

PART 2  
THE WORKS



## CHAPTER VIII

### THE LITERARY THEORIST AND CRITIC

Well into the nineteenth century, La Harpe was remembered as an 'homme de lettres peu aimable, mais aussi trop hai'.<sup>1</sup> This reputation was a legacy left by the many battles of his stormy career as a journalist and critic. By the time that La Harpe arrived on the literary scene, Voltaire was already securely placed as the supreme arbiter of the then accepted good taste. Many of the basic quarrels which decided this taste were over. The differences between the partisans of the Ancients and of the Moderns, between those of poetry and of prose, and other determining squabbles were memories. With the death of Crébillon in 1762, there disappeared the last real threat to Voltaire's hegemony. It was now a time for petty disputes between those who defended the firmly-established Voltairian tradition and those who favoured albeit timid trends that this tradition unwittingly encouraged. As the years went by, literary questions took on political over-tones, and polemics were characterized by personal abuse. In these struggles, La Harpe was seen as a critic of almost obsessive severity, whose 'méchante humeur'<sup>2</sup> made it his second nature to attack.<sup>3</sup>

He certainly entered these fights willingly. Before he was even twenty, ambitious and anxious to win favour with Voltaire, he consciously set out to be the defender of the Voltairian tradition. A brilliant pupil, well-versed in his lessons, he threw himself into the struggle with something of the intolerance of the schoolboy who will not accept any ideas that differ from those of his masters. In his very first known piece of criticism, the *Essai sur l'Héroïde*, he attacked Ovid with a tone of authority that irritated Fréron, who replied scathingly that: 'Les écoliers, à peine sortis du Collège, décident d'un ton de connaisseur sur le mérite de nos grands hommes, les apprécient, pèsent pour ainsi dire leur poids, leur valeur, d'une main soumise encore à la férule'.<sup>4</sup> Sixteen years later, Dorat still insisted that La Harpe had 'précieusement conservé le ton' of his schooling.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, it was from his teachers that the latter had learned that the secret of good taste lay in the study of certain prescribed authors to whom one should always turn for reference — writers such as Virgil and Horace, from among the Ancients, and Racine, Molière and La Fontaine, from more recent times.<sup>6</sup> In this temple of good taste, he saw Voltaire as the living representative of Boileau and Racine,<sup>7</sup> as the true inheritor of the 'grand siècle'.<sup>8</sup> He himself was anxious to be in the ranks of the 'juges éclairés qui vivent sans cesse avec Racine et

M. de Voltaire'.<sup>9</sup> He was proud to be a defender of Boileau. Like Voltaire, while fond of Horace,<sup>10</sup> he preferred Boileau as a law-giver.<sup>11</sup> His essentially academic approach never allowed him to question — as Voltaire sometimes did<sup>12</sup> — the desirability of the dependence of the eighteenth century on the seventeenth.

Nevertheless, his judgements always reflected the views of Voltaire where these views differed from the strict tradition of Boileau. In his *Eloge de La Fontaine*, he furthered the rehabilitation of the fabulist begun by Voltaire.<sup>13</sup> By writing a preface in 1773 for a new edition of letters by Madame de Sévigné,<sup>14</sup> he helped to strengthen another vogue encouraged by the patriarch.<sup>15</sup> Above all, he joined the latter in defending Quinault<sup>16</sup> and Tasso.<sup>17</sup>

This almost slavish adoption of a firmly anchored tradition diminished somewhat the spontaneity of La Harpe's critical approach. Yet Voltaire's dogma was essentially that of a practical artist, and this immediacy was still felt in the work of his pupil. As opposed to Marmontel, he never drew up a formal treatise on good taste, but felt that his literary views should be woven into his judgements on individual writers.<sup>18</sup> He saw his rôle as a critic as a double one, in which he had both to examine the theories of art as well as then to study the application of these theories in a given writer.<sup>19</sup> He was wary of summary judgements, feeling, like Voltaire, that the critic can compare, but must not condemn out of hand.<sup>20</sup> Often, when dealing with great writers, the critic can only express his preferences and can give no judgement.<sup>21</sup> Again, influenced through Voltaire by the Abbé Dubos,<sup>22</sup> he claimed that the critic must combine pleasure and justice,<sup>23</sup> and it is for pleasure that the true critic will prefer to teach with fine examples, rather than to condemn bad ones.<sup>24</sup> It is for justice too that he must give lengthy and truly illustrative quotations from the work under discussion.<sup>25</sup> Although one should consider the man,<sup>26</sup> it is the text itself that must be the basis of all criticism,<sup>27</sup> and in his appreciation of a text, the critic must look for signs of beauty rather than faults. If beauty outweighs the faults, then the text is immediately worthy of praise. A writer can be said to be mediocre only when beauty is rare in his work and heavily outweighed by ugliness.<sup>28</sup> In the same way, a writer must be judged only on his most outstanding work, written at the height of his career.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, the critic has the right to be severe;<sup>30</sup> he must not be afraid to judge even the finest works, as this is the only way to discover the principles of literature, which are the essence of the art.<sup>31</sup>

La Harpe therefore shares Voltaire's approach, midway between strict reason and intuition.<sup>32</sup> However, while insisting that in the theatre, for instance, dramatic probability was the basis of all rules and more important than a blind respect for rules in themselves,<sup>33</sup> in a general fashion, La Harpe showed a greater respect for the rules than Voltaire. Having the essentially practical and spontaneous attitude of the great artist, the latter oscillated between respect for the common sense inherent in rules<sup>34</sup> and distaste for the curbing effect that these

rules can have on great talent.<sup>35</sup> Reacting perhaps against Diderot,<sup>36</sup> La Harpe claimed that those who do not follow the classical rules are taking the easy way out.<sup>37</sup> He could not agree with Marmontel and others who suggested that it was possible to succeed in spite of the rules.<sup>38</sup> The fact that some writers have succeeded in this way in no way invalidates the necessity for the rules.<sup>39</sup> One's own preferences are not in themselves rules.<sup>40</sup> The classical rules are not based on a blind acceptance of authority,<sup>41</sup> but on human experience and good sense.<sup>42</sup>

La Harpe believed, like Voltaire, that while one should take into account variations in taste, man does not change basically, and it is possible to see why great writers have succeeded in the past by following the rules of experience, either consciously or instinctively. Admittedly, the rules were originally formulated by studying already existent examples of fine writing,<sup>43</sup> but this again stresses the natural origin of rules. In their simplest form, rules are a method of helping us to appreciate the workings of the mind of a great writer,<sup>44</sup> who owes as much to them as he does to his individual talent.<sup>45</sup> The rules do not curb genius, but guide it.<sup>46</sup> While they do not supplant talent,<sup>47</sup> they define the limits and possibilities of an art.<sup>48</sup> He was quick to stress that inspiration is not enough;<sup>49</sup> to reply to those who, while not yet putting the Romantic's lyrical overflow of powerful feeling into practice, were already supporting it in their theories.<sup>50</sup>

Yet, for ever a Voltairian rather than a strict rationalist, he disapproved of a too general application of the rules.<sup>51</sup> He considered too methodical an approach to the arts of the imagination to be disastrous.<sup>52</sup> It is possible for a work of art to surpass what can be explained by reference to the rules, and this is where the value of individual criticism comes in.<sup>53</sup> Like Voltaire,<sup>54</sup> he believed that one should be careful to sift those rules that are for all time from those that suit the circumstances in which the work was written.<sup>55</sup> Although he tended to gloss over the importance of the intimate knowledge and tact gained by practising an art when dealing with music,<sup>56</sup> in general, he admitted that this personal experience was invaluable and that good artists were often the best critics.<sup>57</sup>

This liberal approach, however, did not allow the classically-minded La Harpe to separate his discussion on taste and rules from fairly dogmatic pronouncements on questions such as beauty, genius, and the purpose of art in general. All fell within the domain of good taste. True to one tradition of the seventeenth century, he felt that the first purpose of art was to please.<sup>58</sup> While he stressed the natural alliance between morality and the arts, which exists to varying degrees in different genres,<sup>59</sup> he was convinced that morality in art was only useful if pleasing.<sup>60</sup> Here, he remained very much in the Voltairian tradition and stood out against Diderot and others who extolled direct moralizing.<sup>61</sup> In the name of decency, he condemned pernicious literature,<sup>62</sup> but called for moderation and fairness in didacticism.<sup>63</sup> He insisted that one should first reach the heart before instructing the mind.<sup>64</sup> He shifted his position slightly after his conversion in

1794, when he allowed greater importance to religious content,<sup>65</sup> but his opinion remained basically the same. Direct moralizing is only permitted if it fits in naturally and does not destroy the illusion of art. He approved of it in *Alzire*,<sup>66</sup> but found that in his old age Voltaire tended to rely too much on general experience and not enough on the particular needs of a given situation.<sup>67</sup> This approach is cold and uninspiring. For the same reasons, La Harpe often found allegory unsatisfactory<sup>68</sup> and he positively condemned a so-called morality that is divorced from human nature and which refuses to portray human weakness.<sup>69</sup>

The same traditional outlook on art led him to stress the importance of imagination which he saw as the basis of all art, and which he defined as the power to make us see objects as if they were present.<sup>70</sup> Within the limits of decency and good taste, it must bring us as close to nature as is possible.<sup>71</sup> However, this imitation of nature has its limitations. He was not ready to accept the direct imitation of life as advocated by Diderot.<sup>72</sup> Not everything in nature is suitable for art, which must always please. One must choose and, above all, embellish.<sup>73</sup> Although he wished to minimise the presence of the artist when it threatened illusion as in the theatre, he maintained that part of the pleasure that we get from art is admiration for the artist who, while not destroying the illusion of art, impresses us with his skill at overcoming so many difficulties.<sup>74</sup> It is this combination of portraying and beautifying nature that makes for art.

However, when it comes to discussing what makes for beauty in art and from what source it comes, he was, as usual, wary of giving precise definitions.<sup>75</sup> He did insist, admittedly, that there is a fixed ideal of beauty suitable for civilized man and which, being more than the mere description of nature, is attained through carefully following the rules.<sup>76</sup> Like the rules, the idea of this beauty is the fruit of experience and does not change.<sup>77</sup> Yet, he never specified what this ideal beauty was. In a way, but only to a certain extent, he saw it as a just moderation which thoroughly satisfied the mind, without overloading it.<sup>78</sup> At the same time, although firmly anchored in nature, beauty has something sublime and transcendental which makes it stand out from other qualities.<sup>79</sup> Inevitably, La Harpe always preferred the *grands genres*.<sup>80</sup>

In addition, all such discussion was still closely linked to the overriding preoccupations with good taste. Neither beauty nor genius could be conceived of as existing outside the limits already prescribed.<sup>81</sup> Like Voltaire, however,<sup>82</sup> he did believe that genius could go beyond good taste,<sup>83</sup> emphasizing that it is not linked to education, although helped by it. Beaumarchais, for instance, was in his view a man of great talent but little taste.<sup>84</sup> It is possible for genius to appear in one work by an otherwise dull mind.<sup>85</sup> It is certainly not superior intelligence or brilliance.<sup>86</sup> In one sense, genius is the power of invention, but he found this definition unclear and on the whole unsatisfactory.<sup>87</sup> In general, he saw originality in literature as extremely limited. Most ideas have been formulated long ago, and what invention there is is to be found in the way these ideas

are used.<sup>88</sup> True genius can even give interest to the sometimes necessary repetition of ideas in a single passage.<sup>89</sup>

Originally, the term *genius* was neutral and needed qualifying with an adjective. La Harpe was not pleased with the habit of using the term to signify an independent entity, or even a man endowed with mysterious gifts. He was extremely harsh on those who bandied the word about as an excuse for a lack of all other qualities:<sup>90</sup> 'Les rimeurs sont nombreux, et le poète est rare'.<sup>91</sup> It is in this context that he particularly condemned the growing love for laying all at the door of so-called sensibility.<sup>92</sup> It was only to conform to accepted usage that he reluctantly agreed to use the word *genius* in a general way at all.<sup>93</sup>

In its simplest form, he saw genius as a superior form of talent or natural gift for any human activity,<sup>94</sup> but in the arts it seemed to be the power to see and express the deepest of human fears and aspirations.<sup>95</sup> However, just as one may have a talent for any one human activity and not for any other, so, in the arts, genius can be defined to a certain extent with reference to a particular genre.<sup>96</sup> It is for this reason that he defended even the most minor of art forms, providing that it pleased polite society.<sup>97</sup> Every genre has its place,<sup>98</sup> and, in common with most classical critics, La Harpe continually stressed the dangers of mixing genres.<sup>99</sup> At the same time, the close association that he envisaged between genius and genre made him relate the severity of his criticism to what he considered to be the importance of the genre.<sup>100</sup> He reserved his greatest admiration for the writer who had succeeded in the more important genres such as tragedy or epic poetry.<sup>101</sup> It is through appreciating the difficulties involved in a form of art that the critic can get a proper idea of the value of a particular work in that art form.<sup>102</sup> The function of the writer is to overcome difficulties, and the more awesome the difficulties and the more successfully they are overcome, the greater is his genius.<sup>103</sup> To this extent, there are degrees of genius.

No less than genius, La Harpe found taste itself a difficult thing to define. He was careful to distinguish between individual preferences and the judgements of what he considered to be accepted good taste.<sup>104</sup> The initial pleasure that one derives from a work is not always a good guide,<sup>105</sup> although it is the first step to an appreciation of good taste.<sup>106</sup> Many other factors, apart from the value of the work in itself, influence the impression that it makes when it appears and do not allow for careful study. Although he insisted that good taste was the prerogative of polite society and condemned the English for having adopted the taste of the multitude,<sup>107</sup> even the educated public is not always a good judge. He felt that literary squabbles were useful in forming taste,<sup>108</sup> but admitted that everyone was anxious to follow fashion.<sup>109</sup> Nothing illustrated this better than the French love of exaggerated praise and disapproval.<sup>110</sup> Very few people are capable of discerning good taste,<sup>111</sup> and it is almost impossible to do so without the help of the rules.

There is, it is true, a certain perennial and natural instinct for good taste,<sup>112</sup> and, following Voltaire,<sup>113</sup> La Harpe defined this feeling as an intuitive knowledge of beauty and truth.<sup>114</sup> It is a delicate, subtle sense,<sup>115</sup> not necessarily based on intelligence.<sup>116</sup> At the same time, while far from explaining a work in relation to its time and to the biography of its author in the manner of later critics, he nevertheless continually stressed the dependence of art on society, a dependence which altered the application, if not the meaning, of taste.<sup>117</sup> In comparing works of art from different nations and civilizations, the critic must remember that: 'se rapprochant par les premiers principes de l'art et par des beautés qui sont communes à l'un et à l'autre, [ils] s'éloignent par des différences essentielles dans les accessoires et les moyens'.<sup>118</sup> If he did not consider it to be his purpose to analyse the links between a work of art and its background, he did at least feel that the critic should always refer to them as a means of clarifying his criticism,<sup>119</sup> thus affirming his interest in literary history and its inherent comparisons. He even called the study of the relationship between art and its time the ultimate cause or 'philosophie de la critique'.<sup>120</sup> His disenchantment with the French Revolution was to owe as much to his distaste at the breakdown of good taste as to his horror at the events around him.<sup>121</sup> Developing Voltaire's nostalgia for certain ages of glory,<sup>122</sup> he contrasted the Revolutionary period with the age of Pericles to Alexander,<sup>123</sup> the Roman republic,<sup>124</sup> and the time of Louis XIV.<sup>125</sup> Corruption in society brings corruption in the arts.<sup>126</sup>

At the same time, corruption can work the other way round.<sup>127</sup> Favourable conditions in society do not necessarily preserve good taste.<sup>128</sup> Corruption inevitably follows perfection.<sup>129</sup> He saw the main cause of decadence in the eighteenth century to be an increasing self-satisfaction<sup>130</sup> which blinded writers to the value of the models of perfection of the preceding century<sup>131</sup> and led them into trying to improve on what was already perfect. The greatest minds in the eighteenth century were more interested in science.<sup>132</sup> He raged against what he called French frivolity<sup>133</sup> and gave as a cause of decline a surfeit of pleasure and idleness.<sup>134</sup>

The fact is that La Harpe — as we have just seen — followed Voltaire<sup>135</sup> in limiting the effects of society on art to modifications in its external trappings and not in the essence of its form. Eternal good taste rules out any real idea of true relativity in criticism. Just as good taste is formed by studying good writers, so good writers go beyond the limitations of their time<sup>136</sup> and are to be referred to as models of perfection that time has consecrated. In Racine, for instance, La Harpe wanted his contemporaries to see:

ce tact délicat, ces vues justes et fines, ce discernement si sûr, ce sentiment des convenances, ce goût enfin, cultivé par les leçons de Port-Royal, nourri par le commerce assidu des Anciens, fortifié par les conseils de Boileau; ce goût, qualité rare et précieuse, qui peut-être est au génie ce que la raison est à l'instinct; s'il est vrai que l'instinct soit le mobile de nos actions et que la

raison en soit le guide; ce goût qui attache aux productions vraiment belles le sceau d'une admiration éclairée et durable.<sup>137</sup>

A century later, Racine's taste still remained a model for every cultivated man, as La Harpe remained true to the Voltairian idea of progress in the arts. As they deal with human nature which does not change, progress in the imaginative arts is extremely limited, where it is extensive in the sciences. In the arts, perfection was already reached in the earliest times.<sup>138</sup> What progress there is, is linked to the improvement and refinement of society, but rather than any idea of a steady development of the arts, La Harpe shared Voltaire's view of a cycle in which an age of glory is followed inevitably by one of corruption.<sup>139</sup> The ages of glory come about once a certain purity and correct usage in language have been attained.<sup>140</sup> It is then the job of native genius to free its art from the servile imitation of foreign literature and to provide models on which to found good taste.<sup>141</sup> It is as much the hallmark of La Harpe's criticism as of that of Voltaire to turn instinctively for reference to the national heritage of the French seventeenth century.

In similar vein, he was faithful to Voltaire's attitude to the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns, which he regarded primarily as a quarrel between individual preferences.<sup>142</sup> French literature has an undying debt to that of Greece and Rome.<sup>143</sup> Those who have really profited from the Ancients — the greatest of the Moderns — have not been among those who pretend to despise them.<sup>144</sup> While dismissing any blind acceptance of the authority of either the Ancients or the Moderns,<sup>145</sup> La Harpe made out that the Ancients do have a right to our respect, like all those who have stood the test of time.<sup>146</sup> Yet, like Voltaire, he did find that the Moderns have equalled and even improved on the Ancients in certain fields of literature. While the Ancients remain superior in forensic oratory,<sup>147</sup> history<sup>148</sup> and epic poetry,<sup>149</sup> Bossuet perfected panegyrics and La Fontaine is master in the art of composing fables.<sup>150</sup> Progress has been most marked in the theatre. Molière left ancient comedy far behind and Corneille and Racine invented a form of tragedy that may be less heroic, but which is infinitely deeper in its effect on the emotions.<sup>151</sup> If modern writers have succeeded in a language which is less naturally pleasing to the ear, this is yet another sign of their superiority in overcoming difficulty.<sup>152</sup>

No discussion of La Harpe's critical approach would be complete without a study of his views on questions of style. With his interest in form rather than originality, style was at the centre of his preoccupations, and his views on style define perhaps more clearly and closely than anything else the limits of what he considered to be good taste. They show particularly well his fidelity to Voltaire. Style must not be regarded, he maintained, as a separate entity, but as an integral part of good taste.<sup>153</sup> Once good taste is established, any writer not capable of writing well, within its limits, is by necessity mediocre.<sup>154</sup> Throughout his life, he led an unending war against those who used an inflated style, farfetched

imagery, and who again attributed these and other faults to the so-called heat of inspiration.<sup>155</sup> The style must suit the genre<sup>156</sup> and, above all, the situation and the nature of the passage itself.<sup>157</sup>

Three ingredients make up good style:<sup>158</sup> care over the construction and balance of the sentence with a well-prepared transition from one idea to another,<sup>159</sup> care over the choice of expressions and care over harmony, which has to be cultivated in French.<sup>160</sup> La Harpe, like Voltaire, wanted elegance in form, thought and sound. Although he admitted that a truly great style was the product of genius<sup>161</sup> which could, through pleasing the ear, reach the soul and the imagination, that some beauties came about by chance,<sup>162</sup> he still insisted that the basis of elegance could be studied.<sup>163</sup> Although a good writer may, for a variety of reasons, be wrong in what he says,<sup>164</sup> he has carefully thought out his manner of saying things. Bad style is invariably a sign of a lack of true thought and feeling.<sup>165</sup> Sententious utterances are not always signs of thought.<sup>166</sup> To begin with, the writer should study the limitations and possibilities of the language. Before using a figure of speech, he should understand its purpose.<sup>167</sup> As literary French is based on the polite language of society perfected under Louis XIV, the writer can only use about a third of the natural idiom and must expunge from his work vulgar expressions and vulgar ideas.<sup>168</sup> La Harpe frowned on neologisms,<sup>169</sup> false brilliance and conceits,<sup>170</sup> as on anything which endangered his preconceived ideal of elegance.

The art of good style is to bring about variety within these limitations. It is particularly important to use the right word in the right place.<sup>171</sup> He was against an excessive use of adjectives.<sup>172</sup> Imagery is only preferable to the proper term when it adds variety and pleasure to the text.<sup>173</sup> Too much imagery destroys variety and pleasure and merely appears monotonous and affected.<sup>174</sup> Allegory is particularly difficult to use because of this danger.<sup>175</sup> Beauty of style does not come from the images themselves, but from the choice and use made of them.<sup>176</sup> They must always be strictly related to feelings and ideas, or else they will appear unnatural.<sup>177</sup>

Good style is elegant, interesting, sustained, full of harmony, and with just the right amount of imagery and figures of speech.<sup>178</sup> Often, it is based on a happy use of the commonest terms.<sup>179</sup> Its outstanding quality is its concision in which every element has its purpose.<sup>180</sup> It is this necessary economy which makes a sustained or sublime style so difficult. Grandeur must be expressed with the right amount of simplicity.<sup>181</sup>

Clarity is the greatest quality in style, whatever the genre.<sup>182</sup> The writer must remember that he has to be read,<sup>183</sup> and he must not confuse the imagination of the reader.<sup>184</sup> This is why all true imagery moves from the moral to the concrete world<sup>185</sup> and is closely linked to the idea expressed.<sup>186</sup> La Harpe condemned the abuse of abstract terms.<sup>187</sup> Elegance and variety add charm, but do not hinder clarity.<sup>188</sup> The writer has succeeded in his task when the reader is led naturally

to pleasure, when the style is so limpid that the art and the effort of the artist are not seen, but are appreciated.<sup>189</sup> Such a style appears effortless, but is the result of much careful preparation.

If La Harpe showed so thorough a belief in the principles of Voltaire, the latter was not slow to return the compliment. Whatever the patriarch really thought of his disciple, he certainly believed him to be useful for the defence of the Voltairian cause as a ‘champion du bon goût’.<sup>190</sup> Near the beginning of their relationship, Voltaire proudly announced to his friends that the young man showed great promise.<sup>191</sup> He praised him for his love of simplicity.<sup>192</sup> Soon, he was referring to him as ‘son jeune favori’,<sup>193</sup> ‘mon petit La Harpe’,<sup>194</sup> and writing to him as ‘mon cher successeur’.<sup>195</sup> Both in his correspondence and elsewhere, Voltaire became lavish in his praise for the latter’s talents — notably his style — and for his strict good taste.<sup>196</sup> La Harpe’s visits to Ferney were merely to complete his thorough education in purism. Voltaire was quick to associate himself with the irascible nature of the young man, who was ‘né pour combattre’<sup>197</sup> and guilty like himself of preferring Racine to Corneille:<sup>198</sup> ‘Il semble que les épines que j’ai trouvées toujours dans ma carrière piquent à présent La Harpe’.<sup>199</sup>

The quarrel over the stolen manuscripts in the spring of 1768 did not dampen Voltaire’s enthusiasm for his protégé for any length of time and he was pleased when the young man started work on the *Mercur*. He then wrote to Lacombe: ‘Je crois que vous ne pourriez avoir un meilleur second’,<sup>200</sup> and began keeping copies of the paper — something that he had not done since 1762.<sup>201</sup> From 1771 to 1772 and 1774 to 1776, he kept a special collection of La Harpe’s articles.<sup>202</sup> He took a strong paternal interest in the paper<sup>203</sup> and proclaimed that he did not know of a ‘dépôt plus convenable’ for his own declarations.<sup>204</sup> He never failed to encourage La Harpe:

Vous donnez quelquefois dans le *Mercur* des leçons qui étaient bien nécessaires à notre siècle de barbouilleurs. Continuez, vous rendez un vrai service à la nation.<sup>205</sup>

Vous réussirez toujours à la pointe de l’épée . . . Vous seul corrigerez un peuple inconstant et frivole, qui ne sait presque jamais ce qu’il veut ni ce qu’il pense.<sup>206</sup>

The same interest was to be shown in the *Journal de Politique et de Littérature*. When La Harpe took it over, not only was Voltaire a contributor, but he claimed to read it to the exclusion of all other papers.<sup>207</sup>

This support from Voltaire was to give his disciple the necessary strength to raise his articles from mere reviews to general discussions on questions of taste, prompted more or less directly by a new publication. He occasionally inserted longer articles on topics of literature such as lyric poetry<sup>208</sup> or religious and forensic oratory.<sup>209</sup> With the encouragement of Panckoucke, who wanted the literary side of the *Journal de Politique et de Littérature* to form a ‘Cours de

littérature française',<sup>210</sup> he was able to develop his talent for criticism of a less ephemeral nature. His task was:

de résumer dans l'occasion tout ce qui regardait les ouvrages et la personne des écrivains connus, de rassembler tous les traits qui peuvent les caractériser, et de présenter au lecteur, le plus souvent qu'on le pourra, des résultats de cette espèce, aussi intéressants qu'instructifs.<sup>211</sup>

Even in his theatre reviews, he was to show 'tout ce qui pouvait marquer les progrès ou la corruption de l'art'.<sup>212</sup> At times, therefore, he moved from the discussion of a new or revived work by a given writer to a general review of his other productions, as in the case of Guymond de La Touche<sup>213</sup> and Belloy.<sup>214</sup> Following Voltaire's *Lettre à l'Académie française*<sup>215</sup> in July 1776, La Harpe began a long article on Shakespeare<sup>216</sup> which started appearing in the *Journal de Politique et de Littérature* in December 1777 and which was still unfinished when the paper ceased publication in June 1778.<sup>217</sup> Once more writing for the *Mercure*, in October 1778, he gave a long article on J. J. Rousseau, following the latter's death.<sup>218</sup>

However, the support from Voltaire also limited his freedom in his journalism. While the patriarch was alive, La Harpe was sure of his protection and could issue indictments, but was prudent enough not to judge his benefactor: 'On sent qu'il ne nous conviendrait point de prononcer un jugement sur un ouvrage de M. de Voltaire. Il est trop au-dessus de nos éloges et de nos critiques, et personne ne reprochera au disciple de ne point juger son maître'.<sup>219</sup> We have already analysed the furor that arose when La Harpe was the first to break the silence following Voltaire's death with an attack on *Zulime*. His mistake was to believe that he had stature enough as a critic to ignore all but the dictates of his literary creed:

J'ai oublié l'homme qui est mort, pour ne plus voir que l'homme qui ne mourra point. Je ne l'ai plus vu que dans l'éloignement de la postérité, et comme si les siècles eussent déjà passé sur sa tombe. J'ai même affecté, peu de jours après celui qui a été le dernier des siens, d'écarter de son nom ces formules frivoles de politesse trop au-dessous des hommes supérieurs qui appartiennent à tous les âges et à toutes les nations. J'ai dit Voltaire, comme j'aurais dit Corneille.<sup>220</sup>

Whether he wished to admit it or not, he had grown to eminence as the hatchet-man of the Voltairian party. The *Mercure de France* and the *Journal de Politique et de Littérature* had become as much the mouthpieces of a sect as the *Année littéraire* or the *Ephémérides du Citoyen*. In a little over a year, La Harpe was to be forced to abandon journalism, and when he returned to it ten years later the interests of the Revolution limited the literary content of his articles.

With the authority of Voltaire behind him, it is not surprising that he should have adopted a dictatorial tone in his articles. He saw journalism as a mission only to be carried out by 'un homme de lettres très distingué par son esprit et

ses talents'.<sup>221</sup> His censure, he felt, had to be severe: 'Les étrangers croiraient que nous retombons dans la barbarie si les gens de lettres n'élevaient pas la voix de temps en temps pour venger le bon goût et l'honneur de la nation'.<sup>222</sup> He saw as his prime duty the necessity to show 'les travers à la mode, les défauts dominants qui caractérisent telle ou telle époque'.<sup>223</sup> While he followed Voltaire's policy of despising 'ces dénominations grossières' frequently used in literary squabbles,<sup>224</sup> he equally condemned 'ce trafic d'éloges constamment donnés à ce qui est mauvais par des juges qui ne peuvent pas louer ce qui est bon'.<sup>225</sup>

It was this Draconian approach that gave him his reputation for 'un génie naturellement malfaisant'.<sup>226</sup> His contemporaries accused him of resorting frequently both to servile praise and personal abuse. Dorat called him a 'fougueux petit Gazetier', a '*Matamor littéraire*'.<sup>227</sup> Linguet referred to his articles as 'des satires cruelles et injustes'<sup>228</sup> and accused him of turning the *Mercur* into 'un entrepôt de diffamations'.<sup>229</sup> La Harpe's claim in 1775 that he was one of those who talked the least about their own work 'avec toutes les facilités possibles d'en parler beaucoup'<sup>230</sup> should certainly be examined closely. Even his friends were to maintain that the contrary was true;<sup>231</sup> that, moreover, he spoilt his articles by showing too often his irritation with his opponents.<sup>232</sup>

He was certainly not slow to defend his own work when it came under serious attack. In February 1771, he tried to brush aside the critics who had all too easily found mistakes in his translation of Suetonius.<sup>233</sup> He was forced to speak again on the subject in August of the same year.<sup>234</sup> In October 1775, he defended his having won both prizes at the Académie française against complaints by Linguet.<sup>235</sup> It was not, however, until he started work on the *Journal de Politique et de Littérature* that he actually started reviewing his own work. He then displayed a remarkable coyness: 'L'auteur, ayant à parler ici de son propre ouvrage, ne peut que rendre compte au public de son travail . . . &c'.<sup>236</sup> Even then, such reviews remained few and far between.<sup>237</sup>

Most personal references were to continue to be answers to personal attacks both on his works and his good name.<sup>238</sup> If, in these apologias, he displayed a certain naïveté and could show in his articles generally an immoderate harshness, he at least refrained from indulging in allusions that might affect the honour or good name of his adversaries. His imprisonment in 1760 and his obscure origins were still being referred to in the *Année littéraire* as signs of his immoral character as late as 1789.<sup>239</sup> In attacking him, his enemies adopted a tone that he himself reserved for his satirical verse. It was not that he believed irony to be an unnecessary arm for the critic,<sup>240</sup> but he always related such irony to criticism of the text under discussion. He complained bitterly that no one really understood his purpose:

Mais si par hasard un homme de lettres vient à s'imaginer qu'il peut être de quelque utilité, que même il peut y avoir quelque gloire, à dire la vérité au public avec courage et avec mesure, quel déchaînement de la part de

tous ceux qui peuvent craindre la vérité! Passe pour la satire, dit-on de toute part; elle amuse tout le monde. Mais de la critique! Comment la supporter? Comment pardonner à celui qui a raison, et qui ne dit point d'injures?<sup>241</sup>

He claimed that he never printed a line 'contre le témoignage de sa conscience, ni contre la vérité'.<sup>242</sup>

His enemies had certainly no such scruples. They seized every opportunity to bring up the list of La Harpe's more unfortunate productions such as *Pharamond* and *Gustave*,<sup>243</sup> so as to impress on him and on the public 'quelques soupçons de sa médiocrité':<sup>244</sup> 'Choisissons les ouvrages fameux, au moins par leur disgrâce, de ce poète putatif, qui de prix en prix, et de chute en chute, est tombé dans l'Académie'.<sup>245</sup> Linguet, for instance, had no compunction over calling him 'le petit homme le plus orgueilleux . . . , le poète le plus faible, l'orateur le plus sec, le despote le plus impérieux, le journaliste le plus amer, qui ait jamais affligé notre parnasse'.<sup>246</sup> Above all, La Harpe's opponents never failed to stress the debt that he owed to Voltaire and the latter's followers, and Clément, for one, referred to him as the 'petit Dom Quichotte de la secte philosophique'.<sup>247</sup>

Indeed, it was his very fidelity to the *philosophes* and the undoubted advantages that this gave him that made his criticism basically suspect both to the uncommitted and the *dévots*. Self-interest was seen to lurk behind his self-righteousness. Even if he did not necessarily write those articles in the *Mercure* which praised his work, referring, for instance, to *Warwick* as a masterpiece whose 'beautés ne sont fondées sur aucun prestige',<sup>248</sup> such articles were probably seen by him before publication and were too obviously written to please him. A typical example of this mutual compliance is the presentation of his translation of Suetonius by Lacombe who was both proprietor of the *Mercure* and La Harpe's publisher.<sup>249</sup>

In general fashion also, the latter's polemics always seemed to be directed from Ferney. As if by command, he censured Sabatier de Castres<sup>250</sup> and Rigoley de Juvigny.<sup>251</sup> His article on Shakespeare was given the seal of approval by Voltaire.<sup>252</sup> A good example of La Harpe's embracing Voltaire's cause is his treatment of J. M. B. Clément. When the latter first arrived in Paris, he was full of praise for Voltaire and through Voltaire became a friend of La Harpe.<sup>253</sup> However, this friendship only lasted as long as Clément's admiration for Voltaire. The former's initiation into Parisian life soon disenchanted him and, in Voltaire's eyes, he was soon classed as a 'folliculaire'.<sup>254</sup> His many subsequent attacks on the patriarch earned him the nickname from the latter of *inclément*.<sup>255</sup>

Towards the end of 1770,<sup>256</sup> Clément brought out a brochure with the title of *Observations critiques*,<sup>257</sup> in which attacks on Delille and Saint-Lambert were backed up with notes which were critical of Voltaire himself. Saint-Lambert replied by going to see the lieutenant de police, Sartine, and, at Saint-Lambert's

request, La Harpe wrote to Malesherbes for documents to be used against Clément.<sup>258</sup> Clément's brochure was momentarily suppressed and, to Voltaire's delight,<sup>259</sup> its author was imprisoned for a few days in Fort-l'Évêque.

An attack on Saint-Lambert at this time was a direct threat to Voltairian interests. A letter from Voltaire expressing praise of Saint-Lambert's *Les Saisons* had been published by La Harpe in the *Mercure* in April 1769<sup>260</sup> and, in May of that year, the poem had been reviewed favourably by another of Voltaire's protégés, Chamfort.<sup>261</sup> Yet, in spite of the concerted actions of the Voltairian clan, the ban on Clément's brochure was soon lifted. It was now up to La Harpe to refute it in no uncertain terms in the *Mercure* of March 1771.<sup>262</sup>

His main line of approach when dealing with Clément was to accuse him of misusing the name of good taste.<sup>263</sup> He saw him as the opposite of what a critic should be. His critical approach was correct in theory, but he showed himself to be narrow-minded, and his criticism tended to be taken up with quibbling over minor points.<sup>264</sup> He ignored the real use to be made of the example of great writers: 'pour M. Clément un passage d'Horace ou de Boileau vaut mieux que toutes les raisons possibles'.<sup>265</sup> Above all, Clément was guilty of being swamped by personal jealousy and therefore blind to the essence of good criticism: admiration for great talent.<sup>266</sup>

Much of what La Harpe said was seen to be justified when Clément brought out a reply to Voltaire's *Epître à Boileau*.<sup>267</sup> La Harpe then accused him of giving definitive judgements where only personal preferences were called for.<sup>268</sup> The patriarch suitably thanked his defender.<sup>269</sup> In the same year, Clément brought out some *Nouvelles Observations critiques*<sup>270</sup> in which La Harpe was mishandled as much as his friends. It was with a fair amount of reason that La Harpe replied: 'J'avais discuté ses premières observations avec toute l'honnêteté qui convient à un homme de lettres et tous les égards qu'on peut mettre dans la dispute'.<sup>271</sup> It was with such haughty disdain that he was to continue to treat his adversary, with occasional outbursts of exasperation against this leading member of the 'manœuvres de la littérature, qui joignent à l'ignorance et au mauvais goût cet esprit de parti qui ne se nourrit que de préjugés, et ne s'occupe qu'à flatter les ennemis du génie et des grands écrivains'.<sup>272</sup>

This feud was to last for over thirty years. Although we are told that after the Revolution they embraced each other in public,<sup>273</sup> Clément still continued to be harsh in his reviews of La Harpe's work,<sup>274</sup> and it is doubtful that any real reconciliation was ever possible.

In the same vein, those who most frequently felt the bite of La Harpe's pen were those who owed allegiance to an older enemy of Voltaire, Elie Fréron. It was when discussing Fréron and the *Année littéraire* that La Harpe could be at his most scathing:

Il y a trop loin du ton de ces feuilles au style d'un homme de lettres, trop loin du métier que fait cet homme aux beaux arts que je cultive. Nous

n'avons aucun langage qui nous soit commun, et nous ne pouvons jamais ni nous parler, ni nous entendre.<sup>275</sup>

Fréron's protégé, Nicolas Gilbert, came in for equal disdain. Discussing his *Poète malheureux*, the Voltairian affected to see some promise in the young author, despite the disorder in his ideas and 'la foule des incorrections',<sup>276</sup> but feared that the hostility to himself that Gilbert had shown in his preface probably excluded any chance of the latter's taking any notice of his advice on questions of taste.<sup>277</sup>

He welcomed *Le Dix-huitième Siècle* in a similar way:

Qu'il nourrisse sa raison et son âme de meilleurs aliments; qu'il essaie quelque ouvrage qui puisse prouver qu'il a des droits à la gloire. Cela vaudra mieux que d'attaquer avec des armes impuissantes celle des hommes de génie, que l'on respecte toujours, lorsqu'on est fait pour leur ressembler.<sup>278</sup>

The advice was not taken, and Gilbert's arms were powerful enough to make all Paris memorize the lines against La Harpe from *Mon Apologie*.<sup>279</sup> The latter's all too serious tone left him unguarded.

The same pedantry abounds in his reactions to another of Fréron's collaborators on the *Année littéraire*, Sautreau de Marsy, who placed short hostile comments in the *Almanach des Muses* in general reviews of each year's new publications. La Harpe saw these comments as travesties of what an article should be: 'une notice doit donner une idée succincte du plan et de l'exécution d'un ouvrage'.<sup>280</sup>

We have already attempted to show that it was probably Dorat's association with Fréron that caused La Harpe to fall out with his once close friend.<sup>281</sup> In his articles, the former accused Dorat of negligent writing,<sup>282</sup> combined with a lack of originality.<sup>283</sup> His greatest crime, in the eyes of the purist, was his persistent love of *persiflage* or bantering.<sup>284</sup> During their momentary truce in 1772, they had a friendly exchange of letters<sup>285</sup> which La Harpe extolled as an example for other journalists to follow:

Vous pensez sans doute comme moi qu'un commerce pareil entre les gens de l'art, une discussion de bonne foi, renfermée dans les bornes de la modération et de la politesse, où les écrivains seraient les juges et les apologistes les uns des autres, honorerait les lettres autant qu'elles sont avilées par les scandales périodiques de ceux qui déchirent les grands talents pour avoir des lecteurs, et louent les auteurs médiocres pour avoir un parti.<sup>286</sup>

This was not, however, to remain the tone of later exchanges. By January 1774, La Harpe was again accusing Dorat of indulging in a 'langage décousu, néologique, vague et burlesque'.<sup>287</sup> Things reached a head when La Harpe gave a harsh review of Dorat's *Le Malheureux imaginaire* after its performance at the Comédie française on 7 December 1776.<sup>288</sup> When the play was printed, its

author inserted a general attack in the preface against 'ces détracteurs à gages qui mentent à eux-mêmes dans l'éloge ou dans la satire'.<sup>289</sup> He made clear whom he thus designated by joining the battle that was raging between La Harpe and the younger Fréron<sup>290</sup> with a letter to the *Année littéraire* on the theme of 'qu'il est risible ce petit homme'.<sup>291</sup> La Harpe returned to the attack with a review of the printed version of the play,<sup>292</sup> followed soon afterwards with a discussion of Dorat's prospectus for the *Journal des Dames*.<sup>293</sup> Typical of the tone that he adopted at this time to attack Dorat is that to be found in his treatment of the latter's *Le Faux Ibrahim*:

Quoiqu'on ait rarement envie d'être sérieux avec M. Dorat, c'est ici l'occasion de l'être un moment, parce qu'il est impossible de relever et de confondre par un exemple plus frappant, l'erreur aujourd'hui la plus commune et la plus contagieuse dans ceux qui composent et dans ceux qui jugent. Ils pensent ou feignent de penser que cette manière d'écrire est celle qui prouve de l'imagination. Point du tout; c'est celle qui en prouve l'absence totale.<sup>294</sup>

Dorat was guilty of the supreme crime of an over-loaded style. As opposed to the fiery prose of the ex-musketeer, we have here the cold disdain of the purist. It is this and not true slander that really characterizes La Harpe's journalism.

The same approach underlies his clashes with his most formidable enemy, Linguet. As far as ideas were concerned, he accused Linguet of sharing with J. J. Rousseau an inability to distinguish the good from the bad.<sup>295</sup> He was quick to associate Linguet with Fréron,<sup>296</sup> and in matters of literature, he complained that the former did not possess the first principles of criticism.<sup>297</sup> He alleged that he displayed general ignorance allied to an overweening belief in himself.<sup>298</sup> As in the case of Dorat, La Harpe lashed out against Linguet's style, especially his excessive use of metaphors.<sup>299</sup> All in all, however, Linguet remained far too elusive for him. As Diderot remarked, the pages that La Harpe wrote against Linguet were 'fort solides et encore plus dédaigneuses; mais c'est bouillir du lait à Linguet que de lui prêter le collet'.<sup>300</sup>

Indeed, the suppleness of Linguet's mind contrasted sharply with the rigidity of La Harpe's essentially dogmatic approach to criticism, which was allied to a certain ingenuousness. It would appear that he quite genuinely did not realize that in his harsh pronouncements he was above all serving the interests of a party. All he saw were the interests of good taste which coincided with the interests of Voltaire. This dictatorial attitude prepared him for a position of authority as a critic in later years, but in Voltaire's time his efforts were all too often used up in quarrels of only minor interest. Moreover, he lacked his master's fund of wit and all too often we can detect below his apparent disdain, his irritation with his enemies.

His other criticism was limited in nature during Voltaire's lifetime. Apart from his *Eloge de La Fontaine* and his *Eloge de Racine*, other true examples of

his criticism were restricted to prefaces such as the *Discours préliminaire* to his translation of Suetonius, his *Essai sur les trois tragiques grecs* — originally written as a preface for *Philoctète*<sup>301</sup> — and his refutation of Mercier's *Nouvel Essai sur l'art dramatique* which he placed at the head of the *drame Barneveldt*.

Nevertheless, he had already begun in 1774 another important critical work — his *Correspondance littéraire* with Paul of Russia and Andrei Shuvalov. Although it was not published until just before and after La Harpe's death, it covers the years 1774 to 1791 and forms an almost parallel commentary to much of his journalism. This work has, unfortunately, come down to us in a rather ragged form. There are many gaps, and many letters are obviously merged. The chronological order breaks down frequently. Moreover, La Harpe himself only supervised the publication of the letters dating from 1774 to the middle of 1785 and did not intend to publish the letters for 1790 and 1791. The publication of the remaining letters of 1785 to 1791 in 1807 was supervised by a committee of prominent men of letters who suppressed passages that they thought to be too controversial.<sup>302</sup> To cover up what had been done, the publisher, Migneret, then destroyed the drafts.<sup>303</sup>

In addition, there has always been doubt as to the fidelity of the text of even those letters published by La Harpe himself, as it has been tempting to believe that the Catholic zealot of 1801 would hardly want all of what he wrote before his conversion to appear uncorrected, although, certainly, his almost naively uncompromising nature made him fear neither the aftermath of reawakening old quarrels, nor the accusation of inconsequence.<sup>304</sup> We have now seen the originals of eighty-six letters written to Shuvalov,<sup>305</sup> seventeen of which were not included in the published correspondence for no apparently sinister reason. The manuscripts of those that were published reveal considerable editing, both by La Harpe and by the later committee. He toned down certain harsh comments about contemporaries, cut out details that he thought too intimate for publication, and, above all, tidied up the style. The originals also contain many holograph notes of a personal nature, in which we can see La Harpe trying to curry favour with Catherine, referring to his wife's bad health as well as his own, sending his wife's regards and enclosing his own publications. In the letters themselves there is some suppression of passages defending Voltairian deism. Some anti-clerical anecdotes have been omitted. However, he had had to deal with matters of religion with great care,<sup>306</sup> for it must be remembered that these letters were written for the rather stiff-minded Russian court and thus their author always remained a little wary of expressing himself too openly. In similar vein, he carefully avoided political discussion of any importance,<sup>307</sup> withholding, for instance, his real opinion of Joseph of Austria.<sup>308</sup> He is to be believed when he says<sup>309</sup> that he refused to modify the general accuracy of the text and merely refuted certain passages in footnotes, although these footnotes are sometimes inadvertently merged with the original text. As he claimed, his

main concern — questions of style apart — was to cut out verse and anecdotes of a licentious nature and certain passages which he had already published elsewhere, but even this suppression is far from complete. During the Revolution, at least three passages from the correspondence were used by its author in the *Mercure* and they all appear in the editions of the work.<sup>310</sup> There appears to have been little attempt to prune out matters dealt with in his newspaper articles or in the *Lycée*, although the Shuvalov manuscripts do show that he suppressed repetition within the body of the correspondence itself.

The fact is that there was no need for fundamental revision of the text, as La Harpe had always shown in these letters a certain reticence. This is seen particularly when he discusses his own work. There is no mention of *Virginie*, which could have been a source of embarrassment as he did not claim it until 1792, and when referring to the equally anonymous *Aux Mânes de Voltaire*<sup>311</sup> and *Molière à la nouvelle salle*,<sup>312</sup> he is as guarded as if he were still writing in the *Mercure*. In other words, he still kept the tone and basic approach of his journalism:

sauf la différence de forme et de ton qui doit se trouver entre des lettres particulières et des écrits publics. On va beaucoup plus vite dans une correspondance que dans un journal, l'esprit et le style y sont plus libres, et les jugements peut-être encore plus sévères, quoique moins régulièrement motivés.<sup>313</sup>

His judgements certainly tend to be harsher here than in his articles. Long before he attacked Voltaire publicly, his letters revealed his disappointment in the works of the latter in his old age.<sup>314</sup> Indeed, criticism still dominates. There are, it is true, discussions of legal affairs, especially those concerning Beaumarchais,<sup>315</sup> of the quarrels of the physiocrats,<sup>316</sup> of the plastic arts,<sup>317</sup> of various *faits divers*<sup>318</sup> and inventions.<sup>319</sup> He describes the Parisian scene, giving details of the visits of Joseph of Austria<sup>320</sup> and Voltaire,<sup>321</sup> and of the latter's death.<sup>322</sup> He relates various anecdotes.<sup>323</sup> His own interests make him deal at length with the activities of the Académie française and he records faithfully the difficulties of the Comédie française<sup>324</sup> and the Opera.<sup>325</sup> He refers to the music quarrel.<sup>326</sup> He quotes a great deal of light verse, and several letters contain little or nothing else.<sup>327</sup> Yet, in spite of this apparent diversity, the main body of the correspondence is taken up with the discussion of newly performed plays and recently published books in the light of good taste. La Harpe still speaks to Paul of Russia in the way he formerly addressed his audience in his articles and he still displays the same preoccupations. Two letters<sup>328</sup> serve as a sequel to his attack on Mercier and the study of the *drame* which preceded *Barneveldt*; many letters are devoted to fairly long discussions of a single work.<sup>329</sup> Apart from the many obituary notices of differing lengths,<sup>330</sup> La Harpe frequently took advantage of a recent publication, election to the Académie française, or similar event, to review the literary career of an author in the manner that he also

developed in the *Journal de Politique et de Littérature*.<sup>331</sup> It is to be noted that in most cases such reviews contain attacks on opponents such as Linguet and Diderot.

In other words, one must not expect to see in this one-sided correspondence the gay spontaneity of that of Voltaire, or the sometimes scurrilous interest to be found in the work of Bachaumont, Métra, or even Grimm. For La Harpe, the main utility of this work was to keep him in touch with the everyday commerce of criticism following Voltaire's death, and to compensate for the loss of his own position as a journalist:

Mais aujourd'hui qu'il n'y a plus aucune police au Parnasse, la basse littérature s'est mise à parodier la bonne; elle a cru qu'en déraisonnant avec confiance et avec audace, elle prendrait l'air d'autorité qui convient à la raison et au goût.<sup>332</sup>

In his letters, as in his articles, La Harpe was preparing to take over from Voltaire as the supreme arbiter of good taste.

It was in the decade preceding the Revolution that he saw this desire almost fulfilled. With the opening of the Lycée in 1786, he at last had a permanent and respected platform from which to preach his *credo* of good taste. The lectures that he gave at the Lycée, the Ecoles normales and other institutions, later edited and published under the title of the *Lycée ou Cours de littérature ancienne et moderne*, remain by far and away his best known work. Raymond Naves has aptly called the *Lycée* a 'résumé critique du siècle'.<sup>333</sup>

Its plan is an ambitious one. La Harpe's contemporaries — who were only too eager to point out its faults — called it 'un ouvrage de littérature, et le plus considérable en son genre, que l'on ait encore écrit en français'.<sup>334</sup> Brunetière<sup>335</sup> is among many who have since supported its author's own claim that the work was the first to give a general but carefully thought out picture of the history of literature throughout the ages,<sup>336</sup> while admitting that the task was well-nigh impossible for one man.<sup>337</sup> Before the publication of the *Lycée*, most literary history had been confined to specialized works such as Rollin's *Traité des Etudes*<sup>338</sup> or d'Alembert's *Mélanges de littérature*,<sup>339</sup> to vast, mainly bibliographical, compilations such as the Abbé Goujet's *Bibliothèque française*<sup>340</sup> or J. P. Nicéron's *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire des hommes illustres de la République des lettres*,<sup>341</sup> or to the rather shapeless *Mémoires de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-lettres*.<sup>342</sup> Marmontel's *Eléments de littérature*<sup>343</sup> — the only comparable work of criticism of the time — reflects, with its alphabetical order reminiscent of the *Encyclopédie*, an interest in questions of good taste rather than in the discussion of literary history.

La Harpe, on the contrary, follows the Voltairian line of weaving this interest in taste into discussion of works of literature. Voltaire himself discussed writers from many periods in his belief that criticism should always be seen in action and illustrated by a text. A typical example of this approach is to be found in the

literary chapters of the *Siècle de Louis XIV.*<sup>344</sup> It is in like fashion that La Harpe leads his audience through the history of literature to find the key to good taste,<sup>345</sup> but he does so in discussing texts, and not by giving a list of precepts. It is a method of criticism which he continues in his *Commentaire sur Racine* — a kind of sequel to Voltaire's commentary on Corneille — where he is able to express his admiration for the classical theatre, while showing its glories with close references to the text.

Because of this approach, the *Lycée* is, in many ways, the sum of La Harpe's critical activity and, as such, it contains much of his earlier criticism, sometimes only slightly reworked. In it, one can still easily recognize, for instance, his *Essai sur les trois tragiques grecs*,<sup>346</sup> his long article on lyric poetry,<sup>347</sup> his *Réflexions sur Lucain*,<sup>348</sup> and various sections of his *Discours préliminaire des Douze Césars*.<sup>349</sup> He also further elaborated on articles that he had already re-edited for the 1778 edition of his collected works.<sup>350</sup> Apart from the discussion of many books already reviewed in his journalism or in his *Correspondance littéraire* when they first appeared, notable examples of sections based on earlier articles are passages on subjects as diverse as early French poetry and the work of Regnard.<sup>351</sup> Further general considerations on the *drame*<sup>352</sup> merely supplement his earlier reflexions on the genre. Beaumarchais' stormy life occupies as much place here as in the correspondence.<sup>353</sup> La Harpe's final preface to *Philoctète*, published in 1781, is reproduced almost textually in the *Lycée*.<sup>354</sup>

This amalgamate composition dictates to a certain degree the shape of the *Lycée*, which is further determined by La Harpe's limiting himself to what he considered to be the golden ages of literature:<sup>355</sup> the Ancients, from Homer to Seneca, and the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in France, with only passing glances at what happened in between. His dealings with foreign literature are extremely slight. These restrictions gave a certain clarity to the work which is divided into three parts, in each of which La Harpe discusses successively poetry and the dramatic arts, oratory, and finally history, philosophy and the minor genres.

Even so, the size of the work inevitably reveals failings in his erudition. His treatment of the Ancients tends to be superficial. Aristotle and Hesiod are only dealt with partially.<sup>356</sup> He scarcely touches on fictional works such as that of Longus, just as later he will pass over Petronius and Apuleius. He mistakenly attributes poems to Orpheus, at a time when Greek scholars were already highly sceptical of this tradition. He glosses over Sappho and forgets the existence of several fabulists. His treatment of Latin writers is rather better than that of the Greeks — something that again reflects his education. Latin historians fare better than their Greek counterparts. Oratory, dominated by Quintilian and Cicero, is dealt with more fully than any other form of literature of the Ancients. Yet again, the Romans are dealt with to more effect, perhaps because Cicero can stand greater comparison with the eighteenth century than Demosthenes.

Indeed, La Harpe's chapters on the Ancients are characterized above all by an interest in things French. Much of what he says gives one the impression that he knew more thoroughly works by other critics on Greek writers than the Greek writers themselves. His study of Aristotle would appear to owe something to the Abbé Batteux<sup>357</sup> and possibly Dacier — although there is no definite proof of this.<sup>358</sup> His chapter on epic poetry is modelled, at least vaguely, on Voltaire's *Essai sur la poésie épique*.<sup>359</sup> Born in a century in which criticism had been founded on discussion of the relative merits of the Ancients and the Moderns, La Harpe's review of the Ancients relies on continual references to French literature. Shocked by Aristophanes, and preferring Terence to Plautus, his study of ancient comedy is really a basis for a discussion of its influence on Molière and Regnard. In the same way, Greek tragedy leads him into a discussion on Voltaire, Brumoy and Louis Racine. The chapter on Longinus is interesting mainly for what he has to say about Boileau. In similar vein, he defends Homer against La Motte and reviews the quarrel between La Motte and Madame Dacier. His own polemics creep in even in these early chapters. The attack on Seneca is really directed at Diderot.<sup>360</sup>

Just as his knowledge of the Ancients reflected contemporary attitudes, so it is with the seventeenth century and the rise of French classicism that he enters his element. This is not to say that the remainder of the *Lycée* is above criticism. His preference for the noble genres makes him give too much space to some authors and not enough to others. Comedy is not dealt with as fully as tragedy. His treatment of seventeenth-century poetry is extremely sketchy. Only J. B. Rousseau gets proper mention in lyrical verse. Prose fares even worse. It would seem that Voltaire's *Siècle de Louis XIV* led La Harpe to discuss the Cardinal de Retz, almost to the exclusion of all other memorialists and moralists.

The eighteenth century is dealt with with even more partiality. It is, of course, difficult to evaluate the true worth of one's contemporaries or immediate predecessors, but it says something for the influence of fashion when one sees that in tragedy La Harpe devotes more space to Voltaire alone than to Corneille and Racine combined. Other passing considerations also tend to distort the shape of the third part of the work. For the sake of instruction, and in the name of good taste, he felt obliged to talk at length about what he called errors in judgement.<sup>361</sup> As a result, he deals with subjects that are only of limited interest to posterity. He delivers a lengthy attack on descriptive poetry as defined by Roucher<sup>362</sup> and gives a great deal of space to combating those who overrated Piron and Crébillon.<sup>363</sup> As we have already noted, much of the *Lycée* is made up of former articles and, despite revision and re-editing, many passages inevitably reflect the day-to-day nature of La Harpe's journalism.

The general tone of the *Lycée* is also marred by the intolerant right-wing attitude that La Harpe adopted after his conversion in 1794. Many chapters date from after this event and even the earlier ones were then heavily revised.<sup>364</sup>

If this conversion did not alter his literary convictions, it certainly changed his approach to certain authors. He revised his treatment of Bourdaloue as he now wanted to stress the excellence of the latter's ideas.<sup>365</sup> Eighteenth-century religious oratory has rather more space than its importance would warrant. While still admiring Voltaire as an artist, he never misses the opportunity of condemning his political and philosophical ideas.<sup>366</sup> Although we shall discuss the questions involved in this change of heart when we come to look at La Harpe's religious and political views in general, it must be said here that the under-current of thought in the whole of the *Lycée* is a condemnation of the French Revolution and its nefarious effects on the arts and society.<sup>367</sup> As in nearly all his post-revolutionary writings, La Harpe is judging his own past and that of his contemporaries.

The two volumes of *La Philosophie du dix-huitième siècle*, which form a supplement to the *Lycée*, and which replace his earlier lectures on the prose genres,<sup>368</sup> merely summarize the ideas that run through the rest of the work. Here, unfortunately, as is shown by Barbier,<sup>369</sup> La Harpe makes several serious mistakes of attribution and taxes Diderot, for instance, with works that he never wrote. In other words, La Harpe displays a certain ignorance and haste in matters that are a little outside the realm of his normal preoccupations.

To be fair to him, however, we must remember that the *Lycée* is incomplete. La Harpe was already a sick man when preparing for publication the later volumes of the work and we must allow him a few mistakes that the normal process of careful editing would have disposed of.<sup>370</sup> His publisher, Agasse, seems to have confined his editing to pruning certain rather controversial allusions.<sup>371</sup> In addition, La Harpe never finished his course of lectures,<sup>372</sup> and the attempts by Agasse and other editors to fill the resultant gaps with some of his earlier articles have not always shown a happy choice. The first added article on oratory contradicts what he says a hundred pages before on Bourdaloue. We suddenly revert to the pre-revolutionary La Harpe, and there is an inevitable break in tone. Later editors of the *Lycée* have done him a positive disservice by adding an article on Fabre d'Eglantine,<sup>373</sup> which shows moderate praise where in the body of the *Lycée* itself there had only been scathing disapproval. The unity of the work has not always been respected in these additions. It is difficult to see why an article on Chamfort's *Mustapha et Zéangir* should come in a chapter on light verse.<sup>374</sup>

In fact, the unity of the work was already severely affected by La Harpe's general rule of never talking about the living in the *Lycée*.<sup>375</sup> The only exception of any importance is when he compares the Abbé Delille with Roucher.<sup>376</sup> This system has the obvious advantage of helping to separate the work from the man, but it has in places led to a disruption in the basic plan of the *Lycée*. Following their deaths, Fabre d'Eglantine, Beaumarchais, Bièvre and Rochon de Chabannes are treated in passages looking like afterthoughts at the end of the

chapter on comedy. The death of Marmontel gives rise to a long digression on tragedy in the middle of a chapter on light opera.

These faults do not destroy the value of the *Lycée*. When analysing a passage, be it in a field where he is relatively ignorant as when dealing with the Greeks, La Harpe never fails to show how well he understood accepted good taste and his views still tell us a great deal about the eighteenth century. He is particularly good when talking about what he fully understands — the French classical theatre. His genuine admiration for its exponents gives him eloquence. He knows how to rise to oratory or descend to a conversational manner as matters require.<sup>377</sup> While he still tries to avoid personal abuse,<sup>378</sup> he can still dismiss opposition with a good use of ridicule.<sup>379</sup> He is careful to vary his method of attack. Sometimes, he debates with a questioner,<sup>380</sup> sometimes he compares two authors on the same subject.<sup>381</sup> He is not above quoting a passage for the pure joy of hearing it.<sup>382</sup>

The unity and value of the work lie in La Harpe's continual reference to the ever-present underlying dictates of good taste and his admiration for those who exhibit it. For La Harpe, the *Lycée* presented the opportunity of studying on a larger scale and more systematically than before the variations in form that never really departed from basic good taste.<sup>383</sup> It is here more than anywhere else that he best served Voltaire. At last in the position of authority that he had so long sought, he was able to exploit his belief in good taste and his love of it to the full and to put into the *Lycée* all that he had gained from a long and painful career as a critic.<sup>384</sup>

This authority was to last for a number of years. Under the Consulate and the Empire, the *Lycée* became the standard work of reference for a generation whose formal education had been interrupted by the upheavals of the Revolution. In 1810, it was awarded the prize of the Institut for the best work of its kind in the preceding twenty-five years.<sup>385</sup> This success was further confirmed by the restoration of the monarchy and perhaps encouraged by memories of the author's royalist convictions. In 1824, Stendhal found that the *Lycée* was far and away the best selling book in France.<sup>386</sup> Eighteen complete editions of the work appeared between 1815 and 1830.

However, the revolt against established good taste — begun even before La Harpe was born — had been gaining more and more strength. The ideas of Madame de Staël gradually replaced those of Boileau, and La Harpe, the defender of Boileau and Racine, became the symbol of resistance to change. He had, after all, generally opposed the influence of foreign literature,<sup>387</sup> and this influence now replaced what had become a stifling respect for the Ancients and the French seventeenth century. It opened up new fields of literary inspiration<sup>388</sup> and brought what La Harpe dreaded most of all, a mixing of the genres. Little by little, critics looked to unbridled emotion rather than to the admiration of former writers implicit in good taste<sup>389</sup> and to inspiration rather

than to rules.<sup>390</sup> The strictly limited relativity of taste allowed for by La Harpe was pushed aside and his models of perfection were seen to suit only a certain state of society and thus judged in the light of change.<sup>391</sup>

The development of this growing disaffection with La Harpe and all that he stood for is seen nowhere better than in the writings of Stendhal. In 1802, the latter wrote to his sister, telling her to read La Harpe in order to gain the basic principles of taste.<sup>392</sup> In 1811, he still felt that 'un homme qui ne connaît pas la poésie a plus de plaisir après avoir lu le Lycée de La Harpe'.<sup>393</sup> By 1804, however, he was already accusing the latter of a lack of true thought<sup>394</sup> and was soon complaining regularly about 'les dissertations sur le goût qui corrompent le goût, et vont jusque dans l'âme du spectateur fausser la sensation'.<sup>395</sup> He accused La Harpe of removing his audience from what he himself had insisted should be the basis of criticism, the text itself. In Stendhal's view, La Harpe had turned the French into bad judges, smothered genius, especially in the provinces,<sup>396</sup> and had catered to the need for the empty-headed 'de porter des idées toutes faites dans la conversation'.<sup>397</sup> Above all, Stendhal complained about the latent chauvinism of La Harpe's work.<sup>398</sup> In his *Racine et Shakespeare*, he consciously set out to counteract the influence of La Harpe and was only sorry that he could not reply to the *Lycée* with an equal number of volumes.<sup>399</sup> Above all, Stendhal wanted a new liberal approach to criticism:

Les bons livres sur les arts ne sont pas les recueils d'arrêts à la La Harpe; mais ceux qui, jetant la lumière sur les profondeurs du cœur humain, mettent à ma portée des beautés que mon âme est faite pour sentir, mais qui, faute d'instruction, ne pouvaient traverser mon esprit.<sup>400</sup>

With the triumph of Hugo in 1830, this dissatisfaction found itself resolved and La Harpe's influence was soon eclipsed.

Posterity has never replaced him in his former position of eminence as a critic, just as it has never returned to the works of the seventeenth century as models of perfection on which to base all composition. Moreover, La Harpe lacked Voltaire's originality, and his almost slavish obedience to the latter's cause, introducing into his criticism quarrels which meant little to succeeding generations, also limited his ability to survive his time. However, Sainte-Beuve, whose thoroughly relative and almost too historical approach to criticism is almost the opposite of La Harpe's, places him 'dans le vrai milieu de la tradition française' and insists that 'il est bon en un mot d'avoir passé par La Harpe, même quand on doit bientôt en sortir'.<sup>401</sup> His views are solidly based and make him a good teacher for those who would study the brilliance as well as the sterility of a past tradition.

## CHAPTER IX

# THEATRE

### 1. *Tragedy*

Despite his long career as a critic, it was in the theatre that the young La Harpe had most dearly wished to succeed. In the eighteenth century, success at the Comédie française was still the supreme opening to the joys of Parisian society and it was with the success of *Warwick* in 1763 that its author really established himself on the literary scene and won the confidence of Voltaire. This success was never fully repeated, but he continued to write for the stage up to 1785 and was to have more plays performed than any of his contemporaries.<sup>1</sup>

In his eyes, the theatre, or rather Voltairian tragedy, was the greatest glory of his time.<sup>2</sup> He called Voltaire the greatest genius to have exerted the art of tragedy<sup>3</sup> and *Zaïre* the greatest tragedy ever conceived.<sup>4</sup> He saw Voltaire as the bringer of new beauties,<sup>5</sup> but at the same time shared the latter's admiration for the classical tradition of French tragedy. Placing Voltaire in this tradition and praising him as a master of dramatic effect, of the 'peinture des mœurs' and of the dramatic expression of moral ideas, he also admired and wished to emulate to differing degrees Corneille and Racine.<sup>6</sup> In Corneille, he admired with reservation the power of genius and the sublime nature of his plots. Of Racine's plays, he wanted to imitate the structure and, above all, the language.<sup>7</sup> Like Voltaire in the latter part of his career La Harpe resisted all fundamental changes in the conception of classical tragedy and in his theoretical discussions echoed the commonplaces of seventeenth-century classical doctrine. He attacked Shakespeare and accused his eulogists of wanting to destroy one of France's greatest 'titres de gloire'.<sup>8</sup>

He saw in the influence of the English playwright a threat to the pomp and dignity of tragedy in which he strictly believed. Unlike opera, true tragedy did not flatter the senses, but created what he considered to be the height of art, an embellished illusion of nature.<sup>9</sup> He was a strong opponent of any attempt at mixing the serious and the light-hearted in the manner of Shakespeare, as he felt that this was a return to the tragi-comic that had been banished by Racine.<sup>10</sup> Convinced that the theatre was aimed at a polite educated audience,<sup>11</sup> he was quick to stress the limits of decency imposed by respect for certain social conventions.<sup>12</sup> The only innovations that he fully approved of were those that were put forward by Voltaire himself. He was a keen supporter of the latter's attempts to find new local colour<sup>13</sup> and welcomed spectacle and scenic effects in

so far as they did not replace the traditional merits of a good classical play.<sup>14</sup>

It was to preserve these traditional merits that he led an unending war against the exponents of the *drame* and its everyday subject matter. He never failed to point out the importance of the subject in a play, which, like everything else in art, called for a careful choice.<sup>15</sup> A good subject can save a basically bad play, just as genius can do nothing with an unsuitable theme. An unusual but interesting subject can even give originality to what is otherwise a thoroughly derivative work.<sup>16</sup> Dramatic probability is sometimes less important than an interesting plot.<sup>17</sup> However, the range of possible subjects is limited. Tragedy is essentially heroic and noble,<sup>18</sup> and if, as in the *drame*, we choose subjects from everyday life, we lose the benefit, not only of the illusion which results from the distance between the audience and the subject,<sup>19</sup> but of the power of tragedy itself. It is natural for us to feel greater pity for the misfortune of a man of importance who falls from a position of grandeur into adversity. The petty difficulties of the common man are too mundane to move us deeply.<sup>20</sup>

The writer must therefore take his subject from history, mythology or imagination. La Harpe felt that the last two lend themselves more effectively to tragedy<sup>21</sup> and claimed that Voltaire was the first to use his imagination to any effect in plays such as *Zaïre*, *Alzire* and *Mahomet*.<sup>22</sup> History is more difficult to handle since it demands a certain respect for historical fact,<sup>23</sup> but also needs to be freely rearranged and embellished to suit the dramatist's demands.<sup>24</sup> This the dramatist should not hesitate to do. While admitting a certain exaggeration, the characters have to behave in a manner that is both true to the ways of their time and likely to please the author's audience.<sup>25</sup> The very impact of the situation can cover up factual mistakes,<sup>26</sup> since dramatic probability is not a scholastic exercise, but merely dependent on the spectator's belief.<sup>27</sup> Although La Harpe insisted that the educated French with their humanist learning were like Greeks when watching the performance of a Greek play,<sup>28</sup> above all, the modern writer must study what is most pleasing to his audience which is not at the theatre for moral or historical instruction. The play must not present cold perfection, but situations and characters in which every man can immediately see himself. It must be true to human nature.<sup>29</sup>

These ideas are, of course, reflected in his own plays. Of the eleven tragedies that he completed, eight are based ostensibly on history, but reveal frequently so free an interpretation of historical fact as to make them qualify as plays based on imagination. This is particularly true of those on national themes from comparatively recent times.

By subscribing to the tradition of national drama with its picture of outstanding men from various countries, he followed a development that Voltaire had encouraged and in some ways introduced.<sup>30</sup> It was to become particularly popular following the success of Belloy's *Siège de Calais* in February 1765;<sup>31</sup> and for this fashion La Harpe had, to a certain extent, prepared the

ground by his own triumph with *Le Comte de Warwick*. The subject of this play was certainly one to please Voltaire, who admired the strength of character of the real Warwick, 'fécond en ressources, capable de tout',<sup>32</sup> and had already called his story 'une longue et sanglante tragédie'.<sup>33</sup> This description may well have implanted the idea of his play in La Harpe's mind, but there was precedent for the staging of English history. The most notable example of a French play on an English theme was Thomas Corneille's *Le Comte d'Essex*, performed as early as 1678. Some of the character of Essex is indeed reflected in the pride of Warwick, although this is probably due more to the heroic tradition than to any conscious borrowing. The story of Warwick had already been the subject of a French play by Louis de Cahusac, staged in 1742, but never printed.<sup>34</sup> La Harpe claimed that he had never read it.<sup>35</sup> There is also no reason to link his production with Shakespeare's *Henry VI, Part iii*, as the subject of La Harpe's work is merely an incident in the English play (iii.3). To his predecessors in the theatre he thus owed little. His direct source for the story of the rivalry between Edward IV and Warwick is the Abbé Prévost's *Marguerite d'Anjou*.<sup>36</sup> He may also have got some general background details from Hume's *History of England*,<sup>37</sup> Rapin-Thoyras's *Abrégé de l'Histoire de l'Angleterre*<sup>38</sup> or d'Orléans' *Histoire des Révolutions d'Angleterre*,<sup>39</sup> although none of these standard histories mentions the relationship between Warwick and Elisabeth.

Even though La Harpe relies heavily on Prévost's historical novel for the basis of his plot, he alters the story considerably to suit his dramatic needs. Warwick returns from France where he has been arranging a marriage between Edward and Bonne de Savoie, sister-in-law to Louis XI, and while he has been away, Edward has fallen in love with his mistress, Elisabeth. Whereas in the play, Edward has not yet married Elisabeth, thus allowing for the building up of dramatic tension, in the novel, Warwick returns to find a *fait accompli*. Moreover, in real life Warwick was already married and a father, and for the sake of heroic dignity, La Harpe makes him a bachelor, and Elisabeth a maid. Prévost, unlike La Harpe, sees Elisabeth as a heartless schemer, who casts aside the earl without a thought, when offered the greater prize of the throne. The novelist also remains closer to fact by having Warwick refuse to forgive Edward and eventually die at Barnet in the fight against him; La Harpe, on the other hand, has everything prepared for a magnificent reconciliation.<sup>40</sup>

The latter maintained this free approach to his historical sources and his independence of his predecessors in later plays on similar themes. Indeed, in the next tragedy that he wrote on a national subject, *Pharamond*, he had no historical source worth speaking of. In the words of Eudes de Mézeray, when talking about the early French king Pharamond: 'on ignore ses actions, le lieu de sa sépulture, le nom de sa femme, et celui de ses enfants, hormis de Clodion, qui lui succéda'.<sup>41</sup> There had already been a *Pharamond* by Louis de Cahusac,<sup>42</sup> not to mention La Calprenède's novel of this name, but apart from their titles, La Harpe's play

and these other works have nothing in common. The subject of his play was invented.

It was his desire not to imitate Piron's *Gustave Wasa*<sup>43</sup> that was one cause of the failure of his next tragedy, *Gustave*. At the same time, it did not escape critics that there were superficial similarities between the last work and a translation by Maillet du Clairon of an English play on the same subject by Henry Brook.<sup>44</sup> La Harpe certainly owes rather more to Brook's story than to the history of the real Gustav as it is found in the Abbé Vertot's *Histoire des Révolutions de Suède*,<sup>45</sup> or in the rather fragmentary version given by Raynal in his *Anecdotes historiques*,<sup>46</sup> but in fact he relied on his imagination for quite important features of his plot.

The hero of his *Menshicoff ou les Exilés* had already been the subject of a tragedy in one act by Pierre de Morand, performed at the Théâtre italien in 1738,<sup>47</sup> and of Dorat's *Zulica*, staged at the Comédie française in 1760.<sup>48</sup> Both these productions showed Menshicoff in his days of glory as the favourite of Peter the Great. These did not influence La Harpe, but on his own admission<sup>49</sup> he turned for some details to *Les Caprices de la Fortune* by P. J. B. Nougaret and J. H. Marchand, a play in which, as in La Harpe's work, the hero is shown after his disgrace. This was printed in 1773, although not performed until 1776.<sup>50</sup> One cannot, however, as has been suggested,<sup>51</sup> call it La Harpe's main source for his tragedy. It may have given him the idea of a Siberian setting and the presence of a character who has suffered at Menshicoff's hands. Nougaret and Marchand's play is, on the other hand, centred around a kind of Romeo and Juliet situation in which Menshicoff's son falls in love with the daughter of his enemy, now also exiled, whereas La Harpe invented a situation which revolves around Menshicoff's love for his ex-wife.

For the story of the real Menshicoff, La Harpe said<sup>52</sup> that he turned to Voltaire's *Histoire de l'Empire de Russie*,<sup>53</sup> to Formey's *Journal de Pierre-le-Grand*,<sup>54</sup> to the *Anecdotes du Nord*, by P. A. de La Place and J. F. de La Croix,<sup>55</sup> and to the *Mémoires historiques, politiques et militaires sur la Russie*, by General C. H. von Manstein,<sup>56</sup> which was also used as a source by Marchand and Nougaret.<sup>57</sup> He probably also consulted J. M. Lacombe's *Histoire des Révolutions de l'Empire de Russie*.<sup>58</sup> Yet, despite this long list of sources, he departed from historical fact in all but the general background to the play. He invented a divorce between Menshicoff and his wife, as well as a projected marriage between Menshicoff and the Tsarina Catherine on the grounds that there was at the time a rumour to this effect.<sup>59</sup> In the real story it is Menshicoff's wife and not his daughter who dies on the journey to Siberia. The villain of the piece, Vodemar, is entirely fictitious, as are all his machinations, and the denouement in which Menshicoff's ex-wife Arzénie stabs Vodemar at the altar steps is, as the author says, an atrocious crime 'emprunté d'une autre histoire',<sup>60</sup> which is pretty obviously *Méropé*.

In his last play on a national theme, *Jeanne de Naples*, he again elaborated on historical fact. It appears<sup>61</sup> that his main source for this work was Voltaire's *Essai sur les Mœurs*,<sup>62</sup> although he almost certainly consulted the Abbé Mignot's *Histoire de Jeanne Ire, reine de Naples*.<sup>63</sup> However, as in *Menzicoff*, he only really relies on history for the setting of the play. Although the real queen was said to be implicated in the death of her first husband and the king of Hungary did come to Naples to avenge his brother's death, she did not kill herself as a result of it and married Tarente, who here becomes a villain who spurns her. La Harpe invents a story of rivalry between the King of Hungary and Tarente for the hand of Amélie, a relation of Jeanne's.

In these plays, therefore, the subject is often little more than a nominal excuse for introducing new local colour in stock situations which were not going to make the audience feel far from home. This also applies to his two tragedies on oriental themes, although their subjects did allow him to indulge in particularly rich spectacle. In *Les Barmécides*, he appealed to the eyes with the magnificent tombs and family sepulchres which appear in the first and last acts, reminiscent of Voltaire's *Sémiramis*. It was possibly his somewhat grudging admiration for the scenic effect of the funeral pyre<sup>64</sup> in Lemierre's *Veuve du Malabar*<sup>65</sup> that incited him to introduce one in *Les Barmécides*. In choosing an Arabian subject in *Les Barmécides*, he was following the line of Voltaire's *Mahomet*, although he may have been encouraged in his choice by Cordier de Saint-Firmin's *Zaruema*, performed in 1762<sup>66</sup> and with which La Harpe's play shows some similarities. In both works, an important character has been thought dead, the ruler plans a suitably useful marriage for his son, there is a plot against the throne sealed with an oath, and a young warrior, presumed to be an orphan, turns out to be of noble birth. At the same time, other features in *Les Barmécides* remind us of La Harpe's *Pharamond* where the action is equally dependent on recognition, and where there is also rivalry between the hero and the heir presumptive to the throne. The author denied<sup>67</sup> the accusations of those who said that *Les Barmécides* ended in the manner of *Cinna*,<sup>68</sup> but in truth the whole tragedy smacks of Corneille with its plotting by a favourite against his lord and a strong heroine reminiscent of Emilie. Professor Lancaster points out the resemblance between Saëd and Couci in Voltaire's *Adélaïde du Guesclin*.<sup>69</sup> In addition, Saëd is in the same position as Narbas in Voltaire's *Mérope*.

La Harpe's initial source for this work appears<sup>70</sup> to be the Abbé Augier de Marigny's *Histoire des Arabes sous le gouvernement des Califes*,<sup>71</sup> which had been previously used as a source by the novelist Madame Falques in *Abbassai, histoire orientale*.<sup>72</sup> As he wrote much of this play while staying in Ferney, he also probably consulted Voltaire's copy<sup>73</sup> of Barthélemy d'Herbelot de Molainville's *Bibliothèque orientale*,<sup>74</sup> an encyclopaedia of oriental tales from which Voltaire himself composed lines on the fate of Barmécide.<sup>75</sup> As we have seen, however, this romanesque production owes considerably less to Arabia than to other

French playwrights, and La Harpe himself admitted that he had only turned to the original story for the friendship of the caliph, Aaron, for his minister, Barmécide, the latter's marriage and subsequent disgrace, and for the character of these two personages.<sup>76</sup> In other words, the question of characterization apart, he only relies on the story for the setting, as all these events take place before the curtain rises.

He is more faithful to his sources in *Les Brames*. In this tragedy, he merely changes names and has the son of the Mogul Emperor going to Benares without his father's knowledge, whereas in the original story the hero is the son of the emperor's secretary, sent to discover the Brahmin's secrets. However, as we have shown elsewhere,<sup>77</sup> once again the movement of the plot owes a great deal to the author's imagination.

In general, he showed greater respect for his sources when dealing with ancient history or classical legend. He was to insist, for instance, that his *Philoctète* was based faithfully on the work by Sophocles.<sup>78</sup> He wanted to refute<sup>79</sup> Pierre Brumoy's claim that the play could not appeal to a modern audience,<sup>80</sup> and said that, on the contrary, it was the only Greek play that immediately presented itself naturally for performance on the French stage.<sup>81</sup> He even ended his version in the same way as Sophocles with the arrival of Hercules, although he was careful to point out that this was no mere *deus ex machina*; that Hercules had a definite place in a play that was centred around his weapons; and that his appearance did not offend dramatic probability as it was 'conforme aux idées religieuses du pays où se passe l'action'.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, questions of local colour apart, as in Voltaire's *Sémiramis*, the prestige of the story made the audience capable of accepting the supernatural. In *Philoctète*, La Harpe also wanted to counteract the effect of Chateaubrun's play of the same name, which had been performed at the Comédie française in 1755<sup>83</sup> and which, as he pointed out, owed little to Sophocles apart from the subject.<sup>84</sup> He condemned Chateaubrun for destroying Philoctetes' solitude by bringing in a daughter and thus producing a play 'entièrement dans le goût de la galanterie moderne'.<sup>85</sup> He wanted to meet the challenge of the subject as presented by Sophocles, of a play without love and even without a female rôle, something that had not been attempted since Voltaire's *La Mort de César*.<sup>86</sup>

This respect for Sophocles contrasts a little with the treatment of Euripides in La Harpe's abortive *Polixène*. The latter play clearly reflects his conception of tragedy. He disliked the double action in Euripides' *Hecuba* and only considered the story of Polyxena and Pyrrhus to be of any real interest.<sup>87</sup> Following the example of La Fosse, and perhaps inspired by Racine's *Iphigénie*, he shows Pyrrhus in love with Polyxena. This, incidentally, appears to rule out Petitot's suggestion that La Harpe began *Polyxène*, following the success of *Philoctète*.<sup>88</sup> We wonder whether he would introduce love interest when he had just recently so heartily condemned it in contemporary imitations of Greek theatre.

If anything, the example of *Philoctète* seems to have taught him that he could be more certain of success by showing greater respect for his sources. This is seen in his last plays, *Coriolan* and *Virginie*, both dealing with subjects from ancient history. Admittedly, he gave fairly free treatment to the original story in his first play on such a theme, *Timoléon*. Timoleon had already appeared on the French stage in a play by Saint-Germain in the seventeenth century,<sup>89</sup> and a synopsis in French of a German play by G. Behrmann had been published by von Bielfeld in 1752.<sup>90</sup> The only similarities between La Harpe's play and these earlier works spring from their common source, Plutarch. The story is also told by Diodorus Siculus<sup>91</sup> and Cornelius Nepos,<sup>92</sup> but only in Plutarch do we find a description of Timoleon's mother, who plays so important a part in La Harpe's play. Plutarch also describes how Timoleon covers his face with his cloak at the murder of his brother, just as he does in the play, and it is from Plutarch that we learn that Timoleon once saved his brother's life, a fact that the playwright makes much of. The latter has, however, made a number of important changes in the story, although his approach is still not as free as when dealing with national or oriental themes. Apart from some changes in names, the most notable being that of Timoleon's mother from Demariste to Isménie, he alters the ages of the brothers. He places Timoleon's Sicilian expedition before rather than after Timophanes' murder. In the play, Timophanes has not yet taken over power, and love interest is introduced in the person of Eronime.

In *Coriolan*, however, La Harpe does not move far from his sources which he names<sup>93</sup> as Livy,<sup>94</sup> Plutarch, and the Abbé Vertot.<sup>95</sup> He probably also consulted Rollin's *Histoire romaine*.<sup>96</sup> His main source for *Virginie* was again Livy,<sup>97</sup> together once more with Vertot<sup>98</sup> and Rollin.<sup>99</sup> The stories of both these plays were well known. They had been dramatized many times before, and there was little room left for personal improvisation. His inventions in *Virginie*, for instance, are limited in nature. He denied<sup>100</sup> any link between his play and that of Campistron, whose *Virginie* was at that time the best known play on the subject, but in fact he borrowed from the latter the name of Virginie's mother, Plautie, the setting of Virginie's wedding day, and Appius' passion for her. As a reaction to Campistron, however, he returned to history by having Virginie stabbed on the stage by her father, a character who has no part in the other production. His other main innovation was to make Virginie's nurse a party to the plot to have the girl declared the daughter of a slave. In both *Coriolan* and *Virginie*, he pays tribute to the contemporary taste for spectacle, in the former play with the statue of Jupiter in Rome and with the altar and other decorations in the Volscian camp, and in *Virginie* with flaming torches, crowd scenes and many silent characters, but otherwise these plays still reflect his respect for older traditions in the French theatre.

It was because of this respect that he argued that a successful play depended on a delicate equilibrium of all its ingredients.<sup>101</sup> Strong feelings and passion do

not stand alone.<sup>102</sup> Just as a tragic happening does not in itself constitute a tragedy, so subject, characters and emotions are all dependent on a careful development of plot and action.<sup>103</sup> He was sure that Shakespeare would have written better plays had he respected the rules of construction as did Racine.<sup>104</sup> However, for all their basic commonsense, these rules can be interpreted in various ways to suit the dramatist's immediate needs.<sup>105</sup> It is dramatic probability that decides on the use made of the rules, and, while always remaining faithful to the idea of the unity of action, and convinced that the art of the good playwright is to combine variety of interest in the plot with the supreme interest in the hero,<sup>106</sup> he frequently showed scant respect for other unities, especially for that of place.<sup>107</sup> There is a change of scene in most of his plays. On the other hand, although he allowed night to cover the stage during the action in *Les Brame*s, *Jeanne de Naples* and *Virginie*, as a general rule, he paid slightly more attention to the unity of time and favoured a plot in which the crisis is already prepared before the curtain rises.

An example of how he was willing to sacrifice the unity of place, while preserving that of time, is seen in *Coriolan*. Fearing to violate the unities of place and time, his many predecessors dealing with this subject had had to confine the plot to the attempts made to win Coriolan back to the cause of Rome and had fallen foul of the difficulty of sustaining interest after the interview between Coriolan and his mother.<sup>108</sup> To get round this difficulty, it was necessary, if not to disregard the rules, at least to interpret them liberally. Inspired at least indirectly by Shakespeare, he remembered an idea put forward by La Motte and discussed by Voltaire in the *Préface d'Œdipe*.<sup>109</sup> According to this idea Coriolan should be seen to be thrown out of Rome in the first act, accepted by the Volscians in the third, and then lay siege to Rome in the fourth. Voltaire dismissed the plan as containing three separate subjects, but, while not following La Motte too closely, La Harpe was convinced that it was possible to link these three events as the 'parties successives et nécessaires d'une même action, naissant du caractère et des passions d'un même personnage'.<sup>110</sup> In fact, the plan is less adventurous than it might at first sight appear. By bringing the events together, and by having the Volscians already below the walls of Rome, the unity of time is in no way violated, and the unity of place is no more disregarded than in his other plays where the characters frequently have to move from a palace to a prison or a temple.

In other questions of construction of plot, La Harpe showed himself to be an utter traditionalist, advocating careful preparation for the movement of the action. He maintained, for instance, that the exposition — a part of the play which is often neglected — must be laid with care, as everything that happens later on in the play must result from what is revealed in it.<sup>111</sup> Everything must be fully explained from the beginning.<sup>112</sup> The characters must remain true to the picture that we have of them in the exposition, and when there is a violent change

because of great passion, this must be part of the violence of the character and not contrary to its composition.<sup>113</sup> There must be a continual progression of interest, with no falling off in danger.<sup>114</sup> The action must progress with every scene.<sup>115</sup> While he considered an episodic plan to be less interesting,<sup>116</sup> he approved of the introduction of incidents which, while following closely the natural movement of the play in its crescendo of passion, held back the denouement.<sup>117</sup> He liked dramatic irony.<sup>118</sup> Recognitions, while liable to misuse, were not to be despised as a dramatic device.<sup>119</sup> He was fond of dramatic turns of events,<sup>120</sup> although he had to admit that it was frequently difficult to make them seem likely.<sup>121</sup> All in all, however, he remained a strong supporter of a simple action with little or no sub-plot, but enriched with a good use of feeling and character.<sup>122</sup> Tragedy is not a guessing game, and 'plus l'esprit est occupé, moins le cœur est ému'.<sup>123</sup>

He showed similar respect for tradition in his choice of incentives in tragedy, by remaining faithful to the idea of *catharsis* through pity and terror.<sup>124</sup> Joy and sorrow must alternate,<sup>125</sup> and tragedy must show both grandeur and the pathetic.<sup>126</sup> For *La Harpe* there were two kinds of interest possible in tragedy: that in which we earnestly hope for the happiness and safety of the hero, and that in which we share his unhappiness or excuse his faults because of the passion that is destroying him.<sup>127</sup> He personally preferred the first type<sup>128</sup> with a hero showing strength of character, and although his feeling for admiration as a dramatic device cooled off in later life,<sup>129</sup> he had earlier praised it.<sup>130</sup> He did not approve of *Corneille's* cowards, as he felt that humiliation and weakness had no place in tragedy.<sup>131</sup> Passiveness and fatality were likewise to be banned.<sup>132</sup>

For him, as for most classically-minded dramatists, passion was the keynote of all tragedy, and the denouement was a direct result of it.<sup>133</sup> Here again, he showed himself to be an enemy of the *drame* and of its direct moralizing.<sup>134</sup> Crimes and vengeance are allowed in tragedy providing that they spring from strong passion.<sup>135</sup> We pity the worst criminal when he is faced by the pangs of conscience.<sup>136</sup> The only law is that of empathy. Monsters the characters may be, their passion must be capable of arousing fellow-feeling. One of his main arguments against Shakespeare, for instance, was that the latter showed madness instead of true passion; that madness did not excite real pity or terror.<sup>137</sup> What is really strange is very near the ridiculous.<sup>138</sup>

Still insisting on the necessity for pity and terror, he was critical of various tendencies to supplant or strengthen them with other feelings. We have seen how he avoided introducing a love interest in *Philoctète*. It was an experiment which he repeated in *Coriolan*, and in the majority of his plays it remains in the background, not at the centre of the action. He felt that all too often the love interest in the French theatre had become cold, facile, and even monotonous.<sup>139</sup> It is not always suitable for the dignity of tragedy and it has no place in those tragedies that show great events and men of history.<sup>140</sup> In the same way, he dismissed the

horror of Crébillon as displeasing,<sup>141</sup> although he was influenced by the latter in so far as he showed murder on the stage in *Timoléon* and in the *drame Barneveldt*, and brought in ferocious characters such as Vodemar in *Menzicoff*. If horror is to be used, it must be used with great care. One does not want details, but the expression of a direct and immediate great passion.<sup>142</sup> Remaining true to the idea that all art is an embellishment of nature, he argued that in even the most unhappy ending, there should be something to please the spectator, be it a feeling of consolation as in *Zaïre*,<sup>143</sup> or one of justice.<sup>144</sup> Only then can tragedy achieve a perfect balance of sentiment that is both pleasing and moral: 'La grande difficulté, le grand mérite est de trouver le degré d'émotion où l'on aime à s'arrêter, et de n'exciter la pitié ou la terreur que jusqu'au point où elle est un plaisir'.<sup>145</sup>

His first and most successful dramatic production, *Warwick*, illustrates well what he demanded of a tragedy. Sending it to Voltaire, he was above all proud of having written a work of the greatest simplicity.<sup>146</sup> There are no scenic effects as in some of his later plays, and the action relies entirely on the clash of personality between the characters. There is no real sub-plot, as the only possible second source of interest, the fate of Marguerite, the wife of the deposed king, is linked directly to the outcome of the quarrel between Edward and Warwick. The play is constructed in the purest classical terms, with, admittedly, La Harpe's usual laxity over the unity of place as we move between the palace and the Tower of London. The unity of time is strictly observed. Edward is to marry Elisabeth on the evening of the same day, and when the curtain rises we are waiting for the return of Warwick, which will precipitate the action. La Harpe manages to expound the whole initial situation in the very first scene with Marguerite unfolding her plans to her confidant. Warwick, Edward and Elisabeth are described before they are seen. Each act follows a new movement in the action. In Act I, the exposition is quickly set, and all is made ready for the arrival of Warwick. Act II shows the precipitation of the crisis with a series of short scenes in which the suspense increases progressively, while the author holds back the action with a careful use of dramatic irony. Everyone knows that Warwick has been tricked, but he refuses to believe it. Act III ends with the crisis as Warwick confronts the king and is led off a prisoner. Act IV brings a new chance of hope, and Act V the tragic denouement.

La Harpe is careful to alternate joy and despair, but, at the same time, the action relies heavily on three dramatic turns of events. The first comes when Warwick finally but suddenly realizes that he has been deceived (ii.6). The single word 'Elisabeth' uttered by his friend, Summer, and repeated unconsciously by Warwick, destroys his disbelief that Edward could have deceived him. The second arises with his return to honour and glory in Act IV, when he sees as in a moment of inspiration that he should not take advantage of the opportunity for revenge against the king, but rather rally to him (iv.7). The third and last

dramatic change comes with Warwick's death in the midst of public rejoicing, in a manner reminiscent of the ending of Voltaire's *Tancrède*.

The last two sudden changes in the action are open to criticism, although it is possible to accept Warwick's change of heart while in prison in so far as it fits in with the Cornelian tradition of heroic generosity. The same cannot be said of the turn of events in the final act. The clash of passion that has dictated the movement of the action through the first four acts is almost incidental to the denouement. This last act — in which much of the action takes place in a narrative form — has every appearance of being tacked on. The crisis and its resolution are already over. The unity of the action has depended on Warwick's attitude to Edward, and this problem has now been solved. Marguerite's own desire for vengeance is too cold and too far from the centre of interest to suffice as a reason for Warwick's death. If he had to die, he should have done so as a direct result of his pride, and not as a result of a woman's scheming. This weak ending mars the otherwise careful construction of the plot.

This weakness in the ending is stressed by the writer's failure to present us with truly credible characters. They tend to fit too neatly into appointed positions in the plot. Lady Nevil — a strange name for a friend of Warwick's enemies — Summer and Suffolk are merely confidants who obviate the necessity for monologues. Marguerite is a little too much a villainess, whereas Warwick, Edward and Elisabeth all suffer from the contrary tendency to make them worthy of the nobility of tragedy. They appear rather colourless when compared to their real-life counterparts.

Warwick, true to the romance and heroic idealism of the seventeenth century, is only interested in his love and the defence of his good name. He is a warrior full of inflexible pride and 'impétueuse audace' (i.1). His return from France affords him the opportunity of revelling in his glory, which, as in Corneille, has to be a public one. He needs a mirror for his own esteem :

Ces transports, cet hommage,  
Tout ce peuple à l'envi volant sur le rivage,  
Prêtent un nouveau charme à mes félicités.

(ii.1)

Fully conscious of his own worth, his first reaction on learning that Edward no longer wants to marry Bonne de Savoie is anger that he should be thought to have given his word to the French king in vain. When he finally learns the truth about Edward's plans his fury knows no bounds (ii.6). He sees Edward's moves as a direct attack on his good name. It is only when he is restored to power that he will consider helping Edward :

Peut-être l'on préfère avec quelque plaisir  
L'orgueil de pardonner à l'orgueil de punir.

(iv.4)

He refuses to be the 'jouet d'un traître' (ii.7).

The trouble with Warwick as a dramatic character is that he is too lucid. He claims to cherish the heroic ideal of defending love and honour together. He fears above all that he should be judged: 'Infidèle à sa gloire autant qu'à sa tendresse' (ii.7). In spite of this, however, his love is never really in question and plays very little part here. He never has any doubt as to how he should defend his honour. Unlike Rodrigue, for instance, Warwick knows from the outset that he must protect his love by defending his honour. This is coupled to a never-ending righteous rage that even Elisabeth is unable to calm (iv.4). Remaining exactly as we first see him from beginning to end, his behaviour in Act IV can be explained fully by the change in the circumstances rather than by any development on his part. Admittedly, we are faced with a study of inflexibility, but the rigidity in the composition of his character interferes with the flow of the play. This is emphasised by the importance of Warwick in the play. Perhaps over anxious to stress the unity of action in which all incidents must directly concern the hero,<sup>147</sup> and where he must stand out from the other characters,<sup>148</sup> La Harpe neglects here and in several of his other plays the importance of seeing that the other characters have their own degree of interest as well.<sup>149</sup> Here, Warwick tends to obliterate the rest of the cast.

This is not to say that the other characters are totally devoid of interest. The character of Edward, for instance, is more subtle than that of Warwick. In spite of his faithless behaviour, he is a worthy king. The weak Henry VI — who is described in a way that reminds us of Corneille's Prusias or Félix (i.1) — is kept well off the stage. Edward, on the other hand, shows himself as a man who is not to be intimidated. He treats Marguerite with respect, but reminds her in no uncertain terms that he is now her king (i.2). At the same time, he betrays an interesting contrast between his noble language and kingly utterances and his private doubts and fears as a victim of guilty passion (i.3). Nevertheless, even though he is secretly consumed by passion, he is no Racinian monster, and here again lies another weakness in the play. He is no tyrant. He has not forced Elisabeth to marry him. She has only agreed in order to gratify her ambitious father. Above all, the king wants to be reasonable with Warwick (i.4) and even in his fury against the latter, when he has the Earl dragged off to prison, he still only wants him to be punished: 'Je veux son châtement, et ne veux point sa perte' (iii.5). It is as if La Harpe wishes to restore the convention in which no king should countenance insolence from a subject, and still show himself to be the subject's superior. We are tempted to say of Edward, what La Harpe said of Voltaire's Genghis Khan: 'Avec le caractère de modération qu'il a montré, et l'amour qui le possède, on est trop sûr qu'il ne fera de mal à personne: plus de terreur, plus de pitié'.<sup>150</sup> In other words, Edward is too reasonable and Warwick is never really in danger. Both Edward and Warwick are too obviously studies of a type — the one a king, the other a warrior lord. They remain fixed as they first appear and do not develop and acquire depth.

The character of Elisabeth has been sacrificed in La Harpe's desire to put manly passions first. Her love for Warwick is an infinitely legitimate and reasonable one. She quite simply loves in the warrior 'ce vertueux courage' (iii.4). She fears for his life. Nevertheless, time and again, her main fears are for her country. She is preoccupied with the dangers of civil war and the power of Marguerite.

The character of the latter was, of all the four main characters that which was least well received. Grimm complained that she would never have been allowed to roam around the palace.<sup>151</sup> Other critics said that it was unfair to make an illustrious historical figure responsible for a crime that she had never committed.<sup>152</sup> La Harpe transformed the magnificent defender of the house of Lancaster into a schemer, albeit a powerful one. This would have been irrelevant, if it had been more dramatically successful. It is she who is supposed to be ever present but hidden, directing the actions of the other players, but, in the final analysis, she is seen to have little to do with the main action of the plot.

Her first entry is very promising. She reminds us of Arsinoë in *Nicomède*. She too is stronger than her husband. She has shown the determination of an Andromaque in fighting for the freedom of her son. However, these qualities are not seen during the action of the play, and when the other characters refer to her, it is always as an example of cunning and of danger: 'Elle, qui n'eut jamais que l'intérêt pour loi' (iv.4). Her arranging of the killing of Warwick seems to spring from sheer spite. One of the translators of the play into English, Thomas Franklin, tried to remedy this by giving her a stronger motive, and having her stab Warwick herself when she sees him standing over the body of her child.<sup>153</sup> In La Harpe's play, she is merely the mirror of the feelings of the other characters.

Part of his failure in the theatre, at least in early plays, is due to his inability to escape from the mould of *Warwick*, accentuating its faults rather more than its qualities. In *Timoléon*, the first act is again taken up with waiting for the hero's return in an already tense situation. Again in Act II, the conquering hero returns to find trouble at home. While Timoléon has been away, his brother Timophanes has fallen in love with Eronime the daughter of the king of Argos, who will only agree to their marriage on the understanding that Timophanes will declare himself king of Corinth. This cannot please the republican Timoléon. The only difference in the development of the plot is that here the confrontation between the hero and his antagonist comes rather earlier in the play. The general movement of the action, however, remains the same, as the crisis is held back by the battle with the Spartans between the second and third acts and comes at the end of the third with Timophanes' final return to his ambition for the crown. Just as in *Warwick*, the exposition and the first three acts are considerably better constructed than the rest of the play, and the audience in 1764 certainly found this so.<sup>154</sup> In the last two acts, inspiration seems to have deserted La Harpe.

The fourth repeats the movement of the third with Eronime imitating Timophanes and showing herself in her turn prepared to abandon her plans for marriage. The fifth act ends with the murder on the stage of Timophanes, an act of horror which is not typical of La Harpe's theatre. Perhaps dissatisfied with the effect of the *récit* in the fifth act of *Warwick*, La Harpe decided to show on the stage an act that was at least justified by history. Be this as it may, the result is no more satisfactory. Timophanes has not yet committed wrong, and, although he may possibly do wrong in the future and represents a danger to an almost sacred conception of a republic, these motives can hardly satisfy the audience as reasons for his execution.

If this scene seems revolting, it is also because of a fault in the general construction of the plot, as our interest is divided between Timoléon and his republican cause and the love affair and the ambitions of Timophanes and Eronime. Timoléon fails as a tragic hero as he is never personally in danger, and his political considerations are better suited to forming a backdrop but not the motive for tragedy. In the same way, Timophanes' passion and resultant ambition should dominate the plot and not be sacrificed to the overriding themes of civic duty. Timophanes' murder, Isménie's curse on Timoléon, and the latter's despair all appear unfortunate and rather unnecessary.

The lack of true motivation in the plot is again stressed by the disproportion between the characters. Timoléon and Timophanes form a contrasting pair in the manner of *Warwick* and Edward, or even of Corneille's Horace and Curiaque:

L'un fier et courageux, citoyen inflexible;  
L'autre, dans ses vertus plus doux et plus sensible.

(i.1)

While owing something to Voltaire's Brutus, Timoléon is undoubtedly modelled on *Warwick*. He too is a man of great valour, a 'bras invincible' (i.1), knowing his own worth: 'Quand on veut être libre, il faut l'être par soi' (ii.3). He submits all considerations to the overriding 'devoir d'être juste' (iii.2). It is here that he is less satisfying than *Warwick* in that in him there is not even the appearance of a struggle between opposing forces such as love and duty. Timoléon is not jealous of his brother and only acts as a 'citoyen sévère' (i.4). Timophanes respects him (iii.2), and their quarrel is purely a political matter (iv.3). His mother's pleas for Timoléon to abandon his plan to kill Timophanes fall on deaf ears (iv.4), as the republican's rigid determination to serve the public cause makes him a stranger to pity (i.5). Cratès, plotting to kill Timophanes, knows that family ties will not weaken Timoléon's purpose: 'Je parle devant vous comme devant les dieux' (iv.3).

Again, as in *Warwick*, the hero's direct antagonist is slightly more complex, but again rather unsatisfactory. It is difficult to believe that Timophanes was strong enough to put Eronime's father back on the throne of Argos, or to understand why, if he did so, he should now allow this king to dictate terms for

his marriage. He shares some of Edward's qualities. He can put on a good face. Like Edward, when the latter spoke haughtily to Marguerite (*Warwick*, i.2), Timophanes tells Timoléon: 'Je veux votre amitié, sans craindre votre haine' (iv.2). He has been a good president or *prutanis* (v.1) and has many basic virtues (iii.2). Up to now, he has been 'modeste et soumis à l'état' (i.1). He is, however, much more timorous than Edward. While hardly a 'monstre naissant', he has something of Racine's Néron, and like Néron, he is afraid of his mother (i.1). He only wants popularity (i.1) and happiness (iii.2). He is full of good intentions, but is a slave to his love (i.4). Such a weak character is something of an exception in La Harpe's theatre. He makes no real attempt to face up to the situation in which he is placed:

Après ce grand effort tous mes sens abattus  
Sont demeurés sans force, et mon âme affaiblie  
Dans l'excès de ses maux demeure ensevelie.

(iii. 5)

Eronime suffers from the general mishandling of the love interest. Like Elisabeth, she has to please her father (i.5). She shares her lover's good intentions (i.5), hardly comes to life as a character. She is either 'aimable' (i.1) or sunk in a 'désespoir muet' (iii.6).

The character of Isménie, a mother with a strict sense of duty to her country, ready to fall on her knees in order to bring a son back to the path of duty, appears to be based directly on that of the mother of Coriolanus, although La Harpe's source for this is again almost certainly Plutarch rather than Shakespeare or any other dramatist.<sup>155</sup> He later used part of Isménie's rôle for that of Véturie in his own *Coriolan*.<sup>156</sup> She is a kind of Cassandra, endowed with powerless lucidity (iii.4) and despairing of both her sons (iv.4, 5).

It is difficult to say much about the since destroyed *Pharamond*. The action was noticeably simple, but shared the fault of earlier plays by relegating the love interest to the background.<sup>157</sup> The plot echoed vaguely *Sémiramis* and relied for its denouement on the recognition of the true heir to the throne.<sup>158</sup> All in all, however, it made little impression on the spectators.<sup>159</sup>

The characters resembled those of La Harpe's earlier plays. Pharamond was depicted as 'faible et perpetuellement chancelant'.<sup>160</sup> Once again, there was a dominant character, Valamir, a war-lord, almost too powerful for the other characters.<sup>161</sup> We can only imagine that Clodion was a rather spiteful villain, but we are told that Ildigone was performed by Mademoiselle Dubois, who had earlier taken the rôles of Elisabeth and Eronime, and who now acted 'd'après elle-même'.<sup>162</sup> La Harpe himself had already described her talent for gentle melancholy.<sup>163</sup> We must imagine Ildigone to have been another of his charming but helpless heroines.

As we have shown elsewhere,<sup>164</sup> *Gustave* shares the outstanding characteristics of these other earlier plays. The love interest is again of only secondary

importance, and much of the interest of the plot dies away after the third act. The war-lord hero, Gustave, again overshadows the rest of the cast.

Much of the basic similarity between these four early plays springs from their being written so soon one after the other and performed in quick succession between 1763 and 1766. Although La Harpe did not stop writing for the theatre, as we have seen, he did not have another play produced until 1775 and claimed that he used the intervening years to study 'mûrement un art où l'on n'est pas très habile pour y avoir réussi une fois'.<sup>165</sup> However, the next play that he sent to the Comédie française, *Les Barmécides*, does not reveal any real progress either as regards plot or characterization. In spite of spending many years over the work, it was evident to the author himself, when it was performed, that he would have to make major changes in a plan over which he had had 'tant de peine à arranger les ressorts'.<sup>166</sup> At first, he only made cuts,<sup>167</sup> but it soon became obvious that radical changes were needed in the second, third and fourth acts.<sup>168</sup> The fourth act had been particularly harshly judged,<sup>169</sup> and La Harpe himself became all too aware of the faults.<sup>170</sup> He was dissatisfied with the rôle of the heroine, Sémire, the opening of the second act, and the slowing down of the action in the fourth.

Yet, after the changes, it is hardly true to say, as La Harpe wrote,<sup>171</sup> that the play flows any more smoothly, or that the motivation of the plot is more clearly explained. The work is still very slow-moving, and most scenes contain involved narrative. The exposition is not completed before the end of the second act, and the plot still relies on three recognitions — where there had been four — for the action to advance. The motives given in the plot are difficult to believe. For twenty years Barmécide has not been able to tell Saëd, to whom he owed his life, that he was still alive. It is as a result of a note that he has been thought dead, and now it is again because of a note brought by a dying messenger that he has learned of his son's plot against the caliph, Aaron. The whole thing is a rather contrived romance. Two aspects of the story are in themselves distinctly distasteful. Barmécide owes his life to the slaughter of a slave, and Aaron is expected to forgive those who deliberately kill his son. At the same time, the author could not plead that such happenings can be accounted for by the Arabian setting, as Cornelian love and strictly European considerations of nobility and kingship form the centre of the plot. A princess, captive in a harem, is allowed to roam about the palace and even talk openly with the man whom she loves, and who is known to love her, and whose request for her hand has been refused by the caliph. As for Amorassan's rival, on whom the denouement largely depends, he is never seen, and in the words of the *Complainte des Barmécides*, he serves the rhyme 'et puis c'est tout'.<sup>172</sup>

The far-fetched nature of the whole work is reflected in the characters themselves. La Harpe insisted that the generous character of Barmécide was authorized by historical fact.<sup>173</sup> Nevertheless, it is difficult to believe that

Barmécide, banished into exile with his family slain, should abandon his desire for revenge after twenty years on the knowledge that Aaron, troubled by remorse, has committed no other crime and is a good monarch; that like Warwick he should want to preserve what he originally helped to create (iii.1). It is impossible not to compare this work with *Cinna*, but Emilie's reaction to a similar situation is more understandable. Moreover, it is hardly a sign of true generosity for a father to endanger the life of his son, especially when the son has initially placed himself in danger on his father's behalf. It may be pleasing intellectually, but it is not very moving or convincing.

The motives of the caliph are equally incredible. Throughout the play, we are supposed to believe that like Corneille's Auguste, he would be 'le plus grand des mortels, s'il savait pardonner' (i.1), so that he should be seen to be capable of forgiving Amorassan who has just murdered his son:

Si j'écoutai jadis un excès de vengeance,  
Il faut, pour l'expier, un excès de clémence.

(v.5)

Whereas Auguste's pardon for the plotters in *Cinna* remains sublime, Aaron's forgiveness for those guilty of a much more heinous crime, that must have deeply hurt the man as well as the monarch, demands a far greater capacity for belief.

Both Amorassan and Sémire suffer from the mishandling of the love interest, which is once more pushed into a secondary position with the same results as in La Harpe's earlier plays. Even after the changes in the plot, Sémire remains a pale sister to Corneille's Emilie when she reminds her lover to be faithful to the conspiracy (iv.3). Amorassan shares Cinna's hesitation, but is hot-headed. Although we hear of his past victories and are told that he reveals in his actions his noble birth (i.2), in the context of the play, he remains distinctly passive.

In spite of moving from Bagdad to Benares, the action of La Harpe's other attempt at a truly exotic theme, *Les Brames*, shows certain similarities with that of *Les Barmécides*. In both plays, the first act ends with the swearing of an oath, and both end with the pardon of a prisoner who is about to be put to death. Both Akébare and Amorassan plot against a ruler to whom they owe a great deal. Again the action is not particularly well motivated, nor are the characters well drawn.<sup>174</sup>

The first play to show any real improvement in structure is *Menzicoff*, written after both *Les Barmécides* and *Les Brames*, although performed before them. The action is more carefully laid than that of any of La Harpe's plays since *Warwick*, even if the result is not particularly dramatic. It is in places almost too prudently constructed and more contrived than tragic. At times, one can almost see the author combining the scenes so that fear and hope successfully alternate. This play illustrates particularly well the dangers of a tradition where most of the action takes place off the stage. The weighty narrative produces an

unfortunate static effect. Perhaps as an attempt to counteract this, the playwright introduced a dramatic change of events into every act and a recognition into the first. Twice, in the first and fifth acts, a dramatic turn is rather obviously prepared with preceding premonition or suspicion.

Nevertheless, there are qualities that have been lacking ever since *Warwick*. The love interest, while it is as usual subservient to the feeling of admiration that we are supposed to have for the main character, is at least at the centre of the action. The action itself is also better distributed. Each act serves its purpose. The first act is devoted to the exposition and the arrival of Menzicoff in Siberia. The arrival of his ex-wife, Arzénie, in the second act precipitates the action. The third act ends with a crisis, and the fourth act with doubt if not a little hope. The fifth act brings the catastrophe.

The characters are, however, only sketched in. In depicting Menzicoff, La Harpe wanted to show that in his exile he was greater than he had ever been.<sup>175</sup> We learn of his past ambitions and of how he was the equal of his master, Peter the Great (i.2). We hear how he had risen from nothing (i.2), how his only rules had been 'la politique et la nécessité' (iv.5), but the Menzicoff that we see is a changed man:

Il pourra t'étonner: sa fermeté modeste,  
Son courage tranquille, et sa noble douleur,  
Et ses remords surtout, lui rendent sa grandeur.  
(i.2)

As seen on the stage, he is a stoic figure of nobility, stripped of vain titles and bearing his difficulties with calm and dignity. Yet, in spite of this strength of character, he has no effect on the outcome of the plot and is never directly in physical danger.

A far stronger rôle is left, by design or accident, to Arzénie. She is both an 'âme sensible' (ii.2) and mistress of her destiny (ii.1). It is she who avenges the death of her son, and who is as much a central heroine as Mérope or Andromaque by whom she is at least indirectly inspired.

Alexan, like Amorassan in *Les Barmécides*, is hot-headed (i.2, 3), proud (iv.7), 'ardent et fier, et trop sensible' (iv.3), but only seems to serve the plot for an incident in the fourth act and as an innocent victim for Vodemar.

Suard tells us that the Court was shocked by the latter's inconceivable ferocity,<sup>176</sup> and other critics were not slow to see a link with Crébillon.<sup>177</sup> Like many of Crébillon's characters, Vodemar is almost too black a villain to be believable. He has been building up hatred for sixteen years (ii.5), until, like Atrée, hatred is the only passion that he knows (ii.6). He is without pity (iv.3) and is marked by a 'dureté farouche' (iv.1):

Des maux que l'on m'a faits l'affreux ressentiment  
De mon cœur solitaire est l'unique aliment.  
(i.2)

*Jeanne de Naples* — La Harpe's last play on a national theme — is not so well constructed as *Menzicoff*. The general situation of the play is the traditional one of Clytaemnestra, or more directly that of Voltaire's *Eriphyle* and *Sémiramis*. Just as these last two plays reflect Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, so there was at least one other echo of the English play in the version of *Jeanne de Naples* that was performed in December 1781. In the final scene, the queen stabbed herself at the foot of her husband's tomb, and the King of Hungary then killed Tarente in a duel on the stage.<sup>178</sup> This appears to have been too much for the actors,<sup>179</sup> and La Harpe suppressed it in January 1782.<sup>180</sup>

Although the setting is more colourful, with the meeting of the estates in the last act which again reflects the influence of *Sémiramis*, the action is even more static than in *Menzicoff*. The exposition is not complete until well into the second act. Probably in order to please Madame Vestris,<sup>181</sup> later editions of this play have a radically altered first act. A scene between Montescale and Tarente replaces the original opening with Jeanne and her confidant, and the final scene of the act is lengthened. None of these changes, however, really improves the structure of the play. It is one thing to build up an action before the curtain rises, another to maintain it. The basic fault in the plot is that Jeanne's story is already over. The passion which drove her to crime, and which could interest us, is now dead. We neither hope nor really fear for her. Her dethronement is not a matter for the heart, and Louis of Hungary comes into far more direct danger. La Harpe has returned to the besetting sin of a secondary love interest with the triangle of Tarente, Louis and Amélie. Our attention is inevitably drawn towards them and away from Jeanne. The play only comes to life when, like Cornélie in *Pompée*, Jeanne warns Louis of the plot against him, and when she can finally remember what she owes to her position and stabs herself.

The play would certainly have had greater unity if Jeanne had consistently shown greater strength of character. She is capable of brave talk (i.4), and when she finally kills herself, she announces proudly: 'J'ai livré l'assassin, j'ai puni sa complice' (v.5). Nevertheless, most of the time she is markedly hesitant: 'L'infortune est muette, et le remords timide' (i.4). She is weak: 'Même en cédant au crime, elle l'a détesté' (ii.2). Amélie is 'pure et vertueuse' (ii.2) and thus resembles the majority of La Harpe's youthful heroines. Louis, like Aaron in *Les Barmécides*, is a conqueror who avoids spilling blood (ii.2). For Amélie, he is 'le héros qui [l'] enflamme' (ii.1). Montescale, like Saëd in *Les Barmécides*, or Bering in *Menzicoff*, is a faithful public servant (i.4). He is a 'magistrat austère' (i.4), guided by a strict sense of uncorruptible justice (i.2, 3, ii.2). Tarente is a thorough villain, and where hatred destroys love in Vodemar, here in Cornelian vein, ambition is the overriding care (ii.2, iii.6). Tarente is 'perfide' (i.2, 4) and, while he is a ladies' man (i.3), he is 'barbare avec tranquillité' (iv.6.)

This was the last play in which La Harpe relied heavily on his imagination for the construction of the plot. As we have seen, he showed greater respect for his

sources in his final tragedies, *Coriolan* and *Virginie*, and part of the implicitly less imaginative approach is undoubtedly due to the success that he found with his adaptation of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*. This is not to say that he followed Sophocles slavishly. To begin with, he rearranged the material into three acts instead of five, once more looking to the authority of Voltaire to justify such an action. When discussing Voltaire's problems in the subject of *Œdipe*,<sup>182</sup> he was to refer to the 'exemple utile' of *La Mort de César* and claim that certain simple subjects called for a reduction of this nature.<sup>183</sup> *Philoctète*, which he called an even simpler subject than *Œdipe*,<sup>184</sup> needed particularly to be cut down in length as he wished to suppress the choruses which, in true Voltairian fashion,<sup>185</sup> he considered to be out of place on the French stage.<sup>186</sup> In the same way, he does not introduce a confidant and has the whole of the action explained by the leading characters.<sup>187</sup>

In fact, despite the addition of some lines, marked in the text with inverted commas and intended to clarify points that would not be immediately obvious to a modern audience,<sup>188</sup> the general tendency of La Harpe's treatment of Sophocles' play is to shorten the action. This is not always to his advantage. He rather glosses over Pyrrhus' resistance to Ulysses (i.1) and thus diminishes our appreciation of the former's inherent honesty. He cut out the scene in which one of Ulysses' soldiers, disguised as a merchant, increases Pyrrhus' and Philoctetes' desire to leave by saying that the Greeks are on their way. He did so on the grounds that it was unnecessary, since Philoctetes is already in a hurry to leave.<sup>189</sup> On the contrary, this scene prepares us for Philoctetes' immediate recognition of Ulysses when the latter appears to take possession of the arms (ii.3). J. B. Gail relates how when Talma played Philoctète, he leant forward to look more closely at Ulysses: 'cherchant à démêler ses traits, et par là suppléant finement à la préparation qui manque au poète français'.<sup>190</sup>

La Harpe also shortened the ending of the play, cutting out Philoctetes' farewell to his cave (Sophocles, 1452–1468). In the original, there is also a long moment between Philoctetes' seizing the bow and arrows and wanting to strike Ulysses (Sophocles, 1299) and the arrival of Hercules (Sophocles, 1409). In removing much of the dialogue in this scene, La Harpe has unfortunately altered the very meaning of the denouement and shown a typical eighteenth-century distaste for Fate in the Greek sense. At this moment in Sophocles, Pyrrhus deserts Ulysses and decides to take Philoctetes back to Greece, and not to Troy. The arrival of Hercules is to assure the dictates of Fate which has decided that Philoctetes should go to Troy. Hercules does not come, as in La Harpe, in order to save Ulysses.

While thus showing himself unable to rival with Sophocles, La Harpe's *Philoctète* does seem to have taught him at last the rudiments of a properly constructed plot. In *Coriolan*, the reasons for the hero's exile are well explained, and this ensures that the action proceeds naturally, although we do find the same

somewhat static effect which marred *Menzicoff* and *Jeanne de Naples*. Coriolan is condemned by Rome between the first and second act, the battle with the Romans comes between the third and the fourth, and we only learn of Coriolan's death in the fifth. This ending, while suffering from the same inconvenience that beset that of *Warwick* — appearing almost as an afterthought and in *récit* —, is at least better motivated. As in *Philoctète*, La Harpe suppressed the slightest love interest and, following the example of Gudin de La Brunellerie's *Caius Marcius Coriolan, ou les dangers d'offenser un grand homme*,<sup>191</sup> he removed Coriolan's wife and children, referring to them as already dead. Avoiding the tradition of *Athalie* and *Inès de Castro*, he wanted to strengthen the idea of Coriolan's devotion to his mother on which the whole plot depends.<sup>192</sup> The result is a particularly well-marked unity of action.

This unity is enhanced by the strong character of Coriolan who is depicted as in Livy, and whose tragic flaw is 'un trop grand sentiment de ses propres forces':<sup>193</sup> a man who does not know the feelings of the weak (iii.3). It is his belief in himself that irritates the Romans (i.3) and leads him into revolt. His 'bouillant orgueil' (iv.1) annoys Tullius, the Volscian general, and this brings about Coriolan's eventual downfall. Unfortunately, we find here a fault common in La Harpe's earlier plays. The central character is disproportionately strong. Tullius and Volumnius fail to come to life and merely serve the action. Véturie is a pale sister to Isménie in *Timoléon*, on whom she is based, even speaking some of her lines.<sup>194</sup> Véturie is proud of her son (ii.2), but, like Isménie, she preaches civic liberty (i.3) and tends to become a strong and hardly feminine representation of republican feeling.

The same discrepancy between the plot and the characters also occurs in *Virginie*. La Harpe himself called the structure of this play 'à peu près irréprochable',<sup>195</sup> although it did undergo a number of important changes. For a start, the very ending was modified. When the play was first acted, Appius killed himself on the stage.<sup>196</sup> This horrified the audience, who found that it had little to do with the action.<sup>197</sup> In his new ending, La Harpe has Appius dragged off under arrest. At the same time, he also made cuts in Act III, scene 6 and lengthened the end of Act IV.<sup>198</sup> During the Revolution, he made some more changes at the beginning of Act III to bring out the idea of the 'souveraineté du peuple'.<sup>199</sup> These changes are, however, of relatively minor importance, and the general impression given by the plot is one of being clear-cut and remarkably simple. By having the action take place on Virginie's wedding day, there is a suitable sense of urgency and good alternation of hope and fear.

Yet, the characters are little more than the representation of ideas and are scarcely endowed with true personality. The women are true to the two most common types to be found in La Harpe's plays — the helpless and the patriotic, although neither of them has a positive rôle in the work. Just as Valérius is a 'sénateur vertueux, ami de la justice' (i.2), Icilius, 'ce digne citoyen' (i.5), is

‘né pour l’égalité, né pour la république’ (i.1). Together, they are the people and senate of Rome. Appius, the traditional tyrant, ready to justify his weakness, is opposed by a ‘guerrier vertueux’ (v.1). Virginius, like Timoléon or Voltaire’s Brutus, will do anything for his fatherland.

Indeed, in general fashion, it is in characterization that La Harpe is at his weakest. While many of his plots are far from perfect and present us with well-worn situations, they do generally have the quality of being fairly simple. Nor — thanks to their author’s experiments in local colour, combined with a fairly free approach to the unities and even to the *bienséances* — are they quite as repetitive as the characters themselves. These fall into roughly five types that were all traditional on the French stage. The villains were, as we have seen, obviously modelled on Crébillon. La Harpe’s heroes are nearly all men of might like those from the later plays of Corneille. Their merit lies not in their titles but in their moral strength which tends to eclipse that of the other characters. Most of the monarchs in this theatre are pale shadows of Corneille’s Auguste, imitating his clemency and wanting to be just. Another frequent echo of *Cinna* is to be found in La Harpe’s strong-willed women who resemble Emilie. His young helpless heroines are obviously inspired by the Racinian type of *jeune fille*, especially Iphigénie, and undoubtedly influenced by Zaïre. Like the rest of his characters, they lack the variety of their earlier counterparts. This stylization of the characters became even more evident as La Harpe tended to introduce more and more radical ideas into his theatre in the manner of Voltaire in his old age. They then became little more than mouthpieces for the expression of certain views.

This development was, however, only gradual, as in his basic approach to language in the theatre La Harpe still showed himself to be a traditionalist. As tragedy is an illusion which plays on feeling, he wanted the simplicity of his plots to be matched by a simple style. Although not more important than the plot, style needs just as much attention on the part of the author, and a good play is nearly always noted for its good style.<sup>200</sup> In his opinion, only Racine and Voltaire had achieved a perfect style in tragedy.<sup>201</sup> Tragic style is particularly difficult as the author must think of the character and the setting all the time.<sup>202</sup> Language must not destroy the dramatic illusion,<sup>203</sup> and each character must speak in a way that suits him and not the author.<sup>204</sup> La Harpe frowned on monologues<sup>205</sup> and lengthy political asides, even in Voltaire.<sup>206</sup> These not only slowed down the action, but again endangered dramatic illusion. He accused Corneille of saying what should only be felt.<sup>207</sup> At the same time, as tragedy is not aimed at the mind, and as he believed in the nobility of the art, he refused to conceive of tragedy written in prose. Only verse can give adequate expression to the thoughts and feelings of the mighty characters of tragedy and enhance illusion by further widening the gap between tragedy and everyday life.<sup>208</sup>

In his early plays, at least, the style is above all that of the epic where language is used to express heroic sentiment rather than to provoke political discussion.

In *Warwick*, he tried at first to avoid eternal moral truths and the ‘vers à retenir’ which clogged up many of the works of his contemporaries.<sup>209</sup> He wanted to avoid unnecessary epithets and inversions, and above all wished to say ‘de grandes choses avec des termes simples’.<sup>210</sup> It was only following his longer visit to Ferney that he started filling his play with lines that very obviously echo the philosophical thoughts of his host. Lines such as:

L’Anglais indépendant, et libre autant que brave,  
Des caprices de cour ne fut jamais esclave.  
(ii.7)

which are reminiscent of the spirit of the *Lettres philosophiques*, only date from later editions of *Warwick*. As performed and printed in 1763, the play’s style is made up of utterances linked more directly to general human behaviour. There are many neat expressions of feeling, usually in the heroic vein:

Aliment nécessaire à qui sentit l’offense,  
Seul bien des malheureux, l’espoir de la vengeance.  
(i.1)

This results in an elegant, but rather restricted style. Certain noble terms become — as in La Harpe’s more serious poetry — more than a little over-worked. The vocabulary is limited to obvious heroic words such as ‘fatal’, ‘vaillant’, ‘illustre’, &c. The author is forced to rely heavily on devices such as apostrophe, repetition, and the Voltairian trick of antithesis. This last device is found, sometimes in the juxtaposition of noun and epithet as in ‘ces impuissants éclats’ (i.2); sometimes between the two hemistichs of an alexandrine: ‘Et ce mortel abject, tout fier de son ouvrage’ (i.1). He is particularly happy to produce a well-balanced line such as: ‘D’adorer mon amant et d’admirer mon roi’ (iii.5), or even a couplet:

Vous apprendrez bientôt qui vous deviez servir,  
Vous apprendrez du moins qui vous devez haïr.  
(ii.4).

He is fond of the Cornelian habit of using the rhyme to bring in an insolent reply:

*Edouard:*  
Attendez jusque-là ma volonté suprême.  
*Marguerite:*  
J’attends tout désormais du ciel et de moi-même.  
(i.2)

Writing in so restricted an idiom, La Harpe inevitably echoed Corneille, Racine and Voltaire, and his enemies drew up a list of borrowings from the last two writers.<sup>211</sup> Nevertheless, even if it is somewhat derivative, the language is adequate and not too pompous. It flows smoothly and is undeniably generally elegant. However, it rarely rises above explaining the action. Linked to La Harpe’s desire to reduce the love interest, there is no real lyricism, and the style

fails frequently to meet the demands of strong emotion. All Edward can manage when he hears of Warwick's early return is a somewhat hackneyed: 'O Ciel! quel coup de foudre!' (i.4).

The same qualities and faults mark the style of the three plays that followed *Warwick*. *Timoléon* has many lines echoing Cornelian sentiments such as: 'La terreur est un frein pour une âme vulgaire' (iii.2). In places, *Gustave* echoes *La Henriade*.<sup>212</sup> Yet we find already the beginnings of the political and philosophical content that was to have a more important rôle in his later works. In *Timoléon* — a play with, after all, a republican theme — we have a definition of the duties of the state and of the citizen (iv.2), and there is a condemnation of slavery (v.2). We are told that while the audience found the style of *Pharamond* in general to be 'épuré du faux clinquant de la poésie',<sup>213</sup> the point in the play which received the greatest applause was when Valamir called on the king not to abdicate and expressed 'l'amour inaltérable de ce peuple pour ses rois'.<sup>214</sup>

In *Les Barmécides*, the basis of the style is still heroic. There are the usual Cornelian maxims such as:

Mais l'amour a souvent triomphé du destin,  
Et le sort d'un héros est toujours dans sa main.  
(i.1)

There is a certain philosophical triteness in sentences such as: 'Que nous laissons de nous des traces passagères' (iii.1); 'Toujours la trahison conduit de crime en crime' (iii.5). The language still shows a certain lack of flexibility and an inability to deal with subtle ideas. As if embarrassed by the manner in which Barmécide's life has been saved, La Harpe describes the event in almost coy fashion:

Un esclave à peu près de son âge,  
Assez semblable à lui de taille et de visage,  
Semblait s'offrir à moi pour remplir mon dessein;  
Sous le tranchant du sabre il expira soudain.  
(i.2)

Expressed in such terms, the *turquerie* becomes almost comic.

However, we are told that certain lines were applauded,<sup>215</sup> although we suspect that this was due more to the ideas expressed than to any inherent beauty in the verse. Political discussion is stated here more directly than in any of the earlier plays. La Harpe's stay in Ferney, composing poems such as the *Réponse d'un solitaire de la Trappe* under the direct tutelage of Voltaire, obviously encouraged stronger declarations of radical ideas. Much is made of the fact that the caliph has encouraged the arts and shunned war (i.1). More thoroughly than in *Timoléon*, civic duty is now defined closely in accordance with the Voltairian ideal of freedom of discussion: 'l'homme qui pense est meilleur citoyen' (i.1).

La Harpe's departure from the style of his earlier plays is particularly evident in the speech in which Amorassan criticizes the unfair advantage of noble birth:

Je vois de nos destins quelle est la différence;  
 Qu'il est quelques heureux qu'au jour de leur naissance  
 Le ciel marqua du sceau des enfants préférés;  
 Qu'un nom cher aux humains d'avance a consacré,  
 Et qui, dans leur berceau trouvant des diadèmes,  
 Ont été dispensés d'être grands par eux-mêmes;  
 Lorsque d'obscurs mortels laissés dans l'abandon,  
 S'ils reçurent un cœur au-dessus de leur nom,  
 Consacrent aux travaux leur généreuse audace,  
 Et n'ont point d'autres droits pour se mettre à leur place,  
 Et sortir de la foule où tout est confondu,  
 Que l'éclat des talents, la gloire et la vertu.

(ii.3)

Such social criticism had already been implicit in La Harpe's earlier plays, but it was now expressed openly for the first time.

The elements of radical propaganda are even more evident in *Les Brames*. Just as Voltaire was proud to show a people adoring a single god in his politically-minded *Les Guèbres*,<sup>216</sup> so La Harpe's play on the Brahmins — also admired by Voltaire for their monotheism<sup>217</sup> — abounds in religious and political pronouncements.<sup>218</sup> In *Menzicoff*, we again find, as in *Les Barmécides*, a defence of the commoner against the vanity of noble birth. Although La Harpe undoubtedly wanted to please his patron, Paul of Russia, and is careful to underline respect for the law and the properly constituted authorities (ii.1, iv.7), there is an underlying criticism of those whose ambition: 'Croit flatter le pouvoir en foulant l'opprimé' (ii.1). Power is seen not to be the true path to happiness (iii.3, iv.5) and the overriding theme of the play is to show the vain nature of titles (ii.1, 8). As Bering says to Arzénie:

Vous êtes au moment où les grands de la terre,  
 Quand ils ont, comme vous, signalé des vertus,  
 Retrouvent dans les cœurs le pouvoir qu'ils n'ont plus.

(ii.1)

Of all La Harpe's tragedies, *Jeanne de Naples* perhaps comes closest to direct moralizing. Tarente gets his just deserts:

Mais il faut que l'adresse à la fin se trahisse:  
 Quelquefois la candeur confondit l'artifice.

(ii.4)

Yet, this tone is allied to the by now set expression of fashionable ideas: 'Nul pouvoir n'a le droit de commander le crime' (iv.2). There is the usual condemnation of war (ii.1), and Louis, a king, makes the following rather surprising anti-clerical attack:

Le sacerdoce altier lutte contre l'empire.  
 Le plus fort est tyran, le plus faible conspire.  
 On rampe, ou l'on opprime; en ce peuple abattu  
 Le crime est sans courage, et même la vertu.  
 Je vois trente cités qu'asservissent des prêtres,  
 S'agitant sous le joug, mais pour changer de maîtres,  
 Arborer tour-à-tour sur leurs tristes remparts,  
 Ou les clefs du pontife, ou l'aigle des Césars.

(ii.4)

Apart from *Philoctète*, whose text is based, albeit freely, on that of Sophocles, a surprising break in this progression of political content in La Harpe's theatre comes in *Coriolan*. In style, this play reflects that of the youthful La Harpe. He was obviously tempted by the subject for many years, as can be seen from its influence in the plot of his *Timoléon*. There is little radical propaganda, and the main preoccupations are the traditional ones of heroic nobility:

Mais la fierté souvent égare une grande âme,  
 Soutien de l'héroïsme, elle en devient l'écueil.

(i.3)

Just as in *Timoléon* (iii.2), the author expresses here a suitably aristocratic view of the common people and hatred for its flatterers (i.1). Although this is given as the opinion of Coriolan, and is thus implicitly condemned, lines expressing this point of view stand out in the play. La Harpe even defends the Volscian cause (iv.2), in an attempt to give a truly balanced dramatic effect. It is easy to see why this work went into eclipse during the Revolution, although it was performed again fairly frequently afterwards.

*Virginie*, on the other hand, enjoyed its greatest popularity during the Revolution, and as late as 1795, La Harpe was proud to refer to it as proof of his republican spirit.<sup>219</sup> Many lines celebrate the common people who only want 'la justice, et non pas la vengeance' (i.1). One can imagine how the public thought of the war of 1792 when they heard Icilius say:

N'accusez pas en vain le peuple et les soldats,  
 Ils ont le même cœur, ils ont le même bras.  
 Mais pour qui triompher, s'il n'est plus de patrie?  
 Si la gloire, seigneur, qu'ils ont toujours chérie,  
 Si la victoire enfin abandonne leurs rangs,  
 C'est qu'ils n'ont pas voulu vaincre pour des tyrans.

(i.1)

In lines added during the Revolution, there is a direct proclamation of equality before the law:

Et qu'est-ce donc enfin que les lois les plus belles,  
 Si le législateur se met au-dessus d'elles?

(iii.2)

Icilius even shows a belief in a contemporary religion:

C'est la justice même  
 Qu'au fond de tous les cœurs grava l'Être suprême;  
 Elle unit les mortels, tous égaux à ses yeux:  
 L'erreur fit les tyrans, et la loi vient des cieux.

(iii.2)

As we have seen, after *Thermidor*, Appius came to be regarded as Robespierre, and the play was viewed in a different light, but continued to be successful. Surprisingly enough, some of the lines added in 1792 were given a general ovation by the public, who thought that they had been written to celebrate Robespierre's downfall.<sup>220</sup> The only criticism of the play at that time was that the bringing of the army to Rome echoed the behaviour of Dumouriez.<sup>221</sup> Yet, as with much of the literature of the Revolution, the very success that *Virginie* then enjoyed, restricted its appeal to posterity, and in the nineteenth century it was not considered comparable to the work on the same subject by Alfieri.<sup>222</sup>

## 2. *Drame*

This increasing use of political ideas in La Harpe's theatre reflects his general adherence to the doctrines of the *philosophes* and, for all his love of true tragedy, he was too much of a *philosophe* to dismiss the *drame* as worthless. He merely considered it to be a lesser form of art than tragedy. He regarded La Chaussée's *comédie larmoyante* as the basis of the *drame* and stated that all Diderot had done in his *drame bourgeois* was to transport the *comédie larmoyante* into prose and remove the comic element.<sup>223</sup> He claimed that it was not a new genre in its own right; that its only real distinguishing mark was in the choice of its subjects.<sup>224</sup> As far as the *comédie larmoyante* was concerned, he called it a 'genre estimable' when dealt with properly<sup>225</sup> and admired La Chaussée as a stylist. He felt, however, that the latter's plays suffered inevitably from the mixing of different genres. The resources of comedy and tragedy were diluted.<sup>226</sup> These plays lacked the character study of comedy and the sublime quality of tragedy. They tended to be insipid and too like nature that has not been touched by art.<sup>227</sup> They made less demands on the ability of the artist and, with few difficulties successfully overcome, they were less pleasing.<sup>228</sup> With the replacement of verse by prose, the way was further opened to dangerously easy mediocre writing.<sup>229</sup>

Nevertheless, he admitted that the *drame* could be particularly moving. It could make us weep more easily than tragedy,<sup>230</sup> and a love interest could be more fully developed than elsewhere.<sup>231</sup> However, he maintained that two grave dangers beset the *drame*, the 'romanesque des événements, et l'atrocité ou la bassesse des caractères'.<sup>232</sup> He called the complicated works of La Chaussée 'des romans en dialogue'.<sup>233</sup> The emotive power of the plot is everything in the *drame*, linked as it is to a moral theme, and, although this morality is frequently

good,<sup>234</sup> the action is frequently too serious and dull.<sup>235</sup> Paradoxically, this also encourages the introduction of events that are unlikely<sup>236</sup> and which tend to go beyond the bounds of decency.<sup>237</sup> In this, the *drame* is one of the main causes of decadence in the theatre.<sup>238</sup>

With this highly critical approach to the *drame*, La Harpe's own attempts at writing plays in this manner are immediately distinguishable from his tragedies only in their subject matter. *Barneveldt* is one of the many adaptations of Lillo's *The London Merchant or the History of George Barnwell*,<sup>239</sup> which enjoyed a tremendous vogue in France in the eighteenth century.<sup>240</sup> The story of *Mélanie* is drawn vaguely from a real happening. In 1768, a young novice driven to desperation by her parents hanged herself in the hall of the Couvent des Filles de la Conception in the rue Saint-Honoré rather than take her vows.<sup>241</sup> Although La Harpe had no knowledge of the actual circumstances surrounding the young girl's death, he seized the opportunity to imagine a plot in which a girl is forced to take her vows by an ambitious father, even though she is in love and no longer wants to become a nun.

Avid as usual to accuse La Harpe of plagiarism, the *Année littéraire* pointed out with some justification that the plot of *Mélanie* owed much to earlier productions.<sup>242</sup> For a start, *Mélanie*'s situation is that of Marianne in what La Harpe considered the finest of La Chaussée's plays, *L'Ecole des Mères*.<sup>243</sup> In both, a young girl in a convent is to be sacrificed for the sake of a brother, the only difference being that the rôles of the parents are reversed. In La Harpe's play it is the father and not the mother who must be taught the moral lesson not to force vows. Similar situations exist in two short stories, Dubois-Fontanelle's *Emilie ou les vœux forcés*,<sup>244</sup> and the tale of Olympia Caratini, published in *La Bigarrure*<sup>245</sup> and said to be based on a true happening when a young girl hanged herself on the day of her vows in the hay-loft of the Monastery of San Martino in Varese near Milan. In both stories, a young girl in love is sacrificed to the happiness of a sister.<sup>246</sup> The clash of love and monastic duty was also portrayed in Robert Challes' *L'Histoire de M. de Terny et de Mlle de Bernay*.<sup>247</sup> Other similarities can be found to exist between *Mélanie* and Baculard d'Arnaud's *Euphémie ou le Triomphe de la Religion*,<sup>248</sup> where one of the nuns is actually called *Mélanie*. *Euphémie*, who has been sacrificed to a heartless brother, has a lover called Sinval, whose name possibly finds a vague echo in La Harpe's Monval. Madame de Genlis called *Mélanie* 'une imitation bourgeoise d'Iphigénie' and insisted that the character of the priest was taken from Madame de Tencin's *Le Comte de Comminges*.<sup>249</sup> Whatever his real debts, La Harpe does not appear to have had to look far for inspiration.

In spite of the everyday subject and its gloomy and thoroughly instructive ending, this play has still more in common with classical tragedy than with the *drame* as understood by Diderot and others. Indeed, in writing *Mélanie*, La Harpe consciously wanted to avoid the 'romanesque des événements' and the

'bassesse dégoûtante' of the typical *drame*.<sup>250</sup> The plot is simple, respecting all three unities, and what action there is takes place off-stage. Most of the play is taken up with discussion. The first two acts flow fairly well as succeeding attempts are made to make M. de Faublas change his mind and free his daughter from the convent. The last act drags. Dying from poison, Mélanie still manages several speeches in the best dramatic tradition. The act is made up of a series of brusque entrances and exits that are designed to inform us of a duel in which Mélanie's ambitious brother gets killed, but which appear more as a theatrical device than as a natural means to advance the action. Above all, the plot offends common sense, and, as has been pointed out,<sup>251</sup> Mélanie — who has courage enough to kill herself — only has to refuse to take her vows for the whole plot to fall apart.

To have silenced this last complaint, it would have been necessary to draw the character of Mélanie far more carefully. In his characters, as in his plots, La Harpe is still more interested in romanesque dramatic effect than in realism. To strengthen the plausibility of the girl's suicide, the author has added a love interest which, as has been shown,<sup>252</sup> was contrary to the customs of contemporary French society. In fact, Mélanie suffers from the same divisions and anguish that we have already found in other heroines in La Harpe's theatre and with whom she has much in common. Her 'esprits' are 'agités' (i.4): 'Un père! il m'en faut un' (i.4). For all her discussion with the priest and with her father, she never really gives one the impression of a strong enough mind to contemplate suicide rather than to take her vows. Her mother is equally helpless (i.4). Throughout the years, La Harpe tried to improve the characters of M. de Faublas and of the priest. In the edition of 1778, he tried to explain more fully the motives of the father and strengthened the priest's insistence that Mélanie should refuse to take her vows.<sup>253</sup> Following his conversion, it was this last rôle that was to undergo the greatest number of changes when he revised the text in 1802.<sup>254</sup>

Just as the subject of the play had been greeted favourably by Voltaire,<sup>255</sup> so its style met with an expression of approval from the patriarch:

Voilà le vrai style, clair, naturel, harmonieux, point d'ornement recherché; tous les vers frappés et sentencieux naissent du fond du sujet, et se présentent d'eux mêmes; grande simplicité, grand intérêt.<sup>256</sup>

The traditional alexandrines were not, however, welcomed by those who wished to encourage the development of the true *drame* and its reflection of real life. For many, the play was typical of the epic tradition that was killing true dramatic effect in the French theatre. For some, *Mélanie* was a kind of *héroïde*.<sup>257</sup> In other words, it was hardly a departure from the tradition of La Harpe's tragedy.

If it had been meant for the stage,<sup>258</sup> his *Barneveldt* would have been a slightly more daring departure. As it is, the play shows much of the timidity that

characterizes the so-called innovations of the time. His greatest daring here is in his general fidelity to the original text.<sup>259</sup> He did not dress up Lillo's story as a classical tragedy in historical and oriental clothing as in Blin de Sainmore's *Orphanis*,<sup>260</sup> nor did he want to remove the elements of horror as in Anseaume's *L'Ecole de la Jeunesse ou le Barneveldt français*.<sup>261</sup> As opposed to Mercier in *Jenneval*,<sup>262</sup> he did not cut out the murder of Barneveldt's uncle. Yet, this murder is presented with almost comic precautions as he tries to make it 'vraisemblable et supportable'.<sup>263</sup> Firstly, he has night cover the stage, and then partially masks the act with scenery: 'L'action se passe entre des arbres qui dérobent au spectateur l'horreur du coup de poignard'.<sup>264</sup>

Moreover, for the decency of the French stage, he cuts out the spectacle of Barneveldt's execution and, like Anseaume, turns the prostitute Millwood into a widow who has fallen on hard times. Like Blin de Sainmore, he shortens the action by having the hero already in love and invents the scene where the hero is actually driven to commit murder by the artful mistress. Scene changes are, nevertheless, as free as in the English original. We move from the merchant's house to the Great Park at Windsor and then to a prison. The action takes more than one day.

In general, the characters also run true to their English counterparts. Barneveldt is basically timid and, in his rake's progress, he is filled with 'tant de honte et tant d'honnêteté' (i.1). He is deeply ashamed of his actions, but is powerless to resist: 'J'aperçois l'abîme, et je m'y précipite' (ii.1). Despite the change in social status, and despite La Harpe's claims<sup>265</sup> to have made Sara more respectable than Millwood, she is still pretty villainous:

Elle paraît naïve à force d'artifice,  
Séduit par ses talents et même par ses vices.  
(i.1)

Lucy — Lillo's Mary, and who now has a bigger rôle than in the original play — is, on the other hand, almost too good to be true. As she tells herself: 'Ne fais rien pour l'amant, et tout pour la vertu' (ii.6).

The language is on a highly moral tone, with many maxims on the folly and dangers of first passion:

Où la rougeur modeste est encor sur le front,  
L'erreur est si facile, et le remords si prompt.  
(i.1)

As in the works of Sedaine and Diderot and other exponents of the *drame bourgeois*, there is some praise of the qualities suitable to the genre:

ce haut degré  
Où le négociant, aux grands objets livré,  
S'approche des ressorts qui meuvent les puissances,  
Soumet la politique à ses calculs immenses.  
(i.1)

Yet, once again, the style is basically that of classical tragedy, and there is considerably less political discussion than in, for instance, La Harpe's own later tragedies. The general impression is still one of elegance in the traditional heroic vein:

Et lorsqu'enfin les flots, trop prompts à t'enlever,  
De ce dernier plaisir auront pu me priver,  
Tout à mon désespoir, et te nommant encore,  
J'enfonce le poignard dans ce cœur qui t'adore.

(iii.4)

In this play, designed to be read rather than acted, the poet comes again and again between the characters and the reader, and confirms what *Mélanie* suggested, that La Harpe made no real attempt to grasp the vividness and immediate realism of the true *drame*.

### 3. *Comedy*

La Harpe's experiments in comedy were also extremely limited in nature. He only wrote two short one-act plays, remembered more for the circumstances in which they were written than for their own merits. Comedy was, he believed, rather out of favour among his contemporaries who preferred to have their emotions stirred rather than to be merely amused.<sup>266</sup> As a *philosophe*, showing, as we have seen, a moderate taste for the moral tone of La Chaussée, he felt that the latter expressed the aims of the eighteenth century better than any attempt to follow Molière too slavishly.<sup>267</sup> At the same time, he left no doubt as to his own general preference for tragedy. In his view, comedy lacked the poetic grandeur and sublimity of tragedy.<sup>268</sup> It is narrower in its scope<sup>269</sup> and has less power as a form of art as it is aimed at the mind rather than the heart. It is therefore less imaginative.<sup>270</sup> It does not face the same difficulties as tragedy. It can deal with any subject at any length,<sup>271</sup> the only rule being that it must not be too long.<sup>272</sup> The denouement is not very important and does not necessarily depend on what has gone before.<sup>273</sup> The characters only need to be developed to a limited degree,<sup>274</sup> and there is no time in comedy for fine details.<sup>275</sup>

He was particularly disappointed with comedy in the eighteenth century. He maintained that no one had in any way equalled Molière who was the first to show us 'le ridicule de nos faiblesses'.<sup>276</sup> Comedy has a definite moral purpose,<sup>277</sup> but again the morality must not be stated directly, but through characters that are both universal and true to nature, and which show us to ourselves.<sup>278</sup> Believing in the idea of combining utility and pleasure, he insisted that comedy should 'instruire en divertissant'.<sup>279</sup> He defended Molière against Rousseau's attack on *Le Misanthrope*. Virtue, when misused, becomes a fault.<sup>280</sup> In the same way, comedy must show the ridiculous side of vice, and Molière's picture of hypocrisy, for instance, is both moral and amusing.<sup>281</sup> He accused Beaumarchais — whom he admired for his dialogue<sup>282</sup> — of making vice attractive.<sup>283</sup>

True to the tradition of Boileau,<sup>284</sup> La Harpe insisted on the limits imposed on comedy by decency.<sup>285</sup> We must remember that the theatre belongs to polite society, and it must show universal characters and exclude personal satire.<sup>286</sup> Again echoing Boileau,<sup>287</sup> he did not like farce.<sup>288</sup> He had a certain fondness for the gay comedy of writers such as Regnard.<sup>289</sup> In comedy, one is not allowed to be sad.<sup>290</sup> Situation comedy is amusing in so far as it stresses the contrast between character and situation.<sup>291</sup> Nevertheless, Molière's more important comedies of character remained in La Harpe's eyes, the highest form of the art. He had two main complaints to make against writers of comedy in the eighteenth century. He wished that they had depicted the manners of their society in the way Molière had depicted his.<sup>292</sup> Instead, they had rejected the comedy of character and manners, and had returned to the *imbroglio* with all the complications that he disliked in any theatrical plot.<sup>293</sup> He abhorred Italian comedy and considered Harlequin to be unnatural.<sup>294</sup> He was a harsh critic of Marivaux and thought it to be a sign of mediocrity that the 'finesse des petits aperçus' that we find in the latter's theatre only makes us smile.<sup>295</sup> He felt that the pictures of devoted valets were out of date,<sup>296</sup> that there was something immoral about valets and their masters changing places and dressing up.<sup>297</sup> He also refused to believe that people in real life undergo as complete and as quick a metamorphosis as they do in Marivaux's theatre.<sup>298</sup> Most of all, he disliked *marivaudage*, as it was too rich and, in his view, too obviously the style of the author and never that of each character in a given setting.<sup>299</sup> Once more referring to the authority of Molière, he claimed that elegant verse was the only true medium for comedy.<sup>300</sup>

Written in free verse, neither of his own comedies has anything approaching a proper plot. They are made up of a succession of scenes on a central theme. *Les Muses rivales* shows us the Muses vying with one another as to which of them has the greatest claim to introduce Voltaire's universal soul to Parnassus and Apollo. They are joined by the Graces and Apollo, and then by Mercury who tells them that on reaching Parnassus Voltaire has met his hero, Henri IV, and prefers to stay with him. In the absence of Voltaire, the Muses venerate his statue. One must not look here for jokes or other forms of humour. The play consists entirely of praise. The lines list Voltaire's qualities, above all, his enlightenment:

Partout des oppresseurs il brise la statue;  
 Et relevant avec grandeur  
 L'humanité sacrée, à leurs pieds abattue,  
 Comme il en est le peintre, il en est le vengeur.  
 (sc.4)

For *Molière à la nouvelle salle, ou les Audiences de Thalie*. La Harpe could hardly follow the same plan. During the centenary celebrations of Molière's death in February 1773, the Comédie française had already performed two plays,

Artaud's *Le Centenaire de Molière*<sup>301</sup> and the Abbé de Schosne's *L'Assemblée*,<sup>302</sup> which both showed the Muses fêting Molière's bust in the traditional way. Although the Muses still appear in La Harpe's play, they do not hold pride of place. True enough, the scene is set by Melpomene and Thalia, but the latter soon leaves Molière alone on the stage to serve as her substitute to meet those who come to seek her advice. Although, when discussing Mercier's imitation of Goldoni's *Il Moliere*, La Harpe had called the act of putting Molière on the stage 'une entreprise assez hardie',<sup>303</sup> the idea was not particularly original. To give only two examples, Molière also appeared in the play that immediately preceded *Molière à la nouvelle salle*, Imbert's *Inauguration du Théâtre français*,<sup>304</sup> and in Carrière-Doisin's *Séances de Melpomène et de Thalie*,<sup>305</sup> which possibly also influenced La Harpe in the lay-out of his own work.<sup>306</sup>

A more general influence, however, comes undoubtedly from Piron's *La Métromanie*, which — followed by Gresset's *Le Glorieux* — La Harpe considered to be the finest comedy of the eighteenth century.<sup>307</sup> Piron's portrayal of literary abuse — one of Molière's favourite subjects for comedy — led off a score of plays on similar themes, plays such as Palissot's *Les Philosophes*<sup>308</sup> or Cailhava's *Les Journalistes anglais*.<sup>309</sup> All these productions were given new meaning in the light of quarrels between the rival troupes of actors, and this was seen to contribute directly to the success of La Harpe's work.<sup>310</sup>

The play is not entirely satirical. There is a rather artificial joke about the preservation of Molière's chair at the Comédie française:

Je n'y vois personne s'asseoir,  
Que le *Malade imaginaire*.

(sc.1)

We have the description of a man writing verse for his parrot as in *Vert-Vert* (sc.6). There are coy quotations from *Zaire* and *Polyeucte*. There is visual humour. As the Muse du Drame, the audience saw the actor, Dugazon, dressed as a woman in black with a long paper streamer bearing the words: 'Ah! Ciel! Dieu! Grands Dieux! Vertu! Crime! Nature!'<sup>311</sup> There is praise of Louis XVI.

Nevertheless, the best parts of the play display La Harpe's undoubted talent for literary satire. The work is above all a proclamation of his literary faith and, as such, is, in a way, a reply to Mercier's *Molière*. Tragedy is defended against La Foire, just as comedy is opposed to farce (sc.1). There are his usual attacks on ignorant journalists and those who compiled almanachs and dictionaries (sc.2). The scene with M. Misogamme, whose wife has turned their home into a *bureau d'esprit* — obviously an echo of *Les Femmes savantes* — gives him the opportunity to express his dislike of those who bandy literary terms without much thought: 'Ils ont tous du génie, et pas le sens commun' (sc.6). The critic is using his favourite weapon — ridicule.

Both these plays, based on a series of episodes rather than a proper plot, demanded little dramatic preparation. They should perhaps be judged more as

poems. *Les Muses rivales* is a forerunner of La Harpe's *Aux Mânes de Voltaire*, and *Molière à la nouvelle salle* continues the tradition of satires such as *L'Ombre de Duclos*. La Harpe himself admitted that such 'pièces à tiroirs' belonged to a 'genre à part, réservé pour des circonstances particulières, et par conséquent très borné'.<sup>312</sup>

#### 4. Opera

He showed the same condescension to opera, which he again considered to be an inferior genre to tragedy, but he was, as we have seen, an outstanding protagonist in the music quarrel and thus fairly interested in the subject. Like Voltaire, he never failed to defend Quinault against the harsh judgement of Boileau.<sup>313</sup> In his criticism of operas, La Harpe was particularly severe on those who referred to Greek tragedy as the forerunner of modern opera, and who even adapted tragedies as librettos. He argued that modern opera was essentially different from tragedy, ancient or modern; that it had different movement in its action, different dialogue, and different versification, in which poetry is inevitably sacrificed to music.<sup>314</sup> Appealing directly to the senses, there is no illusion as in tragedy.<sup>315</sup> There is no place for the sweeping speeches of tragedy,<sup>316</sup> nor can opera deal with historical subjects.<sup>317</sup> Only in the portrayal of myths is the audience ready to accept what is so obviously fictitious. Lacking the dignity of tragedy,<sup>318</sup> it is impossible for opera to 's'approprier des effets de la tragédie'.<sup>319</sup>

Yet, despite this severe distinction between the genres that he advocated in his criticism, from what we can see of his *Vengeance d'Achille*,<sup>320</sup> the libretto remains nearer tragedy than opera. Admittedly, it is taken from myth and based on the same part of the *Iliad* as Poinset de Sivry's *Briséis*.<sup>321</sup> This, however, is the only feature of the opera that truly coincides with La Harpe's rules. Fearing, as in other genres, the over-use of machines<sup>322</sup> and other complications, he only permitted a momentary appearance of the marvellous in the opening act, and for the rest presented a plot as simple as in any of his tragedies. There is a certain amount of spectacle, with celebrations and sacrifices, but without the full text it is difficult to see whether it was used successfully and was suitable for music.

*Aboulcassem* follows the line of *Les Barmécides*, again showing La Harpe's fondness for the Arabian nights. He knew of no 'histoire plus agréable que celle d'Aboulcassem'<sup>323</sup> and although called a *drame lyrique* this work is a light comic opera. In judging comic opera, La Harpe considered it to be a minor genre demanding indulgence from the critic<sup>324</sup> and certainly from what we can see of *Aboulcassem*, the plot is as involved a romance as could be desired.

#### 5. Conclusion

This love of romance colours the whole of La Harpe's theatre. He follows fashion in adopting national, oriental and ancient settings which allowed for

exotic spectacle. He appealed to the increasingly widespread love of sentiment by showing helpless heroines and truly generous heroes. Collé, for one, attributed the popularity of *Warwick* to the play's false romantic heroism, 'espèce de transport au cerveau'.<sup>325</sup> Although this recipe never brought La Harpe quite the same success again, it became an acceptable background for the stirring cries of the patriot and for the general emotive discussion of religion and politics so in keeping with the time. No play displays better this discussion of such ideas in an essentially almost maudlin way than the melodramatic *Mélanie*. Not only was this play the joy of Paris in 1770 when society learned it by heart,<sup>326</sup> but it continued to drag tears from the eyes of fine ladies for many a year.<sup>327</sup> The future Madame de Staël played the title rôle in Montpellier in 1785.<sup>328</sup> La Harpe's picture of a wise priest found an echo in *Atala*,<sup>329</sup> and Chateaubriand expressed his admiration for the work.<sup>330</sup> In the content of his theatre at least, La Harpe reflected the feelings of the time.

It is in the form of his plays that he remained steadfastly faithful to the increasingly sterile traditions of the classical stage. The thoroughly derivative nature of his works is seen nowhere better than in those whose plots demanded imagination. He quite blatantly turned to his masters as if to a dictionary of the art. He maintained that he could only use the dramatic means employed with success by the great classical writers and limited his task as a playwright to 'les combinaisons nouvelles de ces mêmes moyens'.<sup>331</sup> The critic betrayed the dramatist who should look to nature and not to past tradition for the basis of his art. Moreover, La Harpe condemned the essential immediacy of the theatre, by judging plays above all as poems fit to be read in private.<sup>332</sup> His plays were academic exercises lacking the dramatic interest that was to flourish in the theatre of the nineteenth century, and even as poems they do not match the productions of his classical predecessors.

After his death, four of his plays continued to be performed at the Comédie française for some time. *Warwick* was staged in 1809 and 1818. *Mélanie* was performed frequently up to 1805 and then revived in 1836 and 1837. *Philoctète* and *Coriolan* were permanent fixtures in the repertory up to 1826, and the last play was revived in 1839. No play by La Harpe has ever been performed there since.

## CHAPTER X

### POETRY

Just as in his theatre, La Harpe showed an essentially academic approach to poetry in general. He wished to preserve a tradition of poetry in the grand manner that was now threatened by the melancholy of the imitators of Young.<sup>1</sup> He shunned the 'brutes esquisses', produced by this foreign influence, and turned instinctively to:

Les ouvrages de l'art qui des peuples polis  
Ont fait l'honneur et les délices,  
Monuments achevés, par le goût embellis.<sup>2</sup>

Wanting, as in his prose, to be straightforward and simple,<sup>3</sup> he wished to attain elegance and claimed, in true Voltairian fashion that, while good verse differs from prose in its harmony, it retains the same exactitude and clarity of expression.<sup>4</sup> He pointed out that the mark of true poetry was its masculine vigour<sup>5</sup> and that the true poet was proud to proclaim his debt to the traditional masters of his art.<sup>6</sup> He frowned on contemporary attempts to restore the influence of Ronsard<sup>7</sup> and still looked to Malherbe as the true father of French poetry.<sup>8</sup>

As firm a Voltairian as in other genres, he showed allegiance to his master in his discussion of the earlier quarrels over the rival merits of verse and prose. He refused to call *Télémaque* a poem,<sup>9</sup> since, being written in prose, it lacks the advantage of showing difficulty overcome. Verse possesses inimitable beauties of harmony.<sup>10</sup> Good poetry reaches the heart and becomes what Voltaire calls the music of the soul.<sup>11</sup> A true poet thinks in verse, and the rhythm and the expression of his thoughts are not possible in prose.<sup>12</sup> In addition, rhyme is an essential part of French poetry.<sup>13</sup> La Harpe agreed that French was not a naturally poetic language,<sup>14</sup> and that poetry was an art that needed both to be carefully thought out and learned.<sup>15</sup> It had to be judged dispassionately,<sup>16</sup> and extravagance and other faults should, as elsewhere, be condemned.<sup>17</sup>

He also wished to protect the traditional purpose of poetry. Poetry is not merely a means of communication,<sup>18</sup> and La Harpe frowned on lengthy metaphysical discussion in verse.<sup>19</sup> While admitting that there was a general tendency in the poetry of his day to introduce reasoning,<sup>20</sup> he was convinced that the effect on the ear<sup>21</sup> and feeling<sup>22</sup> are the real interests of the true poet. He always recognized man's natural inclination for the pleasure of lyricism which is at the basis of all poetry.<sup>23</sup>

Yet, despite this respect for lyricism, he himself had a greater propensity for more didactic forms of verse. He had an undoubted gift for satire in the tradition of Boileau. Like Boileau, he could defend his literary creed by producing in verse succinct but telling portraits of his opponents. Here he cast aside the restraint of his journalism and indulged in the irony that he otherwise left to the *Année littéraire*:

Damon, dont le barreau vit briller les aïeux,  
 Né dans l'antique robe au sein du Jansénisme,  
 Dès l'enfance a sucé le lait du pédantisme.  
 Il en a sur le front et la morgue et les plis.  
 Toujours en quatre points divisant son avis,  
 Héritier de l'étude, et du goût de ses pères,  
 Et fait pour figurer dans des cercles austères,  
 Il s'arrache lui-même à ces succès flatteurs.  
 Egaré sur les pas de jeunes séducteurs,  
 Il s'efforce de prendre un nouveau caractère.  
 Le voilà près d'Eglé, rival d'un mousquetaire.  
 D'un élégant robin il affecte les airs,  
 Il est aux petits soins, et même aux petits vers.  
 Le boudoir a chez lui remplacé l'oratoire;  
 L'haute-lisse a fait place au pékin, à la moire;  
 Et lorsqu'il se ruine on se moque de lui.  
 Il apporte partout la fadeur et l'ennui.  
 Il a fait, en un mot, faute de se connaître,  
 D'un pédant fort passable un mauvais petit maître.<sup>24</sup>

He defended the right of satire to deal with objects of only minor importance<sup>25</sup> and still displayed in such verse his love of elegance. As the catch-line is often borrowed, the main merit of a good epigram, for instance, was, he felt, to be found in the concision and elegance of each line.<sup>26</sup> The genre could adopt any tone and even end with a fine thought rather than a witty remark.<sup>27</sup> It does not even need to be mordant, but merely to express an ingenious and amusing idea.<sup>28</sup>

Again in the tradition of Boileau, many of his poems are forms of *art poétique* in verse,<sup>29</sup> and his satires usually have literary quarrels as their theme.<sup>30</sup> Often, especially in his didactic verse, he returns to traditional themes such as a defence of the arts in general.<sup>31</sup> He likes to put forward a picture of the artist's path to glory,<sup>32</sup> showing Voltaire at the summit of human achievement. Another favourite theme in his verse is the defence of genius against envy.<sup>33</sup> While he imposed severe restrictions on the content of his serious verse, claiming that his first duty was not to find strong imagery, but to be 'simple et intéressant',<sup>34</sup> before his conversion at least, he admired the Voltairian union of poetry and philosophy.<sup>35</sup> Many of his early poems read like dissertations in which a question is put forward and then logically analysed. The problem: 'L'homme le plus sensible est-il le plus heureux?'<sup>36</sup> is reviewed in relation to the opposition between the innocent and those hardened by experience, between youth and age, between

sentiment and intellect. Such poems were good preparation for the *concours académiques*, in which, joining his talents for a logical *exposé* to the expression of sentiments liable to please the dominant faction in the Académie française, he excelled with poems such as *Des Talents dans leur rapport avec la société et le bonheur*.<sup>37</sup> For Diderot and others who wanted greater vividness in poetry, this verse was cold and unoriginal, like 'une eau fade qui distille goutte à goutte',<sup>38</sup> but the rather studied elegance brought its author continual success. It was Fréron's joke to talk of the 'prix de poésie fondé pour M. de La Harpe à l'Académie française'.<sup>39</sup>

This talent for the clear expression of ideas allied to a certain wit is seen used to good effect in his only attempt at writing a *conte* in verse, called *Tangu et Félimé*. Reflecting his taste for oriental tales — which the critic even explains at the beginning of his work (I, 1–20) — this poem in four cantos is based on the traditional tale of Fortunatus<sup>40</sup> and J. P. Bignon's *Les Aventures d'Abdalla*.<sup>41</sup> It tells how Tangu, the son of a merchant of Aleppo, woos Félimé, the daughter of the Sultan of Damascus, with the aid of several magic presents, given him by his father. She tricks Tangu and gets hold of the presents. In revenge, he persuades her to eat a magic fig and leaves her to live out her days with a nose as big as a foot, the poem proving:

. . . combien l'on peut faire accroire  
A qui se prend au doux parler d'amour;  
Mais que la fourbe est sujette au retour.  
(I, 25–7)

Written in a genre where, according to La Harpe, anything goes, providing it is gay and amusing,<sup>42</sup> the poem is lighthearted and straightforward. It reads easily. There are witty asides in which the writer confides in the reader while commenting on the tale (I, 130–6, 210–15; II, 214–23). He plays with local colour (I, 139–60), with gallantry (III, 190–5), with mock morality (III, 39) and mock proverbs:

Femme qui pleure a, dit-on, bien des charmes,  
Mais certains nez gâtent beaucoup les larmes.  
(IV, 254–5)

Presented as a mere 'bagatelle',<sup>43</sup> this poem reflects nevertheless its author's additional talent for light verse. While he condemned the banter of poets such as Dorat<sup>44</sup> and found anacreontic verse in general rather facile,<sup>45</sup> he demanded respect for the simplest forms of poetry<sup>46</sup> and, like Boileau, wanted to preserve a certain *marotisme*.<sup>47</sup> Here, as in most of his work, he looked instinctively to the Ancients, especially, like Voltaire, to Horace, whom he admired for his good sense,<sup>48</sup> for his noble and polite familiarity,<sup>49</sup> and for the mixture of gentleness and reproachfulness, of praise and of satire which could find a ready echo in the gallant poetry of the French.<sup>50</sup>

Above all, La Harpe displays in his light verse his usual preoccupation with elegance, and apart from his early *Épître à Zélis* in which the reader senses his

anger at being imprisoned in 1760, he allows very little personal feeling to creep into his verse: 'La poésie légère est la conversation d'un homme de beaucoup d'esprit et de très bonne compagnie, qui parle avec aisance et avec grâce, ne se permet pas tout et ne se répète jamais'.<sup>51</sup> Clinging to the traditional themes of friendship<sup>52</sup> and taste for company,<sup>53</sup> his main aim was to produce subtle praise, which he considered superior to ingenious satire.<sup>54</sup> He wanted a well-turned compliment:

Telle Flore, au soir d'un beau jour,  
Fuit devant le Zéphyre,  
S'arrête, et d'un œil plein d'amour,  
Vient encor lui sourire.  
Mais si de tes regards charmants  
Flore avait le langage,  
Zéphyre des volages amants  
Ne serait plus l'image.<sup>55</sup>

Although this is not always in the best of taste,<sup>56</sup> he preserved the tradition of gallantry à *double entente* that was more noticeable for its reticence than for its daring. The nearest that he comes to mentioning carnal love is in the poem which begins 'Je rêvais: volontiers, c'est de vous que je rêve'.<sup>57</sup> In a dream, he has seen his lady:

. . . comme Adam voyait Eve  
Aussi belle, aussi nue . . .  
(4-5)

but, like J. B. Rousseau in *Les Filets de Vulcain*,<sup>58</sup> the poet dare not express in words what his eyes have seen:

Je veux vous offrir votre image,  
Ce que mon œil a vu, ce qu'a touché ma main . . .  
Mais vous m'ordonnez d'être sage.  
(16-18)

If the poet wanted to avoid 'l'air frivole et le rire apprêté',<sup>59</sup> it is because the author of *Mélanie* had a deep-seated respect for women:

Femmes, c'est près de vous que l'âme est plus sensible,  
Le goût plus épuré, le talent plus flexible.<sup>60</sup>

It was to please women that he wrote many songs and *romances*. He felt that it was in song that his contemporaries had notably improved on the work of their predecessors. They had more elegance and wit.<sup>61</sup> In his own work, the *romance* was to have an elegiac quality. While feeling that the elegy itself could be used, not only as a lament, but to celebrate the return of a friend, birth as well as death, happy as well as unhappy love,<sup>62</sup> he defined the *romance* as the expression of the misfortune and complaints of love.<sup>63</sup> Simplicity is the keynote of all his songs. Most are based on stanzas of eight lines made up of two quatrains

with alternate rhymes, with the occasional enclosed quatrain to vary the rhythm. The quatrain was, he felt, particularly suited to a familiar style,<sup>64</sup> and, as he admitted, alternate rhymes were easier to handle than the classical distich.<sup>65</sup> The only poem where there is any elaboration in form is the *Vers adressés à Mme de Grammont* where the first line of each stanza — made up of the quintet *ababa* — is repeated at the end. It is a very slight modification. In the same spirit of simplicity, he approved of the soft and naive charm of a refrain<sup>66</sup> and used one in *L'Amour timide* and *Le Ruisseau*. He also used a refrain in his *La Prise de Toulon* which was sung to the tune of *La Marseillaise*.

We find the same basic simplicity in the comparatively few odes and similar lyric poems that he wrote in an elevated style. The *Philosophe des Alpes*, for instance, is written in the traditional symmetrical sixains that developed from the medieval *strophes couées*. The perfect balance achieved in this verse form with the shortened rhyming third and sixth lines of six syllables produces a particularly regular and satisfying rhythm.<sup>67</sup> La Harpe is careful to have a masculine rhyme on these shorter lines, as he wants each movement of the rhythm to be rounded off clearly for the 'repos naturel de l'oreille'.<sup>68</sup> In the *Ode à Mgr le Prince de Condé*, the form used is less symmetrical. The rhyme scheme is the same, but here it is the third and fifth lines which have only six syllables. A form of verse favoured by Malherbe, it has been little used since the decline of his influence.<sup>69</sup> *La Gloire* and *Le Chant des Triomphes de la France* are written in octosyllabic dizains with a standard dizain rhyme scheme: *ababccdeed*, with a softening of the couplets by the use of feminine rhymes. It is a form much used by Voltaire. The structure of *Sur la Navigation* is simplicity itself: one alexandrine couplet followed by an enclosed quatrain of which the third line is shortened to six syllables.

As we have pointed out, La Harpe did not write a great deal of elevated lyric poetry, although he certainly lamented the fact that the ode was neglected in France. He attributed this to the national love for a logical progression of ideas.<sup>70</sup> It was a genre which allowed the poet a great deal of freedom, although one had to be wary of introducing too many commonplace utterances on time, death and other eternal questions,<sup>71</sup> and there was always the danger of the poet's introducing himself too obviously into the poem.<sup>72</sup> There was no limit to the choice of subject for an ode, providing that it spurred the imagination and appealed to man's natural feeling for rhythm and harmony<sup>73</sup> with a rapid succession of images, stressing each new feeling strongly and leaving no time for careful transitions and developments.<sup>74</sup> Although what Boileau calls the *beau désordre* of the ode<sup>75</sup> is only apparent and is the result of much hidden art,<sup>76</sup> the poet must remember that he is out to please the ear and the heart<sup>77</sup> and must therefore only allow an impression of fleeting and sudden inspiration, and not of long careful thought. It is for this reason that the ode is particularly suitable for the celebration of a victory, for homage to a great man, or, as in the case of

his *Ode sur la Navigation*, to bear witness to the grandeur of nature and human achievement.<sup>78</sup>

The ideas in La Harpe's odes are again traditional, and the movement of all these poems is very much the same. He maintained that the essence of the art was the careful use of apostrophe or invocation,<sup>79</sup> and in each of his odes the poet takes up his lyre and very consciously calls out to the Muses or Nature for inspiration.

All in all, he may have found the stanza form of the ode somewhat constraining, as he attempted to replace it in maturity with a lyric free verse form which he called a *dithyramb*. This was originally a choral hymn in praise of Bacchus, then extended to the praise of any hero. On the authority of Horace,<sup>80</sup> La Harpe insisted that it was 'un genre de poésie hardi . . . , qui n'était assujetti à aucune mesure de vers déterminée, et pouvait les admettre toutes'.<sup>81</sup> It was particularly suited to subjects of a varied nature.<sup>82</sup> He chose this form for his *Aux Mânes de Voltaire*, since he felt that no subject showed greater diversity than Voltaire and his achievements in many fields of human endeavour.<sup>83</sup> In this way, different rhythms are used to describe different aspects of the latter's work:

Quand il en vient aux ouvrages agréables et aux poésies familières, il emploie la mesure légère et rapide de trois pieds et demi, et reprend ensuite le vers alexandrin et la strophe imposante de dix vers à quatre pieds, quand il s'agit de l'influence générale que Voltaire a eue sur son siècle et de la protection que son génie a étendue sur les opprimés . . .<sup>84</sup>

He was particularly proud of having rediscovered this verse form and what he considered to be its new and varied resources.<sup>85</sup> Under the Revolution, he found that it was a natural form for imposing subjects,<sup>86</sup> and his somewhat bloodthirsty *Hymne à la liberté*, again written in free verse, could, with its praise of the soldiers of France, be called a *dithyramb*.

This search for a satisfactory form for poetry in an elevated style reveals La Harpe's deep-rooted respect for the traditional scale of values in the choice of genres. Ambitious, just as in his theatre, to preserve classical taste for the sublime, he hankered all his life after the most difficult poetry of all, the epic.<sup>87</sup> The very scope of the art, the fact that it is less clear-cut in form than tragedy, makes it all the more difficult.<sup>88</sup> The magic of the theatre is not present to mask any defects, and any fault in the particularly difficult style is immediately obvious.<sup>89</sup> As so few people have succeeded in the epic, its rules have not been fully confirmed by experience. It therefore makes heavy demands on the power of unguided genius.<sup>90</sup> As in tragedy, there is a necessary unity of action in which all must be linked to one central object,<sup>91</sup> but the action can take any amount of time,<sup>92</sup> and epics are through necessity divided into episodes. The art is to make these episodes converge naturally on the central action.<sup>93</sup>

Like Voltaire, he was haunted by the problem of adapting the epic form to the needs of his day:

Quoi! ne peut-on chanter que ces fameux combats,  
 Où le destin d'un jour a détruit des états,  
 Ces triomphes sanglants, jeux cruels de la guerre,  
 Crimes de la fortune et malheurs de la terre?  
 O Muse! offre à mon siècle, à la postérité,  
 Des exploits bienfaisants, chers à l'humanité.<sup>94</sup>

Voltaire had stressed the fact that polite French society hardly encouraged the epic,<sup>95</sup> and La Harpe conceded that the genre had lost its original religious purpose; that only the heroic nature remained.<sup>96</sup> Ideally, the modern epic should be probable in a moral sense, heroic and moving.<sup>97</sup> At the same time, the moral is implied in the story, but the modern epic is not, as some have said,<sup>98</sup> allegorical.<sup>99</sup> Any moral observation must be called for by the situation.<sup>100</sup> The first interest is the grandeur and the moving nature of the story itself.<sup>101</sup> Here, we should be able to admire man at his finest hour, at the height of human endeavour.<sup>102</sup>

To study the art, he turned most readily to the Ancients. Where, like Voltaire, he felt that Virgil had led the art to unsurpassed heights,<sup>103</sup> nevertheless, for all his lack of refinement, Homer remained, in his eyes, a master of the art.<sup>104</sup> Reflecting the state of medieval studies in the eighteenth century, he completely ignored the French Middle Ages and dismissed all attempts in the genre by French writers of the seventeenth century.<sup>105</sup> He complained about the lack of action and truly heroic characters in the work of Camões<sup>106</sup> and maintained that Tasso was the only modern writer to have succeeded to a degree comparable to the Ancients, although his style was far from perfect.<sup>107</sup> In France, only the *Henriade*, and again with severe restrictions — notably, over its plan<sup>108</sup> — was, in any way, worthy of the name of epic.<sup>109</sup> In the *Henriade*, he also found that there was little action and no dialogue.<sup>110</sup> Among modern writers, only Tasso had excelled in dialogue<sup>111</sup> and had been able to give colour to his lesser characters in such a way that they had personality and still offset the hero.<sup>112</sup> He admired the variety of Tasso's descriptions<sup>113</sup> and his art of raising the humblest things to the sublime.<sup>114</sup>

This interest in the genre is reflected in some of La Harpe's earliest poems, his *héroïdes*, which could be called short studies in the epic,<sup>115</sup> although he himself later admitted that in writing these poems, he had above all followed fashion.<sup>116</sup> In itself, the genre was by no means a new one, having been practised by Ovid, but it enjoyed a new popularity through the many translations of Pope's *Letter from Eloisa to Abelard*, whose theme of unhappy love was to ensure its success well into the age of pre-romanticism.<sup>117</sup> What seems to characterize this kind of poem is an intentionally dramatic if imaginary monologue, an apostrophe to an absent partner where language is used to describe passion rather than detail.<sup>118</sup> The situation is, however, usually precise, and the hero is well-known. We see him at a moment of extreme stress, frequently, as in La Harpe, just before

his death. Indeed, La Harpe found the usual emphasis on love rather insipid and not worthy of the epic qualities of the genre. He was probably encouraged in this view by the masculine vigour and republican sentiment that he found in Lucan, whom he began to translate at about the same time.<sup>119</sup> In his own *héroïdes* he wanted to show the great characters of history struggling alone but with dignity with a destiny that would change the fate of mankind.<sup>120</sup>

The only *héroïde* in which he allows the love tradition of Pope to have full play is *Elisabeth de France à Don Carlos*, which he only printed once. There is an echo of *Britannicus* (iv.3) and the picture of a mother who is angry with her son in *Servilie à Brutus après la mort de César*. The other poems all show characters of resolution or, as in the case of Montezuma, of new-found resolution, cast in the Cornelian mould. We see the stoic hero facing up to his victor, Montezuma finding new strength to defy Cortez, Cato defying Caesar, Hannibal defying Flaminius, Socrates accepting his death from the people of Athens. At the same time, the undercurrent of republican sentiment presents us with the preoccupations of eighteenth-century France. There are many attacks on war and intolerance, and tyranny is seen diversely as the Inquisition, the Spaniards, Caesar, Rome, the rulers of Athens, and civil war. The besetting sin of these poems is an inability to vary the tone, as there is little room for background details and graduation of feeling. The heroes rage and rant, linger on their past glory, before calling out for vengeance. The most successful example of rage is to be found in *Annibal à Flaminius*. The heroes have little personality, and the narrative soon gives way to the commonplace utterances of the *philosophe*. In any case, La Harpe abandoned the genre after 1767, as he was forced to admit that it was difficult to have only one character speaking for any length of time without falling into 'les lieux communs et la déclamation'.<sup>121</sup>

He did not return to the epic itself until the end of his life, after his conversion. We have already touched on the difficulties of making the epic fit the needs of the modern world, and one of the main difficulties was that with the loss of the original religious beliefs of the Ancients, it became increasingly difficult to reproduce the supernatural elements that served as a backdrop for every action in the traditional epic. It was in the convincing representation of the marvellous that Voltaire had notably failed.<sup>122</sup>

Before his conversion, La Harpe had accepted the traditional line of thought on this question, by believing that it was impossible to use Christianity in the same way as the ancient religions, since in Christianity:

ses merveilles ne sont pas des fables, mais des mystères. Tout y est rigoureusement métaphysique. Dieu est tout, et le reste rien.<sup>123</sup>

As a Christian, however, he shared Chateaubriand's desire to use Christianity as a source of inspiration<sup>124</sup> and felt that it should be possible to replace the gods of antiquity with the lesser personages of religion such as angels, which, as

had been shown by both Milton and Tasso, were equally capable of pleasing the imagination.<sup>125</sup>

Strengthened by his new-found faith, sometime in 1795<sup>126</sup> he set out to trace the history of the Revolution in epic form in his *Triomphe de la Religion ou le Roi martyr*, of which he had only completed the first six cantos when he died.<sup>127</sup> The work was intended as a poetic expression of the religious and political views of his old age,<sup>128</sup> and as such is a kind of reply to the *Henriade*. A visit by Clermont-Tonnerre to Brunswick closely resembles Henri's visit to Elisabeth. In both, the visitor tells reluctantly of France's ills, but where Henri begins:

Reine, l'excès des maux où la France est livrée  
Est d'autant plus affreux que leur source est sacrée.

(II, 1-2)

Clermont insists:

Prince, de nos malheurs la source empoisonnée,  
C'est des *sages* du jour cette audace effrénée.

(II, 1-2)

As a poem, it suffers from its polemic content and from the choice of its hero. Louis XVI was too well-known for his pusillanimity.

The main interest of the work lies in its language. La Harpe was fully aware of the difficulties of epic style. Apart from the general difficulties inherent in any sustained style, an additional difficulty in the epic is that it is not suited to straightforward description,<sup>129</sup> even if an historical subject such as the *Henriade* does call for carefully drawn portraits.<sup>130</sup> He was all too conscious of the dangers of too much detail.<sup>131</sup> All detail must serve the principal object of the poem,<sup>132</sup> and every image must stir the soul and the imagination of the reader.<sup>133</sup> Voltaire himself attempted to recapture a rich style, which, while keeping to the purity of Racine, was to preserve more of the colour of the heroic grandeur of Corneille.<sup>134</sup> We have already seen how La Harpe followed this example in his theatre, and he saw his *héroïdes*, for instance, as exercises in dramatic style.<sup>135</sup> In these poems, there are many Cornelian lines such as: 'Mon sort est dans mes mains, seul j'en puis ordonner',<sup>136</sup> but the influence of Racine is still very strong:

Pâles et pénétrés d'un désespoir mortel,  
Comme on marche au trépas, nous marchions à l'autel;

Que d'enfants regrettés! que de veuves en pleurs!  
Tes murs retentissaient du cri de tes douleurs.<sup>138</sup>

These last lines reflect even more closely the author's desire to preserve the traditional epic imagery of Virgil:<sup>139</sup>

Assouvir de ton sang les traits de la vengeance;<sup>140</sup>  
Je vois nos dieux frémir, et leur front se voiler  
Sur l'airain amolli, je vois des pleurs couler.<sup>141</sup>

This elevated style was, however, considerably modified by La Harpe's conversion. Where Voltaire in the *Henriade* called on 'auguste Vérité' to rule his verse (I, 7), in the *Triomphe de la Religion* (I, 15–24), in a passage at least influenced by Milton<sup>142</sup> and Tasso,<sup>143</sup> the poet invokes religion and turns his back on the traditional forms of inspiration: 'L'oubli doit engloutir les filles de mémoire' (I, 22). With his new beliefs, he was able to discard the somewhat heavy personification of ideas that clogs up the description of hell in the *Henriade* (VII, 141–58). While he retained the traditional Virgilian picture of hell:

Plonge et descend toujours vers l'abîme embrasé,  
Aussi profondément sous la terre creusé,  
Que s'élève le ciel au-dessus de la terre;<sup>144</sup>  
Un long cri pénétra les cavernes fatales,  
Et fit mugir au loin les voûtes infernales,<sup>145</sup>

he combines this with the more direct biblical tone of Milton. Indeed, his picture of hell owes a great deal to the latter, both with the general picture of Satan surrounded by Moloch and Mammon, and even in details. In both, there is a burning lake,<sup>146</sup> again reflecting Virgil (*Aeneid*, VI, 550), and, in both, Satan prefaces his speech with a triple movement of fury:

Il renia trois fois le nom du tout puissant,  
Trois fois il éleva son sceptre menaçant.<sup>147</sup>

In similar vein, the picture of heaven combines the tradition of the Apocalypse with that of the Elysian fields:

Lorsque l'âme échappée à sa prison fragile  
Vole, esprit immortel, au monde des esprits.<sup>148</sup>

Yet, the echoes of Virgil mark the essential classicism of all of La Harpe's verse. Even if he turns to the Bible in *Le Triomphe de la Religion*, elsewhere in his verse traditional poetic diction abounds, with references to the gods of antiquity, to 'la Renommée aux cent voix', to 'les filles de mémoire', to the 'neuf sœurs' of the Helicon. Many of his images come directly from the writings of the Ancients. In his *Épître au Tasse*, he imitates the *Aeneid* on purpose:

Elle traîne, à travers les cadavres épars,  
Les lambeaux déchirés de sa robe sanglante.<sup>149</sup>

but elsewhere, the borrowing from Virgil is more instinctive than conscious:

Où les mortels les plus fameux  
Sous le marbre et l'airain revivaient à mes yeux.<sup>150</sup>

Virgil's influence is most clearly seen in war-imagery: 'Une moisson de fer hérise nos sillons',<sup>151</sup> and the expression of despair frequently echoes his picture of hell:

Où l'on entend des cris de rage,  
 Et des pleurs et des sifflements,  
 Les soupirs plaintifs des mourants,  
 Le bruit des armes, du ravage,  
 Et l'infortune qui gémit,  
 Et les hurlements de la haine,  
 Et le crime traînant sa chaîne,  
 Et le désespoir qui rugit.<sup>152</sup>

The force of nature too is expressed in terms reminiscent of those of Virgil:

Vos vaisseaux menacés roulent sous la tempête,  
 Et la nuit des enfers se répand sur les flots;  
 Le vent frappe et tourmente, au gré de ses caprices,  
 Vos frères édifices,  
 Entre les feux du ciel et le gouffre des eaux.<sup>153</sup>

Writing in this traditional poetic idiom, La Harpe also echoes the work of other French writers. Sharing many of Boileau's ideas, there are places where he reproduces the general movement of the latter's lines:

Qu'un sublime talent soit un talent utile;<sup>154</sup>  
 Ton génie excité s'agrandira près d'eux.<sup>155</sup>

La Harpe's *Le Chant des Triomphes* is quite obviously modelled on Boileau's *Ode sur la prise de Namur*, with a description of the Rhine which echoes the latter's *Epître IV*, lines 45 and 60.

Attempting to equal the grace of Racine, La Harpe produces lines that are reminiscent, not only of the sibilant sound so characteristic of Racinian verse in general, but, in places, of Racinian lines themselves:

Monstre que l'on caresse au lieu de l'étouffer.<sup>156</sup>  
 Laisse ces vils serpents qui sifflent sur tes pas.<sup>157</sup>

In similar fashion, many lines in La Harpe's poetry remind us of the work of the supreme imitator of Racine, Voltaire:

L'Aréthuse aperçoit de ses grottes profondes  
 Les débris du Croissant qui flottent sur les ondes.<sup>158</sup>

The influence of Voltaire is most strongly felt in descriptions of *turquerie* and fierce action:

Il attire vers lui les vapeurs de la terre,  
 Et le soufre et le nître, éléments du tonnerre,  
 Qui, mêlés à ses feux, et portés par les vents,  
 Se dispersent dans l'air en sillons foudroyants.<sup>159</sup>

Although La Harpe is generally rather gentler in tone than his master, many lines throughout his work owe something to the latter:

Gourmandez ces bourgeois d'une espèce amphibie;<sup>160</sup>  
 Le muphti, les schérifs, (noms peu faits pour les vers);<sup>161</sup>

Rois, contemplez la Grèce, et permettez qu'on pense;<sup>162</sup>  
 Et de l'homme peureux, du grand jour effrayé,  
 La paupière du moins est ouverte à moitié,  
 Vous craignez qu'il n'apprenne à l'ouvrir tout entière.<sup>163</sup>

An interesting influence of Voltaire on La Harpe is seen in the very early *Lettre à M\*\*\**, which — written in prose as well as in verse — reads like a very short *Temple du Goût*.

These borrowings are above all indicative, not only of the increasing sterility of the classical tradition, but of La Harpe's own rather limited powers of invention. In places, he even borrows from himself. For instance, an image which he first used in the 1765 edition of one of his earliest poems, *Montézume à Cortez*: 'L'or tout souillé de sang brille en leurs mains fumantes' (52), is to be found only slightly altered in his very last poem, *Le Triomphe de la Religion*: 'Que l'or souillé de sang brille en ses mains fumantes' (v, 486). A passage in *Sur la Sensibilité* (63–70), first published in 1765, reappears in 1779 in the *Épître à Schowalow* (158–65). Parts of *L'Homme de lettres* (63–79, 200–7) are also found in the *Lettre à M\*\*\**, and the end of the third *Épître à Mme de\*\*\** (16–40) is added to later editions of *Sur le Malheur* (76–102).

This poverty of true inspiration is often all too apparent. His verse abounds in allegory, with imagination, envy, time, unhappiness, &c., personified in set images. In one poem alone, one can read 'affreux sifflements . . . affreux serpents . . . pontife affreux . . . rire affreux'.<sup>164</sup> It is an adjective which appears in many poems, along with other overworked strong terms.<sup>165</sup> As in his theatre, he indulges in a rather creaking antithesis, which is frequently carried through to the rhyme.<sup>166</sup> There is little care taken over rhymes, which are frequently visual rather than audible,<sup>167</sup> tend to be repetitive,<sup>168</sup> and display a general disregard for the supporting consonant.<sup>169</sup>

These faults are made all the more evident by his slavish respect for the traditional techniques of versification. He still believed that the finest verse was written in classical alexandrines. Although it is the most natural line in French, it is, as La Harpe himself admits,<sup>170</sup> the most difficult to handle well. It is in itself the essence of nobility in verse,<sup>171</sup> where the very grandeur of the line carries the reader along and should make him forget the presence of the author.<sup>172</sup> The art of the great writer is to overcome the built-in danger of monotony,<sup>173</sup> but La Harpe placed strict limitations on the variations allowed to combat this. Feeling that enjambment did not go well with rhyme, he thought that it was only to be used when it served a particular well-marked purpose.<sup>174</sup> As a general rule, variations were to come within the rhythm of the line itself, either by changing the rhythm within each hemistich, or by occasionally shifting the caesura by bringing a sentence or clause to an end before the rhyme.<sup>175</sup> In other words, in his mind, the movement of this verse is largely dependent on punctuation. In his noble verse, his elegance is of a rather studied kind.

Understandably, he found that shorter lines were easier to handle. The decasyllabic line, for instance, he found particularly easy as it allowed a free use of enjambment<sup>176</sup> and was suitable for familiarity and wit.<sup>177</sup> He himself used it for this purpose.<sup>178</sup> The line that he used most widely, however, was the octosyllabic, with the free lyricism afforded by its shifting caesura. He liked the freedom given by the relatively minor importance of punctuation in this verse form.<sup>179</sup> He very occasionally used shorter lines, such as the seven-syllable *impair*,<sup>180</sup> or lines of six<sup>181</sup> or five syllables.<sup>182</sup> He disapproved of lines under four syllables long and, in any case, felt that all short lines were best kept for short poems in regular stanzas, as it was exceedingly difficult to give variety to the short rhythm.<sup>183</sup> When it came to mixing verse, the most successful amalgam was, he was sure, between lines of eight and twelve syllables.<sup>184</sup> He only rarely used other combinations such as eight and six<sup>185</sup> and eight and four.<sup>186</sup> All in all, he was not an adventurous versifier and showed throughout his poetry a clear desire to preserve classical form.

However, just as in his theatre, this respect for classical form does not exclude the presence in his verse of certain new tendencies. We have seen his respect for women. Like Voltaire and most of his contemporaries, he condemned the misogynist in Boileau,<sup>187</sup> and it is this feeling for women that seems to have encouraged in La Harpe a definite taste for sentimentality. Wanting 'un beau sentiment rendu dans un beau vers',<sup>188</sup> in places, his poetry shows all the maudlin qualities of a picture by Greuze:

Le père accablé d'ans, pleurant sur sa charrue,  
Perd son dernier soutien, et dans son désespoir  
Maudit encor Paris, qu'il n'a jamais pu voir.<sup>189</sup>

Admittedly, even here La Harpe displayed a marked lack of invention that exasperated, for instance, Diderot.<sup>190</sup> His pictures of sentiment tend to follow set patterns, such as the recurring description of a mother watching her daughter.<sup>191</sup>

In similar vein, the thought of Nature produces two tendencies in his verse. The classicist in La Harpe only looked to nature for 'la leçon et l'image'<sup>192</sup> and, true to his creed that all art is an embellishment of nature, he was convinced that 'la vraie poésie n'est en effet que l'expression de la belle nature'.<sup>193</sup> He was extremely wary of the influence of the German preromantics and of the vogue for descriptive poetry:<sup>194</sup>

C'est peu de crayonner; il faut . . .  
Placer des traits choisis dans des cadres heureux.  
Et n'allez pas surtout, l'un de l'autre copiste,  
Peintre minutieux, scrupuleux botaniste,  
Effeuille chaque rose, ouvrir chaque bouton,  
User votre palette à peindre un papillon.<sup>195</sup>

Not living in the wild, he felt that pastoral poetry did not come naturally to the eighteenth-century Frenchman;<sup>196</sup> that, through necessity rather than desire, the poet still had to turn to classical mythology rather than nature itself.<sup>197</sup> Thus, in his *Vers à la fontaine de Meudon*, for instance, we still find a conscious imitation of Horace.<sup>198</sup> For La Harpe, nature tended to be a pretty garden adjoining a country house:

Où chaque soir enfin, au moment du retour,  
Un concert terminait tous les plaisirs du jour.<sup>199</sup>

Welcoming his friends to his country retreat in *L'Impromptu de campagne*, he thinks quite naturally of Boileau in his garden at Auteuil.<sup>200</sup> We see nature in its summer garb, whence the townsman can return, refreshed for 'le tourbillon de Paris':

La Nature alors est si belle!  
Pour des plaisirs nouveaux elle éveille nos sens.<sup>201</sup>

Even in fiercer mood, nature only serves as a backdrop for reflections on man.<sup>202</sup> Yet the young poet had admired the German preromantics<sup>203</sup> and, even if he did not wish to imitate their 'fausse abondance',<sup>204</sup> he certainly developed — albeit in classical terms — the feeling for nature that was to grow even stronger under the Romantics:

La Nature nous plaît alors qu'elle épouvante.  
Le désert a son charme et l'horreur ses appas.<sup>205</sup>

Under the direct influence of J. J. Rousseau,<sup>206</sup> he liked to express his life-long admiration for the majesty of mountains.<sup>207</sup> Even in reflective mood, he can show a feeling of personal involvement, a melancholy which is most effective, and which is seen in one of his best poems, *Les Regrets*:

Le sombre hiver va disparaître;  
Le printemps sourit à nos vœux;  
Mais le printemps ne semble naître  
Que pour les cœurs qui sont heureux.

Le mien, que la douleur accable,  
Voit tous les objets s'obscurcir,  
Et quand la nature est aimable,  
Je perds le pouvoir d'en jouir.

(1–8)

The same is true in his picture of his own feeling of encroaching age:

Prévenons, s'il se peut, le temps et le besoin;  
La vieillesse prévue en devient moins cruelle.  
Songeons, en la voyant de loin,  
Que nous allons au-devant d'elle;  
Que le temps jusqu'à nous l'apporte sur son aile,  
Rien ne peut nous y dérober:  
L'été sur son déclin rembrunit le feuillage;  
Il séchera bientôt; bientôt il va tomber.

De son premier éclat se retraçant l'image,  
 Vainement le désir revole aux jours passés,  
     Reproduit des cieux éclipsés,  
 Erre encore sur les fleurs, et revient sous l'ombrage.  
 Ces fantômes légers trompent quelques instants;  
 La vérité détruit ce que l'erreur nous donne,  
 L'imagination rappelle le printemps:  
 Mais la raison nous crie: 'Amasse pour l'Automne,  
 Sur la course du temps mesure tous tes pas,  
     L'Hiver ne te surprendra pas'.<sup>208</sup>

The theme is traditional, but the didacticism is fresh as the tone is direct and personal. It is here that La Harpe is at his best.<sup>209</sup> When he is simple and unambitious in ideas and form, he can produce, if not great poetry, at least verse of a good meditative quality.

It is in this form of art, perhaps more clearly than in any other, that we see particularly well his limitations as an artist. His qualities as a critic helped him to compose telling attacks in verse as well as in prose. His elegance as a versifier, allied to a gentle sentiment which offsets the harshness of the critic, is put to good effect in light verse written for fêtes at country-houses, or for dinner in town. But, when he tries to rehandle well-worked ideas on a grandiose scale, he is more than a little tedious.

## CHAPTER XI

# TRANSLATION

As a good humanist, longing for the erudition of an earlier age, La Harpe would have liked all educated men to appreciate the Ancients in the original text.<sup>1</sup> In the transposition from Greek or Latin into French, he felt that something was inevitably lost, since French was inferior to both classical tongues. Its importance in Europe in the eighteenth century was due, not to its intrinsic qualities as a language, but to the mastery of its writers of genius who, especially in the theatre, had hidden the poverty of language beneath the richness of their talent.<sup>2</sup> Its supreme quality, clarity, is a virtue born of necessity.<sup>3</sup> Its relative weakness is particularly evident in poetry,<sup>4</sup> as French lacks the natural harmony of the ancient tongues,<sup>5</sup> having syllables of only vague quantity and value.<sup>6</sup> He longed nostalgically for the concision and synthesis of the Romans and Greeks.<sup>7</sup> He viewed with distaste in his own language the personal pronouns, the use of auxiliary verbs and composite conjugation, and the lack of a true passive voice.<sup>8</sup> He particularly disliked the French need for monosyllabic particles.<sup>9</sup> These basic differences between French and the ancient languages made satisfactory translation extremely difficult. The loss of accident made inversion unnatural in French,<sup>10</sup> and it was impossible to imitate the classical period with its main verb coming at the end.<sup>11</sup>

Yet, he was fully aware of the usefulness of translations, even if it was almost apologetically that he conceded, for instance, the need to insert translations from the Ancients into the *Lycée*.<sup>12</sup> While it could not match the original a good translation was able to reveal some of the beauties of the much-maligned Ancients,<sup>13</sup> and, in the face of wide-spread frivolity and a perverse love of jargon, La Harpe saw that right-minded people turned to the Ancients for 'une nourriture plus solide'.<sup>14</sup> It was in this light that he was to go so far as to proclaim that translations were among the best books of his time.<sup>15</sup> Delille, for instance, as the translator of Virgil, was 'fait pour consoler les amateurs éclairés de ce déluge de vers barbares qui tombent continuellement dans le gouffre de l'oubli'.<sup>16</sup> First and foremost, therefore, he looked to translation as a bulwark against bad taste.

In his views on the techniques of translation, he drew a sharp distinction between verse and prose. Much of his own translation in prose was done on a straightforward commercial basis, and he did not express any deeply felt opinion on the subject other than demanding a fairly rigorous respect for the

original text.<sup>17</sup> He regarded translation in verse, however, as complementary to the creation of poetry. While he admitted that occasionally it was necessary to use prose to translate poetry,<sup>18</sup> as he does once or twice to explain a passage in the *Lycée*,<sup>19</sup> in general, he maintained that a poet should be translated into verse, as it is not enough merely to follow his plan and his ideas, but one must render 'son génie même, et paraître animé du même feu'.<sup>20</sup> Delille, for instance, had led the way by making up for the loss of natural harmony with subtle changes in the rhythm and construction of his verse.<sup>21</sup>

Convinced, as in other forms of literature, that the translator must make his work pleasing and readable,<sup>22</sup> he felt that a good translation was in some ways a second creation.<sup>23</sup> He admired those whose own greatness allowed them to overcome the 'lutte de style et [la] rivalité de génie' that translation implied.<sup>24</sup> He called for only relative fidelity as far as verse was concerned.<sup>25</sup> The only general rule that he observed for all translation, in prose as well as in verse, was the necessity to render the original author's meaning and the general characteristics of his style.<sup>26</sup> He considered it permissible to replace an image which did not suit the spirit of French.<sup>27</sup> In the same way, it was not always possible to keep familiar expressions not normally accepted in the modern tongue.<sup>28</sup> The translator must have the freedom to shorten in his translation what might be too long for the modern reader, and to lengthen what might appear in the same way too short.<sup>29</sup> He can — while preserving the original analogy between them — rearrange ideas and place them in different parts of the sentence, if the sentence then flows more easily and is thus more pleasing to the ear.<sup>30</sup> Translation is, after all, an art:

Tout homme qui traduit en vers doit, autant qu'il le peut, donner à son style toutes les qualités qu'il pourrait avoir, s'il écrivait d'après lui, le même air de liberté, la même élégance dans les expressions, la même grâce dans les tournures . . . il doit enfin . . . tirer de sa langue le même parti qu'en aurait tiré l'auteur qu'il traduit.<sup>31</sup>

The outstanding example of La Harpe's putting this attitude into practice is *Philoctète*. Discussing this work as a play, we have already examined the discrepancies between his version and the original text as regards plot and dramatic intent. In so far as language is concerned, he claimed to have followed the Greek text as closely as he could: 'autant que me l'a permis la différence des langues et le caractère de notre versification, j'ai suivi non seulement les idées et le dialogue, mais même les tournures et les constructions du texte grec.'<sup>32</sup> Yet, on the general question of translating Greek tragedy, he had been forced to admit that the Ancients' simplicity was almost diametrically opposed to 'la noblesse quelquefois un peu trop superbe' of French dramatic verse.<sup>33</sup>

When, for instance, he translated passages from Sophocles' *Ajax*, for the first line of Ajax's last speech (815):

Ὁ μὲν σφαγέυς ἔστηκεν

(here is the murderer standing),<sup>34</sup> he had first written :

Oui, le fer est tout prêt . . . ,<sup>35</sup>

and then substituted :

Oui, le glaive est tout prêt. . . .<sup>36</sup>

At the end of the speech, for the double movement of the Greek (864–5):

τοῦθ' ὑμῖν Αἴας τοῦπος ὕστατον θροεῖ,  
τὰ δ' ἄλλ' ἐν Αἰδοῦ τοῖς κάτω μυθήσομαι.

(this is the last thing that Ajax tells you, the rest I will say to those from below (i.e. the dead)), he substituted:

Recevez mes adieux; il est temps que je meure,  
Que je termine enfin ma plainte et mes revers:  
Mon ombre désormais va gémir aux enfers.<sup>37</sup>

He even modifies the meaning further by later changing the last line to:

Mon ombre va chercher du repos aux enfers.<sup>38</sup>

His supreme interest is the effect of his verse in French.

In the same way, throughout *Philoctète*, the original spirit of the Greek lines is consistently sacrificed to the elegant traditions of the French theatre. This is seen from the very beginning. For the straightforward description of Philoctetes' cries interrupting the religious ceremonies of the Greeks (Sophocles, 8–11), La Harpe introduced his favourite rhythmic device, antithesis:

Il troublait de ses cris la paix des sacrifices,  
De son aspect impur blessait leur sainteté,  
Et souillait tout le camp de sa calamité.

(i.1)

He also — and this is unfortunate — generally hardened the tone of the language, so that where the Greek Philoctetes shows throughout the play a paternal attitude to Pyrrhus, the son of a friend, in La Harpe's work he rages in precisely the same way against Pyrrhus as against his arch-enemy, Ulysses. Where, for instance, in Sophocles (468–72), Philoctetes implores Pyrrhus to take him with him by appealing to him above all in the name of his mother and father, pride of place is now given to the gods:

Ah! par les immortels de qui tu tiens le jour,  
Par tout ce qui jamais fut cher à ton amour,  
Par les mânes d'Achille, et l'ombre de ta mère,  
Mon fils, je t'en conjure, écoute ma prière,  
Ne me laisse pas seul en proie au désespoir.

(i.4)

In similar fashion, the French playwright (ii.2, 3) completely destroys the contrast in the Greek text (895–1080) between Philoctetes' pleading with Pyrrhus for the return of his arms and his outright hatred and contempt for

Ulysses. According to Gail,<sup>39</sup> Talma managed to win great applause with the line: 'Mes armes, c'en est trop, mes armes' (ii.3), but, aware of the illogicality of the unbroken harsh tone, showed the difference for Philoctetes between Pyrrhus and Ulysses by varying the expression in his eyes.

In addition, in several places La Harpe owes more to Racine than Sophocles. This influence is seen to alter further the meaning of the text in the famous scene when Philoctetes' divinely-inspired affliction reaches a crisis and ends with his falling unconscious. In the Greek text, the illness is described thus:

κοῦ δυνήσομαι κακὸν  
κρύφαι παρ' ὑμῖν, ἄττατατ'· διέρχεται, διέρχεται.

(and I shall not be able to keep my ill secret from you. It goes through, it goes through (742-4)),

στάζει γὰρ αὖ μοι φοίνιον τόδ' ἐκ βυθοῦ κηκῆιον αἷμα.

(Indeed, in me again drips the red blood, gushing forth from the depth (783-4)). Under the influence of *Phèdre* (1637-9), La Harpe transforms this illness into a poison:

Le poison se répand dans mes brûlantes veines! . . .  
L'indomptable venin, passant jusqu'à mon cœur. (i.4)

He also echoes *Phèdre* (844) in his version of:

Κάγω δακρύσας εὐθὺς ἐξάνισταμαι ὀργῇ βαρεία, καὶ καταλήσας (. . .).

(And I rise at one, weeping with great anger and suffering pain (367-8)). This becomes:

Et l'œil humide encor de mes pleurs répandus  
Je me présente aux chefs . . .  
(i.4)

The memory of *Phèdre* (1327-8) is no less clear in his rendering of:

ὅς γε σὰν λιπὼν ἱερὰν  
λιδάδ' ἐχθροῖς ἔδαν Δαναοῖς  
ἄρωγός; ἔτ' οὐδὲν εἶμι.

(I who having left the sacred stream have stood fast helping the hated Greeks; yet I am nothing (i.e. am dying)). La Harpe writes:

Pour eux seuls j'ai tout fait, pour eux seuls tout quitté;  
Ma mort en est le prix . . . je l'ai bien mérité.  
(ii.4)

In reality, despite his attempts to show his fidelity to Sophocles, again and again he reveals that he is basically more interested in producing a work similar in nature to his own original productions in the same genre.

The same tendency is to be found in all his translations in verse. They are best understood in relation to, and in the light of, his own creations in related genres.

Just as he turned to the theatre of the ancient Greeks to enrich his own, so he turned to classical writers in other genres ostensibly to enrich his own poetic style; to Lucretius for the didactic, to Martial for the satirical, to Tibullus for a meditative style, and, above all, for the general mastery of light verse, to Horace. Yet, in every case the result owes as much to the general characteristics of La Harpe's poetry as to the work of the original writer. His translation of Tibullus, for instance, does not pretend to be more than an imitation.<sup>40</sup> As for Horace, even Voltaire had said that it was practically impossible to give a satisfactory rendering of his verse in French.<sup>41</sup> La Harpe avoids much of the difficulty by making no attempt to imitate even in stanza form the untransferable Latin lyric metres. In this way, the fourth Asclepiad in 'Quis multa gracilis' (*Carmina*, I, v) is turned into straightforward mixed verse. In 'Ulla si juris tibi peierati' (*Carmina*, II, viii) — which, incidentally, he addresses to Chloé, as he finds the original name, Barine, unpleasant in French<sup>42</sup> — the original Sapphic stanza is replaced by quatrains in seven-syllable lines. Combining the two odes 'Parcus deorum cultor et infrequens' and 'O diva gratum quæ regis Antium' (*Carmina*, I, xxxiv, xxxv), written in Alcaic stanzas, La Harpe says that he has allowed a mixing of rhythms 'pour rendre mieux la variété des tons'.<sup>43</sup> The result is similar in form to his dithyramb, *Aux Mânes de Voltaire*.

The same analogy exists between his two fairly long translations from Lucan and Tasso and his other works in epic vein. One of the passages from Lucan that he published in 1765, *Brutus à Caton* (*Pharsalia*, ii.242–84) reads almost like one of his *héroides*. If we were to look only at his critical attitude to Lucan, his reasons for translating him would not appear altogether clear. Whereas Marmontel — the greatest defender of Lucan in the eighteenth century — had praised him for writing an epic without 'le secours des enfers et des cieux'<sup>44</sup> and was himself applauded for his translation of the Latin writer,<sup>45</sup> La Harpe consistently attacked him both as an artist and as a man.

The artist, he felt, had found the secret of making what had been an interesting story in prose a boring one in verse.<sup>46</sup> As if in reply to Marmontel,<sup>47</sup> he argued that Lucan did not know how to tell a story since in his shapeless history of the whole of the civil war,<sup>48</sup> he lingered in a most tiresome way over minor details,<sup>49</sup> in which the interest is always destroyed by the length and turgidity of his descriptions.<sup>50</sup> The result is that he tends to exaggerate and is cold and monotonous.<sup>51</sup> Condemning the man, La Harpe said that he was incapable of appreciating true grandeur,<sup>52</sup> and could not forgive him for his unjust picture of Caesar as a ferocious bloodthirsty tyrant.<sup>53</sup> But no *philosophe* could afford to dismiss Lucan out of hand. Like Voltaire, La Harpe admitted that Lucan's work had moments of true grandeur.<sup>54</sup> Above all, its theme was worthy of the epic,<sup>55</sup> for, if the author was momentarily led astray by the hopeful beginnings of the reign of Nero, his poem nevertheless constitutes an unending cry against tyranny.<sup>56</sup> It is this feeling for freedom that leads him in

places to sublime eloquence where we find 'ces beautés d'un caractère mâle et neuf qui l'ont rendu digne des regards de la postérité'.<sup>57</sup>

With encouragement from Voltaire,<sup>58</sup> La Harpe therefore limited his translation to chosen passages<sup>59</sup> and only preserved, in general, the moments of extreme action and those speeches where the Latin writer showed his qualities as an orator if not as a poet.<sup>60</sup> He dealt with these passages 'dans une imitation très libre, telle que doit être celle d'un écrivain qui n'est pas un modèle'.<sup>61</sup> He seems generally to be intent on shortening the text as far as is possible. This is most clearly seen by comparing the passages that originally appeared in 1765 with the equivalent text of the final version, published in 1778 and 1806. Either he cuts out a passage as in the case of an image of a tiger in Caesar's speech to his soldiers (*Pharsalia*, I, 327–9), preserved in 1765 but taken out in 1778, or else he further compresses in an even freer précis of the text a passage that was already an abbreviation.<sup>62</sup> He even alters the movement of the poem as when he places after Caesar's speech (I, 337–44) the soldier's applause that originally greeted a speech by Laelius (*Pharsalia*, I, 387–91). In Lucan, Caesar's speech meets with a lukewarm reception (*Pharsalia*, I, 352–6).

For an idea of the little respect shown for the original text, it is again expedient to compare variants. For instance, to translate:

*Primo gentes oriente coactæ  
innumeræque urbes, quantas in proelia numquam  
excivere manus*

(from the end of the orient collected peoples and countless towns have summoned forces such as never seen before in battle (VII, 360–2)), La Harpe first wrote:

Appelés dans mon camp des bornes de l'Asie,  
Des forêts du Caucase et des champs de Scythie,  
Cent peuples du combat attendent le hasard,<sup>63</sup>

and then:

Appelés dans mon camp des bornes de l'Asie,  
Des sommets du Taurus, des champs de la Mésie,  
Cent peuples de ce jour partagent le hasard.

(VII, 281–3)

He is composing in French. In this way, he is not above elaborating on the text, introducing imagery of his own, as for instance, replacing:

*horrida quod dumis multosque inarata per annos  
Hesperia est desuntque manus poscentibus arvis*

(Hesperia (i.e. Italy) is bristling with thorn-bushes, fallow for many years, and hands are missing from the fields that call for them (I, 28–9)) by:

Si Cérès de nos champs pleurant le déshonneur,  
Y redemande en vain la main du laboureur.

(i.35–6)

In fact, the main interest of this work is to see how La Harpe replaces the style of Lucan with the poetic diction of the eighteenth century. He consciously suppresses the quirks of the latter's style such as his habit of referring to the sun as Titan<sup>64</sup> and to Pompey by his nickname of Magnus.<sup>65</sup> Nor does he adopt Lucan's trick of qualifying a proper noun with an adjective which suggests its etymological meaning as in *puniceus Rubicon* (reddish Rubicon (i, 214)), which in La Harpe becomes merely 'le Rubicon naissant' (i, 205). If he keeps the description of the sail of Theseus' boat, *mentitis . . . velis* (ii, 612), 'la voile mensongère' (ii, 553), he feels that he has to explain it in a footnote.<sup>66</sup>

Where Lucan's style is admittedly often too rich, that of the translator frequently appears merely flat, as when *vicerat astra jubar* (the light of day had vanquished the stars (vii, 45)) becomes 'le jour brillait enfin' (vii, 23). In general, he is less precise than Lucan as when *limosa . . . ulva* (the muddy sedge (ii, 70)) is rendered by 'la fange' (ii, 64). Apart from the normal ennoblement of language in which a term such as *viscera* (i, 3, vii, 500) is constantly translated by 'flancs déchirés' (i, 4, vii, 388), the general impression is one of adulteration, as when La Harpe (ii, 89–176) tones down the description of the purges of Sulla and Marius (*Pharsalia*, ii, 134–233). In one place (ii, 580), feeling that he could do no better,<sup>67</sup> he retained a line from the well-known translation of the *Pharsalia* by Brébeuf,<sup>68</sup> whom, like Voltaire, he judged with mixed feelings.<sup>69</sup>

Elsewhere, the language is very much La Harpe's own. An idea of the jargon with which he replaces Lucan's style can be seen in the description of Caesar's troops occupying a town:

*Constitit ut capto jussus deponere miles  
signa foro, stridor lituum clangorque tubarum  
non pia concinuit cum rauco classica cornu*

(when the soldier took up position in the forum and received the order to lay down the standards, the grating of the bugles and the clanging of the war-trumpets sounded together with the strident horn in an impious fanfare (i, 236–8)):

'Le soldat dans la place arborant l'aigle altièrè  
Fait retentir soudain la trompette guerrière'.

(i.225–6)

If he gains in simplicity, in general he weakens the text. To see this one only has to compare Lucan's and La Harpe's description of the death of Julia:

*Nam pignora juncti  
sanguinis et diro ferales omine tædas  
abstulit ad manes Parcarum Julia sæva  
intercepta manu*

(Julia, cut off by the cruel hand of the Fates, has borne away to the lower world the pledges of the union of their blood and the funeral torches with their dread omen (i.111–14)):

Chez les dieux des enfers, Julie infortunée  
 Emporta les flambeaux de son triste hyménée.  
 (I, 69–70)

The purist in La Harpe led him to destroy one of the finest moments in Lucan — also mutilated by Brébeuf<sup>70</sup> —, the description of a mother clutching a dead child:

*membra premit fugiente rigentia vita  
 voltusque exanimis oculosque in morte minaces*

(she hugs the limbs stiff from the fleeing of life, the inanimate face, the eyes threatening in death (II, 25–6)). The vivid image evoked by *minaces* is replaced by the insipid: ‘Un fils que par degrés vient glacer le trépas’ (II, 24).

He did not allow himself quite so much freedom when he came to translate Tasso. As an expression of his lifelong admiration for the latter, he felt that Tasso had to be treated with respect<sup>71</sup> and not freely adapted like Lucan.<sup>72</sup> Whereas, La Harpe insisted, most of his compatriots had imitated, abbreviated or mutilated the text in their versions of the Italian poet, he claimed to have been ‘tout simplement . . . traducteur, du moins comme on peut l’être en poésie’.<sup>73</sup>

However, he was no scholar of Italian,<sup>74</sup> and his translation is characterized by an endless struggle with *l’esprit italien*, even if he only admitted to having slightly altered the text by cutting out the occasional *conchetti*.<sup>75</sup> Certainly, in the eight cantos that he completed by the time of his death, he follows the movement of the original poem faithfully. He preserves all the controversial episodes in Tasso such as that of Olinda and Sophronia in canto II, which he calls ‘hors de propos un très beau propos’,<sup>76</sup> and, in the same way, Armida’s seduction of the Christian warriors in canto IV which is a mere ‘tableau de coquetterie, ennobli par la poésie’.<sup>77</sup> In places, he silenced his severity as a critic and hesitated to remove images that he nevertheless felt to be unsuitable for the modern epic.<sup>78</sup> It is in this context that he kept the comparison:

*Così coperti van ne’giochi mori  
 Dalle palle lanciate i fuggitori*  
 (III, st. xxxii)

Tel le Maure en ses jeux, par l’habitude,  
 Sait parer en fuyant la balle que le suit.  
 (III, 253–4)

In similar fashion, he preserves Tasso’s word *Avventurieri* (I, st. lii), ‘aventuriers’ (I, 413) to describe the Christian volunteers, despite the derogatory sense in modern French. He felt that it was more important to retain local colour.<sup>79</sup> He insisted that he had not changed more than a hundred lines and claimed to have explained each change in the accompanying notes ‘par respect pour un aussi beau génie que le Tasse’.<sup>80</sup>

At the same time, just as his translation of Lucan reflects his interest in the *héroïde*, so his translation of Tasso runs parallel to his other attempts to write a

Christian epic. Where he felt that he had solved the problem of the supernatural in the epic by introducing the lesser personages of religion, he pointed out that it was the duty of the Christian writer to show the 'esprits malfaisants' or demons in hideous form and, for the same reason, angels or 'esprits purs' endowed with beauty.<sup>81</sup> He accused Tasso of using a rather unfortunate amalgam of classical and biblical imagery, especially in the picture of the infernal council in his canto iv. La Harpe therefore suppressed in his translation all the references to the figures of the classical underworld such as Pluto and Cerberus, feeling that they were misplaced in the description of beings who had been cast out of heaven.<sup>82</sup> In this line of thought, he objected to Tasso's use of the term *Orrida maestà* (iv, st. vii) to describe the ruler of hell. The picture thus conjured up was still that of the respectable lord of the underworld and not of the archangel of damnation.<sup>83</sup> In place of Tasso's description, he substituted a line based on Milton (*Paradise Lost*, I, 600-1): 'Ce front encore empreint des traits qui l'ont frappé' (iv, 49). Admittedly, he admired Tasso's 'figures monstrueuses' and felt that the translator's only difficulty was to give new life to well-worked images.<sup>84</sup> On poetic as well as religious grounds, it was quite permissible to place mythological characters such as Gorgons and Cyclops in the Christian's vision of hell, but one had to explain their purpose. It is for this reason that he introduced into his translation the following three lines, again influenced by Milton (*Paradise Lost*, I, 477):

Là sont réalisés les fantômes bizarres  
Que l'erreur inventa dans des siècles barbares:  
Tous, enfants du mensonge, en peuplent le séjour.  
(iv, 35-7)

These changes dictated by La Harpe's views on the Christian epic are, however, of lesser importance than the many modifications that he made of Tasso's text in order to avoid 'ce malheureux esprit des sonnets italiens, insupportable dans le style sérieux, et ridicule dans l'épopée'.<sup>85</sup> In the description of Tancredi's first seeing Clorinda, he suppresses the lines:

*Oh meraviglia! Amor ch'appena è nato,  
Già grande vola, e'già trionfa armato*  
(I, st. xlvii)

('O merveille!, L'amour à peine né, vole déjà grand, et triomphe d'un guerrier.')

<sup>86</sup> He objects to Tasso's tendency to bring love into everything,<sup>87</sup> and this is particularly out of place in the description of Sophronia, whose name means wisdom. The line *Di natura, d'Amor, de' cieli amici* (II, st. xviii) becomes therefore: 'L'innocence la pare, et le ciel l'embellit' (II, 145). He cuts out puns:

*Vince fortezza, anzi s'accorda, e face  
Se vergognosa, e la vergogna audace*  
(II, st. xvii)

(‘Le courage l’emporte, ou plutôt il s’accorde avec la pudeur; il se fait pudique, et la pudeur se fait courageuse.’)<sup>88</sup> This is rendered by: ‘La vertu la rassure et la rend intrépide’ (II, 136). He accuses Tasso of not choosing his imagery with sufficient care. While admiring<sup>89</sup> the latter’s comparison of the devil to a *tauro ferito* or wounded bull (IV, st. i), he cuts out the image that preceded it:

*Ambo lel abbra per furor si morse*

(‘De fureur il se mordit les lèvres’).<sup>90</sup>

Thus, if the pruning is less drastic than for Lucan, it nevertheless results once more in an imposed elegance that reflects far more La Harpe’s own poetic aspirations than those of the original writer. He attempts less to give a true rendering of Tasso’s text than to preserve the general sense in ‘des équivalents en expression et en harmonie’.<sup>91</sup> One must not therefore look to this translation or to any of La Harpe’s translations in verse for great accuracy. As he himself admitted, such translations were above all a means of keeping his hand in at writing verse, while resting from the more arduous ‘travail de création’.<sup>92</sup> It is as lesser creations by La Harpe and as expressions of his own interests that they are to be judged.

The reasons for his undertaking translations in prose are more varied, even if these works all attempt to answer the eighteenth-century need for them.<sup>93</sup> Firstly, there are those productions which he carried out for financial gain such as his re-working into ‘prose poétique’ of Vaquet d’Hermilly’s version of Camões’ *Os Lusíadas* — which we will not discuss here<sup>94</sup> — and his translation of Suetonius. Then, there is the work of the Christian — his translation of the psalms. Lastly, there are the many translations, usually fragmentary in nature and used to illustrate criticism, which he inserted in journals and in the *Lycée*. In these last works, he can again be seen to be more interested in elegance than accuracy, as is proved, for instance, by a passage from Lucan which he translated into prose<sup>95</sup> in order to show what should be cut out or preserved when translating in verse.<sup>96</sup> It especially begs examination, as he introduces it as ‘un morceau fidèlement rendu’, a ‘traduction exacte’.<sup>97</sup>

One can, in fact, even quibble with his translation of the very first sentence:

*Soluerat armorum fessas nox languida curas,  
parva quies miseris, in quorum pectora somno  
dat vires fortuna minor; iam castra silebant,  
tertia iam vigiles commoverat hora secundos;  
Cæsar sollicito per vasta silentia gressu  
vix famulis audenda parat, cinctisque relictis  
sola placet Fortuna comes.*

(*Pharsalia*, v, 504–10)

La nuit avait suspendu les alarmes de la guerre et amené les instants du repos pour ces malheureux soldats, qui du moins dans leur humble fortune ont un sommeil profond. Tout le camp était tranquille, et la sentinelle venait d’être relevée à la troisième veille. César s’avance d’un pas inquiet,

dans le vaste silence de la nuit: plein de ses projets téméraires, dignes à peine du dernier de ses soldats, il marche sans suite: sa fortune seule est avec lui.<sup>98</sup>

Without going into too much detail, one could ask why he has not translated *languida* and *iam . . . iam*; *fessas . . . curas* (tired cares) is hardly rendered by 'les alarmes'. One wonders why, in translating *per vasta silentia*, he adds 'de la nuit'. This lack of a strict observance of the text is even more evident when we come to a descriptive passage, as when the boatman gives his reasons for not wishing to embark:

*Multa quidem prohibent nocturno credere ponto;  
nam sol non rutilas deduxit in aequora nubes  
concordesque tulit radios: noton altera Phæbi,  
altera pars borean diducta luce vocabat.  
Orbe quoque exhaustus medio languensque recessit  
spectantis oculos infirmo lumine passus;  
lunaque non gracili surrexit lucida cornu  
aut orbis medii puros exesa recessus,  
nec duxit recto tenuata cacumina cornu  
ventorumque nota rubuit . . .*

(*Pharsalia*, v, 540–9)

(In fact, many things stop me trusting the night sea, for the sun did not unfurl red clouds on the surface of the sea, nor bring forth concordant rays: with its divided light part of Phœbus summoned the south wind, part the wind of the north. Also, it grew faint in the middle of its course, worn out and languishing, leaving eyes able to face its weak light; and the moon did not rise bright with a slender crescent, or rather the disc had grown faint with its clear lines eaten away, nor did it draw forth its thinned extremities in a straight crescent, it has blushed from the reproach of the winds . . .). In La Harpe, even the imagery is severely modified:

Beaucoup de raisons m'empêcheraient de me confier cette nuit à la mer. Le soleil en se couchant était environné de nuages, ses rayons partagés semblaient appeler d'un côté le vent du midi, et de l'autre le vent du nord, et même au milieu de sa course, sa lumière était faible et pouvait être regardé d'un œil fixe. La lune n'a point jeté une clarté brillante; son croissant n'était point net et serein; sa rougeur présageait un vent violent . . .<sup>99</sup>

In those passages which he inserted in the *Lycée*, he can be seen to have the additional purpose of producing good well-flowing French suitable for recitation in his lectures. This is proved by his reworking of an earlier translation of a passage from Velleius Paterculus:

*Mithridates, Ponticus rex, vir neque silendus neque dicendus sine cura, bello acerrimus, virtute eximius aliquando fortuna, semper animo maximus, consiliis dux, miles manu, odio in Romanos Hannibal. (Res Gestae Divi Augusti, II, xviii).*

(Mithridates, king of Pontus, a man about whom one can neither say nothing nor speak without anxiety; most keen on war, exceptional in courage, sometimes in fortune, always the greatest in spirit, a leader in decisions, a soldier in the fray, in hatred to the Romans a Hannibal). In 1770, La Harpe had written:

Mithridate, roi de Pont, qu'il ne faut point passer sous silence, et dont il est difficile de bien parler, infatigable dans la guerre, terrible par sa politique autant que par son courage, toujours grand par le génie, quelquefois par la fortune, soldat et capitaine, qui haïssait les Romains au point d'être pour eux un autre Annibal.<sup>100</sup>

In the *Lycée*, this becomes:

Mithridate, qu'il n'est pas permis de passer sous silence, mais dont il est difficile de parler dignement, infatigable dans la guerre, terrible par sa politique autant que par son courage, toujours grand par le génie, quelquefois par la fortune, soldat à la fois et capitaine, et pour les Romains un autre Annibal.<sup>101</sup>

The second version is undeniably more eloquent, but it is, at the same time, further from the original text.

This interest in the elegance of the French at the expense of accuracy is even more noticeable when he translates from Greek. The rhythms of his language give a false idea of the original writers, especially in the case of Demosthenes. When La Harpe published passages from *De Corona* in January 1777,<sup>102</sup> they were analysed pitilessly in the *Année littéraire*.<sup>103</sup> By translating the beginning of paragraph three by 'Eschine . . . a dans cette accusation de grands avantages, oui, Athéniens, de bien grands', he mistranslated, as his critic pointed out, the word πολλὰ, by making it mean 'great' instead of 'many', and at the same time he missed out δύο δ' — the fact that Aeschines had two advantages over Demosthenes. Allowing these to be errors due to haste, it is interesting to note that the text remains unaltered in the 1778 edition of his collected works,<sup>104</sup> whereas in the *Lycée* he finally changed it to 'Eschine a déjà dans cette cause, assez d'avantage sur moi; oui, Athéniens, et deux surtout bien grands'.<sup>105</sup> Apart from further criticism of detail, the *Année littéraire* also points out with a certain justification that La Harpe is altogether too liberal in the substitution of his own figures of speech for the movement of Demosthenes' sentences. In paragraph two hundred and eight of *De Corona*, for instance, he introduces<sup>106</sup> repetition, a device which his critic calls a 'jeu puérole, indigne de Démosthène'.<sup>107</sup>

The same hostility greeted the publication of his translation of Suetonius. Even Voltaire wrote on the title-page of his copy of the work 'mauvaise traduction'.<sup>108</sup> It was generally condemned,<sup>109</sup> and the translator's critics had a field day pointing out mistakes.<sup>110</sup> Admittedly, they exist, and the work bears unmistakable signs of haste. In his *errata*,<sup>111</sup> La Harpe conceded that in translating *Ob hanc eamdem valitudinem . . . palliolatus novo more praesedit* (Claudius,

2), he had written ‘en manteau grec’<sup>112</sup> for ‘la tête couverte’ through reading *palliatu*s for *palliolatu*s. His critics seized on many other similar mistakes which he himself did not mention. For example, in translating *Campum Stellatam majoribus consecratum . . .* (Cæsar, 20), he read *stellatum* for *Stellatam* and wrote ‘la plaine étoilée, consacrée aux dieux . . .’<sup>113</sup> instead of ‘Le Champ Stellate’. Again in the same life (34) for *Lucio Domitio, qui Corfinium in præsidio tenebat, in deditionem redacto* we find ‘Il prend à discretion Domitius, qui s’était enfermé dans Corfou’.<sup>114</sup> He has taken the town of Corfinium for the island of Corfu, which is *Corcyra* in Latin.

He is also led into inaccuracy through a lack of specialized knowledge. In the life of Augustus (1), for instance, for *semicruda exta rapta foco prosequit*, his lack of familiarity with sacrificial rites made him translate *exta* — the internal organs of the sacrificial victim — by ‘les chairs’. In the same way, the verb *prosecare* does not signify, as he thought, that the priest then gave these organs to the congregation — ‘les distribua selon la coutume’<sup>115</sup> —, but that they were cut off and offered up to the gods.

In the face of general criticism, he replied rather weakly that he had been led astray by a certain ‘facilité entraînante’, and that all his mistakes could be removed in a revised edition.<sup>116</sup> The damage had, however, been done, and La Harpe — who stressed in any case that he had undertaken this work reluctantly<sup>117</sup> — notably omitted it from his collected works in 1777 and 1778. Nevertheless, there was a serious need for a standard translation of Suetonius. Before La Harpe, there existed only five rather early versions of the work in French,<sup>118</sup> and certainly his version was to be of greater use than that published at the same time and attributed to Delisle de Sales.<sup>119</sup> Even the *Année littéraire*, which naturally endeavoured to prove that the work of any other translator was superior to that of La Harpe, had to admit that his rival had mutilated the text.<sup>120</sup> La Harpe, on the other hand, with the exception of two short passages,<sup>121</sup> tries to follow Suetonius faithfully.

His translation also has the advantage of being written in fairly elegant if not outstanding style. His harsher critics said that it was ‘une version d’écolier où une phrase est cousue à l’autre’<sup>122</sup> and complained of continual cacophony with too many ‘qui, que, qu’ils, qu’on’, too many sentences beginning with ‘il’, and too much hiatus.<sup>123</sup> The more impartial commentators, however, called on the reader to accept the version despite its mistakes, to appreciate ‘tout ce qu’elle a d’agréable et d’intéressant, soit que l’on ne songe qu’aux faits, soit qu’on ne fasse attention qu’à l’élégance du traducteur’.<sup>124</sup> Again in comparison with the work by Delisle de Sales, La Harpe’s version was seen to be ‘plus serré, d’un style plus ferme, plus énergique, plus adapté à l’original’.<sup>125</sup>

His translation was therefore not without merit. Its main need was careful re-editing. Boulard brought out a new edition in 1805 which incorporated most of the changes originally suggested in the *Année littéraire*.<sup>126</sup> Since then, other

editors have further revised the text, and in one form or another, it has continued to appear at regular intervals.<sup>127</sup> Although there have been since 1770 a further eight translations of Suetonius in French, of all translations, La Harpe's has had the greatest number of editions.

It was with the same desire to produce an everyday translation of which the outstanding quality should be 'l'espèce d'agrément que doit avoir ce qui doit être souvent relu'<sup>128</sup> that he worked on a psalter or book of the hours for those Christians whose lack of education did not permit them to appreciate the psalms in Latin.<sup>129</sup> While translating hymns from the Latin of Coffin — taken from the *Bréviaire de Paris* — he used as his text for the psalms and canticles the Vulgate, since, as he readily admitted,<sup>130</sup> he had no knowledge of Hebrew. At the same time, he made free use of the notes given by Father Berthier in his *Psaumes traduits en français*,<sup>131</sup> since these notes often contained word for word translations from the Hebrew.<sup>132</sup>

From what he could see in these notes and from the influence of Hebrew on Greek and Latin texts, he claimed that the elliptic nature of Hebrew made true translation all but impossible.<sup>133</sup> He felt that earlier translators such as Le Maistre de Sacy and Augustin Calmet had tried to remain too faithful to the original text and their work needed continual explanation in notes and commentary for it to be intelligible to the ordinary reader.<sup>134</sup> Most books of the hours, on the other hand, had tended to become completely divorced from the original text.<sup>135</sup> Here, he tried to reproduce as far as was possible the original forms and constructions of the sentences,<sup>136</sup> while feeling permitted

de donner quelque chose au complément et à l'effet de la phrase française. Pour ce qui est la version même, j'ai tâché d'y mettre ce degré de précision qui ne nuit ni au sentiment ni à la clarté, et, si j'ose le dire, cette espèce d'élégance qui s'accorde avec la simplicité.<sup>137</sup>

In fact, his work is still rather too heavily indebted to the Vulgate, even though he claimed to have followed Berthier for indications of variants from the Hebrew. To see this, one only has to study the very first sentence of *Psalm I*:

*Beatus vir qui non abiit in consilio impiorum, et in via peccatorum non stetit, et in cathedra pestilentiae non sedit*

(Happy the man who does not go in the council of the impious, and does not persist in the way of sinners, and does not sit in the chair of unhealthiness). This La Harpe renders as:

Heureux l'homme qui ne s'est point laissé aller aux conseils des impies, qui ne s'est point arrêté dans la voie des pêcheurs, et ne s'est point assis dans la chaire de corruption.

He writes 'la chaire de corruption' despite Berthier's having pointed out<sup>138</sup> that the Hebrew reads here 'le siège des moqueurs', and that the change dates from the original Greek translation's ἐπί καθέδρα λοιμῶν, 'sur le siège des pestes'.

Nevertheless, La Harpe's psalter answered the need prompted by the religious revival following the Revolution, and continued to be re-edited during the first half of the nineteenth century,<sup>139</sup> until superseded by versions which showed greater scholarship and understanding of the original Hebrew text.

Indeed, in general, his translations in prose can hardly be regarded as works of great erudition, but, in a way, they run parallel to, and have some of the qualities of, the *Lycée* in that they are a form of *vulgarisation* or means of presenting to the common reader what is not immediately accessible. As such, they are on the whole elegant if not thoroughly accurate. They give a fair idea of the original in pleasant terms.

## CHAPTER XII

# RELIGIOUS, POLITICAL AND SOCIAL IDEAS

In spite of his overriding interest in pure literature, long before the Revolution La Harpe saw himself as a *philosophe*, conscious of the writer's rôle as a worker for progress.<sup>1</sup> Even in work which might at first seem wholly divorced from such discussion, such as his translation of Suetonius, he preferred to make moral and philosophical judgements in his notes rather than show 'l'étalage pédantesque d'une érudition facile'.<sup>2</sup> When the Revolution came, he believed that civil liberty would for a time open the door to mediocrity in the arts — especially in the theatre<sup>3</sup> — but emphasized that social justice was to be won as the result of the concerted actions of an elite of enlightened writers. It was they who had struck the first blow for liberty by attacking ignorance and religious and political domination.<sup>4</sup> He proclaimed to his fellow-citizens that throughout his work one could find a continuous clearly stated radical purpose.<sup>5</sup> He displayed as wounds won in the cause of freedom the suppression of his *Eloge de Fénelon* in 1771 and of his article on Voltaire's *Diatribes à l'auteur des Ephémérides* in 1775.

It is certainly true that from his very first entry on to the Parisian scene he had been proud to be a *philosophe*. In his eyes, the greatest men of the day were *philosophes*, as renowned throughout the world for their uprightness as for their writings.<sup>6</sup> In 1775, he refused to admit that they acted in stereotyped fashion and claimed that their characteristic quality was their ability to reason.<sup>7</sup> In matters of religion also he subscribed to the opinions of at least one section of the *philosophes*. Up to 1794, for the same reasons as Voltaire, he was to call himself a deist, stressing a belief in a so-called natural religion based on reason rather than revelation.<sup>8</sup> He praised those men of religion such as Massillon, Fénelon and Fléchier who had made others love religion through their writings and their exemplary way of life.<sup>9</sup> Men such as these were worthy of bearing both the title of 'prêtre et celui de philosophe'.<sup>10</sup>

He displayed a truly Voltairian mistrust of metaphysics and elaborate philosophical doctrines, even if they had unwittingly been the source of frequent progress.<sup>11</sup> In his eyes, these doctrines were all too easily torn to pieces by atheists, as they attempted to explain what goes beyond our understanding.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, he felt that there must be a prime cause or Creator of the Universe, as our reason teaches us that without this initiator of all things we would be unable to form any idea of existence.<sup>13</sup> We live in a world given over

to general laws which, once fixed, produce all the necessary moral and physical effects that make up the Universe, even if we can only see a minute part of this.<sup>14</sup> With such ignorance, however, we can still suppose that God, a benign father to mankind,<sup>15</sup> has placed us in the best position we can occupy in the general order of things.<sup>16</sup>

Thus judging religion within the confines of human knowledge, he discussed it mainly in the light of its practical effect on society. While, in part, dissociating himself from those who only considered the abuses of the Church, without appreciating the qualities of Christianity itself,<sup>17</sup> he was proud to draw inspiration from Voltaire as the originator of the movement to destroy the first and most formidable stronghold of despotism, the temporal power of the Church.<sup>18</sup> Before his conversion, as much as any *philosophe*, he was sure that if a desire to rule over one's fellow creatures is common to all men, Christians had the particular characteristic of seeking power through proselytism.<sup>19</sup> His voice was one of many to condemn religious fanaticism,<sup>20</sup> proclaiming that religious fervour was capable of producing good and evil in equal strength.<sup>21</sup> He shared Voltaire's admiration for the Quakers, the only religious sect free of intolerance and with a sincere hatred of war.<sup>22</sup> The abolition of religious vows on 13 February 1790 must have seemed to him an answer to his *Mélanie* and *La Réponse d'un solitaire de La Trappe*. He saw the monastic way of life as a misuse of God's gift:<sup>23</sup>

O Dieu, être suprême et nécessaire, que j'ignore et que je crois parce que tout me l'annonce sans que rien ne l'explique! tu n'as pas créé la beauté pour que l'homme en détournât ses regards: tu n'as pas déployé devant lui les richesses de la création pour qu'il habitât des cachots: tu n'as pas mis dans son cœur le besoin d'aimer ses semblables pour qu'il trompât sans cesse ce besoin si doux, et qu'il jurât de n'aimer rien.

On a défiguré ton ouvrage avant de nier son auteur; et l'athée alors a osé te dire, *Tu ne m'as pas fait*, et le fanatique, plus coupable, t'a dit, *Tu m'as fait ainsi*.<sup>24</sup>

Filled with these ideas, between 1789 and 1794 he welcomed every move made to diminish the authority of the Church in the fight to break down what he and others saw as the tyranny of Rome.<sup>25</sup> He praised as necessary and just the law of 2 November 1789, under which all Church property was nationalized and the parish priests became employees of the state.<sup>26</sup> He defended Mirabeau's *constitution civile du clergé*.<sup>27</sup> Whereas in England there existed what could be called a prevailing religion naturally implanted in society, he felt that this was not true in France.<sup>28</sup> Following the decree of 27 August 1791, he considered the celibacy of priests to be contrary to nature and hence unacceptable in society.<sup>29</sup> They were now to be treated as ordinary citizens. Joining the campaign for divorce, he insisted that the celebration of marriage and burial were to be in the hands of the civil authorities.<sup>30</sup> Little by little, he moved into open conflict with all forms of organized religion.<sup>31</sup> Taking his lead from Voltaire, and foreshadowing

Robespierre's *Culte de l'Être suprême*, he called for a civic and brotherly form of worship,<sup>32</sup> free from incomprehensible dogma.<sup>33</sup> He suggested that man's natural disposition for religion was to be satisfied by the teaching of the simple straightforward worship of a universal god of reason at certain times of the year to coincide with the seasons.<sup>34</sup>

As can be seen, he did little more than subscribe to the widely-held opinions of his time. Indeed, after his conversion, he was to write of his attacks on religion under the Revolution that he had merely repeated what he had heard said by others, and admitted that he had never really thought deeply about the questions involved.<sup>35</sup> He felt that he had been led astray initially by the foolishness of youth and the desire to shine in society.<sup>36</sup> He was to see less inconsequence in his change of position than was imputed by his enemies. Introducing the unchanged text of his *Correspondance littéraire*, he was to say that if it showed him as a friend of the *philosophes*, it did not reveal him to be a flatterer of their mistakes.<sup>37</sup> In his post-revolutionary fight, he attacked not so much the *philosophes* themselves as their disciples of lesser renown who had now replaced them.<sup>38</sup> He was careful to draw a line between the atheists and those *philosophes* who were not what he called completely mad.<sup>39</sup> Whereas before the Revolution he had attacked the *protégés* of the enemies of Voltaire, he was in his old age critical of Rœderer, Dupuis, Lenoir-Laroche, Laréveillère-Lépaux, and others who, in the Institut, the Convention, newspapers and elsewhere, made a cult of La Mettrie and Diderot.<sup>40</sup> If Voltaire had attacked 'l'homme religieux', Diderot and his like had done far worse with 'une guerre mortelle à l'homme moral'.<sup>41</sup>

As much as any religious fanatic, these *philosophes* and their disciples had built up dangerous metaphysical doctrines which had sought to explain what is beyond our grasp.<sup>42</sup> They had been guilty of that most fundamental of sins — pride.<sup>43</sup> The materialists, under the leadership of Helvétius, had been particularly guilty in this respect.<sup>44</sup> Henceforth, he set out to prove that many of the *philosophes* were guilty of more dangerous sophistry and intellectual intolerance in their so-called philosophy than had been the Church in recent times in matters of religion.<sup>45</sup> If anyone had sought proselytes in the eighteenth century it had been the *philosophes* and not the Church.<sup>46</sup> Above all, he saw in their irreligion and their hatred for authority a threat to the very basis of civilized society.<sup>47</sup> They had become the true spiritual fathers of the worst excesses of the Revolution.<sup>48</sup> Voltaire was seen as relatively blameless when compared to these men.<sup>49</sup>

Nevertheless, the latter was not spared harsh attack. The disciple of Voltaire now called his ex-master 'la sirène de l'impiété',<sup>50</sup> and, whilst he still admired him as an artist, he accused him of being biased even in his literary criticism<sup>51</sup> and condemned him for making fun of everything in a way that was contrary to common sense.<sup>52</sup> It was Voltaire who had given the *philosophes* their most

valuable weapon, this power of mockery which crowned their insults, their lack of morality, and their lies.<sup>53</sup> La Harpe named him — along with Diderot, Raynal, Rousseau and Helvétius — as one of the first and most powerful forces behind the upheaval that led to the horrors of the Revolution.<sup>54</sup> Placing him among the sophists, he was to say of Voltaire that it was impossible to show more thoughtlessness, audacity or bad faith.<sup>55</sup>

Yet, polemics aside, when it came to basic principles, La Harpe remained very much a Voltairian. He still considered deism to be the necessary first step of a reasonable approach to religion,<sup>56</sup> although he now believed that sincere and carefully thought out deism led naturally to Christianity.<sup>57</sup> Reiterating his belief in man's need for religion,<sup>58</sup> and stressing the frailty of man<sup>59</sup> by now adopting an almost Pascalian approach to reason,<sup>60</sup> he was still convinced of the idea of a prime cause as being natural to man's needs,<sup>61</sup> a limiting factor to stop man's desire for knowledge from leading to fanaticism.<sup>62</sup> If he maintained that he had never fully subscribed to certain aspects of Voltaire's fatalism,<sup>63</sup> he still believed in a Voltairian view of free will not pre-determined on a practical level by outside causes.<sup>64</sup> Whereas Providence exists and had foretold the terrible apostasy of the Revolution, if only men had troubled to look,<sup>65</sup> and whereas God chooses certain times of terror and destruction so as to ensure the triumph of his law,<sup>66</sup> this action does not apply to everyday life.

He remained fairly close to the Voltairian line of thought even when he set out to prove the social utility of religion and the necessity of public worship.<sup>67</sup> Still careful to separate religion from its abuses,<sup>68</sup> he was sure that whilst morality is engraved in our conscience by God himself,<sup>69</sup> it is the practice of an established religion which must control our natural desires. He believed that the man who made out that he knew nothing, felt no moral obligation in any sphere of activity.<sup>70</sup> Dismissing the *Fête de la Raison* as a Revolutionary farce really intended for praising Robespierre,<sup>71</sup> he claimed that organized religion and public morality were indissoluble; that religion formed the basis of civil order and general prosperity.<sup>72</sup> In this way, although every citizen has the right to disbelieve and not to practise religion, no government should countenance attacks on religion, as these necessarily constitute a danger to public order.<sup>73</sup> In similar vein, the question of a dominant or state religion can only be decided by political and local needs and not through either religious or irreligious fanaticism.<sup>74</sup>

However, if La Harpe's conversion was not to bring so abrupt or extreme a change in position as might have been expected, in practical terms his new-found faith was to be a militant one, as the troubled times of *Thermidor* and of the *Directoire*, and his irascible nature demanded. He was to become the most severe of Catholics, condemning Protestants as dangerous heretics<sup>75</sup> and abandoning the atheist to eternal damnation.<sup>76</sup> He refused to recognize his second divorce, since it was contrary to the will of God,<sup>77</sup> and was dismayed at

the idea that illegitimate children should be treated on an equal footing with those born in wedlock.<sup>78</sup> It was as a champion of the Catholic cause that he became the ardent defender of the non-juring priests<sup>79</sup> and saw the *Concordat* as the crowning of his dearest wishes.<sup>80</sup> Claiming to be no longer interested in the vanities of this world,<sup>81</sup> he was to adopt, in the face of widespread cynicism from his enemies, a penitent humility.<sup>82</sup>

Naturally enough, this change in attitude in religion affected his political loyalties. From being a radical, he was to become thought of as a man of the right and sympathetic to the royalists. Yet, again the times changed more than he did. In his basic political outlook, he always remained, in his principles at least, something of a moderate. In common with many of the *constituants*, he originally regarded the Revolution as an unpleasant but necessary operation to restore the health of the nation. It was an operation which was not to last long,<sup>83</sup> and he did not feel that the preservation of liberty should necessarily imply a rigorous existence.<sup>84</sup> He shared the all too widespread optimism of the time — the belief that the Constitution was to be the answer to all ills.<sup>85</sup> From the beginning, he was aware of the dangers of demagoguery<sup>86</sup> and despised those who flattered the masses.<sup>87</sup> In the early days of a revolution there was a place for the hot-headed who only knew how to destroy the old order of things, but he proclaimed that they should soon give way to those who could construct the new order following the dictates of Reason:

Il y a longtemps qu'elle dit aux forcenés, aux illuminés, aux fanatiques de tout espèce: Arrière, arrière, enfants perdus de la Révolution, votre tâche est faite, et nous n'oublierons pas que vous avez été utiles; mais ne gêtez pas votre ouvrage et le nôtre: nous n'avons plus besoin de gens qui crient; il nous faut des gens qui pensent.<sup>88</sup>

His appeal was to fall on deaf ears.

If, understandably, he remained silent as constitutional revolution became popular revolution and was replaced by the Terror, and if, unfortunately, under the Terror he carried favour with Robespierre, his basic views on government and society were to remain largely unaltered by his change of faith. Looking back on the beginnings of the Revolution and on those who then led it, he was to write that he too had been mistaken, not in the principles involved, but in their application.<sup>89</sup> The great mistake of these early revolutionaries had been, he felt, firstly to incorporate into their Constitution the elements of its own destruction, and at the same time to abandon their powers too soon,<sup>90</sup> thus giving free rein to the anarchy of the popular societies, which, under leaders like Danton, became the centres of a purely destructive force, infinitely more powerful than that of those who tried vainly to give France a legal constitution.<sup>91</sup>

It was in this spirit that after 1794 he was to miss no opportunity of condemning any recurrence of what he judged to be activities by the Terrorists

either in France in general or within the Convention.<sup>92</sup> It was also to this extent that he now admitted to being a counter-revolutionary:

Songez qu'à présent c'est en effet de liberté, de constitution, de république qu'il s'agit, et non plus de révolution, et que par conséquent des législateurs ne doivent approuver que ce qui est favorable à la liberté, à la constitution, à la république, et ne doivent réprover que ce qui leur est contraire.<sup>93</sup>

Thinking of Cromwell after the civil war in England,<sup>94</sup> he sensed that it was now time to turn one's back on the excesses of the past and fulfil the betrayed hopes of 1789.

As in matters of religion and good taste, from the beginning of the Revolution he took his lead in all political matters from Voltaire himself, whom he saw as the supreme liberator of the human mind and as the centre of the campaign to teach people to think.<sup>95</sup> During the Revolution, he was proud to name as fathers of the revolutionary movement Voltaire, Rousseau, Mably and Helvétius,<sup>96</sup> although he was to insist in later years that he had always found fault with the political doctrines of the last-named writer, together with those of Diderot, Raynal and Boulanger.<sup>97</sup> In any case, he always tended to see in these writers theorists whose thought was highly important but often divorced from reality and its difficulties.<sup>98</sup> Thus, he felt that Mably was over systematic,<sup>99</sup> and, above all, he wished to limit the influence of Rousseau, whose writings — full of contradictions and far-fetched ideas — were becoming 'un arsenal commun où nos ennemis allaient chercher des armes contre nous, comme nous en trouvions contre eux'.<sup>100</sup>

Putting aside the *Confessions*, whose few moments of beauty could not make up for its many faults,<sup>101</sup> and attacking Ginguéné for praising Rousseau as a man,<sup>102</sup> La Harpe admired much in Rousseau as a writer and willingly paid tribute to his eloquence and fine style.<sup>103</sup> He accepted Rousseau's importance, not as a prime mover of the Revolution, but as a source of inspiration once the Revolution was under way. He pointed to a fact which tended to be forgotten by his contemporaries: that before the Revolution, *Du Contrat social*, which, admittedly, was to become the breviary of the law-givers,<sup>104</sup> was practically unknown. In earlier years, Rousseau's reputation reflected the general taste for lighter literature<sup>105</sup> and rested mainly on *L'Emile* with its *Profession de foi du vicaire savoyard* and on *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, which appealed particularly to women and to the young.<sup>106</sup>

He did not consider the *Profession de foi du vicaire savoyard* to be revolutionary in nature, since, even if it was the work of a moralist leading an open direct attack against the Church,<sup>107</sup> the actual substance of the work was comparatively mild, implying an underlying defence of basic belief.<sup>108</sup> He was more worried by the influence of Rousseau in ideas on society and government. Stressing Rousseau's own admission that his ideas were often merely hypothetical.<sup>109</sup> La Harpe reminded his fellow-citizens that Rousseau's writings

were to be seen mainly as works of philosophical speculation and not as guides for practical action.<sup>110</sup>

As a good Voltairian, La Harpe found that Rousseau gave a false picture of the true nature of man. It is abundantly clear that man himself, like any finite and imperfect being, is made up of both good and evil.<sup>111</sup> The potentialities for good and evil are merely greater as man develops.<sup>112</sup> La Harpe was willing to agree that man in society was not perfect, but followed his master in being wary of those who judged the world over optimistically.<sup>113</sup> In theory, at least, he admitted that the only kind of happiness possible for man consisted in trying to limit the effects of evil on others and on oneself.<sup>114</sup> Again as with Voltaire, despite his conversion, his old age was merely to accentuate this already latent limited pessimism.<sup>115</sup>

La Harpe had no wish to return to the state of nature, about which we know so little.<sup>116</sup> Far from subscribing to Rousseau's idea that, divorced from society, man will preserve a celestial and majestic simplicity given him by God,<sup>117</sup> the Voltairian was convinced that the further man moves from primitive nature, the more he conforms to his own natural desires which encourage learning and other social activities.<sup>118</sup> He maintained that society is natural, as man is a social animal.<sup>119</sup> In common with most writers in the eighteenth century, he admitted the existence and utility of natural desires. He completely rejected any theory of innate ideas,<sup>120</sup> although he did refuse to accept Rousseau's complete belief in natural sentiment.<sup>121</sup> Passion had to be controlled by reason.<sup>122</sup> He called on his fellows not to follow Rousseau's dangerous mistake of inciting men to return to ignorance, instead of teaching them to make better use of the knowledge gained by civilization.<sup>123</sup>

The Revolution was in this way a challenge for the proper use of reason. The liberty brought by revolution was not an invitation to unlimited licence, but an opportunity for man to assume responsibility.<sup>124</sup> La Harpe shared the idea put forward in the Constitution of 1791<sup>125</sup> that all men are born free and equal in rights,<sup>126</sup> but never subscribed to the Constitution of 1793, which declared that all men were equal 'par la nature'.<sup>127</sup> He believed to the very end of his life that the organization of society must always be based on respect for the equality of natural rights and complete freedom in the exercising of these rights,<sup>128</sup> with its implication of protection for the individual,<sup>129</sup> but he argued that inequality in society does not come from a kind of tacit agreement on the part of man,<sup>130</sup> but from the essential differences in the abilities of different men, which are part of the nature of man whatever his condition and not merely of man in already established society.<sup>131</sup>

The organization of society, therefore, must reflect this essential inequality,<sup>132</sup> and again disagreeing with Rousseau,<sup>133</sup> La Harpe always defended the right of property.<sup>134</sup> He agreed that property was the basis of all law, but saw this as a primary instinct based on a desire for self-preservation. This desire makes us

respect the property of others through a wish that similar respect be shown for our own.<sup>135</sup> Law must protect the right of property, as it did in 1791<sup>136</sup> and 1795,<sup>137</sup> but not in 1793:

La Loi ne donne pas les propriétés, elle les garantit à ceux qui les ont.  
Le riche pourra dormir en pleine sécurité dans sa maison, parce que, sans cela, l'artisan ne dormirait pas dans sa boutique, ni le cultivateur dans son héritage.<sup>138</sup>

In protecting the rich as well as the poor, the law protects that most essential of qualities in society, order,<sup>139</sup> and respects the basis of society, the nature of man himself.<sup>140</sup> La Harpe was to become an opponent of the agrarian laws,<sup>141</sup> and, later on, the very idea of Babeuf and his *communauté des biens* horrified him.<sup>142</sup>

At all times, as a result of this belief in the right of property, La Harpe, together with many of the middle classes, remained a firm defender of commerce.<sup>143</sup> If he disapproved of war, it was to a certain extent because it endangered the wealth of the country.<sup>144</sup> For the same reason, he attacked the means used for taxation under the *ancien régime*, accusing them of failing to encourage a stable healthy economy, based on a sane and farsighted fiscal policy.<sup>145</sup> Believing that the first duty of a government is to make every citizen interested in the public good by respecting his individual interests,<sup>146</sup> he wanted a fiscal policy which took this into account. In the first years of the Revolution, he shared the optimistic belief of many in a legally approved form of taxation.<sup>147</sup> Having been a friend of both Turgot and Necker, he followed fashion in seeing agriculture as the basis of a truly rich economy.<sup>148</sup> However, he was not, any more than Voltaire, a physiocrat, and insisted that other activities were not to be despised.<sup>149</sup> He praised Turgot for having extracted from the muddle of the writings of physiocrats such as the elder Mirabeau what was reasonable and useful.<sup>150</sup> He would appear to have sided with Turgot in the disagreement with Necker in 1775 over the question of unlimited freedom of trade,<sup>151</sup> but he tended as time went by to look to the latter, who had experience on his side.<sup>152</sup> He felt that Turgot was too rigid<sup>153</sup> and that Necker showed desirable moderation.<sup>154</sup>

Despite his disagreement with Rousseau over the nature of man and property, certain of La Harpe's opinions were nevertheless influenced by the latter. His ideal for a perfect society was not so very different from Rousseau's. Like Rousseau, he wanted a situation in which every man could through his own honest toil meet his own daily needs and not depend on the pity of others.<sup>155</sup> Moreover, we have seen how he deplored anarchy, and, with his love of order and justice, he followed the feelings of his time by showing an almost religious respect for law.<sup>156</sup> In later years, he was to complain about laws whose lack of precision allowed every form of dangerous interpretation,<sup>157</sup> and said that the action of law, devoid of any moral purpose, should be limited to dealing with

subversive or criminal acts, and not with opinions.<sup>158</sup> Initially, however, he subscribed to the idea of a universal rule of law, in which no man was beyond the law.<sup>159</sup> He was to state that all authority is the power given by the law to assure respect for the law,<sup>160</sup> and that any man who exercises power other than that of the law is by definition a despot.<sup>161</sup> It was this belief that, for a time at least, led him to disagree with Montesquieu over the question of *pouvoirs intermédiaires*.<sup>162</sup> While showing a fair amount of respect for ministers of the *ancien régime* to whom he owed a great deal,<sup>163</sup> he said that their every move was dictated by 'le droit du plus fort'.<sup>164</sup> He also rose in true Voltairian fashion against judicial despotism.<sup>165</sup> Remembering what he considered to be Voltaire's justified hatred for the *parlements*<sup>166</sup> and how he himself had suffered at their hands,<sup>167</sup> he called for and welcomed their suppression.<sup>168</sup> He always condemned Louis XV as the example of a weak king who encouraged abuse by not ruling for himself,<sup>169</sup> since the evil that kings can commit is always less than that which can be committed in their name.<sup>170</sup>

Brought up under the *ancien régime*, it was not until fear of the Terror forced him to speak disrespectfully of kings<sup>171</sup> that he ever really doubted their right. Earlier, he had insisted that subjects should obey their prince and see in him the protector both of themselves and of their property.<sup>172</sup> This did not, however, stop the Voltairian from questioning the behaviour of kings, nor from suggesting the qualities of an ideal ruler:

Le monarque doit réunir, du moins en partie, tous les talents divers dont dépend le sort des nations . . . il doit rassembler sous ses regards la guerre et les lois, l'administration intérieure et étrangère, et . . . il doit avoir surtout ces vues générales et bienfaisantes qui sont la philosophie du trône.<sup>173</sup>

As a king was no longer a soldier at the head of an army,<sup>174</sup> and since, if war occasionally benefited a king and his ministers, the common people — on the winning as well as the losing side — could only suffer a great deal,<sup>175</sup> it was now the duty of a good king to work for what could be his greatest glory — that of making his subjects happy with peace and prosperity.<sup>176</sup> All too often, kings had been educated wrongly<sup>177</sup> and had remained ignorant of the misfortunes of their people.<sup>178</sup> Although merit is perhaps more easily recognized in a feudal system,<sup>179</sup> it is in the art of employing great men for the good of the nation that we can recognize the great king.<sup>180</sup>

Standing in direct contact with his people, the king's prime purpose is to punish crime and reward virtue,<sup>181</sup> and it was seeing kings as living symbols of the law<sup>182</sup> that led La Harpe and his contemporaries to the conception of a constitutional monarchy.<sup>183</sup> Although he was later forced to admit that Louis' power had been at the most a right to be represented when decisions were made,<sup>184</sup> in the early years of the Revolution, when all power seemed to be in the hands of the legislative assembly, La Harpe had been among those to advocate a certain amount of authority for the executive. He saw it as a safeguard

against anarchy.<sup>185</sup> He praised Louis XVI for avoiding civil war by turning himself into the first citizen under the law,<sup>186</sup> and, as late as May 1792, he still refused to believe that Louis had ever plotted against the people.<sup>187</sup>

If, as early as April 1792, he was proclaiming that no king could have done for the people what the people did for itself<sup>188</sup> and if he claimed to be a good supporter of the Republic at a time when an admission to the contrary would have been dangerous, one can suspect that secretly he was more than a little disappointed when the monarchy fell.<sup>189</sup> After *Thermidor*, he was to be no friend of the Convention when all power lay in its hands and, when a new executive force was set up in the being of the *Directoire*, his opposition to it was finally to lead to his exile. He dismissed any idea of a royalist plot within France as a myth exaggerating the danger of the rebellion in Vendée and set in motion by the Terrorists in order to stir up popular feeling.<sup>190</sup> He kept a certain nostalgia for the aspirations of former days, for the hope of an enlightened monarchy, for honour rather than republican virtues.<sup>191</sup>

Forced to admit that Louis had been loved more than he had been respected,<sup>192</sup> La Harpe now saw that he had been wrong to attack the *pouvoirs intermédiaires*, feeling that he had criticized Montesquieu over this question when blinded by a fanciful conception of things as they should be. He had failed to see what benefits could be drawn from a necessarily imperfect state of affairs.<sup>193</sup> At the same time, to be fair to La Harpe, we must point out that he never fully rejected Montesquieu's views on law and readily referred to him as his master in such questions, preferring at heart Montesquieu's practical observations to the hypotheses of Rousseau.<sup>194</sup> The beginning of his quarrel with Linguet, for instance, was over the latter's attack on Montesquieu's definition<sup>195</sup> of republics, monarchies and states ruled over by despots.<sup>196</sup> Sharing both Montesquieu's and Voltaire's admiration for England,<sup>197</sup> he showed that he clearly understood the problems involved in the division of power between the executive, the legislature and the judiciary. Like Montesquieu<sup>198</sup> and Voltaire,<sup>199</sup> he was proud to subscribe<sup>200</sup> to Locke's ideas on the subject.<sup>201</sup> While insisting that judicial power must always be placed between the citizen and the executive<sup>202</sup> and, after *Vendémiaire*, becoming steadily more suspicious of the executive,<sup>203</sup> he at all times defended the right of the legally elected legislature to speak for the people and never accepted Rousseau's definition of the will of the people with its refusal to allow legislative power to be placed in the hands of their representatives.<sup>204</sup> Once there was a Constitution which clearly defined the division between the powers of government,<sup>205</sup> he remained not only its ardent supporter,<sup>206</sup> but an active defender of the legally elected representatives. In a nation of any size, he maintained, representation and delegation of power was a practical necessity. A popular referendum for the passing of every law would lead to complete anarchy.<sup>207</sup> In this light, he spoke for those for whom respect was due under the Constitution.<sup>208</sup> The electors certainly had the right to watch

their representatives very closely and criticize, when necessary. They did not have the right to slander or insult them.<sup>209</sup>

It was with despair that all around him La Harpe saw the popular societies take on a legal and political character which, in his eyes, belonged only to assemblies set up by the law.<sup>210</sup> This agitation prepared the end of the rule of law to which he so heartily subscribed and led to a constitution in which government was clearly placed where he did not want to see it placed — in the hands of the people.<sup>211</sup>

In the light of these principles — borrowed on the whole from Montesquieu and Voltaire — La Harpe can hardly have been fit — as was suggested by his enemies<sup>212</sup> — to fill the fifth act of a tragedy in which the other acts consisted of various murders by the mob. His beliefs are essentially those of restraint and order. Indicative of this continual desire for order is his trust in education as one of the most solid foundations possible for a truly free society.<sup>213</sup> In various forms, it was a recurring theme in his journalism during the Revolution, and, from July 1790 on,<sup>214</sup> he joined the campaign for organized state education which was becoming a major subject of discussion. He inserted a *Plan sommaire d'Education publique* in the *Mercure* on 22 and 29 January 1791 in order to back up his review on the fifteenth of the same month of Etienne Lacépède's *Vues sur l'enseignement public*.<sup>215</sup> With the backing of Condorcet, Talleyrand finally introduced a bill for elementary education on 10 September 1791,<sup>216</sup> but it was not voted on and, to La Harpe's dismay, the matter was still in the hands of the *Comité d'Instruction* in April 1792.<sup>217</sup>

Naturally enough, all this discussion reflected the general preoccupation with education shown by all the major writers of the eighteenth century. Like many of his contemporaries, La Harpe felt that it was time to use schools to form men and citizens, and not just humanists and students of rhetoric.<sup>218</sup> Although this former brilliant pupil of the Oratorians did not openly advocate the banning of the Church in matters of education until January 1792<sup>219</sup> — four months after Talleyrand's lead<sup>220</sup> — he then became, as in other questions, one of its bitterest opponents. He was particularly harsh on the Jesuits, who, although removed from education as far back as 1762, still exerted influence through their pupils imbued with their scholasticism and their love of the niceties of theology.<sup>221</sup> In other words, the Jesuits had shown throughout their educational system a hatred for everything that even remotely suggested liberty of thought.<sup>222</sup>

Wanting therefore to restore a certain respect for the natural growth of children, in questions of education at least, he readily accepted the lead given to his generation by Rousseau.<sup>223</sup> He regarded *L'Emile* as the book in which the latter had placed the greatest eloquence and true moral philosophy, even if the educational system proposed was not thoroughly practicable.<sup>224</sup> He admired the book in so far as it reflected the liberating theme of Locke, especially as

Rousseau, with his eloquence, had managed to turn what Locke had merely indicated dryly into vivid, persuasive ideas.<sup>225</sup> However, just as he condemned other excesses in Rousseau's thought, he regretted the impracticability of most of the ideas in *L'Emile* and felt that the only really valuable part of the work was that dealing with early childhood.<sup>226</sup> While agreeing that one should condemn the repressive atmosphere of the old-fashioned teaching establishments,<sup>227</sup> he still believed in organized teaching in institutions<sup>228</sup> and accused Helvétius, for instance, of underrating the moral power of traditional education.<sup>229</sup> He frowned<sup>230</sup> on Rousseau's idea of an *éducation négative et libre*.<sup>231</sup>

Another work to exert considerable influence in the eighteenth century in matters of education was *De l'Éducation publique*,<sup>232</sup> variously attributed to Diderot or, as is more likely, to J. B. L. Crévier.<sup>233</sup> Although La Harpe claimed not to have read it by the time he composed his own educational plan,<sup>234</sup> when he later studied it for his *Histoire de la Philosophie du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*,<sup>235</sup> he found that his views on the subject coincided with those of the author in many respects. Taking the book to be by Diderot, he said that, for once, the latter had been fairly reasonable.<sup>236</sup> However, agreement is, on the whole, again limited to the question of primary education, as, all in all, he was struck by the work's sharing a fault common to all such treatises at this time — a failure to make the type of education proposed invariably suitable to the age of the pupils.<sup>237</sup>

Not least important as writers on education at this time were women, and La Harpe had been on close terms with at least two female authorities on the subject, Madame Necker and Madame de Genlis. Although there was no question of women in his plan, as early as 1765 — obviously influenced by *L'Emile*<sup>238</sup> — he made an eloquent plea in their defence:

Ce sexe que le nôtre encense  
D'un nuage de préjugés  
Voit obscurcir par nous les jours de son enfance,  
Et tous ces devoirs partagés  
Entre la feinte et l'ignorance.  
Il tremble de penser, il tremble de sentir;  
Sa raison est muette, et son âme est captive.  
On s'efforce d'anéantir  
L'aimable expression de sa candeur naïve.  
Pour le mieux asservir, on cherche à l'aveugler;  
Et l'on n'instruit enfin sa jeunesse craintive,  
Que dans l'art de rougir et de dissimuler.<sup>239</sup>

It would, however, be wrong to see in this appeal feminism as we understand it. Like Rousseau and the rest of his contemporaries, he looked to women to complement the qualities of men.<sup>240</sup> We have seen how the poet generally wanted to please women, and, as a Parisian, he admired women as the creators of urbanity and as the legislators of the manners of French society.<sup>241</sup> At the

same time, underneath their charm and their talents, he liked to find eternal feminine qualities and admired, above all, the mother with her family.<sup>242</sup>

In his plan for organized education, therefore, he confined himself to the education of men and there again displayed a traditional outlook. He did not attempt to be original, wanting to be more useful than unusual,<sup>243</sup> and echoing his deep respect for the University as it stood<sup>244</sup> and for its teachers in the tradition of Rollin and Coffin.<sup>245</sup> His main changes were to be in the distribution of learning, in a course of study which would be less heavy in the early years and more intensive in the late years of a child's development, while bringing in more minor innovations throughout the course.<sup>246</sup> The beginning was to take its inspiration from the new spirit of Locke and Rousseau, where the end was still to reflect his humanist background and encourage an elite of orators.

Covering the years of four to seventeen, he placed the beginning of secondary education at the age of ten. Saying that henceforth all teachers would have to be properly qualified, he wanted primary education to be placed in the hands of the public authorities, with a teacher appointed by the *département* in every parish. He felt that in existent primary education, one had tended to overload the child's mind with questions of metaphysics, grammar and syntax. For the first two years, at an age which to us still appears rather young, he proposed that the child should learn to read, do a little arithmetic, and have some religious instruction. In the last three years, the child was to perfect his reading, writing and simple arithmetic. In general, for the earliest years of education, La Harpe argued that one had to occupy solely memory and the senses.<sup>247</sup> It was only when the power of reasoning began to develop that the child could be taught a little local geography and the history that it directly evoked, and a limited form of moral catechism.<sup>248</sup>

He was convinced that children have a natural perception of what is just, if it is explained clearly and not in abstract terms.<sup>249</sup> If, unlike Rousseau,<sup>250</sup> he was to consider competition to be a good incentive,<sup>251</sup> and approved of prizes in the final years of his educational system, he shared the belief in natural discipline:

il faut bannir de l'éducation ce despotisme grossier qu'on a nommé pédantisme, et y substituer une autorité toujours raisonnée. Les enfants aiment qu'on raisonne avec eux: c'est leur faire croire qu'ils sont déjà ce qu'ils ont toujours envie d'être, de *grandes* personnes. Il importe de les soumettre à l'obéissance la plus exacte, mais toujours en leur démontrant la nécessité de les punir suivant l'exigence des cas, mais jamais par la force, et toujours par des privations, par la honte, par un petit surcroît de travail.<sup>252</sup>

In this way, he wanted to encourage the introduction of prefects, which had previously only been found in a few schools. Not only would this prepare the prefects themselves for authority in later life, but it would give all the pupils a greater idea of the meaning of law.

In secondary education, he again showed his respect for the colleges of the University and for the services that they had rendered society through their scholarships. He condemned the all-too-widespread desire to destroy them.<sup>253</sup> The colleges were to remain much as they were, with a little less ceremonial and fewer holidays. They were to be independent, but under the protection and encouragement of the government. The Rector of the University was to be assisted in his functions by two inspectors, elected once every three years by the governing bodies of the University and entrusted with seeing that the schools carried out their duties satisfactorily. They were to report to the municipal authorities. Two major changes that La Harpe did want to see here, however, were the suppression firstly of the division of the University into four *nations* and, secondly, that of the formidable faculty of theology, at whose hands he had suffered in 1771, and whose metaphysical niceties now seemed an anachronism. Its job — to teach the positive practical theology needed by the working priest — could be carried on in seminaries.<sup>254</sup> In addition, he wanted to abolish faculty divisions, and vocational studies such as medicine and law were to be pursued in specialized schools divorced from the University.<sup>255</sup> Such studies were, in any case, to come after the completion of general education.<sup>256</sup>

In the first part of secondary education, from ten to fourteen years, he was sure that the pupils were now old enough to tackle the abstract problems involved in learning grammar and dead languages, thus reducing the length of study from six to four years. Bringing in this form of instruction later on in a boy's education meant that it could be assimilated more thoroughly and more quickly.<sup>257</sup> All too often in the past, the very young, finding it difficult to understand the principles involved, had lost interest, and thus lacked a solid basis for the more fruitful studies of rhetoric. Brought up in a tradition where the study of the Ancients was paramount, he believed that a knowledge of the classical languages was the basis of any proper education.<sup>258</sup> Moreover, whereas Diderot, for instance, wanted this study to be interspersed with useful practical knowledge,<sup>259</sup> for La Harpe, the purpose of such a study was to bring the pupil into contact with the Ancients, as they were the supreme models for all forms of intellectual expression. After all, it was in reference to them that the youth was to develop his taste.<sup>260</sup> He believed that it was better to read ancient history in Livy or Plutarch than in modern commentators such as Rollin, and maintained that it was impossible to learn such matters satisfactorily in later life. Reflecting, however, his own propensity for Latin, he wanted the teaching of Greek to be begun only in the last year of the four-year cycle, and then it was to be reserved for those who already had a fair mastery of the other language.

While he had nothing to say about the way in which the humanities and rhetoric were taught, when it came to the two years of philosophy — to be reserved in his view to pupils aged fifteen and sixteen — he felt that there was

room for considerable reform. Where he left the choice of curriculum in physics and mathematics to the individual teacher, since he considered them to be subjects of only secondary importance at this stage,<sup>261</sup> he suggested that one should do away with the usual text-books on logic, metaphysics or ethics written in bad Latin. For an understanding of logic, pupils should read an extract from the *Logique de Port-Royal*, or Father Lamy's *Art de Penser*. For metaphysics, he proposed Locke and Condillac, and, for ethics, Cicero's *De officiis*.

At the end of this period, when the pupil would have attained the age of seventeen, La Harpe wanted to introduce a special year of *Rhétorique supérieure ou Classe d'éloquence*, as, again referring to the Ancients, he saw instruction in oratory as all important in a proper education.<sup>262</sup> In this Aristotelean school of learning, the pupils were to do all their work in French, with five exercises to complete per week. Two of these exercises were to be in deliberative oratory, two in judicial oratory, and one in demonstrative oratory. In this last category, they were to be either in panegyrics or the discussion and development of a moral or political idea.

As this year of study was to be reserved for an élite, he wanted its pupils to be taught at the Collège Royal (now the Collège de France), which, for this purpose, was to become part of the University and to undergo considerable reform:

ce collège, tel qu'il est aujourd'hui, n'est guère qu'une sorte de luxe littéraire qui fait partie des ornements de la capitale; les chaires dont plusieurs sont remplies par des hommes d'un grand mérite, sont plutôt des récompenses de leurs travaux qu'un objet d'utilité générale.<sup>263</sup>

Reawakening old literary squabbles, he was horrified that the chair of French literature should be held by the Abbé Aubert and, while taking care to point out that what he said did not apply to his own lectures at the Lycée, stated that, in any case, it was not in attending lectures, but in reading good writers that the public could form its taste.<sup>264</sup> The same was true for the chairs of Latin eloquence and poetry, even if the latter post was held by as respectable an authority as Delille. He wanted the study of medicine and subjects of a similar nature to be dealt with in their respective specialized schools. The chair of canon law served no useful purpose following the confiscation of Church property and, as for the chairs of history and ethics, history is only studied in books, and morality cannot be taught.<sup>265</sup>

While making sure that those teachers who would lose their jobs under his reform would be pensioned off, he wanted as the central function of the institution a chair of *éloquence française* whose incumbent was to be appointed by the municipality, and whose activities were to be supported by the teaching of sciences such as geometry, astronomy, mechanics, physics, chemistry and natural history and, in similar fashion, of oriental languages and Greek, as they were difficult subjects not widely taught elsewhere. In addition, to give the institution

greater vitality, he advocated the introduction of boarders living in dormitories and thus sharing in the life of the establishment, and, in order to ensure that teaching continued every morning without interruption, he called for the use of *agrégés* to replace teachers when they fell ill.

The plan, naturally enough, irritated the theologians,<sup>266</sup> and N. J. Sélis, Delille's substitute at the Collège Royal, who wrote a brochure in defence of the institution.<sup>267</sup> Otherwise, there was little that appeared even remotely new. La Harpe still put far too much stress on the teaching of the classical languages. For many years before the Revolution, educationalists had wanted to reduce this influence in favour of the study of French.<sup>268</sup> The new plan was also not particularly practical. For instance, he wanted children to start their formal schooling at the age of four. Talleyrand was to propose, more reasonably, that such education should begin at the age of six.<sup>269</sup> To the modern reader of La Harpe's plan, the ideas of Locke and Rousseau seem to be grafted on to the traditional outlook of a much older age. If, in some ways, these speculations foreshadow the development of the Ecole normale supérieure and its preparatory *khâgne*, they reflect in a more general fashion the needs of a very special period — the Revolution. Not only has the importance of the humanities diminished in favour of subjects neglected by La Harpe, but, except in times of trouble, oratory has never been the most useful of assets.

Moreover, it is somewhat typical of the man that this preoccupation with classical learning and oratory should have remained at the centre of his interests during a time of social upheaval, when oratory was being rapidly replaced by demagogy, and when classical learning had long since become a little irrelevant. It was as a voice from the past that he continued to lecture his readers through the most critical period of the Revolution. As a journalist, with one whole printer's page at his disposition every week, and as ambitious as ever, he wanted to build up his articles into nothing less than a series of philosophical, literary and political memoirs worthy of being re-read at leisure.<sup>270</sup> Several of his articles at this time were *réflexions* or *observations* prompted by a new publication and were, in fact, fairly lengthy digressions, frequently running over several issues, on one or more questions of political or social theory.<sup>271</sup> It was a time when papers became the most powerful means of spreading truth or falsehood.<sup>272</sup> In good hands, journalism could be seen as a bastion of liberty, bearing faithful witness to events for posterity.<sup>273</sup>

Aware of the importance of his rôle as a journalist,<sup>274</sup> he still showed no more tolerance than when papers were concerned with literature alone. He now poured scorn on those so-called men of letters — upstarts unknown before the Revolution — who thought that journalism consisted merely in a display of revolutionary sentiment, devoid of any attempt to follow common sense.<sup>275</sup> Where, in matters of taste, he had always referred to well-defined tenets, again, when attacking those whom he thought dangerous to the Revolution — be

they absolute royalists or demagogues — he made his opinions clear by setting forth his general principles.<sup>276</sup> Unfortunately, as in his articles on pure literature, it would seem to be this essentially dogmatic approach that led him into excess. Although his principles were those of moderation, he rejected moderation in practice by arguing that those who wanted continually to appear moderate ran the risk of encouraging the dangerous as well as the good.<sup>277</sup> He maintained that it was always his duty to show clearly where he stood.<sup>278</sup> While the first Constitution was respected, this attitude was laudible, but it became pure folly under the Terror.

Only fear can explain his continued support for the Revolution up to the spring of 1794. In his heart he must have known that he was betraying his principles. In November 1792, three months after the fall of the monarchy, he said of Voltaire — his mentor in political outlook as in much else — that the latter would have seen the events of August 1792 as the end of the world.<sup>279</sup> With such lucidity, it is a pity that he did not share the courage of his fellow journalist, Camille Desmoulins, or of that other disciple of Voltaire, Condorcet. To his eternal regret, he now served his new masters:

*La faiblesse fut dans la crainte d'un danger individuel, qui n'était rien, si on l'eût bravé, et dans l'oubli d'un péril général véritablement formidable, du moment où les aboyeurs de tribune deviendraient législateurs, administrateurs et juges. Chacun s'imagina longtemps qu'il se déroberait au danger en se tenant à l'écart, et n'avoir rien à craindre en n'étant rien, ne faisant rien. Ce calcul eût été juste, quoique lâche, dans toute autre révolution; il était absolument faux dans la nôtre.*<sup>280</sup>

Indeed, principles have little meaning when compared with the behaviour of a man who praised at their successive moments of glory men of widely differing views such as Necker, Mirabeau, Robespierre and Bonaparte. After his death, Petitot echoed the feelings of many of his contemporaries by saying of La Harpe:

*si on nous interroge pour savoir de quelle école il était, nous serons fort embarrassés pour trouver une réponse positive; et peut-être nous deviendra-t-il plus facile de dire les torts qu'il n'eut jamais, que de détailler les opinions qu'il adopta.*<sup>281</sup>

Learned by heart like so many school lessons rather than the deep-seated convictions of the man of sincerity, his principles were to be cast aside at moments of stress, leaving him then unable to explain his inconsequence and turning to God for solace.

## CHAPTER XIII

### ORATORY

In the previous chapter we saw the importance that La Harpe attached to oratory under the Revolution. In such troubled times, it was for him 'le grand art des peuples libres'.<sup>1</sup> Yet, this was only the reflection of a lifelong respect for this form of art. Long before the Revolution, oratory was for the critic and the *philosophe* both a means of preserving good taste and of expressing radical propaganda. His esteem for oratory in literature is immediately seen in the amount of space devoted to it in the *Lycée*, a work which he wanted to be of particular use to orators.<sup>2</sup> The discussion of oratory takes up by far and away the greatest number of pages in the section on the Ancients. Like most of his contemporaries, he followed the lead of Fénelon<sup>3</sup> — whose judgements on the art he found somewhat summary but sound<sup>4</sup> — and turned to the Ancients to study the techniques of all oratory. He did not conform slavishly to the ideas of Antiquity and refused, for instance, to draw the traditional sharp divisions,<sup>5</sup> feeling that the differences between demonstrative and deliberative oratory should not be over-stressed,<sup>6</sup> but he was still convinced that the would-be orator should have a deep knowledge of Demosthenes and Cicero.<sup>7</sup> It was again with respect for the traditions of good taste that he was to express his radical views.

The effect of these views on his oratory must not be under-estimated. It will be remembered that it was as a *philosophe* that he became a member of the Académie française, and it is in his *éloges* that he expressed in particularly outspoken terms his support for the ideas of the *philosophes*. When, shortly before his death, his religious fervour led him to revise these *éloges*, only two remained unaltered.<sup>8</sup> He had always maintained that oratory was a weapon for progress,<sup>9</sup> and this had led him to disapprove of *oraisons funèbres*. Although he naturally modified his opinion in his closing years,<sup>10</sup> before his conversion, he tended to dismiss them as the final lies of flattery<sup>11</sup> and the opposite of the true *éloge* which should reflect the moral and social awareness of the proper historian:<sup>12</sup> 'Le philosophe voit le grand homme placé dans son siècle entre les lumières et les ténèbres, et il le juge sur ce qu'il a ôté aux unes et ajouté aux autres'.<sup>13</sup>

This love of the philosophically inspired panegyric became widespread in the years immediately preceding the French Revolution. It was not until 1759 that a prize was first given at the Académie française for praise of a famous man. This prize was carried off by A. L. Thomas for his *Eloge du Maréchal de Saxe*, and

henceforth heroes of diverse natures had the honour of being chosen by the Academy for an hour's eulogy. Provincial academies soon followed suit. D'Aguesseau, Duguai-Trouin, Sully, Colbert, Montausier and Louis XII were only a few of those chosen to be thus celebrated. Although his praise for Thomas was somewhat qualified,<sup>14</sup> La Harpe claimed that the latter's example had given new life to the Academy's competitions and turned the prize-givings into great social occasions.<sup>15</sup> Earlier competitions on the discussion of a moral saying or judgement had, in La Harpe's view, severely restricted the orator's scope<sup>16</sup> and thus held back until now one of the greatest glories of the institution as an encouragement to the arts.

Nevertheless, in his experience of praising talents of different kinds, he came to see that not every great man was a suitable subject for an *éloge*. He did not consider it to be the duty of the genre — especially in the Académie française — to be devoted to the praise of those whose talents were highly specialized, such as philosophers and scientists, and among whom he placed Fontenelle and Descartes.<sup>17</sup> Nor did he feel that a eulogy was to be used to defend a man whose talents were, if not in doubt, at least the subject of discussion.<sup>18</sup> He therefore took his subjects, firstly, from among universally appreciated men of action such as great kings, warriors, ministers, magistrates and prelates and, secondly, from among those literary giants from whom all good taste was seen to stem.<sup>19</sup>

In the first category, he praised Charles V, Henri IV, Fénelon, and Catinat, and in the second, La Fontaine, Racine, and — in an *éloge* not written for a competition — Voltaire himself. He did begin an abortive *Eloge de Molière*,<sup>20</sup> but later regretted it as he did not believe sufficiently in the grandeur of the subject.<sup>21</sup>

Part of this need for restriction in the choice of subjects comes from the difficulty of convincing an audience whose reaction to the announcement that one is going to indulge in praise is almost instinctively hostile.<sup>22</sup> If the subject is unworthy of oratory, the orator is at a disadvantage and liable either to lower the standards of his art or to exaggerate his praise, with the result that he indulges in bombast and the expression of well-worn commonplace ideas.<sup>23</sup> Although historical truth is not of prime interest to the eulogist, who cannot be expected to draw a complete picture of his subject in an hour's talk, the *éloge* will be more effective if he respects truth in what he does show.<sup>24</sup>

At the same time, an *éloge* is not a factual history of a great man or a mere catalogue of his achievements,<sup>25</sup> as was shown when La Harpe triumphed over Guibert — a professional soldier and author of a treatise on tactics — with his *Eloge du Maréchal de Catinat*. Specialized knowledge could be useful, and La Harpe felt that it had helped Necker in his *Eloge de Colbert*,<sup>26</sup> but in preparing his own *éloges*, he limited himself to reading the most authoritative authors, notably Voltaire, and the memoirs of the period.<sup>27</sup> He preferred contemporary memoirs to general histories, as the biased views of the interested contemporaries

still gave a more accurate picture than that produced by usually dogmatic historians.<sup>28</sup> In any case, in oratory, he was sure, eloquence was more important than fact. He did not want to draw a fine portrait of his subject, but to show a 'physionomie passionnée dans un tableau d'histoire'.<sup>29</sup> Although he never imitated Thomas, he certainly admired the dramatic setting that the latter gave to his *Eloge de Marc-Aurèle*.<sup>30</sup>

As for the question of truth, when facts would appear to detract from the grandeur of the subject, the secret is for the eulogist to pass over them without excusing his subject, merely mentioning them to show that he is aware of the limits imposed on him by human nature.<sup>31</sup> In his *éloges*, La Harpe therefore tends to gloss over such difficulties. Questions such as Charles V's treatment of Du Guesclin or the horrors that followed his death,<sup>32</sup> Fénelon's *quiétisme*,<sup>33</sup> La Fontaine's *contes*,<sup>34</sup> or the misuse by others of Voltaire's ideas<sup>35</sup> are dealt with summarily. Truth is not to be found in detail, but in the general significance of the great man's life. Faithful to his purpose as a *philosophe*, he tried to show in the man whom he was praising 'tout ce qui peut agrandir en nous l'amour du devoir et l'idée du beau'.<sup>36</sup>

It is as a *philosophe*, therefore, that in his two eulogies of kings, he tried to bring out the qualities of the enlightened monarch. In Charles V, he showed the two-sided image of the restorer of peace and prosperity in France and of the lawgiver,<sup>37</sup> and in Henri IV the warrior against fanaticism as well as the great king.<sup>38</sup> He wrote his *Eloge de Charles V* while he was at Ferney and was, in the words of the Duc de Villars, 'inspiré par le dieu qui y préside'.<sup>39</sup> His crowning at the Académie française was generally seen as a triumph for the *philosophes* over the *dévots*. However, under article vi of the rules of 1671, the Academy had to submit all speeches for a writ of approval by two theologians from the Sorbonne. To d'Alembert's disgust, the clergy managed to have certain anti-clerical passages watered down.<sup>40</sup> The Academy's reply was to stop asking for the theologians' approval, and this led inevitably to the head-on clash over the *Eloge de Fénelon* in 1771.<sup>41</sup>

According to Collé, it was a political consideration that lost La Harpe the prize at the Académie de La Rochelle for his *Eloge de Henri IV*: 'Il s'est trouvé . . . une apostrophe du pauvre cultivateur aux riches inutiles à l'Etat, qui était de la dernière véhémence, et qui paraissait une critique trop vive du gouvernement actuel'.<sup>42</sup> Collé said that La Harpe's censor, Saurin, had cut the passage out, but even as printed, the second part of the *éloge* contains a fairly long attack on those courtiers who were responsible for Sully's disgrace and, at the same time, on 'l'oisiveté, qui dans un état est presque aussi funeste que les crimes'.<sup>43</sup> Petitot, on the other hand, suggests that the author failed to realize that the secret intention of the Academy was not so much to have a panegyric of the king as an apologia of protestantism.<sup>44</sup> Be this as it may, in depicting Voltaire's hero, La Harpe certainly lingered on the fanaticism

of the religious wars of the sixteenth century and on the massacre of St Bartholomew's day.<sup>45</sup>

In similar vein, in the *Eloge de Fénelon*, he set out to show that 'Fénelon est parmi les gens de lettres ce que Henri IV est parmi les rois',<sup>46</sup> or, in other words, yet another symbolic figure for the *philosophes*:

Je dirai aux littérateurs, il eut l'éloquence de l'âme et le naturel des anciens; aux ministres de l'église, il fut le père et le modèle de son peuple; aux controversistes, il fut tolérant, il fut docile; aux courtisans, il ne rechercha point la faveur, et fut heureux dans la disgrâce; aux instituteurs des rois, la nation attendait son bonheur du prince qu'il avait élevé; à tous les hommes, il fut vertueux, il fut aimé.<sup>47</sup>

La Harpe drew a picture of an archbishop who was a leader of virtuous men spread throughout the world and enlightened by his writings,<sup>48</sup> whose memory had the same effect as his life — namely, to make religion attractive.<sup>49</sup> Thus, the underlying theme of the whole work is a defence of an eighteenth-century view of religion: 's'il est des esprits infortunés et superbes qui ne connaissent la religion que par des abus, le peuple ne doit la connaître que par des bienfaits'.<sup>50</sup>

This treatment naturally horrified orthodox Christians and delighted enemies of the Church such as Diderot.<sup>51</sup> The ecclesiastical view was summed up by Father F. P. Gourdin who condemned the eulogist for attributing to Fénelon a tolerance of other religions that he never had, for implicitly rising against the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, for his harsh treatment of Bossuet, for his views on religious fervour, and, above all, for turning Fénelon into a Voltairian: 'Après nous l'avoir offert comme un homme de lettres citoyen, vous deviez nous le montrer comme un philosophe chrétien'.<sup>52</sup> The royal edict, which suppressed the work,<sup>53</sup> complained especially about the description of religious fervour,<sup>54</sup> as well as the other features that displeased Gourdin and his fellow priests. If Marmontel thought that it was an outstanding monument to good taste,<sup>55</sup> and if Voltaire welcomed it as 'le génie du grand siècle passé fondu dans la philosophie du siècle présent',<sup>56</sup> the authorities thought it dangerous.

With Nicholas de Catinat, the subject of La Harpe's last eulogy of a man occupying an important position in the state, he was on safer ground. Placing his *éloge* under the aegis of patriotism, he set out to produce a truly Voltairian picture of Catinat as a man of all trades<sup>57</sup> and again managed to associate him with the cause of the *philosophes*. He admired Catinat's moderation<sup>58</sup> and, above all, the fact that this great soldier saw war as a public crime and as a calamity from which one could only be saved by victory.<sup>59</sup> Catinat put the interests of the state above his own:<sup>60</sup> 'Mais Catinat que rien ne pouvait enivrer ni éblouir, portait dans son cœur ces principes d'ordre, d'équité, de bienveillance universelle, trop oubliés dans son siècle, et plus développés, plus sentis dans le nôtre'.<sup>61</sup>

The same unity of purpose is to be found in the literary *éloges*, although here the general guiding light is, naturally enough, good taste rather than *philosophie*.

The *Eloge de Racine* of 1772, for instance, sets out to prove that Racine did not follow on from Corneille; to stress the uniqueness of his genius, how he is the supreme model for good taste. This is not to say that the ideas of the Enlightenment have no place in these works. In the *Eloge de Racine*, the author allowed an aside — which he suppressed in his old age — in which he praised republics as the natural home of glory and talent, where only true merit was praised.<sup>62</sup>

In his *Eloge de La Fontaine* of 1774, La Harpe wanted to show both the great poet and ‘le bon homme’,<sup>63</sup> but, at the same time, to make clear that the poet loved by children and the common people was also much appreciated by philosophers.<sup>64</sup> In the *Eloge de Voltaire* — his final work in the genre — while showing that, along with Racine, Voltaire is a model for all times in matters of taste,<sup>65</sup> La Harpe discusses the importance of his work as a catalyst to social reform.<sup>66</sup> The abolition by edict in 1779 of the *droit de main-morte* or serfdom was to be celebrated by the Académie française as the subject of its *concours de poésie* in 1780, and it was this that gave rise in the *éloge* to the general digression in praise of Necker’s policies.<sup>67</sup>

Such ideas, however, do not alone account for the success of an *éloge*. For La Harpe, the eulogy of a famous man was the supreme chance for the orator to make full use of his imagination, ‘non pas, il est vrai, celle qui invente, mais celle qui peint et qui émeut’.<sup>68</sup> With the emphasis on description, and a moving description at that, he considered that more than anything else a natural gift of expression and a strong belief in what one has to say are subordinate to the need for method.<sup>69</sup> Like Quintilian,<sup>70</sup> he placed the composition of a speech under three headings: invention, which he limited to the proper understanding of the subject, disposition or the proper placing of material, and elocution or the use of a style suited to the subject.<sup>71</sup> Although a logical progression of ideas is not as important in demonstrative as in deliberative oratory,<sup>72</sup> he still felt that every part of a speech called for care. If fixed divisions did not have to be clearly marked, at least the orator should make sure that the public’s attention is drawn to the principal features of his speech on which all the rest should depend.<sup>73</sup> In all oratory, the introduction or exordium should have few personal reflexions and is best based on a universal truth.<sup>74</sup> He himself usually limits this section in his *éloges* to an opening paragraph expressing his own admiration for his hero, followed by a succinct description of how he will praise him. This introduction needs to be clear and to the point,<sup>75</sup> and, in the same way, especially in demonstrative oratory, the conclusion has to be kept short and straightforward.<sup>76</sup> In the body of the speech, however, he frowned on too quick a flow of ideas;<sup>77</sup> the orator’s judgement determines the right amount of development called for,<sup>78</sup> leaving ample space for feelings, variety and grace.<sup>79</sup>

In all but two of La Harpe’s *éloges*, the divisions between the various parts of the *discours* are clearly marked, showing that the strict discipline of *rhétorique* still lurked in his subconscious mind. His most common plan is to divide the

body of the speech into two halves and, while letting the general movement of the speech follow the chronological order of the life of the hero, find two dominant themes around which to build these halves so that they balance and complement each other.

In his *Eloge de Charles V*, he announces this plan in the introduction and then devotes the first part of the speech to tracing the misfortunes of France under civil war and Du Guesclin's fight against the English. In the second, he draws a picture of Charles as a lawgiver and reformer. A certain similarity of plan appears in his *Eloge de Henri IV*. In an apostrophe to Henri in the introduction, he states: 'Je raconterai ta vie: je ne connais point d'autre manière de louer ce qui est grand'.<sup>80</sup> So, in part one, he passes in review Henri's simple life in Béarn — seen as the opposite to the soft living of the Royal court in Paris — before dwelling on the horrors of the religious wars. In part two, he considers Henri's work as a king, leading up to a final contemplation of his tomb at Saint-Denis. Here, Sully occupies the place that was held in the earlier work by Du Guesclin.

In the *Eloge de Fénelon*, he first deals with Fénelon when he was in favour at court. He outlines Fénelon's education of the dauphin and discusses Fénelon's literary work, especially *Télémaque*. The second half of the speech is devoted to Fénelon's fall from favour and his persecution by Bossuet. He compares the two and tries to show the reasonable qualities of Fénelon as a man of religion.

The same technique characterizes his *Eloge de La Fontaine*. In part one, he sets out to show how La Fontaine's *bonhomie* and original manner pervade his work, and dwells on the dramatic qualities of the fables, on the writer's style, and on his common sense. In the second section, devoted to the man, the eulogist talks about La Fontaine's essential goodness, his association with Lully, and how he is honoured by posterity. However, as in La Harpe's other literary *éloges*, the life of the hero is less fully dealt with than in those devoted to men of action. Reflecting his essentially non-relative approach to literature, he maintained that 'l'éloge d'un écrivain est dans ses ouvrages'.<sup>81</sup>

It is perhaps for this reason that he departed from his usual plan of sections in his *Eloge de Racine*, which is a major piece of criticism. Supporting the text with copious notes, he discusses in turn Racine's superiority over Corneille, the unique qualities of his theatre, the quarrel with Pradon over *Phèdre*, and finally how Racine is the model of good taste.

The *Eloge de Catinat* also shows a departure from the bipartite technique. La Harpe follows Catinat's career without interruption. Still showing the influence of Voltaire's *Siècle de Louis XIV*, he gives a general picture of the political situation of Europe at the time. He then traces Catinat's military career, before dealing with his difficulties at Versailles. He reviews his friendship with Vauban and his military reforms. We witness his disgrace under Villeroy. The *éloge* ends with his retirement and his calm and frugal life in old age.

In contrast, the *Eloge de Voltaire* is divided into three sections. In section one — which is supposed to be a general discussion of Voltaire's literary activities — La Harpe echoes the taste of his time by talking, above all, about Voltaire's theatre, stressing its superiority over that of Crébillon, and placing Voltaire alongside Racine. In section two — as we have already pointed out — Voltaire is discussed as a guiding light for reform, and in the closing section of this work, written two years after the subject's death, the disciple defends his master's memory and his intellectual heritage. He draws a picture of peace, of the patriarch's finding refuge at Ferney from the literary squabbles that had plagued him for so long. The *éloge* ends with its author reminding his audience of his own debt to Voltaire.

In each *éloge*, in accordance with his views on oratory, La Harpe attempts to suit his style to the subject.<sup>82</sup> His desire for dramatic effect, for instance, would appear to be most in evidence in his first two *éloges*, when dealing with the majesty of kings. He then uses a great deal of apostrophe and antithesis.<sup>83</sup> On the other hand, the sentences are longer, and the movement of the prose is slower, in the *Eloge de Fénelon*, as the discussion is on a deeper plane.<sup>84</sup> In the *Eloge de Racine*, after a fairly sober assessment of Racine's qualities, La Harpe's admiration leads him to exhort his audience.<sup>85</sup> His *Eloge de La Fontaine* is written in a style that tries to recapture the simplicity of the subject, just as that of the *Eloge de Catinat* seems to be influenced by the latter's moderation.<sup>86</sup> In his *Eloge de Voltaire* the disciple adopts an exultant tone to celebrate his master.<sup>87</sup>

The essential point to remember in oratory is that the total effect of a speech is more important than a moment of brilliance, and La Harpe thought that maxims and other sententious utterances tended to disrupt the flow of the speech.<sup>88</sup> He was wary of imagery,<sup>89</sup> and it is rare in his *éloges*. He ruled out jokes,<sup>90</sup> but was also afraid of pedantry.<sup>91</sup> In deliberative oratory, he will even feel that ideas are more important than fine expressions,<sup>92</sup> and he could on occasions disapprove of the classical period, convinced that great orators, aiming at concision, made a greater impression on their public by expressing their ideas in short sentences.<sup>93</sup> The secret of true eloquence is to be straightforward but elegant, to speak for everybody, without speaking like everybody.<sup>94</sup>

He tries to produce the same effect of simplicity in his first two attempts at deliberative oratory, *Des Malheurs de la Guerre et des Avantages de la Paix* and *Combien le Génie des grands écrivains influe sur l'esprit de leur siècle*. Although shorter than the *éloges*, they show the same simple dichotomy in their composition. In the first speech, the misfortunes of war are opposed in the first section to the advantages of peace in the second. In the second speech, in similar fashion, he compares the effects of ancient writers on their time before showing the same effects in more recent epochs.

He was aware that the main difficulty for the orator in a speech on war was that the subject was so well-worn.<sup>95</sup> However necessary it still was to moralize over war, he did not dare describe it, since such descriptions were themselves hackneyed and no longer interested the public.<sup>96</sup> Instead, he set out to show the effects of war on society, especially on those who had suffered most from it, through losing their livelihood. In so doing he was echoing widespread feelings in France as the speech was written only three years after the end of the Seven Years' War. However, like most of the *éloges*, it was also intended to appeal to the more radically-minded members of the Académie française. It is dedicated to the *philosophes*, the friends of mankind,<sup>97</sup> to whom the orator looks for hope of reform.<sup>98</sup> The underlying theme is, therefore, not war itself, but an eighteenth-century view of kingship: 'Et l'homme qui dans les forêts mourait du moins à son gré, n'a-t-il rien reçu de tant d'institutions sociales et politiques, que des chefs pour le conduire à la mort'.<sup>99</sup> Thus, calling on kings to remember that their greatest glory is to make their subjects happy,<sup>100</sup> La Harpe first shows how war ruins economy and administration, and how the peasants are the first to suffer from it; secondly, how it ruins commerce, making the merchants the second people to experience it; and how all too often the king is the last person to feel its ills. In the picture of peace, he advocates wealth in every domain and dialogues with those who would dispute its advantages. He reiterates once more the claim that the king's first task is to work for the happiness of his people, praises Henri IV, condemns the fanaticism of the crusades, and ends with a prayer to the god of reason.

The same spirit animates *Combien le génie des grands écrivains influe sur l'esprit de leur siècle*, which was written at Ferney. While setting out to trace a rapid history of the influence of the educated throughout the ages, the work is in fact an expression of Voltairian intellectual aristocracy. The central idea is that only intellect lies beyond the power of tyranny;<sup>101</sup> that this quality is best used by the wise man who combats prejudice and error<sup>102</sup> with the ultimate aim of seeing the general improvement of mankind.<sup>103</sup> Before leading up to a final exhortation to young genius to dare all, the orator once more gets in an attack on fanaticism, tied this time to praise for Montesquieu, Catherine the Great and Voltaire himself. La Harpe said that he failed to win a prize for this work at the Académie de Marseille, since he was excluded by the rules, having already won the poetry prize for the same year.<sup>104</sup> Boulard was to maintain that the author withdrew from the competition in deference to Chamfort,<sup>105</sup> but the real reason was probably given by the Duc de Villars: 'Je l'aurais vu couronner avec bien du plaisir à notre académie de Marseille pour un très beau discours, si on n'eût craint d'irriter encore plus le fanatisme en lui montrant le fidèle et énergique tableau de son délire et de ses horreurs'.<sup>106</sup> Provincial academies did not have as secretaries such energetic partisans of change as Duclos and d'Alembert.

This assiduous expression of fidelity to radical views undoubtedly helped La Harpe in his path to the Académie française, and the bitterness of his enemies at the news of his election had some justification. In his *Discours de réception*, however, he made little if any concession to them:

Mes premiers regards se sont tournés vers cette classe d'hommes choisis, qui me donnait une idée plus noble de mon état et de mes travaux, vers ceux chez qui j'ai cru voir la dignité des lettres conservée comme un dépôt dont ils sont responsables à la nation, et qui fait partie de leur propre gloire. J'ai regardé comme le but de mes efforts cette adoption qui en devient aujourd'hui la récompense.<sup>107</sup>

Tradition demanded that this speech be filled with praise, but La Harpe felt that it was of greater interest to embark on a general discussion of a topic of more widespread appeal<sup>108</sup> and took as his central theme the idea — possibly inspired by Quintilian<sup>109</sup> — that a man of letters is most at home in the society of his colleagues.<sup>110</sup> This overshadows, and pushes to the end of the speech, the *compliments d'usage* for the two men that he was replacing, Colardeau and Saint-Aignan.

Announcing his plan clearly and linking the subject to his election to the Académie française, he first attempts to define true men of letters. They were those who throughout Europe were bound together by mutual esteem and enlightenment, and love for humanity.<sup>111</sup> They were noted for their admiration for Virgil, Racine, Tacitus, Montesquieu and Fénelon. In the strict habit of balancing ideas, he then contrasts the natural desire for solitude and the need for company that all men experience. After a short picture of the writer in his retreat, whence rises 'la voix du génie qui va se faire entendre au monde',<sup>112</sup> we are shown the advantages and disadvantages of fashionable society which are then compared to the supreme benefits to be gained from meeting one's fellow writers. Fashionable society can teach amenity, which should characterize all social intercourse and help writers to temper the austerity of their writings.<sup>113</sup> However, fashionable society only wants to shine and neglects truth. It is contact with other writers that rekindles 'dans les âmes le feu du génie de l'amour des arts'.<sup>114</sup>

There are 'des couleurs sinistres [qu'il interdit à ses] pinceaux',<sup>115</sup> he admits, and he refuses to discuss personal disappointments and how he has been a victim of envy. Nevertheless, it is as an example of a writer who has escaped envy that he manages to work in praise for Colardeau, claiming that he did not have to alter what he said of Colardeau on earlier occasions.<sup>116</sup> The passage on Colardeau, however, is mainly devoted to the intentionally pathetic picture of Colardeau's dying before being able to take his place at the Academy:

Lorsque vos suffrages, qu'il n'avait brigüés que par son mérite, vinrent le chercher sur le lit de douleur, qu'il ne quittait presque plus, vous vous souvenez, messieurs, de quelle joie pure il parut rempli, et combien l'expression en était aimable et touchante. On vous porta sa lettre de remerciement,

et vous crûtes entendre le chant du cygne. Son âme semblait se ranimer un moment pour la gloire et la reconnaissance; mais ce dernier rayon allait bientôt s'éteindre dans la tombe, et son nom inscrit dans vos fastes, était donc tout ce qui devait vous rester de lui!<sup>117</sup>

This elegiac tone is soon replaced by one of triumph. He uses the long life of Saint-Aignan to run quickly over the three reigns that it spanned and lead up to praise for Louis XVI, 'la vertu sur le trône, assise à côté des grâces'.<sup>118</sup> The speech ends with an almost prophetic picture of Voltaire's coming to Paris:

Quel moment, messieurs, si nous pouvions le voir, à la fin de sa carrière, jouir à la fois de sa gloire et de sa patrie! s'il pouvait, sur ce théâtre qu'il a tant de fois embelli de ses chefs-d'œuvre, s'avancer courbé sous l'amas de ses couronnes; répondre par des larmes de joie aux cris de la France assemblée et plus heureux que Sophocle, survivre encore à son triomphe.<sup>119</sup>

The work was not seen to be particularly original,<sup>120</sup> but, allowing for a certain exaggeration, called for by the occasion, it is nevertheless carefully constructed, with the transition from one idea to another carefully managed in a particularly well-phased progression from discussion to the more intense eloquence of praise. If much of the speech seemed a little self-satisfied to La Harpe's enemies,<sup>121</sup> who could not accept his rhetorical claims to modesty while he implicitly associated himself with great men,<sup>122</sup> at least they could not deny that it had a certain elegance.

These three speeches were all that he wrote in the way of true deliberative oratory before the Revolution. Once he became a member of the Academy, his only platforms for public speaking were either the Academy itself, as when he gave a speech as director in 1782 on the purpose of the institution and its prizes,<sup>123</sup> or, beginning in January 1786, the Lycée. One must remember that the major part of the *Lycée ou cours de littérature ancienne et moderne* was originally intended to be read aloud,<sup>124</sup> and, while he had to agree not to read or recite from memory the lectures that he prepared for the Ecoles normales,<sup>125</sup> at the Lycée itself it was essentially part of his method to write down what he had to say beforehand.<sup>126</sup> His lectures can, therefore, be regarded as carefully prepared speeches.

This does not mean that each section of the *Lycée* is a formal oration, although parts of the work — notably the introduction on the general notions of writing — are eloquent pleas for good taste. It does, however, explain why he should have regarded as *discours* works that are little more than literary *exposés*. The *Discours prononcé à l'ouverture du Lycée, le 3 frimaire an IX*, apart from a few personal remarks to celebrate his return to the Lycée after an absence of four years and some praise of Bonaparte, is really an introduction to his translation of Tasso. It was printed merely to prevent misquotations.<sup>127</sup> The so-called *Discours de l'état des lettres en Europe depuis la fin du siècle qui a suivi celui d'Auguste jusqu'au règne de Louis XIV* is a link between parts one and two of

the *Lycée*,<sup>128</sup> in which the author hurries over the periods of literature that he does not intend to deal with at length, and is more a catalogue of human achievement in the Dark and Middle Ages than a proper speech. Although first printed separately, it was later placed in its proper place in the *Lycée*.<sup>129</sup>

Another *discours* to be found in this work<sup>130</sup> is *De la guerre déclarée par nos derniers tyrans à la raison, à la morale, aux lettres et aux arts*. Given shortly after *Thermidor*, it is far more of a speech in its own right, not fitting into the plan of the *Lycée* as a whole.<sup>131</sup> Although rather formless, being merely a 'résumé succinct',<sup>132</sup> it marks its author's first public atonement for having remained silent under the Terror, and is an earnest exhortation to Frenchmen to cast aside all that the Terror implied:

Vous tous qui avez un cœur, vous qui avez pleuré sur tant de crimes, pleurez sur celui qui les renferme tous, sur l'entière dégradation de la nature humaine en France, et au dix-huitième siècle! pleurez . . .<sup>133</sup>

Elsewhere under the Revolution, he became an active if not an important orator, first in 1790, when defending authors' rights, then in 1795, in the troubles leading up to *Vendémiaire*. Yet, not only was the Revolution to tax La Harpe's moral strength, but it was also to be a severe strain on his aesthetic judgement, especially in questions of oratory. He was torn between the constrained elegance of Academic oratory and the unbridled excesses of the oratory of the Revolution. He was forced to admit that most Academic speakers were eloquent moralists rather than true orators,<sup>134</sup> and he had always claimed that deliberative oratory could only really flourish in a republic.<sup>135</sup> It had now come to life in 1789,<sup>136</sup> but he remained wary of the misuses of language in the name of Liberty.<sup>137</sup> His first article published under the Revolution<sup>138</sup> was an attack on Mirabeau's habit of using a favourable adjective with a noun that could only mean something evil, such as *crime héroïque* and *vertueux délateurs*:<sup>139</sup>

Je vois déjà s'élever un édifice oratoire de figures violentes, d'apostrophes hardies et de maximes impérieuses. Heureusement, nous autres, un peu initiés dans le secret de la Rhétorique, nous connaissons un peu ces grandes ressources, et je pourrais sur ce texte [de la Liberté], faire ma tirade comme un autre. Mais j'ai toujours cru qu'il fallait laisser aux orateurs du barreau cet art facile et commun, qui ne consiste qu'à montrer un côté des objets. La véritable éloquence, celle qui convient aux grandes assemblées, consiste au contraire à embrasser les objets sous tous les rapports, et à saisir le point où est la vérité: or, quand on m'aura étalé tout ce qu'on peut dire de plus gravement sentencieux sur l'importance de tout ce qui touche à la Liberté; quand on se sera bien passionné pour la chose ou pour le mot, j'approuverai les sentences, selon la tournure, je louerai le pathétique selon sa valeur, et je ramènerai la question par cette seule parole: à l'application.<sup>140</sup>

He particularly disapproved of those who were prepared to slander their enemies for the sake of dramatic effect.<sup>141</sup>

This expression of what Revolutionary oratory should consist of was not, however, based on experience. It was now no longer a question of reiterating praise for an already well-loved figure, of exposing widely-held ideas on an overworked theme, or of cloaking compliments in elegant praise, but of convincing a quite possibly hostile audience with the only language that it could understand. In neither of his two speeches on author's copyright is La Harpe to be noted for giving both sides of the question, and in both he turns the rather complex and specialized subject of rules and regulations into a matter of patriotism.

In the *Adresse des Auteurs dramatiques à l'Assemblée nationale*, which precedes the petition and its five propositions for a law to guarantee authors' rights, he sets out to gain the sympathy of the deputies by stressing how the dramatists, under Voltaire's lead, turned the theatre into a weapon for freeing the oppressed, and thus won themselves the hatred of the tyrants. Before the Revolution, the theatre had become, he claimed, the only place where the slightest expression of a desire for freedom had been preserved:

Mais aussi que de soins, que d'efforts pour l'anéantir! combien le despotisme en était effrayé! que d'inquisiteurs à gages occupés à le rassurer! quelle servile industrie exercée à calculer l'effet d'un vers, l'intention d'un mot! On eût dit que ce qu'il y avait de plus bas dans la pensée des tyrans et des esclaves, fut constamment employé à deviner ce qu'il pouvait y avoir de noble et d'honnête dans la pensée des âmes libres.<sup>142</sup>

He implied that even if the Comédiens français no longer had their exclusive privilege, their refusal to give the authors their proper rights was indicative of how they belonged to the old order and stood in the way of liberty and equality.

These points are carried to their logical conclusion in the *Discours sur la liberté du théâtre* — his only speech as a *jacobin*. Once more beginning with a general statement in which he claims to speak not as an author but as a citizen, he again sets out to prove that 'l'intérêt particulier des auteurs dramatiques s'identifie si évidemment et si heureusement avec l'intérêt général',<sup>143</sup> and insinuates that, if the actors had their way, it would be 'le triomphe de l'aristocratie et du despotisme sur l'esprit patriotique et sur la liberté',<sup>144</sup> by referring to the actors' quarrel with the *commune*, and by maintaining that it was on aristocratic grounds that nationalist plays by Belloy were put on at the time of the *états généraux*.

Man of letters that he was, he still stooped to revolutionary jargon, and, if he did not indulge in personal calumny, cloaked in the calm of these early revolutionary speeches, there is all the inuendo and veiled allusions to opponents as enemies of the people that were to become the stock-in-trade of popular oratory, and which he pretended to despise. Moreover, he would appear to have progressed with the Revolution, for in a speech given at the Théâtre de la République in 1793 — and which has disappeared — the audience heard 'le despotisme

traité comme il le mérite'.<sup>145</sup> In oratory, as in other fields, La Harpe's conversion was to call for a radical change of position.

After *Thermidor*, echoing public sentiment,<sup>146</sup> he began a monumental *Commentaire sur la langue révolutionnaire*,<sup>147</sup> which was to remain unfinished at his death. To use his expression, as much as any act of the Revolution, language had become a 'monstruosité',<sup>148</sup> the most powerful instrument for general perversion.<sup>149</sup> He reiterated his despair at the revolutionaries' love of slander,<sup>150</sup> which — now turned against him — had become 'ces imputations odieuses d'*aristocratie* et de *royalisme*'.<sup>151</sup> Insisting that a proper proportion and use of style was not only a social convention, but was essential to the protection of freedom,<sup>152</sup> he defined revolutionary style as a 'style à contresens',<sup>153</sup> which consisted of taking common words and making them signify the opposite of what was their normally accepted meaning.<sup>154</sup> He claimed that the Revolutionaries were presumptuous schoolboys who did not appreciate the value of the words that they used<sup>155</sup> and misused them,<sup>156</sup> while indulging in ranting, redundant appellations and generally vacuous remarks.<sup>157</sup> Their invective was as empty of real meaning as it was immoderate.<sup>158</sup> Just as he was to hold the *philosophes* responsible for much else in the Revolution, he was to make out that they had set the tone with their pomposity, their arrogance and their trickery, and their pedantic and turgid language.<sup>159</sup>

As a counter-revolutionary, however, he was hardly less virulent than before. Even his lectures were marked by outbursts of fervour that had little to do with literature: 'Opprobre et exécution! (et puisse ma voix retentir, pour nous justifier, jusqu'aux extrémités du monde et jusqu'aux dernières générations)! Opprobre et exécution sur les monstres qui, en violant les tombeaux des morts qu'ils dépouillaient, en refusaient aux victimes qu'ils égorgaient. Je sais que ceci est une digression; mais rien n'est déplacé, rien n'est perdu toutes les fois qu'il s'agit d'élever un cri de vengeance contre ceux qui, pendant si longtemps, ont élevé impunément un cri de guerre contre l'espèce humaine toute entière'.<sup>160</sup>

From what remains of the speeches that he composed when he entered the fight against the Convention in 1795, we can see that La Harpe now relied for dramatic effect upon reminding his audience of the urgency of the situation, and he took the language of his opponents and showed how empty it was of meaning:

Sachez surtout ce que vos plats démagogues se gardent bien de vous dire, et ce qui n'est que trop vrai: sachez que l'Europe humiliée par vos victoires, est consolée et vengée de reste, en regardant avec le sourire du plus profond dédain et de la plus insultante pitié, ce que vous appelez votre *liberté*.<sup>161</sup>

Using all known oratorical devices such as apostrophe, repetition, antithesis, suspension, enumeration, and rhetorical questions, he paints a sinister picture of danger and pours forth his scorn for his enemies:

Et que sera-ce si les tyrans sont d'une espèce à inspirer non-seulement la haine, mais le mépris qu'ils méritent? Ouvrez leur cœur, et vous y lirez l'arrêt de mort écrit contre tout ce qui vaut mieux qu'eux, contre quiconque ne les rassure pas contre eux-mêmes en s'abaissant à les flatter. Et croyez-vous qu'il n'y ait plus de ces tyrans-là? qu'il n'y ait plus de ces hommes tout prêts à crier encore dans l'occasion, *A moi, sans-culottes?* . . . Vous qui savez ce que signifie ce cri . . . ne l'oubliez pas.

Et que sera-ce encore, si par une suite de circonstances inouïes qui n'ont pas encore cessé, l'idée de l'incarcération présente en même temps celle du massacre? . . . Quand un homme sera-t-il au-dessus des frayeurs de tout ce qui l'environne, d'un père, d'une mère, d'une femme, de ses enfants, de ses amis? Voilà l'homme le plus ferme anéanti; et n'est-ce pas le vœu des tyrans?<sup>162</sup>

For all his care over words, in politics he replaced the studied elegance of his academic oratory with the sweeping movement of strife.

It was his misfortune to waste his natural gift for eloquent prose on matters of only relative importance, be they the dry subjects of the *concours académiques*, where there was no place for a fresh or novel idea, or the heated invective of polemics whose interest for posterity is limited by the day-to-day nature of the events which incited them. Moreover, taste in oratory as in other genres has changed. The modern reader can appreciate the grace with which the ideas are expressed in these speeches, but experiences an almost instinctive desire to brush aside the oratorical devices which appear as a surplus embroidery on a rather fine clear flow of language. Nevertheless some of La Harpe's *éloges* — by far and away the most important examples of his oratory — are of value as works of criticism. In some ways, they prepared the ground for the *Lycée*. Both in his *éloges* and in the *Lycée*, he praises and defends his heroes with an eloquence inspired by sincerity.

CHAPTER XIV

PHILOSOPHICAL DIALOGUES, PAMPHLETS  
AND APOLOGIAS

Parallel to much of La Harpe's oratory, there is a whole series of other works which share the distinction of being devoted above all to the expression of political or religious ideas. Obviously inspired by the example of both Diderot and Voltaire, his very first attempt at expressing such ideas was in a form of dialogue. In the *Dialogue entre Alexandre et un solitaire du Caucase*, first published in 1765, Alexander, caught in a storm, seeks refuge in the cave of a hermit, referred to as the *philosophe*. In this interlude between battles, the vain glory of the conqueror is opposed to the inner richness and true happiness of the simple man. Apart from the setting of the scene with details such as the old man worrying about his vegetables and offering Alexander some of his soup, the whole work is taken up with the dialogue.

The serious tone is rather more reminiscent of Diderot in his shorter *entretiens* or of Voltaire in parts of the *Dictionnaire philosophique* than of the latter in his *contes*. La Harpe would appear at this time to have felt safer in satire and gentle bantering when writing in verse. He always found the imaginary dialogue tempting, but lacking the versatility of, say, Diderot in his longer works, he was only too aware of the difficulties of achieving a proper balance between the arguments of the interlocutors.<sup>1</sup> Here, Alexander's claims to grandeur make little headway against the all-too-powerful arguments of the hermit. Refusing to leave his cave for the honours of the court, the hermit displays the same common sense and almost escapist attitude as Martin in *Candide*: 'Non, Alexandre, mon bonheur est dans ma caverne; que m'importent les maux de l'univers?'<sup>2</sup> In spite of the very definite expression of the views of the Enlightenment, the conversation itself remains rather inconclusive. When the sun reappears, Alexander rejoins his troops: 'Il était rêveur, et commençait à s'interroger sur ses conquêtes. On lui annonça que l'ennemi paraissait. La trompette sonna, et il oublia tout.'<sup>3</sup> We are shown a short episode without a real beginning or end.

This rather fragmentary nature is repeated in *Le Couvent des Camaldules*, written about 1770.<sup>4</sup> We again meet a hermit, but this time it is a man who does not know happiness. The author is out walking at sunset in the woods near Yerres: 'Jamais ces bois ne m'avaient paru plus beaux; il me semblait qu'entour de moi tout devait goûter le repos et le bonheur.'<sup>5</sup> This joyful vision of nature is,

however, destroyed when he starts talking to a solitary monk. The monk is in every way the opposite of the philosopher-hermit. Like Mélanie, he has been forced to take vows by his ambitious family, although here it is the mother and not the father who has been hard-hearted. Echoing his *Réponse d'un solitaire de La Trappe*, La Harpe shows a monk who has become embittered to a point where he has only one sad mission in life: 'Je jurai dans mon cœur que tous ceux que j'aurais occasion d'entretenir sauraient de moi les dangers, la honte et les horreurs de la vie monastique'.<sup>6</sup>

Although the form of this dialogue is freer than that of the earlier one, the theme still leaves little place for proper narrative or description. Nature is expressed in La Harpe's usual terms with the approach of a storm, which makes the monk hurry off and leave the author to reflect on his misfortune and — in a manner reminiscent of La Harpe's *héroïdes* — address the deist's god for an answer: 'Mon âme était profondément triste. Je vis que le malheur, quand il est extrême, finit par rendre le cœur dur, et que les plaintes du désespoir deviennent des blasphèmes'.<sup>7</sup> There is little to be said about these two works except that they lack the wit and charm which make similar productions by Voltaire so readable. They are very short and are too obviously vehicles for the expression of a given idea.

An attempt at a playful tone is, on the other hand, to be found in *Oui ou non*, a supposed conversation between an uncommitted Parisian and a foreigner called *le bon sens* over the decrees of August and September 1795. It illustrates particularly well how, even after his conversion, La Harpe still looked to Voltaire for literary form. Like the latter on England, he was to state here that the history of the Revolution was to be written by executioners.<sup>8</sup> La Harpe's foreigner has the open-mindedness of Voltaire's Babouc and other travellers. Perhaps out of respect for the moderate American republic, and vaguely echoing Voltaire's *Ingénu*, the foreigner is an uninformed and hence unprejudiced American: 'Je viens de loin, d'une petite habitation, isolée dans le nord de l'Amérique, où je ne communiquais avec personne, et je suis venu par mer jusqu'au Havre, j'ignore tout'.<sup>9</sup>

The Parisian is quite unable to explain what is happening in the Convention, nor can the foreigner understand the deputies' language, but then neither can the French, mystified by 'l'absence de toute loi, proclamée en LOI par un corps législatif'.<sup>10</sup> Denying the foreigner's idea that what France has had for six years is civil war, the Parisian ingenuously claims that this has been a magnificent Revolution with such marvellous inventions as the guillotine — a 'célérité destructive' which is only one of the wonderful discoveries of the time.<sup>11</sup> When the Parisian tells the foreigner that the deputies have condemned in advance as rebels and enemies of the state all those who would not vote to re-elect them, the latter asks naively: 'Ne m'avez-vous pas dit que par votre constitution le peuple était souverain; et comment le souverain peut-il être rebelle?'<sup>12</sup>

This syllogism, while far from reflecting the author's real opinion, has enough truth in it to make the situation amusing. Here, even if the manner is a little stilted and artificial, we can see the disciple of Voltaire using wit as an effective weapon. His exasperation with the Convention soon turns from direct irony to affected despair. After the dialogue, there is a post-scriptum in which the voting figures are analysed, and the work ends with the abrupt cry: 'La plume tombe des mains'.<sup>13</sup> Having poured out ridicule, what more can the writer say?

Another fairly successful attempt at a witty dramatic setting is to be found in the *Prédiction* or *Prophétie de Cazotte*, a work which was much admired by Sainte-Beuve.<sup>14</sup> It certainly caters for La Harpe's taste for satire. It purports to tell of a dinner party given at the beginning of 1788 for Cazotte, La Harpe, Chamfort, Condorcet, Vicq-d'Azir, Nicolaï, Bailly, Malesherbes, Roucher, and the Duchesse de Grammont. Each character is clearly drawn, and the work is not lacking in mordant humour. The subject of conversation has been the *révolution des esprits* and the inroads made against the Church: 'On conclut que la Révolution ne tardera pas à se consommer; qu'il faut absolument que la superstition et le fanatisme fassent place à la philosophie, et l'on est à calculer la probabilité de l'époque et quels seront ceux de la société qui verront le règne de la raison'.<sup>15</sup> However, in the midst of this mirth, Jacques Cazotte, the author of the *Diable amoureux* and other mystic tales, has remained silent. When provoked by the others, he tells each of them in turn what fate awaits them — poison for Condorcet, opened veins for Chamfort and Vicq-d'Azir, and, with the exception of La Harpe, the scaffold for the rest: 'Vous serez alors gouvernés par la seule philosophie, par la seule raison'.<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, this prophecy is not to be seen merely as that of a mystic. It had been self-evident for anyone prepared to see the dangers inherent in a society corrupted by the *philosophes*:

Si vous en êtes encore à ne voir dans ce que nous avons vu que ce qu'on appelle *une révolution*; si vous croyez que celle-là est comme une autre, c'est que vous n'avez ni lu, ni réfléchi, ni senti. En ce cas, la prophétie même, *si elle avait eu lieu*, ne serait qu'un miracle de plus perdu pour vous comme pour les autres, et c'est là le plus grand mal.<sup>17</sup>

It is a common enough theme in La Harpe's post-revolutionary work,<sup>18</sup> but it is not always expressed with such concision and art. The author's personal involvement brings life to the dialogue, and the vivacity of the work in general makes us regret that he did not write more in the genre.

His other polemic writings are not as entertaining. His pamphlets, for instance, tend either to back up a particular speech and deal with the single dominant question raised in that speech, or to develop into rather long-winded political treatises. The plan adopted in the first type is best seen in the petition following the *Adresse des auteurs dramatiques* and in the introduction to the *Acte de garantie*, following the short address, entitled *Réflexions préliminaires*.

In both these works, the principles of the questions involved — authors' rights and civil liberties — are laid out in straightforward fashion so as to introduce clearly proposals for reform. The *Réponse aux observations pour les comédiens français*<sup>19</sup> and, like the latter work, contains long quotations of formal agreements for plays.

Two longer pamphlets are *La Liberté de la presse défendue . . . contre Chénier* and *Le Salut public*. The first of these is a reply to M. J. Chénier's report to the Convention on 2 May 1795 (12 floréal an III) and, in particular, to article v of Chénier's projected law for censorship. Written in haste,<sup>20</sup> the tone of this brochure is extremely harsh. Calling Chénier one of the presumptuous school-boys of the Convention<sup>21</sup> and thus associating him with those whom he attacked in his campaign against Revolutionary language, La Harpe sets out to prove the dangers of Chénier's proposals:

le rapport est une déclamation insignifiante et souvent ridicule, . . . le décret consacre l'arbitraire le plus tyrannique, et ne tiendrait à rien moins, par ses conséquences, qu'à nous ramener sous le régime des décemvirs, qui ont été les tyrans de la pensée avant de l'être de la France.<sup>22</sup>

Insisting throughout on the revolutionary and thus meaningless but dangerous language of Chénier's report, he counters ten points brought up by the latter, denying his claims to the existence of a royalist and *émigré* plot, insisting on the right to one's own opinions, expressing horror at the idea of deportation, and discussing at greater length the implications of the above-mentioned article v. Considering the immoderate tone of this brochure, it is indeed surprising to see how Chénier was nevertheless to remain one of La Harpe's main protectors against authority.

*Le Salut public* is a much more moderate piece of work. Written some time after the riots and other troubles of Prairial an III and before the disturbances of Vendémiaire an IV, it reflects a mood of greater calm and confidence. In essence, it is a reply to P. C. L. Baudin's bill to allow an automatic return to office of a third of the deputies in the new legislature of the autumn of 1795. At the same time, it develops into a discussion on civil liberty in more general terms. Baudin's idea that the extension of the deputies' term of office is in the interest of *le salut public* is merely indicative of the Convention's general misunderstanding of the term.<sup>23</sup>

Speaking in the name of truth and common sense,<sup>24</sup> he is convinced that he shows extreme caution in all he says,<sup>25</sup> but the main line of his attack on the Convention as a whole is rather rigid, with again a certain trace of bitterness:

Ce n'est qu'en tenant à la main les pièces originales et authentiques que la postérité pourra croire qu'à la face de l'Europe qui a les yeux sur nous, des législateurs aient pu tenir un pareil langage. Il serait trop long de rapporter

tous les discours; ce serait une trop grande perte de temps et de papier. Mais en voici un résumé de la plus rigoureuse fidélité, et je défie qui que ce soit de le contester.<sup>26</sup>

When, however, he comes to Baudin himself, he tries not to offend the man. Insisting on his appreciation of the latter's talents as a writer, he points out that he usually admires his ability to reason<sup>27</sup> and regrets that for once he has been led astray.<sup>28</sup> The critic has returned to his first duty, which is to examine the text. If Baudin was not satisfied,<sup>29</sup> at least La Harpe could show how little personal abuse he had brought into the criticism of Baudin's report.<sup>30</sup>

Yet a tone of detached impartiality is no more typical of La Harpe's political writings than it is of his writings on questions of taste. Just as in literature, his personal involvement in politics was to lead to a form of militant crusade for the very defence of civilization. He became a fierce defender of the faith as well as a tyrannical protector of the arts. It was the persecution of the non-juring priests and their deportation to Cayenne that led him to publish part of his abortive *Commentaire sur la langue révolutionnaire* separately in 1797 under the title of *Du fanatisme dans la langue révolutionnaire, ou de la persécution suscitée par les barbares du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle contre la religion chrétienne et ses ministres*.<sup>31</sup> In this publication, he set out to show that for fifty years the only true fanaticism that France had known had been that of irreligion.<sup>32</sup> Divided into thirty sections, it deals first with the general abuses to be found in religion, philosophy and language. Defending the non-juring priests, it tries to limit the importance of the Vendée insurrection as a danger to the Republic now that the main disturbances are over. It lingers on the horror of the Terror and the persecution of the clergy. It shows how all this stems from the ideas and language of the *philosophes* and calls for an end to revolution with the restoration of worship in obedience to the designs of Providence. In true polemic vein, it condemns above all public crimes committed in the name of a public authority.<sup>33</sup>

A work of similar purpose, but dealing with religion in more general terms, is the *Apologie de la religion*, again possibly based on material gathered for the *Commentaire sur la langue révolutionnaire*. In what exists of this work,<sup>34</sup> the author first claims to prove man's natural dependence on God in the light of the strictly defined philosophical concepts of necessity and contingency.<sup>35</sup> Satisfied in his own mind with the conclusions reached in his *prolegomena*, he then launches out on an attack on heretics and atheists and on the credulity of the *philosophes*, before expounding his belief in a divine order of things whose earthly manifestations or miracles are recorded in an unbroken tradition by both the Old and the New Testaments. In a similar way, the prophecies of the Bible are seen to be linked to one another and to prove each other with the birth of Christ.

Yet, as the times called for answers to the *philosophes* rather than theological dissertations, in a work where the title alone is a reproach against the apostasy

of the times,<sup>36</sup> the arguments are based on the convert's own reactions to the gospel, the psalms and the scriptures,<sup>37</sup> on the grounds that feeling gives sight to the soul.<sup>38</sup> As for the *philosophes*, he maintained: 'Je suis dans leur conscience comme dans la mienne, tant je les ai vus et connus: je la mettrai à nu; et si je ne fais pas rougir les maîtres, je pourrai du moins en dégoûter les disciples, et c'est quelque chose.'<sup>39</sup> After a fairly lengthy *exposé* of the ideas of the Bible, he announces: 'Je vais marcher désormais dans une route plus libre et plus spacieuse, un peu moins embarrassée des épines de la discussion. Fort des démonstrations précédentes, je pourrai m'adresser en même temps à ceux qui croient et à ceux qui ne croient pas.'<sup>40</sup> Convinced that the scriptures have a reply to everything,<sup>41</sup> he is more at home in proclaiming his own faith than in actually proving the existence of divine nature for others.<sup>42</sup> What argument there is is usually a general condemnation of the *philosophes* or the refutation of their ideas.

The work foreshadows Chateaubriand's *Génie du Christianisme* in theme and in purpose, but there is little of the picturesque quality of the latter work, or of what Chateaubriand himself calls 'l'extrême variété des tons qui le composent'.<sup>43</sup> There is little to make the *Apologie* attractive. La Harpe does not get beyond questions of dogma and doctrine, and, in preaching a religion of love, he displays an intolerance that characterizes much of his polemics. His cause is hardly helped by his calling the *philosophes* monsters and madmen.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, as the work was not only designed as an attack on the *philosophes*, but for its author himself as a means of expressing his own humiliation before God and before mankind,<sup>45</sup> it is not lacking in moments of almost sublime eloquence:

Un homme a été assez malheureux pour oublier, pendant quarante ans, la loi d'un Dieu dont il reconnaissait l'existence, et pour blasphémer la religion sainte que ce Dieu est venu lui-même apporter aux hommes. Ce même Dieu, par un miracle de sa grâce, le touche en un moment par la lecture des livres saints, qu'il avait toujours négligée; Dieu éclaire son esprit et parle à son cœur. Le voile tombe, et, devenu chrétien, et chrétien pénitent, il reconnaît que sa vie a été une suite des égarements les plus honteux et les plus coupables, même devant les hommes.<sup>46</sup>

This very simplicity and directness is proof enough of the sincerity, if not of the perfection, of La Harpe's beliefs. It is in his penitence that he is best able to speak for the faults of a whole generation.