeau.¹³

The Lycée itself was quickly associated with political discussion, and, because of various utterances made in his lectures by Condorcet, the authorities even envisaged making the institution submit to censorship.¹⁴ Gradually, in his own lectures, La Harpe began to echo the spirit of the times. At the opening of the second session of the Lycée on 4 December 1786, for instance, he won the displeasure of the clergy by discussing the work of the Church fathers on purely aesthetic grounds.¹⁵ This approach horrified the Archbishop of Paris, Juigné, who went to Versailles to see the secretary of state, Breteuil, and demanded that

the Lycée be suppressed.¹⁶ Luckily, it had powerful protectors and it continued to be a centre for the expression of liberal sentiment. When it became fully evident that important changes were afoot, La Harpe made sure that his lectures were in tune with them: 'J'observais la marche de l'esprit public, et je ne voulais pas que la faculté de parler tous les jours devant trois ou quatre cents personnes fût infructueuse'.¹⁷

While his colleagues sought to show that the Lycée was a school for patriotism,¹⁸ his lessons became finally those of a 'littérateur citoyen'.¹⁹ He began discussing the philosophers of the eighteenth century. In December 1788, during the meeting of the Notables in Versailles, he started the fourth session of the Lycée with five lectures on Montesquieu and the question of *pouvoirs intermédiaires*. While dealing with Montesquieu, he echoed Voltaire's defence of the beheaded Lally, and the latter's son, Lally Tollendal, embraced La Harpe to the clapping of the audience. The next day, he had to read the passage again at the house of Madame de Montessan.²⁰ All these lectures were enthusiastically received, and he only refused the appeals to publish them there and then because he was already thinking of bringing out the whole of his literature course as one work.²¹

His concern with contemporary problems was such that he showed great interest in the calling of the Etats-Généraux. In December 1788, he signed a petition enquiring as to how Paris was going to be represented at this assembly.²² He saw that now the moment for change had arrived: 'le gouffre de la banqueroute fut ouvert à tous les yeux; on en vit l'horrible profondeur, les Etats-Généraux furent appelés pour le combler; et dès ce moment la Révolution commençait dans toutes les têtes'.²³ The individual had to push aside his personal preoccupations and show himself to be ready for a 'vie publique et sociale'.²⁴ As a good citizen, La Harpe contributed to payment of the national debt²⁵ and, on 5 August 1789, when the Revolution had just begun, and Paris was organized into a provisional Commune, he was elected to represent the District de l'Abbaye-Saint-Germain-des-Prés.²⁶

Yet, throughout this period, within La Harpe there had been a struggle between the *philosophe* and the man of taste, and in the closing years of the Ancien Régime he appeared to cling fervently to the joys of society as he knew it. As before, he still slipped out of Paris in the summer and visited noblemen in their fine country houses. He was the guest of Malesherbes at Bâville in 1786.²⁷ In 1787, he stayed with the Montesquiou-Fezensac family at Maupertuis, near Coulommiers.²⁸ Nor did he break with other habits. Still as vain as ever in the presence of women, he became a rival of Flins des Oliviers for the love and admiration of Chateaubriand's sister, the Comtesse de Farcy. Chateaubriand himself found him rather comic: 'Il arrivait avec trois gros volumes de ses œuvres sous ses petits bras, tout étonné que sa gloire ne triomphât pas des cœurs les plus rebelles'.²⁹ His fame and position of authority as the successor to

Voltaire, where even men such as Talleyrand sought his advice,³⁰ merely accentuated his arrogance:

Le verbe haut, la mine animée, il tonnait contre les abus, faisant faire une omelette chez les ministres où il ne trouvait pas le dîner bon, mangeant avec ses doigts, traînant dans ses plats ses manchettes, disant des grossièretés philosophiques aux plus grands seigneurs qui raffolaient de ses insolences.³¹

He was perhaps the more tempted as he could now enjoy society to the full; at last he had an income to fit his tastes. Apart from a pension of 3,000 *livres* on the *Mercur*³² and another 3,000 for his lectures at the Lycée,³³ he was given at the beginning of 1787 a pension of between 600 and 800 *livres* by the new Duc d'Orléans.³⁴ Thanks to Calonne, he had been granted a further state pension of 3,000 *livres* for his 'travaux littéraires' on 21 August 1786,³⁵ and, on 9 March 1787, Joseph de La Borde — a man who enjoyed playing the rôle of Mæcenas — settled an annuity of 1,500 *livres* on him.³⁶ He was now even rich enough to give money to charity.³⁷

If his habits changed in any way at the time of the Revolution, it was not because of civic fervour or through any conscious decision, but because of recurring ill-health. As he approached the age of fifty, he already felt the beginnings of old age.³⁸ He began to accept less readily invitations to dinner³⁹ and was a little jealous of those who had found a quiet domesticity that was unknown to him.⁴⁰ He was not an active member of the Commune and resigned after barely six weeks in the middle of September 1789.⁴¹ He later insisted that he had done so because he had been bored by the proceedings,⁴² but at the time his excuse was that he badly needed a rest after four years of continuous work at the Lycée.⁴³ Henceforth, he was to serve the Revolution, not as an active worker, but as an intellectual commenting on it from the sidelines.

The opportunity to do this came when he signed a contract with Panckoucke in the morning of 30 November 1789, under the terms of which he agreed, together with Marmontel and Chamfort, to supply most of the material for the *Mercur de France*.⁴⁴ He was back in his natural habitat, or, in the words of Sainte-Beuve, he returned to 'ces querelles de journaux qu'il maudissait et qui étaient sa vie'.⁴⁵ He took up the battles where they had been left off in 1778. However, no writer could now not afford to introduce into his discussion references to the ideas of the time. Book reviews became apologias of civic principles, and, because of this, journalism was frequently a highly dangerous occupation. It was through displaying what some have called a remarkable talent for opportunism,⁴⁶ that La Harpe was to remain in this post up to the spring of 1794.⁴⁷

In the first years of the Revolution, however, his main interests were not directly linked with the more general cause of the Revolution, although inspired by it. The spirit of change influenced, for instance, his relations with the Comédie française which had deteriorated over the years. He had not been an active

member of Beaumarchais' reforming Bureau de législation dramatique⁴⁸ and had even been wary of antagonizing the actors,⁴⁹ but with the Revolution he and other authors, who had complained of being ill-treated by the Comédie française, saw a chance for righting matters. In 1789, the theatre was divided through the quarrel over Chénier's *Charles IX*⁵⁰ and in March 1790 it lost its municipal subsidy. Soon, friends of La Harpe such as Madame Vestris and Talma⁵¹ were thinking of leaving to start up a new troupe in the Palais-Royal.⁵² The institution was no longer as formidable as in the past. La Harpe went to see Sedaine and, at a meeting at the latter's house, joined several other authors in drawing up a list of complaints against the actors.⁵³

For a start, the exclusive privilege enjoyed previously by the Comédie française had placed the authors at a disadvantage, reducing the possible market for their work. Then, they were particularly annoyed by certain habits that had crept into the Comédie française during the previous thirty years. There was, for one thing, the steady raising of the *règles* or minimum limit for takings below which a play automatically became the property of the actors. La Harpe had more than once been a victim of this rule. This minimum limit was calculated on the straight takings at the door, and these had been reduced by the increasing popularity of subscriptions for boxes. These subscriptions assured the actors a steady income and made them less dependent on the success of an individual play. This security had led to various abuses, such as longer and longer holidays and shorter and shorter appearances by leading actors. On top of all this the authors had been those to suffer most from various quarrels in the Comédie française.

Seeking a remedy to these ills, La Harpe led a deputation of authors to the bar of the Assemblée nationale on 24 August 1790 and read an address and petition demanding a new law to govern contracts between authors and actors.⁵⁴ Since there no longer existed any exclusive privilege, he and his fellow authors demanded the right to negotiate with any theatre manager who respected the rules of his municipality, which would in turn be responsible for the observance of these rules. Under the proposed reforms, no troupe of actors would be able to perform a play without the author's formal consent in writing or until he had been dead for five years. Even then, his work would not automatically become public property, if he had signed a deed of transfer with a particular troupe.

To those used to copyright, these demands now seem reasonable enough, but reform was not to be easily won. The actors quickly replied.⁵⁵ Molé, Dazincourt and Fleury sent a report to the Comité de Constitution in which they quite blatantly insisted on their existing rights.⁵⁶ Another deputation of writers under Parisau, who thought La Harpe's aims went too far, if not in substance at least in manner, presented a petition to the Assemblée nationale on 9 October.⁵⁷ A report was prepared for the Comité de Constitution by Mirabeau, who was known to be favourable to the authors' demands.⁵⁸ It was discussed and approved

by the Assemblée nationale on 13 January 1791,⁵⁹ but not ratified until 19 July.⁶⁰ Even then, the fight was not over. Realizing that they had not achieved their aims permanently, the authors formed an association under Framéry and Sedaine on 25 March 1791.⁶¹ The laws of 1791 were rescinded on 30 August 1792, along with much else that preserved individual rights to property,⁶² and the authors were again forced to publish pamphlets and to petition the legislature.⁶³ There was no new permanent law in their favour until 1 September 1793.⁶⁴

La Harpe's other crusade in these years was a defence of the now increasingly obsolete Académie française. As far as his ill-health and his teaching at the Lycée would permit, he had remained an active member of the institution, both in the last years of the Ancien Régime and in the first years of the Revolution. Yet he himself reflected the Academy's growing sterility. At Florian's reception in May 1788, for instance, he read his *épître* on descriptive poetry, which he had already read in 1781.⁶⁵ Even before the Revolution, many saw the Academy as completely irrelevant and even criminally escapist in nature. In April 1789, a widely-distributed anonymous brochure, called *Séance extraordinaire et secrète de l'Académie française* and attributed to Rivarol,⁶⁶ made fun of the Academy and argued that while France was interested in the reforms promised by the Etats-Généraux, the Academicians were lost in their own preoccupations. La Harpe was shown as only caring about the propagation of good taste.⁶⁷ What is true is that during all the troubles of July 1789 most of his time was still taken up with sifting the entries to the Academy's competitions.⁶⁸

La Harpe saw no incongruity in these activities and always maintained that the Academy had made a notable contribution to the 'progrès de l'esprit public'.⁶⁹ He demonstrated that an Academician could be a good and useful citizen in March 1790 when he and Marmontel were chosen to represent the Academy on a committee appointed by the municipality to find a successor for the Abbé de L'Epée at the Etablissement des Sourds et Muets.⁷⁰ This did not, however, stop the Academies in general from coming under attack, and the question of their very existence became a matter for widespread discussion when Palissot wrote to the *Chronique de Paris* and accused them of being 'aristocraties littéraires'.⁷¹ Their subsidies were due for review in the Assemblée nationale, but when the matter was raised there on 16 August 1790, the debate was adjourned until the usefulness of the Académie française should have been proved to the satisfaction of the legislature.⁷² It was with the greatest difficulty that the subsidy was maintained on 20 of the month,⁷³ and La Harpe and his fellow academicians were forced to draw up a report which sought to show the usefulness of their institution.⁷⁴

This was now threatened in the Assemblée nationale by a formidable opponent, Mirabeau, who had the help of a renegade academician, Chamfort. The Academy turned to Talleyrand for its defence.⁷⁵ Immediate discussion in the legislature was stopped by Mirabeau's death on 2 April 1791, but in May,⁷⁶

Chamfort published the speech that he had prepared for Mirabeau, and it was widely distributed.⁷⁷ At the Academy's prize-giving on 25 August, the room was practically empty, and, as La Harpe was forced to admit, 'les Académiciens ont été obligés de faire les frais de la séance'.⁷⁸ He read the speech with which he had opened the second session of the Lycée in 1786,⁷⁹ and which still struck his audience as being more suited to that institution.⁸⁰ He frankly failed to understand that attitudes were changing, and that the Academy, which had been in the fore of the fight for reform, was now left far behind.⁸¹

Nevertheless, he too had changed his position in at least one matter. In 1789, his admiration for Necker had led him to express his dislike of Mirabeau, but in 1790 he actively sought the latter's friendship, possibly in order to win powerful support for his proposed reforms in the theatre. Three days before reading his petition on the subject at the *Assemblée nationale*, he published praise of Mirabeau in the *Mercure de France*.⁸² Henceforth, the two men met regularly, La Harpe insisting that he shared Mirabeau's political outlook.⁸³ Much has been made of the fact that La Harpe further identified himself with the latter and his policies, by becoming a Jacobin towards the end of 1790.⁸⁴ To many, the name of *Jacobin* is synonymous with the *Montagne* and the Terror, but this is to confuse the popular society deriving its power from the masses that the club was to become with the earlier association of constitutional monarchists that founded it.⁸⁵ Marat and Robespierre were only to come to power by the progressive withdrawal or expulsion from the society of the moderate elements that had been its guiding lights. During the time that La Harpe was a member — at the end of 1790 and during the first months of 1791 — it was still principally interested in somewhat abstract questions of constitutional reform and counted among its members many aristocrats. La Harpe himself was introduced by the Duc de Villars.⁸⁶ During his term of membership, La Harpe only spoke once, and then it was to further the cause of liberty in the theatre and to seek support for the projected reforms that he had put forward at the bar of the *Assemblée nationale*.⁸⁷ At the same time, he showed his support for the society in his journalism and praised its defence of the constitution.⁸⁸ If he stopped going to the meetings, it was because of his continuing ill-health. He withdrew later because he began to sense changes in the society and its growing love of demagoguery.⁸⁹

La Harpe remained a moderate and was suspicious of much that the Revolution had created. He was still an active Voltairian, and in 1791 he was again given the chance of showing his adherence to Voltaire's cause. When opposition to the plan to move Voltaire's remains to the Panthéon became fairly outspoken, La Harpe rose in its defence and publicly reiterated his belief in Voltaire as a supreme leader for progress through his initial freeing of men's minds.⁹⁰ When the ceremony took place on 11 July 1791, the weather threatened to dampen it. It was held back until the afternoon. In pouring rain, the procession

and the other proceedings lasted from 2 to 9.30 p.m.⁹¹ In the procession, immediately behind the hearse, there walked Voltaire's niece and Madame de Villette. Holding the latter's hand there came La Harpe himself, who thus 'payait aux mânes de Voltaire son tribut public de reconnaissance filiale'.⁹² To celebrate the event, the Théâtre de la République gave five performances of La Harpe's *Les Muses rivales*, and to suit the circumstances the author now altered the ending and added a speech on Voltaire as the father of freedom.⁹³

He then also had fresh successes with some of his other plays. *Mélanie* was finally performed in public for the first time on 7 December 1791, and was seen to stand out from the mass of other anti-monastic dramas of the time.⁹⁴ At this time also the public was above all interested in the rights of citizens, and the theatre turned to Rome where the name of citizen was the proudest one could bear. A whole succession of plays with characters such as Caius Gracchus and Lucretius were widely applauded. When La Harpe finally admitted that he was the author of *Virginie*⁹⁵ — which was revived on 9 May 1792 — he was acclaimed as a good citizen who had had the right ideas even before the Revolution had begun.⁹⁶

During the whole of this period, he continued his lectures on literature. He ended his summary of the philosophy of the eighteenth century before moving on to other prose genres of the time during the fifth session of the Lycée.⁹⁷ This session began on 14 December 1789 and ran without interruption — except for public holidays — through to 1 August 1790.⁹⁸ His activities as a journalist, however, left him with less time for his lectures and, in March 1790, he called on Boisjolin to replace him occasionally.⁹⁹ On these occasions, the latter did little more than read from La Harpe's notes.¹⁰⁰

In addition, by this time, because of the Revolution and the growth of political clubs, interest in the Lycée had died away. It did not have the success it had had in previous years, and, when the session ended in August 1790, its financial difficulties were clearly serious.¹⁰¹ When it was finally wound up on 14 December 1790, La Harpe for one was owed 1,200 *livres*.¹⁰² The Lycée was saved by its friends who on 31 October 1790 had decided to raise a capital of 30,000 *livres* by selling a hundred shares of 300 *livres* each.¹⁰³ A deputation was sent to see La Harpe on 1 December 1790 in order to make sure of his support.¹⁰⁴ He agreed to buy one of the shares, and on 19 December was one of those to sign the act of association which set up the new Lycée.¹⁰⁵ On 21 December, he became a member of the new administration, by becoming one of the two members of a committee for literature,¹⁰⁶ although he appears to have left most of the work to his colleague, L. P. Béranger, and to have limited his efforts to publicizing the aims of the Lycée in the Académie française.¹⁰⁷ He turned up on 2 January 1791 and helped the other members of the governing board to plan the opening.¹⁰⁸ This took place on 10 January 1791. La Harpe read the introduction with which he had presented his literature course in 1786.¹⁰⁹

Although attempting to preserve the Lycée as a sanctuary for the arts and good taste, the new directors did try to capture greater support by showing an interest in civic pursuits. Already in 1789, the former administration had set up a law course under Delacroix.¹¹⁰ In December 1790, all members of the *Assemblée nationale* were given free entry to the Lycée.¹¹¹ As a result, the institution did seem to gather new strength, but it did not regain its pre-revolutionary splendour. La Harpe was not satisfied with the finances of the new organization and said so. On 21 February 1791, he sold his share to one of the directors, the banker Théodore Jauge.¹¹² He seems to have stopped teaching there altogether at Easter, and was only paid 600 *livres* for the session.¹¹³

His dissatisfaction may be explained by the fact that his financial situation was now by no means as healthy as it had been just before the Revolution. It is true that he got further support from La Borde who settled another annuity for 1,520 *livres* on him on 19 January 1791,¹¹⁴ but all his state pensions were now suspended¹¹⁵ and he received no more money on them after 1791.¹¹⁶ He felt that he could make more money by giving classes in his new second-storey flat at n° 2, rue du Hasard (rue Thérèse), where he and his wife had moved sometime during 1791.¹¹⁷ He therefore resigned from the Lycée in October 1791¹¹⁸ and on 12 November he wrote to the papers, announcing his intention of starting a private course for a hundred people.¹¹⁹ It is not certain how many of these lessons he actually gave, as he was now general editor of the *Mercure* — a post that he was to keep for seven months¹²⁰ — and in January 1792 he was particularly troubled by illness.¹²¹

A further misfortune was the loss of his position as literary correspondent to Paul of Russia at the end of 1791.¹²² We can only presume that the prince found fault with his radical views. Luckily, Panckoucke now helped him, by agreeing to publish his literature course.¹²³ On 12 March 1792, he settled an annuity of 3,600 *livres* on La Harpe and on his wife,¹²⁴ although this was later reduced to 1,800 *livres* on 18 June,¹²⁵ because, La Harpe said, Panckoucke was not in a position to pay more.¹²⁶ Nevertheless, this, together with the two annuities from La Borde and the salary from the *Mercure*, removed the threat of immediate poverty, and, probably not altogether satisfied with his attempts at resolving his financial problems with a private literature course, in the autumn of 1792 La Harpe agreed to return to the Lycée. On 12 October, it was decided to ask him to give thirty lessons, for each of which he was to receive a fee of 40 *livres*.¹²⁷ On 31 October, it was announced that he had accepted,¹²⁸ and he received an advance payment of 600 *livres* on 26 November.¹²⁹ The news of his return caused an increase in the number of subscribers, and it was hoped that at last La Harpe and the Lycée were about to rediscover the glory of former times.¹³⁰

Yet, it was now that society as La Harpe knew it began to crumble about him, as the real republican and popular Revolution came into being. Whereas in 1791,

power had been in the hands of those who were ready to control the aspirations of the workers with repressive laws such as the Loi Le Chapelier, and for the sake of order to countenance the shooting of demonstrators on the Champ de Mars, this power now moved further and further to the left. The flight of the king had snuffed out all hope of a constitutional monarchy. The declaration of war on Austria was soon going to turn against its instigators, the Brissotins. A Republic, drawing its inspiration from the masses, and not from Voltairian enlightenment, came inevitably into being. After 10 August 1792, La Harpe and all he stood for were out of date. Bemused by events around him, he was heard to say in comic and helpless fashion that 'il était affreux d'outrager ainsi un roi constitutionnel, à la barbe des loix'.¹³¹ Many of his friends, noblemen such as the Comte Montmorin de Saint-Hérem, were to die in the September massacres. There was no place now for those who had gaily talked of the evils of the Ancien Régime in circles where their effects had never been really felt.

At first, admittedly, these changes were lost in the wave of national enthusiasm following Brunswick's manifesto and the victory of Valmy. La Harpe himself was caught up in this spirit.¹³² The enemy, which had threatened to engulf the Nation, had been pushed back. He wanted to produce a 'cri d'indignation et un chant guerrier, adressé à nos braves défenseurs'¹³³ and in September 1792 he began his *Hymne à la Liberté*,¹³⁴ which is remarkable for its bloodthirstiness:

Le fer, amis, le fer! il presse le carnage:
C'est l'arme du Français, c'est l'arme du courage,
L'arme de la victoire, et l'arbitre du sort.
Le fer! . . . il boit le sang; le sang nourrit la rage,
Et la rage donne la mort.¹³⁵

Among these lines of military fervour, however, one can detect the poet's own feeling of inadequacy and his fear lest he be thought less patriotic than the soldier:

Si ma main étrangère aux fatigues de Mars
Est trop faible déjà pour le fardeau des armes;
Du moins pour mon pays brûlant d'un saint amour,
Du moins je veux qu'on dise un jour,
Que chantant les vengeurs de la France insultée,
J'eus l'âme et la voix de Tyrtée.¹³⁶

From now on, La Harpe, possibly aware that he no longer served a truly useful purpose in society, was willing to bow before the dictates of its new masters.

It is difficult to be a hero when lacking the natural character of a hero, and it is equally difficult to know when to be silent and be fully prudent when one is not accustomed to practising such wisdom. Even before the Revolution, La Harpe had got into trouble more than once through a lack of self-restraint. For three years now, he had constantly declared his political point of view and the habit was too strong to break. Betraying his past, he now joined in the

chorus against the deposed king,¹³⁷ as he sought to show his complete fidelity to the Republic:

On sait assez combien l'ancien régime était odieux et oppressif: on ne sait pas assez combien il était absurde et ridicule; c'est aussi ce que je tâche de faire, toutes les fois que j'en trouve l'occasion, soit au Lycée, soit ailleurs. Si j'étais chargé de quelque partie de l'instruction publique, je voudrais, au bout de quelques temps, mettre les élèves au point de ne plus parler de la royauté que comme on parle depuis longtemps des sorciers et des possédés¹³⁸

In the middle of the Terror, he set out to celebrate the 'trionphe général et solennel remporté sur la superstition'.¹³⁹ He was seen to approve of all the most farcical comments and suggestions. He quoted as a 'grande vérité et un excellent avis', Cubières' nonsensical claim that 'c'est de la messe que sont nés tous nos malheurs . . . c'est de la comédie que naissent tous nos plaisirs'.¹⁴⁰ He believed that the plan to remove all the royal coats of arms from the books in the Bibliothèque nationale was truly republican and worth the cost.¹⁴¹

Yet, for all his deviousness and his recreant praise for the new institutions, he could not mask his inner distaste for what was happening. Remove from the articles that he wrote at this time the introductory phrases of approval for the Commune or the Comité de Sûreté générale, through which he attempted to protect himself, and one still finds an underlying trust in the supremacy of the educated.¹⁴² He could not really feel at home in Paris in the mob rule following the troubles of May 1793 and was to claim that in private, at least, while visiting Madame de Villette, he had expressed his fears of the *Montagne* to two members of the Convention, Isnard and Launay d'Angers.¹⁴³ In La Harpe, a respect for the rules in literature found a corollary in political matters in an undying respect for order.¹⁴⁴ This comparison with literature, indeed, probably brings one nearest to La Harpe's real attitude at this time. He was probably only vaguely aware of the real suffering that was going on about him. Already in 1763, when he first made his mark on the Parisian scene, Grimm had written: 'Je meurs de peur que m. de La Harpe ne reste toute sa vie froid et sage'.¹⁴⁵ The latter's love for rules was greater than his feeling for reality. He could only teach and not experience, and was a pedant even in life. Through all this period when men were forced to show their mettle, his dearest worry still remained the preservation of good taste.¹⁴⁶

At this time, however, his private life underwent an important change. He broke away from his past by divorcing his wife on 29 March 1793.¹⁴⁷ It has been suggested that this was for 'incompatibilité d'humeur',¹⁴⁸ and although there is now no means of proving this, La Harpe's earlier behaviour makes this seem most likely. Marie-Marthe Monmayeux now went to live in Saint-Germain-en-Laye, only returning to Paris on 2 July 1793 to give a power of attorney to her lawyer for the partition of the community.¹⁴⁹ This was drawn up by La Harpe and the lawyer on 6 July.¹⁵⁰ During April and May 1793, La Harpe paid his

ex-wife a pension, but then replaced it with the interest on two of his annuities, on the understanding that this should revert to him were she to die first. He only kept back the interest on the annuity settled on him by La Borde in 1787. He then continued to live alone in his flat in the rue du Hasard (rue Thérèse) and ate his meals with a Polish couple called Minut, who lived in the same house.¹⁵¹

In public, he maintained his reputation as a good republican by publishing *Virginie*¹⁵² and taking care to make changes in the third act which brought the play more in line with current thought.¹⁵³ It was again staged with success at the Théâtre de la République on 15 and 22 August 1793, and at the first of these performances — which was being given free to celebrate the anniversary of the Republic — the public called insistently for the author who came on to the stage and recited his *Hymne à la liberté*.¹⁵⁴ At the same theatre on 31 December 1793, massed choirs sang to the tune of the *Marseillaise* lines that La Harpe had composed on the recapture of Toulon:¹⁵⁵

Triomphe, Liberté; donne partout des lois!
Ton sort est désormais de vaincre tous les rois!¹⁵⁶

And yet, protest as he might his fidelity to republican principles, he remained strangely suspect in the eyes of the new authorities. David suggested that he should become a member of the Jury national des arts, but this was rejected by the Comité d'Instruction publique on 15 November 1793.¹⁵⁷ His name remained indelibly linked with those of pre-revolutionary society. He had had pensions from Marie-Antoinette and from Calonne. He had two annuities from one of the former *fermiers généraux*, La Borde, who was arrested along with his colleagues in November 1793.¹⁵⁸ He was on close terms with the Duchesse de Grammont, who was arrested on 14 September 1793,¹⁵⁹ and with Madame de Damas, who was imprisoned on 23 November.¹⁶⁰ In addition, he had been an active member of the now-defunct Académie française. In 1792, possibly because of ill-health, he had abandoned the institution. Although elected chancellor on 30 June 1792,¹⁶¹ he did not turn up once at the Academy during his term of office. In July 1792, while defending the Academy in a general way, he said that its dissolution was by now a matter of indifference to him.¹⁶² He remained conspicuously absent from its meetings throughout the remaining months of 1792 and the first months of 1793. However, when it became obvious that the institution was once again under serious attack, he remembered just how important a place it had had in his life, and how he had fought for it in earlier years. In July and August 1793, he only missed four meetings and, along with Morellet, Ducis and Bréquigny, he was present at the final meeting on 5 August.¹⁶³ Together with the other academies, the Académie française was then suppressed on 8 August, showing, in the words of the Abbé Grégoire, 'tous les symptômes de la décrépitude'.¹⁶⁴ On 23 December, La Harpe was one of the ex-academicians who presented a petition to the Convention, asking that the

Academy's former subsidy be redistributed among those of its members who lived off literature alone.¹⁶⁵ Such interests and connexions were not likely to endear him to the authorities. Then, these associations apart, he was above all to be regarded warily as a member of the highly suspect Lycée.

Following the fall of the monarchy, this institution, like much else that dated from before the Revolution, became an object for close scrutiny by the new government. While acquiescing in the Lycée's request for financial help, by granting it 10,000 *livres* on 19 November 1792, the minister of the Interior, Roland, warned it that he and his fellow ministers were not pleased with its record and had been shocked by what they had heard in some of the lectures.¹⁶⁶ The only immediate reaction to this, on the part of the Lycée's administrators, was to ask the teachers to show more republican spirit in their speeches at the opening of the new session on 3 December 1792.¹⁶⁷ La Harpe once more read the introduction to the literature course which he had first given in 1786, but showed his republican spirit by reading some of his translation of the *Pharsalia* and his *Hymne à la liberté*.¹⁶⁸ The administrators were so pleased with this last work and its suitably patriotic appeal that they subscribed to have it printed at once.¹⁶⁹

La Harpe originally planned only to teach up to April 1793, when he was to be replaced by Sélis.¹⁷⁰ In March, however, he expressed his wish to continue. Since Sélis could only give one lesson a week, he wondered if he could not fill the other of the two weekly classes normally devoted to literature. The administrators, on the other hand, wanted him to prepare some lessons on foreign literature which they considered to be noticeably missing from his course. When he pleaded that he did not have enough time to prepare such lessons, they decided to stick to their original plan and left him out of the programme for the second half of the session.¹⁷¹ This was, however, to underrate his popularity with his audience. Sélis then fell ill,¹⁷² and a group of women subscribers drew up a petition demanding La Harpe's reinstatement.¹⁷³ After a vote, the administrators acquiesced, and it was agreed that La Harpe should continue to give one lesson a week up to the end of July.¹⁷⁴ At the opening of the second half of the session on 8 April 1793, he read part of his translation of the *Pharsalia*, the epilogue *Aux mânes de Lucain*, and two passages from his poem on women.¹⁷⁵ He had an audience that listened faithfully to lines that had all been heard before.

Such activities, however, struck the authorities as more and more irrelevant to the needs of Republican France. Roland's warning in November 1792 had no lasting effect. Once again, the Lycée's finances fell into a sorry state. On 14 June 1793, a committee was appointed to try and get further financial help from the government.¹⁷⁶ It had to report failure on 10 September.¹⁷⁷ The government was not going to give money to an institution that counted among its founders so many important personages of the Ancien Régime. One of the committee

members, the chemist Lavoisier, was himself a former *fermier général*. On 4 November 1793, it was decided to set up another committee to arrange for the complete 'régénération' of the Lycée, and the purging of this establishment had begun.¹⁷⁸ This committee met seven times throughout November and progressively eliminated from the list of founders and subscribers all those suspected of not having the true republican spirit. It gave its report at a general meeting of the Lycée on 2 December 1793.¹⁷⁹ This foundation was now to be called the *Lycée républicain* and in the building the 'signes insultants de la féodalité' were to be replaced by the statue of Liberty and the busts of Brutus, Marat and Le Peletier.

For the opening on 11 December 1793 (21 frimaire an II), members of all the important revolutionary governing bodies and committees were invited to come and hear La Harpe read some passages of poetry, Garat a speech on history, and Cadet Gassicourt an ode entitled *Le Lycée républicain*.¹⁸⁰ For this occasion, the teachers had to wear the famous *bonnet rouge*. So, on the appointed day, La Harpe placed on top of his head the dreaded symbol of the *sans-culottes* and listened in silence while a certain Varlet read a poem in honour of Marat.¹⁸¹ It was a time for prudence. However, the room was hot, and in the end La Harpe could not resist removing the *bonnet rouge*, while saying audibly: 'Ce bonnet qu'on dit fait pour les têtes républicaines, ferait bouillir la mienne'.¹⁸²

His friend, Boissy d'Anglas, was to maintain that it was this action that finally set in motion the suspicions that led to La Harpe's imprisonment by the authorities three months later.¹⁸³ The latter himself claimed¹⁸⁴ that this was for having dared, in an article in June 1793, to suggest that it was time for the war to come to an end.¹⁸⁵ In fact, it is difficult to point to a precise reason for his arrest, but like so many others at this time, he was probably imprisoned merely as being thought suspicious. By this time, it hardly needed a reasoned motive for such a fate. The Terror created an atmosphere of hysteria, in which every man became obsessed with fear of his neighbour. The intellectual was naturally suspect, and Palissot, for instance, had difficulty in getting a *certificat de civisme* because he had dared to make fun of Rousseau in *Les Philosophes*.¹⁸⁶ Where a reason for imprisonment was given, it was often seen to have no possible relationship with the truth. Danton — a convinced revolutionary if ever there was one — was accused in the official decree against him of having 'tenté de relever le trône en France'.¹⁸⁷

A warrant for La Harpe's arrest was issued by the police on 16 March 1794 (26 ventôse an II) on orders from the Comité de Sûreté Générale,¹⁸⁸ and by 18 March (28 ventôse) he was in the Luxembourg.¹⁸⁹ He was, however, still in very poor health and was soon moved from the over-crowded Luxembourg — which housed at that time nearly six hundred and fifty prisoners¹⁹⁰ — to a *maison de santé*, known as *Montprin* and run by a certain Desnos at n^o. 1466, rue Notre-Dame des Champs, where there were then only ten inmates.¹⁹¹ A

warrant for his transfer was issued on 14 April 1794 (24 germinal an II),¹⁹² and he was moved immediately.¹⁹³ On 1 June (13 prairial), the civil committee of his section drew up a favourable report on him for the Comité de Sûreté Générale.¹⁹⁴ Admitting that he was highly educated, ‘mais brusque, orgueilleux, égoïste’, and accusing him of a certain reluctance to be active in his section, they were on the whole pleased with his record as a citizen. Indeed, for the first two and a half months of his imprisonment at least, he himself continued to make out that he was a staunch republican,¹⁹⁵ confident that the authorities would see that they had made a mistake and that he would soon be released.

In later years, he was to claim that, before being imprisoned, he had won the personal animosity of Robespierre by not concealing his distaste for the man nor his contempt for his writings,¹⁹⁶ and that it was he whom Robespierre designated in his report for the Fête de l’Être suprême on 8 June 1794 (20 prairial an II) as having been almost republican in 1789, but royalist in 1793.¹⁹⁷ The truth is that La Harpe claimed a heroism that he had never shown. On 29 May (10 prairial), he wrote from his prison a letter that was meant, if not for Robespierre’s eyes, at least for those of someone in authority, and in which — while pleading for his release — he expressed not only his approval of Robespierre, but of all he stood for.¹⁹⁸

This letter had no effect, and as his term of imprisonment dragged on, so his financial resources grew thinner and thinner. Since the imprisonment of La Borde in November 1793, La Harpe had not been paid the interest on his annuity.¹⁹⁹ He was still expected to support himself in prison, although not able to work. Friends, notably the hellenist, J. B. Gail, contributed to his keep,²⁰⁰ but it was scarcely enough. He withdrew into himself and began to consider carefully the very meaning of his life. For the first time in adulthood, he was out of the whirl of society and forced to contemplate its values. A whole generation was on trial. He became aware of the shallow and devious nature of his previous existence. His preoccupation with money, with success with women and fame in literature, the spoils of wit and false gallantry, the booty of intrigue, these brought no spiritual comfort. While he had talked about the niceties of literature and the theoretical aims of a cultured world, in the real world men had suffered, and he was coming into contact directly and intimately with this suffering. In the Luxembourg, he had met the ill-fated son of the famous Buffon,²⁰¹ and now his room was next to that of an old man of eighty-eight.²⁰² In the same prison, there was another old man whose mind was so decayed with age that he was a complete imbecile. This man was accused of conspiracy.²⁰³

Among La Harpe’s companions in prison there were Christians of varying degrees, but who all had found in their faith a fund of spiritual comfort. Like a Roman finally struck by the cruelty and the frivolity of his pagan city, La Harpe was impressed by the moral steadfastness and the power of the persecuted faith.²⁰⁴ He began to seek the company of the Bishop of Saint-Brieuc, Regnault

de Bellecise, of the Bishop of Montauban, Le Tonnelier de Breteuil, and of the widow of Stanislas de Clermont-Tonnerre. Before the Revolution, all three had paid more respect to the court than to God, but now found in their prison a reserve of strength in the religion that they had somewhat neglected.²⁰⁵ They gave La Harpe a Bible and a copy of *De l'imitation de Jésus-Christ*, and he read them carefully as he sat alone in his room. When he came to the words in the latter work which ran, 'Me voici, mon fils, je viens à vous parce que vous m'avez invoqué', he was filled with a sudden feeling of intolerable anguish and joy:

Je n'en lus pas davantage, l'impression subite que j'éprouvai est au-dessus de toute expression, et il ne m'est pas plus possible de la rendre que de l'oublier. Je tombai la face contre terre, baigné de larmes, étouffé de sanglots, jetant des cris et des paroles entrecoupées: je sentais mon cœur soulagé et dilaté, mais en même temps prêt à se fendre. Assailli d'une foule d'idées et de sentiments, je pleurai assez longtemps, sans qu'il me reste d'ailleurs d'autre souvenir de cette situation, si ce n'est que c'est sans aucune comparaison ce que mon cœur a jamais senti de plus violent et de plus délicieux, et ces mots, *Me voici, mon fils*, ne cessaient de retentir dans mon âme et d'en ébranler puissamment toutes les facultés.²⁰⁶

For the first time, he stood face to face with his destiny and, again for the first time, he really experienced dread and awe. No longer could he avoid responsibility for what was going on. He and all those who had talked of Liberty and Man so as to shine in the safe society under Louis XVI or to hide from the realities of the Revolution had unleashed the demon that had brought them all to the door of death.

CHAPTER VI

THE CHRISTIAN FIGHT

His companions in prison now welcomed him into their rooms, and, under the guidance of Madame de Clermont-Tonnerre,¹ he started to translate the psalms.² As the Terror dragged on, La Harpe and his friends remained where they were, living, perhaps not under immediate threat of death, but with uncertainty as to their future. The fall of Robespierre on 27 July (9 thermidor) was, however, to bring almost immediate freedom. The warrant for La Harpe's release was issued by the Comité de Sûreté Générale on 1 August (14 thermidor),³ and on the following day he returned to his flat in the rue du Hasard.⁴ At first, still troubled by ill-health,⁵ he wanted to live rather quietly. He did not return to journalism.⁶ His finances were in a sorry state and he could not afford to live in grand style.

Yet, life held new promise for him. He found that he was considered to be one of the heroes of *Thermidor*. *Virginie* was performed again at the Théâtre de la République on 12 August (25 thermidor), and it was now seen as a protest against the tyranny of Robespierre and Saint-Just.⁷ When it was withdrawn after the second performance, because of the illness of Vanhove the elder, the public clamoured for the play to be brought back. It was suggested in some quarters that there was a plot to silence one of France's most distinguished men of letters.⁸ Vanhove was ill for nearly four months,⁹ but when *Virginie* was finally performed again on 29 December 1794 (9 nivôse an III), it once again attracted enthusiastic audiences.¹⁰

For his part, La Harpe was still anxious to show that he was a good patriot. For the Fête des Victoires, designed to celebrate the expulsion of the enemy from French territory, and held on the Champ de Mars on 21 October 1794 (30 vendémiaire an III),¹¹ he wrote a *Chant des Triomphes*,¹² which was set to music by Le Sueur. As before, he proclaimed the rights of Liberty, but now echoed the changing times, by expressing himself in gentler terms:

Que la Sagesse, protectrice
De la paisible Égalité,
Soit la seule dominatrice
Des enfants de la Liberté.¹³

La Harpe had returned to eminence. It was even suggested that he should be the new head of the Bibliothèque nationale,¹⁴ but, by then, he had agreed to go back to teaching at the Lycée. This establishment was still in financial straits.

In August 1794, it owed 17,282 *livres* 12 *sols*,¹⁵ and La Harpe and several other teachers had not yet been paid for the previous session. Once more, the founders turned to the government for help. The latter still insisted on keeping a close control on the Lycée and other similar organizations,¹⁶ but voted it the sum of 20,000 *livres* to help it out of its difficulties.¹⁷ The question of paying the teachers was raised on 15 November (25 brumaire), but although the help from the government was now pending, the Lycée's debts still came to 11,203 *livres* 18 *sols* 4 *deniers*, and the matter was adjourned.¹⁸ Nevertheless, Garat was appointed to go and ask La Harpe to edit the programme for the following session.¹⁹ He announced on 28 November (8 frimaire) that not only had the latter been unwilling to edit the programme, but that he was not satisfied with the salary attached to his teaching post.²⁰ Under the reorganization of the Lycée in 1793, the teachers were no longer paid a fixed yearly income but 25 *livres* for each hour of teaching.²¹ La Harpe had been arrested after only having given a relatively small number of lessons and was among those to suffer most from the new ruling. However, it was now decided that those teachers who were seen to be in financial need would be entitled to a special bonus.²² Gohier and Saint-Martin were appointed to take La Harpe 600 *livres* for the previous session and to inform him of the new decision.²³

In fact, La Harpe's financial situation was now slightly better. Marie-Marthe Monmayeux died on 10 November 1794 (20 brumaire an III),²⁴ and the interest on the two annuities awarded to her after her divorce in 1793 now reverted to her former husband. On 3 January 1795 (14 nivôse an III), the latter was one of those awarded 3,000 *livres* by the Convention nationale,²⁵ and, in addition, his teaching at the Lycée during the session was to bring in another 3,000 *livres*.²⁶ With this improvement in his financial situation, and as the memory of prison died away, he seemed to return to some of his former pleasures. A man changes his opinion more easily than his character or his habits. La Harpe returned to the social round. He visited Madame de Clermont-Tonnerre at her country house, Champlatreux, at Saintry, near Corbeil.²⁷ He went to dine at Livry with a friend of long standing, Madame de Damas.²⁸ In Paris or at Clichy, he started calling on the young Madame Récamier for whom he had a paternal affection. He had been a frequent guest in her mother's box at the theatre and, as the young woman now rose to fame in the fashionable world, he looked on approvingly,²⁹ while, for the rest of the world, he kept his tyrannical tongue. Almost with joy, he plunged back into the quarrels of the Parisian scene, even if it was now as an enemy of the *philosophes* with whom he had been for so long associated.

He did not, however, open hostilities at once. At the Lycée on 31 December 1794 (11 nivôse an III), he gave a speech against Robespierre and the Terror.³⁰ It was a safe enough theme, and the speech was applauded by even the most radically minded.³¹ In his course at the Lycée this session he combined the study of classical oratory with the question of Revolutionary language³² and managed

to introduce more and more digressions on the horrors of the past. His lessons were well attended and well received. His political digressions were faithfully reproduced in the newspapers.³³ It looked as though he was going to be once again a faithful servant for new masters, and he was soon given another platform on which to speak. On 8 January 1795 (19 nivôse an III), he was appointed teacher of literature at the short-lived Ecoles normales in the Sorbonne.³⁴ He began teaching there on 23 January (4 pluviôse).³⁵ Again his subject was classical oratory, and again he brought in the question of Revolutionary language.³⁶

It was only then that it became apparent to all that La Harpe was no friend of the new régime. As irascible a Catholic as he had been a *philosophe*, and sounding sometimes more like a preacher than a lecturer,³⁷ he first condemned the structure of the Convention and complained about the anarchy of some of its members in a lesson at the Ecoles normales on 12 February 1795 (24 pluviôse an III).³⁸ Henceforth, he was to be identified as a man of the political right, and it was as such that he took a more active part in politics than ever before.

He was urged to political activity by the fact that *Thermidor* brought no peace to the Parisian scene. In the poverty stricken city, riots were frequent. La Harpe was only one of many who saw in this situation a danger that power might once more fall into the hands of men of the extreme left.³⁹ It was with the help of the army and of right-wing deputies that the Convention quelled the troubles of April and May 1795, but it was quick to disavow this alliance. Like many tarnished by association with the rule of Robespierre, most deputies were men of the centre who feared equally both the left and the right. On 1 May, M. J. Chénier was the sponsor of a decree to silence right-wing journalists, and La Harpe replied immediately with a brochure in which he defended the liberty of the press at all times.⁴⁰ When *Virginie* was performed again at the Théâtre de la République on 10 May, the audience considered Chénier to be the symbol of tyranny under attack, and had several passages repeated.⁴¹

This reaction from the audience was only one of many signs that the Convention was growing increasingly unpopular in Paris. During the Revolution, political discussion in the capital had nearly always originated in the Sections, and a number of these Sections had now fallen into the hands of right-wing reactionaries, who continuously criticized the Convention, especially when the latter started to prepare for constitutional reform. After *Thermidor*, it had soon become obvious that government could no longer be carried on under the constitution of 1793, and in December 1794 the Convention had set up a committee which now put forward its proposals for reform. To avoid tyranny from the mob and the ever present danger of a dominant faction in the government, the committee advocated the division of legislative power between two chambers, *Les Cinq Cents* and *Les Anciens*, of which a fifth of the members were to be renewed annually, not by direct suffrage, but through an electoral college.

These proposals could only meet with approval from the right. The latter was, however, less happy with the plan to entrust executive power to a governing committee of five members, the Directoire. It was horrified when P. C. L. Baudin presented a report on 18 August (1 fructidor) in which he proposed that in the forthcoming elections two thirds of the future deputies should be chosen from among those already in the Convention, in which the centre of power would thus stay. Its fury knew no bounds when this report was adopted by the Convention on 22 August (5 fructidor).⁴² This was followed by another report by Baudin on the organization of the forthcoming elections, which was adopted by the Convention on the 30th (13 fructidor).⁴³

At first, continuing ill-health forced La Harpe to spend much of his time in the country, and he could only watch the moves in the Convention from afar.⁴⁴ On returning to Paris towards the end of August, however, he plunged into politics. He published two pamphlets,⁴⁵ one of which brought a public reply from Baudin. The latter made much of the fact that he had seen a leader of right-wing discontent in the Sections, Richer-Sérizy, leaving La Harpe's flat.⁴⁶ La Harpe replied that the latter, who had been in the Luxembourg with him, had merely called to pay his respects,⁴⁷ but their two names remained linked. That they had views in common can be seen from La Harpe's own part in the affairs of his Section, La Butte-des-Moulins.

By this time, the danger of public disorder had grown great, and, as in earlier troubles, the government brought the army within striking distance of Paris. In the face of this move, the Section Le Peletier — of which Richer-Sérizy was a member — passed a resolution on 6 September (20 fructidor) seeking to guarantee individual liberty, respect for people's homes, and freedom of the press.⁴⁸ The next day, the government clamped down with a law forbidding communication between Paris and the rest of France and the army in particular.⁴⁹ On 9 September (23 fructidor), La Harpe led a deputation to the Section Le Peletier from La Butte-des-Moulins and delivered a speech in favour of the former's act of guarantee.⁵⁰ He was at this time also preparing a similar bill of rights of his own.⁵¹ On 10 September (24 fructidor), as he had already expressed publicly his doubts as to whether the army could be forced to act against the people,⁵² he was appointed by his Section to go and fraternize with the soldiers. He was only stopped from doing this by the news that the army had broken camp.⁵³

La Harpe's Section was now in the fore of the struggle with the government. In the plebiscite for the new constitution, like all but one of the other Sections, La Butte-des-Moulins accepted the constitution itself, but refused to acknowledge the decrees that ensured a safe return for members of the Convention.⁵⁴ On 7 September (21 fructidor), it decided not to admit into its ranks men who had taken part in the Terror,⁵⁵ and on 16 (30 fructidor), as an alternative to the Convention's plans for the elections, it prepared an address demanding proportional representation in the voting, reflecting the geographical and

and numerical importance of Paris and the Parisians.⁵⁶ At a meeting on 24 September (2 vendémiaire an IV), it drew up a list of complaints.⁵⁷ It expressed its disapproval of the purge from public office of the relatives of *émigrés* and non-juring priests, a measure which had been proposed in the Convention on 6 September (20 fructidor an III)⁵⁸ and approved on 21 (5^e jour complémentaire).⁵⁹ It viewed with dismay the refusal by the Convention on 22 September (6^e jour complémentaire) to consider a petition from the Section Le Peletier demanding the reimprisonment of partisans of the Terror and the lifting of the ban on permanent assemblies in the Sections.⁶⁰ Finally, it denounced as untrue the claim by the Convention on 23 September (1 vendémiaire an IV)⁶¹ that the decrees on the manner of electing the legislative bodies had been accepted by the majority of the people.

It is difficult to say to what extent this intransigence in La Butte-des-Moulins was due to the influence of La Harpe, but he certainly continued to support actively the ideas that were expressed there. When a deputation from the Section des Amis de la Patrie came to the general assembly of La Butte-des-Moulins and defended the Convention's proposed purge of the relatives of priests and *émigrés*, the following day he rose and warned his fellow citizens against such a move.⁶² He also seized the opportunity to speak out against the freeing of men implicated in the Terror. On 28 September (6 vendémiaire), he again attacked the Convention, accused it of basing its power on a constitution that had not yet come into force and once more defended the decisions of the general assemblies in the Sections.⁶³

By 27 September (5 vendémiaire), rumour had it that his name was to be included in a list of those to be proscribed,⁶⁴ and he appears to have started making preparations for going into hiding.⁶⁵ At the same time, this prudence was countered by even greater activity in his Section. On or around 1 October (9 vendémiaire), there was a change of power in both the Section Le Peletier and La Butte-des-Moulins, as the real moderates took fright. In La Butte-des-Moulins, La Harpe was appointed secretary.⁶⁶

The Section Le Peletier now passed a resolution calling on the other Sections to send their electors to a meeting in the old Théâtre français. This rather farcical event lasted the whole of 3 October (11 vendémiaire). Although at least thirty Sections had promised their support, less than twenty turned up.⁶⁷ By 1 p.m. there were only between sixty and eighty people present, and, when the meeting was adjourned for a time between 3.30 and 5 p.m., the electors of only fifteen Sections had arrived.⁶⁸ No committee was ever properly formed, and most of the day was spent waiting for more support. The numbers slowly dwindled until the last person left about 11 p.m., an hour before the government forces arrived to take over the building. The one decision taken was, however, important. The meeting guaranteed support for the Section Le Peletier's call for arms. La Harpe was sent to this meeting by his Section, but, or so he later insisted,⁶⁹ he saw

immediately that the meeting was a hoax and left when the call for arms was approved. He claimed that he was back at the general assembly of his Section by 7 p.m., where, despite the uproar that reigned there,⁷⁰ he called on the two thousand odd members present to disavow this intention to take up arms.⁷¹ Despite this, by the end of the day, eight Sections, including La Butte-des-Moulins, were in open rebellion against the Government.⁷²

The army now moved in from Les Sablons. The first clash was a moral victory for the Sections. Menou, leading troops against the Section Le Peletier, could not bring his men to fire on fellow-citizens. Another more ruthless commander was found in Bonaparte. La Harpe was to make out that he spent the morning of 5 October (13 vendémiaire) preparing, along with some other citizens, a call for disarmament for the printers.⁷³ Be that as it may, it was already too late. La Butte-des-Moulins took arms at 6 a.m., and within the hour had surrounded the Palais-Royal with an armed force of two hundred men.⁷⁴

In the ensuing confusion, La Harpe somehow managed to disappear. He slipped away to a prepared hide-out in the home of the book-loving notary, A. M. H. Boulard, in whose large house at n° 28, rue Saint-André-des-Arts there was room enough for Boulard's books and a fugitive.⁷⁵ He was to remain hidden there for a year and to find in Boulard a friend who would stand by him until his death and defend his reputation long after.⁷⁶ La Harpe had good reason to go into hiding. The government immediately set up military courts, and on 6 October (14 vendémiaire) the Comité de Sûreté générale issued a warrant for La Harpe to be brought in for questioning.⁷⁷ On 15 October (23 vendémiaire), he was named in the Convention as one of those on whom the Royalists counted in their plots to overthrow the Republic.⁷⁸

However, there was still confusion, and it was not until 27 December (6 nivôse) that the Directoire finally issued a warrant for his arrest, accusing him and others of being 'tous prévenus de conspiration contre la sûreté intérieure et extérieure de l'Etat'.⁷⁹ On 7 January 1796 (17 nivôse an IV), La Harpe's neighbour, Madame Minut, and a treasury official called Méat were arrested on a warrant from the Directoire and accused of holding 'des assemblées de Conspirateurs, et d'être en relation avec le cn Laharpe'.⁸⁰ They had probably helped him to move his personal effects to Boulard's house. They were interrogated on 9 January (19 nivôse) and Méat was then released.⁸¹ The preliminary investigations against Madame Minut continued for a little while, but would appear to have led to no definite conclusion, and she too was soon released under supervision.⁸²

Indeed, these proceedings were carried out without any real conviction. Nearly all those responsible for *Vendémiaire* had somehow managed to escape arrest. There was only one execution. The Directoire soon had other things to worry about. La Harpe therefore remained where he was without being unduly bothered, but his financial situation quickly deteriorated. He could no longer

teach at the Lycée, and even if he received the interest of his annuities — and this is far from certain — the government, now faced by bankruptcy, insisted that this interest be paid in worthless *assignats*. La Harpe was reduced to selling some of his books⁸³ and relying on the charity of others.⁸⁴

This time of reclusion was not lost for him, although he was not in the best of health. He worked on a commentary on revolutionary language⁸⁵ and on the first three volumes of the *Lycée ou cours de littérature*.⁸⁶ Again Panckoucke was to come to his help. Although the former no longer had any interest in the Lycée, having sold the rights to his son-in-law, Henri Agasse,⁸⁷ he now signed an agreement with La Harpe on 6 June 1796 (18 prairial an IV) for a commentary on the theatre of Racine.⁸⁸ He promised him 6,000 *livres en numéraire métallique* and gave him an advance of 900 *livres* to tide him over.⁸⁹

La Harpe's political activities had placed him in a difficult situation, but not for long. While admitting that he had perhaps been guilty of certain errors of judgement, he never doubted the almost divine right of his cause.⁹⁰ By the spring of 1796, he felt that it was safe to get in touch with the authorities through the good offices of the under-director of the War office, Abancour, and tried to get the warrant against him revoked.⁹¹ During April, May and June, the police examined the case and presented a report to the Directoire on 9 July (21 messidor). The Directoire refused to discuss the matter and sent it back without dealing with it.⁹² By now, however, La Harpe had a powerful ally in M. J. Chénier. Chénier, who had no reason to be particularly attached to La Harpe, nevertheless admired him as a writer.⁹³ With Chénier's support, Abancour wrote to the Minister of Police on 15 July (27 messidor),⁹⁴ enclosing a copy of a letter in which La Harpe justified his own actions.⁹⁵

Although these moves did not bring the latter immediate freedom, there was now hope that liberation was not far off. Already on 8 September (22 fructidor), the founders of the Lycée were sure that he would soon be cleared and decided to ask him to give two lessons every *décade* during the forthcoming session.⁹⁶ Montesquiou-Fezensac visited him and tried to get him to agree to this, but he remained cautious. On 12 October (21 vendémiaire an V), Saint-Martin renewed the offer and managed to persuade him to promise to give a definite reply within a week.⁹⁷ Perignan and Saint-Martin were then sent to see him again, and on 14 October (23 vendémiaire) they reported that he was willing to take up his lessons again, once the warrant against him was revoked.⁹⁸

His case was now in the hands of the departmental Grand Jury. It came up before this body at the beginning of November, but took a little time to be dealt with. On 6 November (16 brumaire), the president of the Jury, Landry, wrote to the Minister of Justice for more information on La Harpe.⁹⁹ This was sent on 9 November (19 brumaire) and the Jury then examined the case carefully.¹⁰⁰ By 18 November (28 brumaire), it had decided in his favour;¹⁰¹ he could return to public life.

His reappearance at the Lycée was a triumph. At the opening in the evening of 1 December 1796 (11 frimaire an V), he gave a reworked version of his *Discours sur l'Etat des Lettres*,¹⁰² in which he rose against 'les barbares du dix-huitième siècle, qui se sont nommés *Philosophes*!'¹⁰³ and condemned without quarter all those who failed to recognize God.¹⁰⁴ The experience of *Vendémiaire* had not taught him restraint. In place of the guilty anger of *Thermidor*, there was now the intolerance of the Royalist Catholic revival that was to colour French politics for many a year to come. He spoke violently for an hour and a half, with the sweat running off his face and onto his paper, and looking up to heaven for divine inspiration.¹⁰⁵ Intolerance was to be met with intolerance. Republicans accused him of hypocrisy, of madness, of having sold himself to the enemy.¹⁰⁶ The Royalists proclaimed his continuing greatness.¹⁰⁷

Feelings were now running high, as the elections of March and April 1797 drew near. La Harpe was seen to be anxious to enter the Corps législatif. Already in December 1796, however, his friends feared that his dogmatic attitude to faith would be held against him¹⁰⁸ and, by March 1797, it was obvious that he would be unable to find an electoral body willing to nominate him.¹⁰⁹ Ever since his speech at the opening of the Lycée, he had not ceased in his lectures to pour out violent criticism of the *philosophes*, of those who had contributed in varying degrees to the 'ruine de la religion, de la morale et des lois'.¹¹⁰ At the end of February 1797, he had made his chances of election even more remote, by bringing out a defence of non-juring priests, *Du Fanatisme dans la langue révolutionnaire*.¹¹¹ This publication unleashed an unprecedented wave of attacks from all those who remembered his behaviour in earlier days. They felt that a real Christian would protest his faith a little less. Røederer had immense success with *Les SI—Épître à . . .*, which was obviously inspired by Voltaire's attacks on Lefranc de Pompignan, and which consisted of a list of allusions to La Harpe's past.¹¹² Lalande likened him to Newton in his dotage.¹¹³ The *Journal de Paris* gave the signal for a whole host of epigrams and short articles against him, whose very number would make them difficult to catalogue. Undaunted, ever sure of himself, La Harpe brought out a second and a third edition of his work within two months,¹¹⁴ and then printed an attack on Helvétius that he had delivered in the Lycée.¹¹⁵

With the tone thus once again set for polemics, he now returned to journalism. Together with Fontanes and Bourlet de Vauxcelles, he founded *Le Mémorial, ou recueil historique politique et littéraire*.¹¹⁶ There was no pretence as to its intended function; it was to harry the government and remind it that it was answerable to the people.¹¹⁷ The first issue of this daily paper appeared on 20 May 1797 (1 prairial an V), and La Harpe was quickly involved in more quarrels. Within four days, he had begun an argument with the *Décade philosophique*,¹¹⁸ to be followed in June and July by further quarrels with the *Journal de Paris*.¹¹⁹ However, all this was incidental to the main purpose of his articles at this time.

The elections in the spring of 1797 had brought a horde of right-wing sympathizers into the legislative bodies, but the Directoire only replaced one of its members and remained basically unchanged. In his articles, La Harpe never missed the chance of criticizing it: 'On commence à sentir tout ce qu'il y a d'étrange dans le silence accoutumé du directoire, qui daigne rarement descendre jusqu'à rendre aux législateurs ce qu'il leur doit'.¹²⁰ In July, he was to come into direct opposition with the known anti-clerical member of the Directoire, La Révellière-Lépeaux.¹²¹ In August, he became once more the champion of the non-juring priests.¹²²

Journalism apart, this was a time of unparalleled activity for La Harpe. The continual devaluation of the *assignats* meant that his annuities were now practically worthless and he was forced to work hard for a living. Besides teaching three times in every *décade* at the Lycée Républicain,¹²³ in the middle of January he started a course of lectures on Racine's theatre at the new Lycée des Etrangers in the former Hôtel de Marbeuf¹²⁴ and, from the middle of May, he gave lessons on seventeenth-century literature at the Cercle de l'Harmonie which was opened in what had been the rooms of the Duchesse d'Orléans in the Palais-Royal.¹²⁵

In society, he had returned to the brilliance of former years, a brilliance that seemed all the more enhanced by the years of repression that now seemed to be past. Fashionable society under the Directoire, like La Harpe, seemed to have shaken off its radical leanings and to have sought refuge in the traditional values of the nobility. As a figurehead for this new feeling, he was associated with all the various factions known as the *Clichyens*.¹²⁶ He was proud to be a friend of a leader of the right-wing in the legislature, Pastoret.¹²⁷ His finances were now in better shape. His lessons at the Lycée Républicain alone brought him 2,000 *livres*.¹²⁸ In August, with Migneret he sued the publisher J. N. Barba for 1,125 *livres* for a pirated edition of *Du Fanatisme* and was successful.¹²⁹ In July, with various other authors — and as a sequel to earlier copyright campaigns — he started proceedings against the theatre manager, Tolozé, who had performed plays without permission.¹³⁰ It looked as though his efforts were to bring in their proper rewards.

He had been moving about Paris after leaving Boulard's house. In May 1797, he was living in the rue Neuve du Luxembourg (rue Cambon),¹³¹ but by July he had taken up residence at n° 913, rue de l'Université, near the rue des Saints-Pères.¹³² He was anxious to settle down. Encouraged by Jacques Récamier, who was fond of match-making,¹³³ La Harpe, now aged fifty-seven, let himself be drawn into marriage with a girl of twenty-three, Louise Catherine Victoire de Hatte de Longuerue.¹³⁴ Her mother had brought her to Paris from the family home in Rebais, near Coulommiers, but in spite of the girl's undoubted beauty, it was not easy to find her a husband. Although eminently respectable,¹³⁵ the family's fortunes were modest. Overjoyed at the idea of having so celebrated a

son-in-law as La Harpe, the girl's mother did all she could to make him believe that her daughter was keen to marry him, and, as vain as ever, who was he to doubt her.¹³⁶

Under the terms of the wedding contract, signed in the Récamiers' house in the afternoon of 28 July 1797 (10 thermidor an V), and passed before La Harpe's friend, Boulard,¹³⁷ the bride brought a dowry of 6,000 *livres* and an annual income of 600 *livres*. In return, she was assured of an income of 12,000 *livres* following La Harpe's death. They were married on 9 August (22 thermidor).¹³⁸ The marriage lasted three weeks. Unable to conceal her repugnance for living with a much older man whom she did not love and who was not in the best of health, she then left him.¹³⁹ Never had he been so humiliated, but he had to accept the situation as best he could and, while not approving, offered no resistance to her demands for a divorce,¹⁴⁰ which was finally granted on 9 July 1798 (21 messidor an VI).¹⁴¹

In any case, La Harpe did not have long to reflect on his misfortune, as it was soon overshadowed by other worries. As we have seen, he had been among those to lead the unending attacks in the press on the Directoire and its policies. Together with Michaud in *La Quotidienne*, Fiévée in *La Gazette de France*, and Richer-Sérizy in the *Accusateur public*, to name but a few, he and the right-wing in general had returned to the polemics that had been only momentarily checked after *Vendémiaire*. With the strong, if divided, royalist movement in the legislative bodies firmly supported by the right-wing journalists, the executive felt itself to be in danger. To counteract this, Barras and Reubell schemed as best they could. They managed to win La Révellière-Lépeaux to their cause. Somehow Carnot was kept uninformed, and the fifth member of the Directoire, Barthélemy, was too timid to offer any real resistance to their plans. Above all, they had the support of the army. To restore a safe economy at home, the legislature continually called for peace abroad. This was not well received by the warring generals.

In July 1797, the Directoire, in the face of opposition from the legislature, appointed as Minister of War the diehard republican Lazare Hoche, who then marched on Paris. He was only held back by the Conseil des Cinq-Cents' managing to point out in time that this was unconstitutional and that he was too young for the job of minister. Throughout August, the legislative bodies wasted time complaining and arguing, while Barras with the help of Bonaparte quietly prepared a *coup d'état*. At 3 a.m. on 4 September (18 fructidor), an armed force of thirty thousand men surrounded the legislature while it sat, thus making the majority ineffective. Barras, Reubell and La Révellière-Lépeaux then got the minority which was favourable to their aims to ratify the putsch and, on 5 September (19 fructidor), decreed the deportation of a hundred and sixty-five citizens. Among those to be deported were two members of the Directoire, Carnot and Barthélemy, sixty-three deputies, and the 'propriétaires-entrepreneurs,

les directeurs, auteurs, rédacteurs et collaborateurs' of forty-two papers, of which *Le Mémorial* came first on the list.¹⁴²

Somehow La Harpe managed to avoid arrest and deportation to French Guiana. He left Paris in a hurry and is said to have first headed for the Jura mountains in the company of Richer-Sérizy, and to have found shelter for three weeks in a farm at La Borde Damenicol, between Dôle and Saint-Aubin-du-Jura.¹⁴³ Be that as it may, Richer-Sérizy eventually reached Bâle, where he was arrested at the beginning of November,¹⁴⁴ while La Harpe found safety nearer Paris. Thanks to Madame de Clermont-Tonnerre, by the end of October, if not before,¹⁴⁵ he was in a secure hide-out in the home of two spinsters called Bézard in the rue de la Déguide (rue du 14 Juillet) in Corbeil.¹⁴⁶ He was to stay there for over two years.

CHAPTER VII

THE LAST YEARS

Although he was accompanied by a faithful servant called Dupuis, who, together with his wife and children, shared his exile,¹ La Harpe was by now penniless and once more forced to rely on the charity of his friends.² To help him, they persuaded Migneret to bring out his Psalter,³ and he undoubtedly received further help from the publisher of the *Lycée*, Agasse⁴. He spent much of his time at Corbeil revising this work, making sure that it tallied with his views following his conversion. Agasse had to keep asking him to be more prudent, but La Harpe insisted on his right to express himself as he wished.⁵ He had never been an easy character to deal with and, despite adversity, he was still as conscious as ever of what he considered to be his duty to criticize as he thought fit. The first eight volumes of the *Lycée* appeared in May 1799.⁶ In the meantime, he had moved on to work on the *Histoire de la Philosophie du XVIII^e siècle*,⁷ on which he had begun a course of lectures at the Lycée Républicain, interrupted by his having to hide.⁸ He possibly also worked at this time on an *Apologie de la religion*⁹ which he had begun while still in Paris, but which was to remain unfinished at his death.

The polemics around these writings did not disturb the quiet existence that he led in his retreat. He returned to poetry. He translated the first eight cantos of Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata*¹⁰ and worked on a religious epic centred around Louis XVI and the Revolution.¹¹ Except for the occasional visit from Madame de Clermont-Tonnerre and from friends such as Madame Récamier,¹² his whole life revolved around a steady routine of work. It was now essential to keep quiet and wait, while the Directoire struggled with the difficulties of war abroad and of continuing *chouannerie* at home.

The end of this régime was soon in sight. In June 1799, there was a brief moment of alliance between the legislature and part of the executive, when Barras and Siéyès — who had replaced Reubell — joined forces with the Conseils to get rid of the other three members of the Directoire. But anarchy continued, and the executive was seen to be increasingly ineffective and corrupt. The far left was flourishing again and gaining power. Siéyès realized that France needed autocratic control. He turned to the army and, after some difficulty and disappointment, found a man of force in the newly-returned Bonaparte. On 9 November (18 brumaire), while the other members of the Directoire were still



Madame Récamier visiting La Harpe during his last illness
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asleep, Siéyès and Roger-Ducos summoned the Conseil des Anciens and, convincing them that there was a danger of a left-wing uprising, got them to agree to meet with the Conseil des Cinq-Cents on the next day at Saint-Cloud under the protection of Bonaparte. The other three members of the Directoire were silenced by bribery and confinement. The régime had come to an end. The next day, Napoléon Bonaparte, with the help of his brother Lucien, overthrew the Conseils with a show of force, and the right-wing triumphed: 'Tout se rangea presque de soi-même devant celui qui seul réunissait la volonté, le pouvoir et le talent de gouverner; et la France commença dès ce moment à rentrer dans le rang des nations civilisées'.¹³

One of the first acts of the Consulate was to allow the return to Paris under supervision of all those who had been deported or forced into exile by the *coup d'état* of 1797.¹⁴ Fontanes did not even wait for the decree and was knocked down by a horse while out walking in Paris on 17 November (26 brumaire).¹⁵ La Harpe, on the other hand, was more cautious¹⁶ and did not return to Paris until 16 January 1800 (26 nivôse an VIII).¹⁷ Through Madame de Clermont-Tonnerre, he then found a flat belonging to one of the canons of Notre-Dame, J. P. Sincholle d'Espinasse,¹⁸ in the shadow of the cathedral at n° 31, Cloître Notre-Dame (n° 4, rue Massillon) and lived 'up dirty stairs, through dirty passages . . . in a dark small den'.¹⁹ His lodgings were humble, but at least he was back in his beloved Paris with its promise of the joys of society. He was now seen again at the most important functions. On 25 February (6 ventôse), in the presence of Bonaparte and all the finest society in Paris, he recited part of his translation of Tasso at a ball given by the Foreign Minister.²⁰

His ill-health, however, never allowed him to return fully to the social round of earlier years. Even before his return, the Lycée Républicain had been making plans to have him back as a teacher,²¹ but when he was approached, he replied that, although willing to come and read part of his translation of Tasso, he intended to return to the country as soon as he could, on account of his poor health and his poverty.²² In spite of this plea, he stayed on in Paris and, even though the Lycée continued to try and convince him to come and teach there,²³ possibly in order to please his royalist friends, he started a private course of lectures in the latter part of February at the home of the financier, Despreaux, in the Hôtel de Bonneuil in the rue de Provence.²⁴ This lasted for about three months. Once more, La Harpe spoke to a brilliant gathering, with Madame Récamier setting the tone by sitting by his side as he talked.²⁵ While dealing with the theatre of Voltaire, he interspersed his lectures with readings from his *Jérusalem délivrée*.²⁶

As the year went on, he began to withdraw from society. He was given a triumphant welcome when he visited the Lycée Républicain in April, but once more declined the offers to reinstate him as a teacher there.²⁷ He lived quietly in his flat,²⁸ working on the Commentary on Racine's theatre²⁹ and on the three

volumes of the *Lycée* that were to come out in August.³⁰ There, he received visits from his friends, notably from his two collaborators on *Le Mémorial*, Fontanes and Bourlet de Vauxcelles. The latter, a gentle soul who shared La Harpe's admiration for Fontanes, became at this time an almost inseparable companion. His very docility off-set La Harpe's increasingly inflexible aggressiveness.³¹

Fontanes now resuscitated the *Mercure* which had slowly fallen into decrepitude following the death of Panckoucke.³² La Harpe was invited to become a collaborator and his name appeared on the prospectus.³³ Finally, however, he withdrew, as he was tired of the polemics of journalism and was not sure whether his health would allow him to contribute regularly.³⁴ For the time being, he only sent verse.³⁵ He was less and less inclined to be caught up in new ventures. In the same way, he refused³⁶ to join Suard, Morellet and other former Academicians who formed a private Académie française on 26 June 1800 (7 messidor an VIII).³⁷ He was only too happy when he could escape from Paris and was invited to spend part of the summer at the Récamiers' country-house at Clichy-la-Garenne.³⁸

However, his lack of money — especially the cost of his moving back to Paris and into his new flat — would not let him become an absolute recluse. It was in order to make a little money³⁹ that he now agreed to go back to the Lycée Républicain and gave a lesson on the sixth day of every *décade* for the first four months of the new session.⁴⁰ At the opening on 22 November (1 frimaire), he gave a speech to celebrate his return.⁴¹ He praised Bonaparte, condemned the *philosophes*, and attributed the happy outcome of past troubles to Divine Providence. He then led up to an introduction to reading a passage from his translation from Tasso who had by this time replaced Lucan as his main stand-by for such occasions. He compared him favourably to Homer, while pointing out that certain passages should not be read in front of children. This somewhat ingenuous introduction to the poem bored the audience which became restless.⁴² Nevertheless, his authority as a survivor from the glittering age of Voltaire assured him an enthusiastic following when he started his course on 6 December.⁴³ He could still triumph. At the beginning of November, he had been made an honorary associate of the Athénée de Lyon.⁴⁴ He was even admired, albeit grudgingly, by his political opponents. He completed his controversial course on the *philosophes* of the eighteenth century and, by the end of January, he had dealt with d'Alembert, Fontenelle and Buffon. Even the radically-minded agreed that he had dealt with them fairly.⁴⁵ He stopped teaching in the first week of April 1801.⁴⁶

It was probably also in order to stave off the effects of poverty that he decided, perhaps reluctantly, to prepare for publication the letters that he had composed as Paul of Russia's correspondent in Paris. He had begun work, correcting the drafts, by the summer of 1800,⁴⁷ and the first four volumes appeared in the spring of 1801.⁴⁸ The publication unleashed a horde of attacks that were to

plague La Harpe right up to his death. Whether he foresaw just how many there would be is hard to say, but they hurt him deeply. There was a certain naïveté in his nature, coupled with his belief in himself, that probably prevented him from realizing the danger of thus unearthing old, by no means gentle, criticism of still living contemporaries. By now, all he wanted was peace, but he could not escape easily from the polemics of a lifetime.

As before, the first reactions came in the *Journal de Paris*. Feeling himself to be unjustly attacked in a satire by Joseph Despaze, La Harpe wrote him an indignant note. Past experience had not taught him to be prudent when annoyed. On 18 May 1801 (28 floréal an IX), Despaze took his revenge by publishing in the *Journal de Paris* a long list of La Harpe's sins as an ardent revolutionary.⁴⁹ It was the signal for all those still faithful to the ideas of the *philosophes* to follow suit. The papers jibed at him throughout the summer, referring to more and more supposed crimes in his past. At the end of May, Colnet published a *Correspondance turque* to mimic the *Correspondance russe*.⁵⁰ It was a collection of all possible kinds of anecdotes on La Harpe, drawn from the scandal-sheets of the preceding forty years and designed to show that 'M. Laharpe n'a jamais loué qu'un seul littérateur' — himself.⁵¹ In June, Colnet also published a collection of epigrams, of which nearly all were directed against La Harpe.⁵² In the same month, Chénier joined battle with *Les Nouveaux Saints*, in which he called La Harpe the 'grand Perrin Dandin de la Littérature', who went around repeating: 'J'ai dit du mal de tous, car j'aime la justice'.⁵³ Once again, it would be difficult to catalogue all the attacks on *capucin* and *révérend père* La Harpe that appeared at this time. As late as February 1802, Palissot was to have success with his *Etrennes à M. de La Harpe, à l'occasion de sa brillante rentrée dans le sein de la Philosophie*⁵⁴ which consisted of a selection of works written by the latter when he was still faithful to the *philosophes*.⁵⁵

Harrowing as all this must have been, he had other troubles to preoccupy him. In May 1801, his already frail health broke down completely. He had chronic indigestion⁵⁶ and was beginning to be plagued by constant sciatica and general rheumatism. Struggling with his illness, he prepared three more volumes of the *Lycée* for publication in July.⁵⁷ It was illness,⁵⁸ as well as a plea from Chateaubriand,⁵⁹ that stopped him from bringing out a reply to Morellet's *Observations critiques sur le roman intitulé 'Atala'*.⁶⁰ In July, he again left Paris.⁶¹ We can only presume that it was to go and stay once more with the Récamiers at Clichy.⁶²

From now on, his illness and his lack of money were to dictate every thought and action. The *Lycée* sold well, but its author did not share in its success. He had sold the rights to Panckoucke in 1792, when he had agreed to take an annuity from him.⁶³ This, as we have seen, brought in an annual income of a mere 1,800 *livres*.⁶⁴ Agasse did offer now to add 600 *livres* to this, but he was unable to do so at once.⁶⁵ In addition, the La Borde family was in financial difficulties as well,

and La Harpe was not its only creditor. He had been counting on 1,200 *livres* due on the interest of the two annuities settled on him by the late Joseph de La Borde and had expected to be paid at the beginning of October 1801. This was not to be.⁶⁶

Luckily, the Lycée Républicain was still there to help him out of immediate poverty. At the beginning of November 1801, he agreed to prepare a speech for the opening on 22 (1 frimaire).⁶⁷ He wanted to introduce some lectures on lighter forms of verse in the eighteenth century. He again agreed to teach on the sixth day of every *décade* during the first four months of the session. In the middle of November, however, he had to write and tell the Lycée that, because of his ill-health, he was unable to prepare his speech for the opening and planned instead to read a chapter on Montesquieu from his *Histoire de la Philosophie du XVIII^e siècle*.⁶⁸ It struck his audience as being more elegant than profound.⁶⁹ His political opponents were quick to criticize the lectures that he gave during December and January on the paradoxes of Fontenelle, La Motte and Trublet and on the odes of Lefranc de Pompignan.⁷⁰

For a little time, his health seemed to be slightly better. He returned to the social round and, gingerly, to the delights of the table. He was lionized by the young Catholic Royalists and was a frequent guest at the dinners given by Madame Récamier. Once a week, he gave a reception in his flat for at least twenty people.⁷¹ In February 1802, Bonaparte's sister, Elisa Bacciochi, asked, or rather commanded, Madame Récamier to invite her to dinner so that she could be introduced to La Harpe.⁷² The evening was somewhat spoilt by the news of the arrest of Madame Récamier's father. Jean Bernard was postmaster general and was accused of allowing royalist mail to circulate. Following the royalist attempt on Bonaparte's life on 24 December 1800 (3 nivôse an IX), the latter had started to clamp down on both the republican left and the royalist right. In February 1802, La Harpe's friend, Madame de Damas, who had given refuge to two of the plotters, was sent to join her husband in exile.⁷³ Simultaneously, La Harpe himself became a victim of these moves.

On 25 February 1802 (6 ventôse an X), he was ordered out of Paris within twenty-four hours.⁷⁴ The order came so suddenly that his audience at the Lycée was assembled before it was realized that he would not be giving his class.⁷⁵ Those members of the Lycée's administration who were present had only just time enough to give him an advance of 600 francs to help him on his way.⁷⁶ At 6 a.m. on the next day, he set out for Châtillon-sur-Loing.⁷⁷ He could not understand why he, who had expressed publicly his admiration for Bonaparte, should be treated in this way.⁷⁸ He saw himself as a victim of the *philosophes*;⁷⁹ his departure was certainly interpreted as a blow for the Royalists.⁸⁰ Madame de Genlis was to say that he was exiled because the weekly meetings that he held in his flat came to be regarded by the government as seditious,⁸¹ a statement which tallies with the reason given in an official note published only a few days

after he was exiled. This accused him of nurturing ‘chez lui le caquetage de quelques coteries’.⁸² Moreover, a more specific reason for his falling foul of the authorities was that they believed — wrongly as it turned out — that he intended to attack Bonaparte in his poem on the Revolution, *Le Triomphe de la Religion*,⁸³ by showing the latter’s part in the events of *Vendémiaire*.⁸⁴ In any case, La Harpe was not treated harshly, but merely removed from Paris where his activities in 1795 and 1797 had shown that his presence could be dangerous. On 28 March (7 germinal), he was allowed to return to his former refuge in Corbeil.⁸⁵

There, he was no longer a journalist in flight but an object of pilgrimage for much of the literary world. Ballanche and Beuchot both went to Corbeil to try and persuade him to take charge of editions of Voltaire’s selected works.⁸⁶ His main disappointment was not to be in Paris for the first Easter following the ratification of the Concordat.⁸⁷ It was to mark this that he wrote to the Comédie française on 6 May and withdrew *Mélanie*,⁸⁸ about which he had felt unhappy for some time.⁸⁹ Not having set foot in a theatre since his conversion in 1794,⁹⁰ he had lost touch with copyright regulations and, when the play was given a fresh run at the end of 1801, at first he had felt unable to do anything about it.⁹¹ Even now, his withdrawal of the play was criticized in the press,⁹² and, despite complaints by La Harpe’s agent, the actors kept the work in their repertoire.⁹³

The productions of La Harpe’s youth were still there to mock him in his old age. During his stay in Corbeil, he corrected the text of *Mélanie*⁹⁴ and revised panegyrics such as the *Eloge de Fénelon*, initially written to please the *philosophes* of the Académie française.⁹⁵ Much of his *Triomphe de la Religion* dates from this time,⁹⁶ despite the fact that work was becoming more and more difficult. He was still very short of money and kept pestering the lawyer of the La Borde family for the interest due to him on his annuities.⁹⁷ His poor health⁹⁸ deteriorated rapidly, as he was far from proper medical care.⁹⁹ The Préfet de Police, Dubois, began to take an interest in his case and persuaded Fouché to go and see Bonaparte, who then agreed that La Harpe should be allowed to return to Paris.¹⁰⁰ He arrived there on 28 July and immediately entrusted himself to the care of his doctor.¹⁰¹ He spent most of his time on a couch. He no longer went out. His rheumatism effectively paralysed him.¹⁰²

His illness cost him a great deal of money, and, as we have seen, his funds were already low. Once again his friends rallied round. In August, they organized a benefit performance of *Philoctète* in a private house.¹⁰³ On 1 December (10 frimaire), Migneret bought La Harpe’s rights on all his works printed and unprinted, except for the *Lycée* which belonged to Agasse, and the Commentary on Racine which was the property of Madame Panckoucke.¹⁰⁴ For this sale he was promised 2,400 *livres*, of which he received 200 *livres* at once, and was to get further monthly payments of 200 *livres* beginning on 22 December.¹⁰⁵ On 13 January 1803 (23 nivôse an XI), Agasse finally settled on him an annuity of 600 francs¹⁰⁶ which he had promised as a supplement for the latter’s earnings on

the *Lycée*.¹⁰⁷ It was also, undoubtedly, to help him that the editors of the *Mercur* had agreed in October 1802 to publish part of his lectures in their paper.¹⁰⁸

In his sedentary existence, La Harpe still managed to do a fair amount of work. He continued with his *Triomphe de la Religion*, which all the Royalists were now awaiting eagerly,¹⁰⁹ and began preparing an 'édition épurée' of his works, from which he planned to expunge all that was liable to offend the 'respect dû à la religion'.¹¹⁰ If he could not go out, at least he could receive visits from his friends. Fashionable ladies met in his room. Maria Edgeworth was taken there by Madame Récamier in December 1802 and found there Lady Elisabeth Foster and the Russian Princess Dolgorouki.¹¹¹ Fontanes and other writers went to see him daily. Chateaubriand discussed his *Génie du Christianisme* with him.¹¹² He found him working on his religious epic and willing to recite it:

Oubliant qu'il était malade, coiffé d'un bonnet blanc, vêtu d'un spencer ouaté, il déclamait à tue-tête; puis, laissant échapper son cahier; il disait d'une voix qu'on entendait à peine: "Je n'en puis plus: je sens une griffe de fer dans le côté". Et si, malheureusement, une servante venait à passer, il reprenait sa voix de Stentor et mugissait: "Allez-vous-en! Fermez la porte!" Je lui disais un jour: "Vous vivrez pour l'avantage de la Religion. — Ah! oui, me répondit-il, ce serait bien à Dieu; mais il ne le veut pas, et je mourrai ces jours-ci". Retombant dans son fauteuil et enfonçant son bonnet sur ses oreilles, il exiait son orgueil par sa résignation et son humilité.¹¹³

This routine did not, however, last long. The illness got worse. In January 1803, it appears that his friends had him transported to some baths founded by Nicolas Albert on the corner of the quai d'Orsay (quai Anatole France) and the rue de Bellechasse, but the rigours of this establishment were too much for him and he was home within a few days.¹¹⁴ Paris was ravaged by an epidemic of influenza which he was in no state to resist. He fell seriously ill on or about 16 January.¹¹⁵ In the morning of the 24th, feeling that his last hour had come, he sent for the parish priest and received the last sacrament.¹¹⁶ The crisis passed, but he continued to get weaker. Society flocked to his door.¹¹⁷ The Institut de France, which was slowly returning to the former order of Academies, feeling perhaps that it had been unjust to him by refusing to admit him earlier, now elected him on 25 January to the Language and Literature class.¹¹⁸ It was little more than a mark of respect. By 1 February, it was obvious that complications had set in and that he was failing. At 1 p.m. on 2 February (13 pluviôse), he dictated his will to Boulard, but was even too weak to sign it.¹¹⁹ The same day, he again received the last sacrament. He now prepared himself to meet his Maker, abjured his past sins, sought forgiveness. He again sent for Boulard and at noon on 3 February (14 pluviôse) dictated a codicil which was a rather stilted retraction of all that he had said in his writings while still a *philosophe*, coupled with a declaration of faith that was not without its measure of self-satisfaction: 'J'exhorte tous mes compatriotes à entretenir des sentiments de paix et de concorde, demandant pardon à ceux qui ont cru

avoir à se plaindre de moi, comme je pardonne bien sincèrement à ceux dont j'ai eu à me plaindre'.¹²⁰

By 5 February (16 pluviôse) all hope of saving him had gone; it was merely a question of waiting for the final crisis.¹²¹ Fontanes went to see him on 10 February (21 pluviôse) and found him listening to the prayers for the dying. Even so, he was still alert. He turned to Fontanes and murmured: 'Mon ami, . . . je remercie le ciel de m'avoir laissé l'esprit assez libre pour sentir combien cela est consolant et beau'.¹²² But the death throes were not far off. Nursed to the end by Madame de Clermont-Tonnerre — who had now become the Marquise de Talaru — he struggled through the night,¹²³ but at 7.10 a.m. on Friday 11 February 1803 (22 pluviôse an XI) he was dead.¹²⁴

He was laid out where he had died. On the morning of Sunday 13 February (24 pluviôse), a funeral service was held for him at Notre-Dame and afterwards friends and a deputation from the Institute came to pay their respects at his flat.¹²⁵ At 1 p.m. they all set off for the Cimetière de la Barrière de Vaugirard.¹²⁶ Snow was falling and a bitter wind lifted the trappings and bared the coffin-lid. Fontanes gave the funeral oration for his friend and mentor, hoping that death would bring peace from the bickerings that had plagued La Harpe to the end.¹²⁷ It was not to be. If his critics could no longer annoy the man, they could, even before his body was in the ground, still attack his reputation. His conversion had had too much political significance for his death to pass without a great deal of comment. The priests and the Catholic right were highly pleased by the manner in which a former deist had died sanctified by the Church.¹²⁸ Those who doubted the sincerity of the conversion of a man who had still kept his appetite for good living, his harsh tongue for all that he disagreed with and his belief in himself while asking God for forgiveness, could not allow him to die in peace. They accused him of following the Catholic revival in the same spirit as earlier he had faithfully subscribed to the glory of the *philosophes*. They felt that he changed his opinions as easily as a less subtle man changes his coat and that all he was really interested in was being at the centre of controversy on which he thrived.¹²⁹

The polemics over La Harpe were to continue for many a year. Too many remembered his harsh criticism and only a few had courage enough to defend his memory as a man. Indeed, even when the politics which coloured the judgements of his contemporaries have gone, the task of defending La Harpe is not an easy one. It is true that, in spite of his reputation as a severe critic and his undoubted irascibility, especially in old age, he was not a vicious man and inspired great devotion in his friends.¹³⁰ Yet, he had lived all his life with the habits of intrigue. He was ambitious and, above all, vain. He lacked the quality of questioning introspection that is the mark of the truly human man. Throughout his life, he believed himself to be sincere, but did not ever really probe his beliefs very deeply. It is the blindness of his trust in what he advocated that accounts to a certain extent for his dogmatism both as a *philosophe* and as a

Christian. He believed firmly in his conversion, but he could not sense that it was incomplete. He followed all the rules of his religion, but did not realize that rules only serve to explain and are not the essence of a belief. All his life he had turned to rules rather than to human experience and in the end the rules let him down. The critic had greater stature than the man. At the only moment of true terror in his life he had seen the shallow nature of his existence. Never again was he really put to the test. He fell back into the preoccupations of the man-about-town. On 29 December 1838, his remains were transferred to the Cimetière du Père Lachaise.¹³¹ When they opened the coffin, 'il n'existait presque plus rien de ses cendres chétives'.¹³²