

CONCLUSION

Emile Faguet rightly compares La Harpe to two other would be artists best remembered as critics, Boileau and Sainte-Beuve,¹ and it is tempting to explain him in accordance with Coleridge's much quoted view of critics as men who have failed in other forms of art.²

He certainly never lived up to the early promise of his *Comte de Warwick*. His theatre reflects all too well the inevitable sterility of writing in a tradition that had already long since reached its zenith. His plays are of interest in so far as they reveal in their content the fashions of the day. On to a basically classical form, he grafts, in the manner of Voltaire, greater spectacle and new local colour. Although wary of direct moralizing, he does introduce into his dramatic works the propaganda of the *philosophes*. However, the result lacks both the glory of the tragedies of the seventeenth century and the efficiency of the less elegant prose *drame*. While introducing new ideas and new settings, he remains too declamatory and shows an unfortunate propensity for the romanesque. His work lacks the power of action and the realism that is the mark of true theatre. It is a reflection of his conception of the theatre that in the *Lycée* he deals with the dramatic arts under the general heading of *poésie*.

His poetry is again cast in a strictly traditional mould, but at least he does not always have to be as ambitious as in his theatre. Where he is ambitious, his lines sound hackneyed and more than a little trite. His lighter verse, however, is, if not outstanding, fairly elegant and sometimes amusing. The same elegance is to be found in his work as a translator, where he had no pretensions as a great scholar. He was, perhaps, most at home in his *éloges* and other academic types of oratory where form was everything. It is, undoubtedly, a reflection of his belief in form that his political ideas are underlined by an unbroken desire to preserve order under the rule of the educated. Certainly, it is this belief in the importance of form that characterizes his work in all genres.

Indeed, if in general he failed as an artist, he did so largely because from the outset he approached all art armed with his thorough schooling as a critic. Every production became an academic exercise carried out in imitation of those whom he considered to be the masters of good taste — notably Voltaire. Whereas the latter had wit and a power of expression which have ensured the continuing success of a fair part of his work despite posterity's many changes in taste, to the modern reader most of the work of his disciple appears stilted and unoriginal.

At the same time, while great artists may be the best critics (and Voltaire again would seem to be proof of this), La Harpe is an eloquent defender of

Voltairean tradition. His tyrannical attitude in matters of taste did not stem from jealousy of those who succeeded where he had failed, but from a sincere and deeply felt belief in the taste of his master. Villemain, who was convinced that the greatest critics were great artists, since 'le talent seul peut faire agrandir l'horizon du goût',³ found La Harpe lacking in boldness and depth,⁴ but said of him that:

sa véritable gloire sera toujours d'avoir proclamé le génie de quelques-uns de nos grands hommes. Je ne sais en effet si dans les lettres, après l'honneur de produire des beautés originales, il est un titre plus noble que de les admirer avec éloquence, d'en expliquer les merveilles, d'en augmenter le sentiment, d'en perpétuer l'imitation. La Harpe, qui n'avait pas assez de force pour recevoir, pour saisir puissamment la première inspiration, s'anime et s'échauffe par le reflet des grandes beautés qu'elle a produites.⁵

The principal drawback of this dogmatic approach based on admiration for what has gone before was that it made it difficult for La Harpe to understand the purpose of innovation, and he became above all identified with resistance to change. Nevertheless, his views on literature are, on the whole, based on common sense. He tends to be chauvinistic and is frequently the prisoner of his own prejudices, but what he says is clear and elegantly stated. He illustrates superbly the essentially active Voltairian approach to criticism, by teaching good taste by examples and not by precepts. It is also refreshing for the modern reader to escape from the all-pervading psycho-somatic approach to literature that characterizes much of more recent criticism and rediscover an approach where works of art are evaluated separately on their own merits.

France's debt to La Harpe is no minor one. For all its faults — its gaps and its imbalance — the *Lycée* assured, more than any other critical work, the continuity of French literary culture at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Between the death of Voltaire and the triumph of the Romantics, no great writer dominated the literary scene. The upheavals of the Revolution and the following years meant a breakdown in standards of education and taste. With no outstanding genius or new school of thought yet in a position of authority, people still turned for guidance to the last firmly established tradition of literary taste — that of Voltaire. La Harpe's *Lycée* presented a fairly compact, clear and methodical repertory of Voltaire's views applied to all the more important French writers of the past. It was after his own death that La Harpe probably best served the interests of his master.

In life, he was more often than not a liability to the Voltairian cause. One cannot help but be struck by the naive vanity of the man whose irascibility and thorough belief in himself led him into many a trap. Yet, his almost aggressive attachment to Voltaire makes him an interesting witness to his times. He belonged to a breed of men which seems to have begun to flourish widely for the first time in France, in the eighteenth century — the professional man of

letters who had to fight for a living and who could no longer count on birth or automatic patronage to secure success. La Harpe was made for the polemics that surrounded the last twenty years of Voltaire's life. His belief in himself then gave him strength to act as the upholder of Voltairian purity after the latter's death. All in all, the faults and qualities of all his writings, his lack of originality as an artist as well as his prejudices as a critic, tell us far more about the period than would the highly personal productions or the calm impartial observations of a man who had not been in the thick of the fray.